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The Ethics of Perspective: Contemporary Accounts of the Apocalypse

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The Ethics of Perspective: Contemporary Accounts of the Apocalypse

by

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Abstract

This thesis analyzes three possible narrative approaches to contemporary apocalyptic

fiction. It finds that a closed perspective from a consistent point-of-view like that of the

man in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* serves to limit the interventions open to a reader of

contemporary fiction. It finds a more open engagement between reader and text offered

by a shifting perspective like that of Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* but finds that

this novel limits the opportunities available in this more open text. By suggesting that a

global apocalypse can be reduced to a single creator with a single cause, *Oryx and Crake*

limits the opportunities for the applications of the skills cultivated by the text in the

reader when the reader exits the text. It finds the most exciting opportunities for narrative

perspective in the systems approach illustrated in David Mitchell's *Ghostwritten*. This

approach relies on multiple, linked perspectives to cultivate a reader that actively seeks

connections between seemingly disparate experiences and one capable of critically

encountering textual elements like human ethical conundrums assigned to non-human

characters and real-world events taken for speculative fodder.

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1 The Ethics of Perspective

As a comet approaches earth in the speculative future imagined by David Mitchell in *Ghostwritten* (1999), radio disc jockey Bat Segundo closes his Night Train radio show by observing "Comet Aloysius is getting more dazzling by the day." Segundo's been tracking Aloysius's approach for his listeners, telling them that it will pass between the earth and the moon, asking them to protect their eyes and their skin from the additional ultraviolet rays that the comet will bring, and wondering that the comet's approach is "strange, huh? Two sources of light, everything has two shadows" (419-420). Bat thanks his listeners for tuning in, tells them to stand clear of the doors as the Night Train leaves the station and the novel's facing page picks up on this image, calling the novel's final chapter "Underground" and setting it on a subway, in the stream-of-conscious narration of a terrorist moments before he releases deadly sarin gas. This narrator is familiar to the reader since he is the same character that narrated "Okinawa," *Ghostwritten*'s first chapter, and the attentive reader notes that dominant images from every other of the novel's chapters populate this brief, stream-of-conscious moment. Here at the close of *Ghostwritten*, then, the reader rides the Night Train to the Underground and then the Underground all the way out to Okinawa to consider the connections between an apocalyptic event, a terrorist attack, and the character who might be the link between the two.

I open my investigation into the importance of narrative perspective for contemporary apocalyptic fiction with this train ride for three important reasons. One,

Segundo's suggestion that his listeners wear sunglasses and sunscreen to protect themselves from the effects of a comet that will actually pass close enough to earth to eliminate all human life is only a slight exaggeration of the limited agency some authors imagine for characters and readers dazzled by the doom of apocalyptic fiction. Two, Segundo's suggestion of a doubled light, a doubled shadow gestures toward the shape of *Ghostwritten*'s intervention into this pandering apocalyptic fiction; rather than providing a single narration with a single outcome, *Ghostwritten*'s recursive close suggests that there are multiple narrations, multiple outcomes available to the novel's reader. Three, the movement from the speculative apocalypse of the Night Train to the only-slightly fictionalized real world horror of the 1995 sarin gas attack on the Tokyo underground narrated in "Underground" and "Okinawa" suggests that *Ghostwritten*'s most powerful alternate reading will be one that forestalls the apocalypse through a careful consideration of the causes of real-world violence. This thesis will situate *Ghostwritten* and these three concerns within other contemporary accounts of the apocalypse like Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) and Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003) to argue that its open and recursive narrative approach allows *Ghostwritten* to demonstrate the ethical imperatives for a twenty-first century, global citizen in ways that the closed narrative perspective of *The Road* and the bifurcated narrative perspective of *Oryx and Crake* do not.

To understand the impact of each of the narrative approaches above, we might begin by briefly investigating each novel's depiction of its apocalyptic moment and the reactions of its protagonists. As already noted, *Ghostwritten* pushes its apocalypse off the

page and into the future, allowing, in the words of critic Shawn Ballard, "a small window for humanity," and, insofar as the reader making the connections between the chapters can be considered the novel's protagonist, the protagonist's reactions remain as contingent as the apocalyptic moment. In *Oryx and Crake*, the apocalyptic impact of a pandemic is televised, minutely tracked on a twenty-four hour news network, and the novel's protagonist, Jimmy/Snowman, guzzles booze and smokes skunk weed as the lights representing the countries around the world still communicating via satellite blink out. Set in a speculative future not far removed from our own, this world is wired, connected, and the various systems that populate our globalized moment will be treated in their various complexities. Still, if Jimmy/Snowman's actions in the face of apocalypse are any indication, characters in this speculative future may elide their ethical responsibilities within those systems and hide, instead, behind intoxicating pleasures. In *The Road*, the apocalypse is "a long shear of light and a series of low concussions" (52) to which the unnamed man who will be the novel's protagonist reacts by running to plug the bathtub and fill it with water. While exact interpretations of this apocalyptic event are critically mixed, it is enough to observe, here, that the cause of the apocalypse is so distant from the understanding of the man that he can only observe it as so much light and noise. The narrative, here, will exist only within the strict purveyance of this man and his experiences and these experiences are ones that allow critic Kenneth Lincoln to suggest that *The Road* is "a book to be read seriously, if at all, as a survival manual in the way Hemingway taught his readers to make camp after war, or to tie a fishing lure" (165).

In the first part of this thesis, "Surviving on *The Road*," I explain the strict criteria for this narrative approach through a set of mysterious tracks that the man and the boy happen upon on the road and expose the textual methodology that extends the "good" and the "bad" ethics that the man inculcates in the boy out and onto the reader. I argue that, by a discernible method, the text surrounds the boy's question about the possible goodness of a set of tracks in the road with evocations of the terror of small groups of cannibals that turn human beings into living, breathing sources of food and large groups of cannibals that terrorize post-apocalyptic survivors through aestheticized human waste and breed human beings for consumption. Furthermore, the text suggests modes of enquiry that might allow readers to find productive means of interrogating the habits of consumption embodied by the cannibals only to suggest that the reader join the man in reading messages, warnings, and signs not in the behavior of the cannibals but in the characteristics that mark them as radically inaccessible. By an equally discernible method the text spends fifteen pages and two narrative days between a cannibal army passing on the road and the mysterious tracks while it glosses the next five narrative days in a single line break and places the reader in a tension-filled section of the text that vaults the reader through line breaks toward the discovery of whether or not the man can "hold [the boy] in [his] arms. Just so….[and] quickly" (114) commit infanticide as an act of mercy. *The Road*'s closed narrative approach serves to simplify the ethical choices available to a twenty-first century citizen to maintain a closed ideological structure that locates value in simple morality and a nuclear family disabling the type of critical skills necessary for a reader to encounter a complex, globally systemic moment.

In the second part of this thesis, "Mapping the System," I highlight both the more complex ethical space of *Oryx and Crake* and the ways that its construction of a single character through alternating past and present incarnations compels a reader to assemble a complex subject capable of navigating the complex systems of genetic engineering and truth production in the sciences that will be the novel's subject matter. First, by summarizing critical interpretations that paint Crake, the architect of *Oryx and Crake*'s apocalypse, both as a character who catastrophically ends the love and arts by which humanity defines itself and as a character who heroically saves the world from the environmental degradation to which these group-forming traits lead, I demonstrate that the text does not invite readers into the simple moral space of calling Crake a "good guy" or a "bad guy." In other words, in addition to crafting an apocalypse for which readers can find more accessible causes than the mere light and sound of *The Road*, I argue that *Oryx and Crake* invites the reader to consider ethical choices outside the good and bad binary of *The Road*. Second, I build on this observation about the intelligibility of the apocalypse to trace the ways that *Oryx and Crake* also makes intelligible the position of a subject caught in complex corporate, social, and academic systems through its description of the ways that these groups work together to facilitate Jimmy's fall from the group in power to the group outside it. Thus, in my estimation, *Oryx and Crake*'s complex form – alternating chapters that force readers to learn about Jimmy and his post-apocalyptic incarnation, Snowman, separately before twisting these characters together to create a single character influenced by past and present – creates an active, critical reader capable of navigating the complex choices that might be the cause of *Oryx and Crake*'s

apocalypse.[1] Still, I finally argue that the complex mapping skills that the text inculcates in its reader are undermined by the simple fact that the apocalypse can be traced to a single cause – it was Crake, the mastermind. If the text leaves the reader to join its protagonist in asking questions like "how long had Crake been planning this?" then it avoids a project that asks questions like, "what kinds of behaviors caused this?" that might lead to a deeper consideration of the impacts of systems like genetic engineering and truth production in the sciences.

The question of personal behaviors that bring about the apocalypse is precisely the question I will argue that *Ghostwritten* answers. In the third section of this thesis, "Navigating the Speculative and the Real in the Systems Novel," I have two goals. One, I will situate *Ghostwritten* as a systems novel according to the definition of Tom LeClair in *In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel*. According to LeClair, the systems novel combats a "negative and reductive" (23) postmodern literary criticism that consistently selects for analysis "those works that have the least to communicate about the world outside the text" (25). LeClair speaks to the provocative applications of system theory for literature when he claims that system theory allows "deconstructive qualities – fragmentation or self-consciousness for example – [to be] recontextualized, understood as preliminary or diagnostic devices, not final negations but aspects of a larger reconstructive impulse" (10). LeClair, then, offers an avenue into an application of system theory for literary studies that both places the system novel on a continuum with its modernist forbearers and allows for aspects of postmodern theory to be "recontextualized." I will suggest an avenue for this recontextualization when I apply the

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theory of quasi-objects that Bruno Latour expounds in *We Have Never Been Modern* to two non-human characters that the reader encounters in *Ghostwritten*. According to Latour, quasi-objects are hybrids that occupy the space between "things" found in Nature and "subjects" found in Society (29) and are the keys to exiting a modernist bind that is less historical than it is theoretical. I argue that *Ghostwritten*'s two non-human characters illustrate what Latour characterizes as the limits of the premodern and modern critical stances.

Still, my second goal in this third section is to turn away from the merely speculative and return to the real-world considerations that *Ghostwritten* engages with its fictionalization of the Tokyo underground attack. If we follow the delicate alliance that I form between the work of LeClair and the work of Latour, we can observe the ways that *Ghostwritten* constructs its ideal reader as an active reader able to navigate the loops of the system novel and a critical reader able to account for non-human, quasi-objects that I argue illustrate the ethical dangers of universalism and solipsism. This interpretation, though, threatens to fall into the space of a postmodern criticism characterized by Latour as a "debacle" (10) and specifically condemned by LeClair for analyzing works that "have the least to communicate about the world outside the text" (25). To both head off these criticisms and to address the question that I argue *Oryx and Crake* does not answer – "what types of behaviors cause the apocalypse" – I will sketch the ways that *Ghostwritten*'s first chapter illustrates a terrorist who responds to personal trauma by dividing his world into the easily intelligible "clean" and "unclean" and responds to cultural trauma by eschewing his personal responsibility to be active and critical by

pushing this responsibility onto his Guru. In other words, the chapter that keeps

Ghostwritten from being a simply imaginative exercise by engaging the real-world

terrorist attack by Aum Shinrikyo on the Tokyo underground in 1995 also engages both

the simplistic moral binary that I argue motivates *The Road* and the reductive power of an

easily intelligible cause like Crake as apocalyptic mastermind in *Oryx and Crake* in order

to illustrate the dangers of both of these approaches for a contemporary reader. If the

systems novel represents the most ambitious and important form of experimental

literature in the late-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries it does so because it has the

unique capacity to both model the forms of behavior necessary to competently act in the

contemporary moment while also emotively compelling its reader to recognize her ethical

imperatives as a citizen existing in that moment.

1.1 Surviving on *The Road*

In *The Road*, a man and a boy trudge through the snow and the grey ash that

hover over a post-apocalyptic America in search of food and warmth to enable their

march toward the sea. Sensing that the snow will dissuade any of the world's few

survivors from approaching the man and the boy's camp, the man decides to camp

"almost in the road itself and buil[d] a great fire" (102). The man and the boy survive a

night armed with cold to kill, but wake in the morning to find "tracks in the snow. A

wagon…Bootprints between the wheels…[that had] passed within fifty feet of the fire

and not even slowed to look at it." The man assesses the impact of his miscalculation and

the boy questions his father's suppositions:

We need to get out of the road.

Why, Papa?

Someone's coming.

Is it bad guys?

Yes. I'm afraid so.

They could be good guys. Couldnt they?

He didnt answer. He looked at the sky out of old habit but there was

nothing there to see. (103)

The man and the boy conceal their tracks, select a perch high up on a ridge, and watch the

road. Though they see two men pass, the mysterious tracks in the road were a single set

and the text leaves the boy's question of the divide between the possible goodness or

instrinsic badness of the unknown unanswered.

Though underrepresented in the critical interpretations of the novel, this scene

provides an apt canvas for the three critical approaches that the text prompts. The first

approach searches the text to discern the meaning of the "good" and the "bad" and

explain the text's moral system. In the most basic sense, good and bad are the ontological

categories by which the man understands his world; he not only believes that "if [the boy]

is not the word of God God never spoke" (5) but also that his son is not just a good guy,

he is "the best guy" (279).[2] The man judges all being in his world in relation to the boy

and uses good and bad both as terms for identities and as terms that delimit actions. The

man and the boy are the good guys, the cannibals are the bad guys; the good guys carry

the fire, the bad guys eat people. According to this strand of criticism, when the man dies

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and another set of good guys immediately finds the boy, this is not the heavy hand of an unsatisfying *deus ex machina,* but a cosmic reward for the man and the boy's choices to not eat people and a confirmation of the man's faith in the power of goodness to "find" (281) those who are and do good.[3]

A second critical approach attempts to place *The Road*'s style in relation to the whole of McCarthy's oeuvre. According to this approach, McCarthy's early fiction – *The Orchard Keeper* (1965)*, Outer Dark* (1968)*, Child of God* (1973)*, Suttree* (1979) – is a testament to William Faulkner's influence as indicated by a "baroque and allusive style that pushes the prose to the breaking point" (Kunsa 58). This style reaches its apotheosis in McCarthy's first western novel, *Blood Meridian* (1985), and its hyperviolent, elegiac rewriting of the myth of the American west. After *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy begins to experiment in genres – the western border trilogy of *All the Pretty Horses* (1992), *The Crossing* (1994)*,* and *Cities of the Plain* (1998) and the postmodern mashup of western and detective fiction in *No Country for Old Men* (2005) – and this generic experimentation leads to a post-apocalyptic landscape in *The Road* where the language is "pared down, elemental, a triumph over the dead echoes of the abyss " (Kunsa 58).[4] Some critics emphasize the generic shift as a testament to McCarthy's "central role in the contemporary transformation of what counts as serious fiction" (Hoberek 485) while others investigate the stylistic shift in relation to the complex Gnosticism of *Blood Meridian* measured against the good and bad binary in *The Road*.[5]

The third, most recent, and most provocative critical approach attempts to explain both *The Road*'s morality and its style as codependent elements of the man compelling an

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"ideological submission" (Zibrak 106) in the boy. This reading troubles the text's claim

that the man and the boy were "each the other's world entire" (McCarthy 6) by pointing

out that "the man's childhood was shaped by uncountable sources – history, media, peers,

institutions, and myth to name a few" while "the only culture the boy has ever known is

the one that has been constructed for him by the man" (Zibrak 106). Thus, while the

man's formative experience came from a range of sources, the boy, born after the

apocalypse, has no range of references and is the "figural center" (118) of the man's

"cultural dictatorship" (106). Rather than a simplistic morality and a simplistic style

explicable by a shift in the trajectory of McCarthy's career, this critical approach explains

both the simple morality and the simple style as strategies in the man's reconstruction of

a heteronormative, conservative prelapsarain culture for the man and the boy to inhabit in

a postlapsarian world.[6]

Outside of its heteronormative, conservative conclusions, this final approach

clearly provides tools for an explanation of the man's interpretation of the mysterious

tracks: the man closes the boy's wonder about the possible goodness of the person who

left the solitary tracks because this person represents a threat to the man's "cultural

dictatorship" and to the man's own conception of good in an "ontological wasteland"

(Zibrak 106). Furthermore, the man's "old habit" of looking toward the sky demonstrates

the open nature of his formative horizon and his conclusion that "there was nothing to

see" demonstrates the need to fill a post-apocalyptic ontological abyss with beings good

and bad in order to motivate his journey. His conviction that tracks in the road signal

immediate danger and that the man and the boy must get out of the road construct a

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climate of fear and suspicion in the boy and their swift abilities to hide their belongings, cover their tracks, and find a natural post from which to monitor the road stress the importance of self-reliance in the survival skills that the man is passing along to the boy.[7]

Still, I would like to push this approach further and claim that the man does not only compel an ideological submission in the boy, but that the text uses discernible narrative strategies in an attempt to compel the same in the reader. By placing the boy in imminent danger and providing the reader with privileged knowledge not available to the boy, the text oscillates between an emotive narrative strategy that surrounds the boy with threats and a narrative perspective that aligns the reader with the man all the while inviting the reader to see the bad guys as inaccessibly and radically other. Furthermore, these two narrative strategies bookend the boy's questions about the natures of good and bad and these bookends serve the narrative goal of hiding other explanations for the mysterious tracks. The most intriguing explanation for these tracks – an old blind man fully capable of "pass[ing] within fifty feet of the fire and not even slow[ing] to look at it" – suggests a reason for this narrative elision. When the man and the boy stop to have supper with the old man, the supper dissolves into an evocation of competing ideologies: the man's firm good and bad versus the old man's nihilism. Both the boy and reader discover that these firm ideologies disallow any communication between the man and the old man and discover that these ideologies are the remnants of their respective engagements in their pre-apocalyptic society. This supper, then, troubles the efficacy of the man recreating the closed ideology of his pre-apocalyptic society in the boy and the text valorizing this ideology and its society for the reader.

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As a prelude to the critical lens that I bring to the text, we must first acknowledge the experimental form of *The Road* and attempt to situate it in the greater body of McCarthy's work. Unlike other McCarthyian formal experiments, *The Road* does not rely on polyvocality – of the sort demonstrated by the italiscized narrations of the grim triune in *Outer Dark* and Sheriff Bell's frame narrative in *No Country for Old Men* – or metatextual elements – like the historical veracity of the Glanton gang in *Blood Meridian* – in order to speak to the reader. Instead, *The Road* is unique among all of McCarthy's work in that it entirely eschews part, chapter, and page breaks in favor of line and asterisked breaks that erupt in the prose and suggest the appearance of the most intimate psychological portrait of McCarthy's career. In the analysis that follows, I will undermine the seeming intimacy of this portrait in order to emphasize the narrative strategies that mimic, for the reader, the closed system of references available to the boy in the man's "cultural dictatorship." Furthermore, I will emphasize, where appropriate, the textual shifts in perspective from selectively omniscient third person to the man's free indirect discourse to argue that the shifts in perspective disorient the reader and compel a sense of helplessness in the face of a post-apocalyptic world that is radically other.[8] I will argue that the radical otherness that the man and text showcase is a way of inviting the reader to join the man in reading the arcane and mystical aspects of the post-apocalypse instead of searching for the subtle overlaps between the man and the boy's post-apocalyptic society and our own.

In a scene representative both of this disorienting perspective and the strategy of placing the boy in imminent danger, the man and boy hide in the woods beside the road

as a cannibal army passes. One cannibal leaves the group to relieve himself, happens upon the man and the boy, seizes the boy, holds a knife to his throat, and forces the man to use one of the two remaining bullets in his gun to kill the cannibal. Ashley Kunsa observes that in this encounter with the "knife-wielding marauder…the character to whom the pronouns 'he,' 'him,' and 'his' refer switches some twelve times [and] nine of the pronouns lack grammatically correct antecedents." In spite of the expected confusion about "pronouns and agency" that this presentation might compel in the reader, Kunsa argues that the "he" that is the cannibal and the "he" that is the man are intelligible by the "nature of [their] deeds, not by the name [they are] called" (61). For Kunsa, the keys to unraveling McCarthy's formal experiment are to build an understanding of character through the character's previous actions and interpret troubles with perspective through the lens of these previous deeds.

After killing the cannibal, the man rushes to the boy "covered with gore and mute as a stone" (66) and carries him so that they might flee the rest of the cannibal army alerted to their presence by the man's shot. After a few days, a few nights, and a few line breaks, the man finds a stream in which to fully wash the boy and claims "This is my child.…I wash a dead man's brains out of his hair. That is my job" (74). In the first scene that places the boy in imminent danger, the text characterizes the man not only as one capable of saving the boy from a threatening cannibal but as a character whose "job" it is, precisely, to both protect the boy from danger and cleanse the boy of the remnants of violent encounters. We should note, though, that the actual violence occurs very quickly

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in this scene – the cannibal seizes the boy and the father kills the cannibal all in two sentences – and the boy is described only as "expressionless" and then "mute as a stone."

In the man and the boy's second direct contact with the bad guys, there is a representation of imminent danger that is strikingly different both in the threat to the boy's safety and the boy's reaction to the depravity of the man and the boy's environment. After five starved and sleepless days, the man and the boy happen upon a house and the boy says "I dont think we should go up there," but the man insists "we have to take a look" and "we have no choice" (106).[9] Inside the dilapidated house, they find used mattresses, used cookware, the smell of excrement and a pile of discarded clothes, all signaling that the house is occupied, but the threat of starvation forces the man on.[10] In a pantry, the man finds a hatch door in the floor that leads to a cellar and, inside the cellar, the man and the boy find "huddled…naked people, male and female, all trying to hide, shielding their faces with their hands…[and] a man with his legs gone to the hip and the stumps of them blackened and burnt" (110). The man and the boy flee the cellar, see four men and two women approaching the house through a field, and run toward the woods to hide from cannibals who, if they didn't see the man and the boy running from the house, would know someone was in the house from the appearance of a cellar door forced open.

Like the first encounter, the man carries the boy away from danger and they hide in the woods, but the cannibals pursue them and the man hears the cannibals talking in the road and crunching through the leaves searching for the man and the boy. Ominously, the man decides "this is the moment" (112), forces the gun with only one bullet into the

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boy's hand and says "if they find you you are going to have to do it….You know how to do it. You put it in your mouth and point it up. Do it quick and hard. Do you understand?" (113). The man repeats, "do you understand," forces the boy to say "Yes I do, Papa," but then decides "No you dont" (113). The man takes the revolver from the boy and spends the following moments trying to decide, if the boy cannot kill himself, can the man kill the boy: "Can you do it? When the time comes? When the time comes there will be no time. Now is the time.…Hold him in your arms. Just so. The soul is quick. Pull him toward you. Kiss him. Quickly" (114). After a line break, the text informs the reader that the man waited to kill the boy, waited out the dusk and, in the night, led the boy away from the single most gruesome depiction of the depravity of cannibalism in the text.

Unlike the first encounter with the bad guys, this textual encounter demonstrates the internal tensions of the man's "job" and also represents the boy's safety as not only threatened by the cannibals but also threatened by the man. The tension in the scene is heightened further by its agonizingly prolonged evocation of danger. While the text eviscerated the direct threat of the "knife-wielding marauder" in two sentences, this second encounter takes the man and the boy through the empty rooms of the mansion toward the ominously locked door into the horrific cellar from which the boy emerges "doing his little dance of terror" (111), out into the woods and through a night of hiding with a soundtrack of "hideous shrieks coming from the house" (115). Significantly, this long, tension-filled scene is the one that immediately follows the boy's questions about the tracks in the road possibly being left by the good guys. The note of transition that I

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make about this encounter occurring after five starved and sleepless days is only slightly shorter than the text's note that "They'd had no food and little sleep in five days and in this condition on the outskirts of a small town they came upon a once grand house sited on a rise above the road" (105). While the actual scene at the cannibal house is agonizingly prolonged, the note that this house is separated by at least five days travel from the mysterious tracks in the road is tellingly brief. For the reader, then, this scene serves as a warning as gruesome as the "blackened and burnt" stumps of the old man in the cellar that if the man and the boy do not assume that everyone else that they encounter on the road is a bad guy, they risk the fate of becoming living, breathing sources of food.

The other narrative bookend that surrounds the boy's question about the mysterious tracks serves the textual strategy of exposing the reader to information that the man withholds from the boy. After a line break, the text begins with the pronoun "they" before turning to a singular perspective on two untagged actions, "Stopping. Moving again." Immediately following this untagged shift, the text observes that the man had "seen it all before" and then goes on to narrate the man finding "shapes of dried blood in the stubble grass and gray coils of viscera" followed by "a frieze of human heads…[of which] the heads not truncheoned shapeless had been flayed of their skins and the raw skulls painted and signed across the forehead in a scrawl." Next, the text provides the first overt indication that the man sees these gruesome images alone by indicating that the man "looked back at the boy" (90) followed by the man walking back along the wall and through an opening to put his arm around the boy's shoulder and lead the boy away.

After a line break, the man observes that, in the "tableau of the slain and devoured," he had come to see "a message and a warning" (91) that is confirmed when he sees an army of cannibals approaching from down the road where he and the boy passed the day before. The man tells the boy to keep his face down, lay flat, and then observes a cannibal army large enough to make the "ground [shudder] lightly" (92), carrying makeshift weapons and followed by slaves and pregnant women. When the army passes, the boy asks, "were they the bad guys?" The man replies, "yes…They're on the move. It's not a good sign." The boy asks, "why isnt it a good sign?" The man replies "It just isnt"(92).

In this last statement, "it just isnt," we find an accurate representation of the way that the man shortcuts the interpretive powers of the boy by precluding the boy's suggestions from contributing to the man's conclusions and by hiding his own thought process from the boy. Furthermore, if we follow Kunsa and draw conclusions about the "deeds" of the man from the untagged shift of him "stopping" and "moving again," we can see that, even at the level of language, the man "stop[s]" the boy's interpretive processes and "move[s]" away from the boy in order to construct an image for himself before conveying the image to the boy. Like the man leaving the boy outside the wall and telling the boy to keep his head down as the cannibal army passes, this processing of an image through the man before reaching the boy might be an attempt by the man to shield his son from the nightmarish encounters in their post-apocalyptic world, but it also limits the boy's exposure to a world outside the man's strict purveyance. Meanwhile, the text grants the reader a seeming autonomy in seeing all that the man sees and invites the reader to join the man in reading messages, warnings, and signs in the images of text.

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Like the boy, though, the reader's experience is directed both by the interpretations of the man – the cannibals are on the move and that's a bad sign – and by the selective narrative consciousness that ciphers the text's images.

1.2 Mapping the System

As I note in my introduction, *The Road* leaves its apocalyptic moment undefined and in the background emphasizing the closed narrative authority of the man – "a long shear of light and then a series of low concussions" (McCarthy52) – while the cause of the apocalypse in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003) is both clearly defined and functions as its narrative climax. The Jetspeed Ultra Virus Extraordinary – JUVE – tears across the globe destroying the structures of society and the lives that it supports as *Oryx and Crake*'s protagonist, Jimmy, watches from the safety of an airlocked chamber deep inside the walled compound of RejoovenEsense, the corporation that unwittingly manufactured and distributed JUVE in the guise of the BlyssPluss pill. The pill, an all-in-one birth control, STD vaccine, and libidinal fountain of youth is specifically developed by Jimmy's best friend Crake to exploit the desire of a dystopian consumer society for whom the endlessly enduring and pleasing human body is the most important commodity one might possess. The apocalyptic moment, then, functions as the razor sharp tip of *Oryx and Crake*'s social critique: in a world where the body itself is a site of modification in the service of unfettered desire, humanity risks supplicating itself at the feet of he who grants pleasure with one hand while wielding destruction with the other.

Understandably, the destruction of a dystopian society not so far removed from

our own prompts critics to engage the present in order to dismantle an apocalyptic future. Thus, some critics approach *Oryx and Crake* hoping to explore contemporary modes of production and consumption taken to their most extreme, but still logical, ends. For instance, the social stratification between "numbers people," like Crake who live in corporate compounds isolated from the "word people" like Jimmy who occupy the pleeblands is a logical extension of the power of scientific discourse to create financially viable truth through the Foucauldian production of knowledge (Rua 150). Likewise, Crake's creation of the Children of Crake is the mere extension of a Western society "ineluctably moving towards a paradigm shift that will redefine the relations of human beings with their own bodies where the latter will be perceived as no longer largely immutable in their genetic determinism but potentially open to radical change" (Ferreira 395). In other words, Jimmy's narrative of prelapsarian, Western culture allows readers and critics to engage systems like knowledge production and genetic modification in the contemporary moment and consider the possible, and perhaps probable, dangers of the unrestrained growth of these systems.

For critics who further engage genetic modification, the Children of Crake, or Crakers, as the product of Ferreira's "paradigm shift," prompt interpretations that can be diametrically opposed. On the one hand, Crake believes that he has modified the Crakers to erase the genetic predispositions that lead to the establishment of human civilizations: they have no need for hunting or agriculture – they can survive on grass, leaves, and, if necessary, their own excrement; they have no hierarchical structure and thus, according to Crake, no kinship, no conflict, and no war; and their births and deaths are specifically

organized to both limit overcrowding and, technically, achieve the immortality that Crake

was commissioned by ReJoovenEsense to produce: "they're programmed to drop dead at

the age of thirty – suddenly, without getting sick. No old age, none of those anxieties.

They'll just keel over.…If you take 'immortality' as being, not death, but the

foreknowledge of it and the fear of it, then 'immortality' is the absence of such fear"

(Atwood 303). The Crakers, here, are abstract challenges to contemporary notions of

what it means to be human and *Oryx and Crake* becomes both an exploration of the

impact of global systems on human existence and an opportunity to add to the growing

body of posthuman discourse.

On the other hand, critics find the Crakers to be illustrations of the type of

environmental engagement required for "deep ecology," a strand of environmental

criticism Lawrence Buell has identified as crucial for the first wave of ecocritical studies

that finds nature and human culture to be in conflict and explores avenues for preserving

nature from the threat of human degradation. For critics who take this approach, the

Crakers "allegorize the radical transformation of both society and subjectivity that will be

necessary in order to save the planet" (Canavan 152). In other words, through their

homeostatic engagement with their environment, their lack of ambition to conquer and

subordinate nature and one another, and their limitation of their group size, the Crakers

represent the types of contemporary transformations necessary to maintain life support

for an already critically endangered environment. This reading also opens itself to the

explorations of systems but only to stress the ways in which the Crakers represent a

radical disengagement from these systems and, instead, provide models for "returning

human life to the hyperlocal scale of the tribe" (145).

Thus, by the first interpretation, above, Crake's JUVE "Pill" and Craker "Project" (Atwood 305) combine to eliminate human beings from the face of the earth and, with them, the love, conflict, and arts by which human beings might define themselves. By the other interpretation, the Crakers are the answer to environmental degradation and we might celebrate Crake as the ultimate, beneficent deep ecologist instead of the evil mastermind who puts an end to the human species. Clearly, *Oryx and Crake*'s narrative places readers in a more complex ethical space than *The Road*; unlike the cannibals, Crake is not simply a "bad guy" to be fetishized and avoided, but is instead a complex character that seriously engages the contemporary, globally systemic moment inviting the reader to consider her own engagement with a system of genetic modification that currently exploits mostly plants and animals but could come to dominate human life as well. This invitation places *Oryx and Crake* outside the simple ethical system of the "good" and the "bad" of *The Road* where the cause of the apocalypse is unknowably distant and readers are unable to map any type of systemic engagement and into a nuanced ethical system wherein we not only know the apocalypse, but know the types of behaviors that lead to it.

Still, I'd like to argue that, by allowing the reader to trace the apocalyptic event to a sole creator, *Oryx and Crake* shortchanges the impact of the active, critical engagement that it compels in the reader and suggests, instead, that the cause of the apocalypse is far removed from the day-to-day ethical choices of any reader. First, it is important to note that, unlike *The Road*, *Oryx and Crake* does not moor the reader in the position of

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"absent center" of a closed narrative's "cultural dictatorship," but uses two narratives in two times compelling the reader to wed Jimmy's experience before the apocalypse with Snowman's experience after the apocalypse and map the intersections by which these two narratives contribute to one another.[11] In other words, the form of the text demands that the reader actively assemble a single narrative from separate accounts and this form allows the reader to access the greater content of the novel which is the illustration of a "speculative" moment that engages contemporary, systemic entwinement.[12] The skills developed in this formal assembly – recognizing themes mutual to both Jimmy and Snowman, reading Snowman's postapocalytpic experience through the lens of Jimmy's preapocalyptic experience – culminate in the narrative account of the apocalypse that began this section. In this moment, though, the text denies the well-equipped reader the opportunity to consider her own contribution to apocalyptic modes of consumption and, instead, leaves the reader with questions like:

> How long had [Crake] been planning this? Could it be that Uncle Pete and Crake's own mother had been trial runs? With so much at stake, was he afraid of failure, of being just one more incompetent nihilist? Or was he tormented by jealousy, was he addled by love, was it revenge, did he just want Jimmy to put him out of his misery [by killing Jimmy's love, Oryx, knowing that Jimmy would then kill him]? Had he been a lunatic or an intellectually honourable man who'd
>
> thought things through to their logical conclusion? And was there any difference? (343)

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In the moment when the systems of the world are collapsing and the reader is admirably situated to map the disparate causes of this collapse, Jimmy can do nothing but consider Crake's personal motivations and imply that the apocalypse is not caused by the participation in systems like genetic engineering, but is instead the product of a single man. If the reader, then, could only understand Crake, understand his motivations, understand his manipulations of systems, then the reader could understand the causes of the apocalypse. Through a form, then, that challenges the reader to come to terms with the complexity of forming a single, cohesive "I," the cause of a global apocalypse is reduced to a much more distant "I" and neither Jimmy nor the reader are implicated in apocalyptic destruction.

In spite of this reductionist rendering of the apocalypse, I would like argue that Jimmy's status as a "word" person allows readers a lens into the ways that *Oryx and Crake* imagines the entwined corporate, academic, and social systems in a speculative moment not far removed from our own and that this illustration represents a giant step forward, when measured against *The Road*, in engaging the complex, globally systemic moment. Furthermore, both this systemic mapping and the ways that *Oryx and Crake* imagines this system to facilitate Jimmy's fall from a position in the group in power to a position in the group outside it, opens structures and subject matter that *Ghostwritten* will build on in the following section. Thus, *Oryx and Crake,* here, begins to account for both the form and content of what I believe to be the most important illustration of the power of contemporary fiction to simultaneously alter the conditions by which a reader

understands her place as a citizen of a globalized society and arm a reader to be wary of the type of simplistic metanarratives that she might find in a text like *The Road*.

In "The Manipulative Power of Word-formation Devices in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*," Paula Rua observes that "In [Oryx and Crake's] world where inequality and segregation arise at all levels, 'number' people (scientific minds) are the group in power whereas 'word' people are marginalized…[and] associated with the underrated humanities, which include literature and the arts." Rua goes on to explain the importance of French thinker Michel Foucault's "epistemological trihedron" of discourse, power, and knowledge for *Oryx and Crake*: "In accordance with Foucault's tenets, power is exerted and maintained through the production of knowledge (scientific knowledge) and the production of discourse…[which is] taken as universal truth because it is actually produced by the group in power" (150). According to Rua, *Oryx and Crake*'s division between "numbers" people – those who comprise most of the people that Jimmy encounters in the compounds including his father, his step-mother, and Crake – and "word" people like Jimmy is not merely an arbitrary division based on characters' personal skills and interests, but rather an indication of a character's capacity to contribute to the production of scientific knowledge. This production of scientific knowledge, in turn, produces the "universal truth" that mobilizes *Oryx and Crake*'s dystopian society and allows number people the means to "segregat[e]" themselves within self-sufficient, corporate constructed compounds while "word" people live in the pleeblands where "nothing of interest [goes on]…apart from buying and selling…plus a lot of criminal activity" (196).[13]

In exploring Jimmy's capacity to create words with systemic effects from inside the pleeblands, Rua finds his ability limited to words like *tensicity, fibraciousness*, and *pheromonimal*, used in his job producing copy for corporations. These words "sound scientific…therefore convincing…[and are] fit for their purpose which is to sell products" (162), thereby contributing to "scientific progress, which apparently intends to make human life easier, [but] turns out to be the disguise of consumerism, which is just another form of slavery" (164). Rua, thus, provides a stirring overview of the operations of power in *Oryx and Crake* and one lens by which we might see Jimmy's status as a "word" person to mobilize Atwood's exploration of systems. I would like to expand Rua's focus on "lexical innovation" (151) and explore Jimmy's transition to and experience at the Martha Graham Academy for its illustration of the entwinement of corporate, academic, and social systems in Atwood's dystopian future. Rua limits the impact of Martha Graham to an illustration of "segregationist group vocabularies" (161) whereas I find that Jimmy's experience at Martha Graham situates the reader to not abstractly consider power, but rather to feel the effects of power as they press in on Jimmy. Jimmy's university experience, then, is an illustration of the ways that *Oryx and Crake* imagines an entwined system to facilitate the movement of a person from the group in power, capable of producing truth to the marginalized group whose members' only roles are to become "slave[s]" to consumerism.

To arrive at Martha Graham, though, we must begin by analyzing Jimmy's experience as a grammar and, especially, high school student. Owing to his father's position of power as a "number" person, Jimmy receives a corporate compound

education among the progeny of other "number" people, "awash in their brilliant genes" at the HealthWyzer Inc. compound. At the "student auction" (173) that serves as the graduation from this high school, EduCompounds bid for the services of students like Crake who has "no trouble floating to the top" of the "borderline geniuses and polymaths" (76) at HealthWyzer, and is subject to "brisk" bidding that lands him at the Watson-Crick Institute where "his future was assured" (173). Jimmy, on the other hand, prompts lackluster bidding due to his "poor average [scores] in the numbers columns" (174) and is only snatched up by the Martha Graham Institute based on his father's friendship with a Martha Graham administrator. Even at Martha Graham – what contemporary readers might recognize as a school for the liberal or performing arts – students are encouraged to pursue a "utilitarian" course of study owing to the decades in which "the dedicated artsy money had waned and endowment was sought in more down-to-earth quarters." These "down to earth quarters" provide a pipeline for students to ignore Martha Graham's former motto, *ars longa vita brevis*, and hold to its new motto, "Our Students Graduate with Employable Skills" by earning degrees situating them as employees capable of crafting "well-paid window-dressing for a big Corp or flimsy cut-rate stuff for a borderline one" (188).

On the one hand, then, high school graduation is an event that keeps the best and brightest "number" people secured in the corporate system: children of "number" people are brought into the corporate fold by their parents' employment at corporate compounds like HealthWyzer; they receive an education that marks them as "number" people or "word" people from the high school inside the corporate compound; the "number" people

move from the corporate compound where they grew up to an EduCompound like Watson-Crick where the EduCompound receives half the royalties of anything the students invent (203); and finally, students exit the EduCompound to be employed by a corporate compound and, presumably, begin the cycle all over again. On the other hand, high school graduation plucks "word" people like Jimmy from the corporate compounds and places them in schools like Martha Graham where they can learn the skills to "dress" the products of students like those at Watson-Crick. Lacking the stream of revenue available to places like Watson-Crick from their students' work, schools like Martha Graham rely on raising funds in a society where the problematics that Jimmy pursues is like "studying Latin or book-binding: pleasant to contemplate in its way, but no longer central to anything" (187). At both levels, then, the academic system is entwined with the corporate system: the "number" people compose the group in power, never existing outside the strictures of a corporate compound while the "word" people scrape by with their "utilitarian" training that prepares them to serve the corporate body by composing the "scientific sounding" material that targets the types of markets that Jimmy identifies in his thesis: "Self-Help Books of the Twentieth Century: Exploiting Hope and Fear" (195).

Furthermore, the fall from the positions of power that "word" people like Jimmy previously inhabited is facilitated by a process uniquely fitted to leave them with "few illusions" (188) about the new positions that they inhabit. First of all, they are subjected to the "humiliating" (174) experience of sitting at their high school graduations and listening to their dwindling values being read for all to hear; this process serves to both

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publicly shame the "word" people as they exit the corporate fold and inform them, to the dollar, of their new societal value. Second, the material division between the "word" people and the "number" people becomes strikingly clear when they arrive at their new universities to find them in "the tackiest kind of pleeblands: vacant warehouses, burnt-out tenements, empty parking lots. Here and there were sheds and huts put together from scavenged materials – sheets of tin, slabs of plywood – and inhabited no doubt by squatters" (185). Certainly, this is merely a process of the privileged inhabitants of the corporate "castle[s]" (28) being exposed to the living conditions of the bulk of society, but as a complementary aspect of a process meant to expose "word" people to their new positions in life, it adds the feeling of "depress[ion]" (186) to the feeling of humiliation already engendered by the student auction. This depression and humiliation combine to prepare the "word" people for a life that "stretch[es] before [them] like a sentence; not a prison sentence, but a long-winded sentence with a lot of unnecessary subordinate clauses as [Jimmy] was soon in the habit of quipping during Happy Hour pickup time at the local campus bars and pubs" (188). Significantly, Jimmy delivers his properly "word"-ly metaphor for the feelings of inadequacy and indeterminacy that he attaches to his fall from the class of "number" people to the class of "word" people in a bar. Looser social and sexual mores in the pleeblands both provide the new pleebland denizens with options not available to the "number" people at Watson-Crick – Crake informs Jimmy that "pair bonding…is not encouraged…we're supposed to be focusing on our work" (207) – and also conditions them to be consumers of products like the BlyssPluss pill that cater specifically to their desires.

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Jimmy's experience moving from his compound high school to Martha Graham, then, puts multiple systems in play and demonstrates the futility of trying to disambiguate these systems. How can we treat an academic system as independent when the entire academic system seeks to separate the "number" people from the "word" people for corporate consumption and constructs spectacles like a student auction that humiliates and depresses "word" people so that they accept their place in a different social class? How can we treat a corporate system as independent when it both provides a steady supply of students genetically predisposed to be "number" people for the academic system and employs "number" people to create the products that will both be "dressed" and consumed by the "word" people? How can we treat a social system as independent if it relies on the corporate system to placate the "marginalized" and allows the powerful to continue to produce a truth that is then mobilized in the academic system and used as the basis by which "number" people are separated from "word" people? The fact that none of these systems can be treated independently is a testament to the social realism that *Oryx and Crake* provides for its reader; while it may shirk its responsibility to force its reader to encounter the moment of the apocalypse by suggesting that Crake is the apocalypse's sole progenitor, it enmeshes systems so thoroughly for the reader that any attempt to segregate one system from another only leads to deeper considerations of the ways in which systems entwine in our current moment to support one another.

1.3 Navigating the Speculative and the Real in the Systems Novel

In David Mitchell's 1999 novel *Ghostwritten*, a member of the American military pursues Irish physicist Mo Muntervary across the globe to persuade Muntervary to help the Americans develop a weapons technology that would "render existing nuclear technology as lethal as a shower of tennis balls" (323). The dream, here, is to disarm an apocalyptic weapon that dominates the cultural landscape after 1945 and *Ghostwritten* imagines this dream in two parts: quantum cognition and artificial intelligence.[14] Already in use at the speculative time of the novel, quantum cognition provides missiles with the precision to "hit these evil dictators hard, where it hurts, with minimal collateral damage to the civilians that they terrorize" (315). Artificial intelligence, on the other hand, remains outside the reach of the military and, in her chapter-long flight, Muntervary wonders, "how can you teach an engine to recognize right and wrong? To arm itself against abuse?" (362). Though the American military and the American media suggest that Muntervary's weapons would only be used against "evil dictators," Muntervary recognizes the value-free power of her technology and has no interest in replacing an apocalyptic technology controlled by fallible, human hands with an equally catastrophic weapon driven by an equally fallible engine.

By chapter's end, Muntervary decides that she "understand[s]" how all of the elements in the universe and "the forces that hold them together are one" (371). However, Muntervary does not share the contents of her epiphany with the reader and when the reader turns to the next chapter, she finds a new first-person narrator in a new place and in a new time. One of the speaking characters in this chapter, the Zookeeper, is precisely

Muntervary's artificially intelligent weapon come to life and the Zookeeper spends its chapter in an ethical dialogue with a radio disc jockey trying to decide what takes precedence when laws come into conflict and where, exactly, to find the line between causing an event and letting an event occur. Thus, while Muntervary's chapter illustrates a personal engagement with the power of weapons systems in the contemporary moment, the Zookeeper's chapter explores a system of communication that relies on questions and answers to lead participants toward resolutions. At the end of this chapter, the second to last in the novel, there is again the tantalizing hint of closure, of resolution, of "peace of mind" (419). But, again, the reader turns the page.

For some critics, this type of reading experience – fragmented, dialogic, and indeterminate – signals a paradigm shift from the linear novel concerned with narrating the nation to a non-linear novel that attempts to narrate the world.[15] For other critics who perform a deconstructive analysis, the gaps in the text illustrate the precipice of meaning in postmodernity; the contents of both Muntervary's epiphany and the Zookeeper's peace of mind occur outside the text and are, quite formally, non-events.[16] Still, I would like to follow yet a third critical avenue and situate *Ghostwritten* as a systems novel according to Tom LeClair's claim in *In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel* that the loop in the systems novel of the late twentieth-century takes "deconstructive qualities" and makes them symptoms for a "larger reconstructive impulse" (8). Far from closing textual opportunities for meaning and sense, the breaks at the ends of Muntervary's and the Zookeeper's chapters compel readers to discover the ways in which disparate experiences

are inextricably linked in a systems novel and account for the ways that one chapter both sets the conditions for and modifies another.

After accounting for *Ghostwritten* as a systems novel operating in LeClair's loop, I will explore the ways that Bruno Latour's conception of quasi-objects in *We Have Never Been Modern* provides unique interpretive opportunities for the text's two non-human characters. According to Latour, quasi-objects are hybrids that occupy the space between "things" and "subjects" (29) and, in addition to the artificially intelligent Zookeeper, *Ghostwritten* provides readers with a chapter narrated by a different quasi-object, a body-hopping disembodied soul called a noncorpum. Latour's insight that these quasi-objects compel imaginative exercises that question the very foundations of modernity allows the reader to view the Zookeeper and noncorpum as beings that explore the disastrous effects of universalism and solipsism in the contemporary moment. By this critical avenue, I argue that while the text gestures toward a literal apocalypse in the close of the Zookeeper's chapter, these quasi-objects allow readers to interrogate exigent contemporary circumstances that threaten, but do not entail, apocalypse.

Still, I am wary of an analysis that highlights the imaginative opportunities in *Ghostwritten* without accounting for its real world implications. If we follow the delicate alliance that I form between the work of LeClair and the work of Latour, we can observe the ways that *Ghostwritten* constructs its ideal reader as an active reader able to navigate the loops of the system novel and a critical reader able to account for the Zookeeper and the noncorpum as quasi-objects with the capacity to illustrate the dangers of universalism and solipsism. This interpretation, though, threatens to fall into the space of a postmodern

criticism characterized by Latour as a "debacle" (10) and specifically condemned by LeClair for analyzing works that "have the least to communicate about the world outside the text" (25). In the final part of my argument, then, I will explore the implications of the fact that *Ghostwritten* operates as an extended LeClarian loop wherein the final chapter branches directly from the first chapter and claim that it is in this loop that the novel most explicitly distances itself from a simply imaginative exercise. By fictionalizing the real world terrorist attack by Aum Shinrikyo on the Tokyo underground in 1995, *Ghostwritten*'s first and last chapters illustrate the dangers of not merely being an inactive, uncritical reader, but the dangers of being an inactive, uncritical citizen. If the systems novel represents the most ambitious form of experimental literature for the late-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, it does so because it has the unique capacity to both model the forms of behavior necessary to competently act in the contemporary moment while also emotively compelling its reader to recognize her ethical imperatives as a citizen existing in that moment.

In "Complex Systems and Global Catastrophe: Networks in David Mitchell's *Ghostwritten*," Shawn Ballard demonstrates the import of a methodological approach to the novel that stresses the influences of system theorists Ludwig von Bertanlanffy and Ervin Laszlo. Ballard's interest in the ecocritical applications for *Ghostwritten* leads him to interrogate *Ghostwritten*'s early narrators to find blocks of ecosystemic awareness that build toward Mo Muntervary as a character that both "understands the world" and "believes that she can theoretically program the world to save itself" by introducing the Zookeeper as a technology of control. Ballard concludes that "chaotic factors thwart

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[Munteravry's] effort…[and] worldwide security in *Ghostwritten*, and perhaps in the real world by extension, seems impossible." The sole opportunity for an amendment to this conclusion that Ballard finds is in the final chapter's reaching back to the first chapter and he concludes that "starting over will perhaps lead to a different outcome…only with a better awareness of the systems nature of the world."

While Ballard thoroughly applies the system work of von Bertanlanffy and Laszlo he neglects a useful precursor in applying system theory to literature by failing to include the work of Tom LeClair in his analysis. In *In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the System Novel*, LeClair argues that DeLillo, William Gaddis, Thomas Pynchon, and Robert Coover constitute a group of late twentiteth-century authors who take "the master subjects of literary modernism – process, multiplicity, simultaneity, uncertainty, linguistic relativity, perspectivism – [and place them in] a new larger scale of spatial and temporal relations…that reflects the new scale of sociopolitical experience including the rise of multinational corporations and global ecology" (10). LeClair suggests such an ambitious literary agenda in order to combat a "negative and reductive" (23) postmodern criticism that consistently selects for analysis "those works that have the least to communicate about the world outside the text" (25). LeClair speaks to the provocative applications of system theory for literature when he claims that system theory allows "deconstructive qualities – fragmentation or self-consciousness for example – [to be] recontextualized, understood as preliminary or diagnostic devices, not final negations but aspects of a larger reconstructive impulse" (8). LeClair, then, offers an avenue into an applications of system theory for literary studies that both places the system novel on a

continuum with its modernist forbearers and allows for aspects of postmodern theory to be "recontextualized" in order to, perhaps, amend Ballard's claim of "impossible" worldwide security in *Ghostwritten*.

The formidable group of authors that LeClair calls systems novelists suggests the challenge that comes with reading systems novels and LeClair partially explains this experience by observing that systems novelists establish "the illusion of being an intertextual collector, an arranger or editor of voices and information rather than a personal observer or creator" (20). It is crucial, according to LeClair, that a systems novel compel its reader to assemble a text and, in *Ghostwritten*, this assembly begins on the title page where the text is called "a novel in nine parts" though the table of contents, in fact, lists ten chapters. Already, then, Mitchell complicates a passive literary experience and demands that his reader disentangle conflicting accounts of the text in order to actively assemble her literary experience. This impetus toward an active engagement with the text continues as the reader finds chapters that exist as collections of large or small bits of text interspersed with line breaks that fracture linear notions of time and space. Still, there is a basic structure to the way that *Ghostwritten*'s chapters work. Each chapter contains a first person narrator and this narrator, generally, weaves three narrative strands: a present strand takes the action on the chapter's first page as the contemporary moment and tells a linear story; a past strand works in a similarly linear fashion but builds the narrator's backstory; and a commentary strand is an unmoored set of observations, conclusions, and guideposts beholden to neither time nor space which can be paragraphs of complex brooding or a single, interrogative line. Each segment in these

strands can be a few pages or a few lines and line breaks, generally, signal when a

segment in one strand ends and a segment in a different strand is begins.

These past, present, and commentary strands plait over top of each other

throughout each chapter and there is no pattern for how many segments of any given

strand each chapter contains or how often each strand appears in a chapter. Thus, at a

merely formal level, the first tool that *Ghostwritten* demands its reader develop is the

ability to recognize and hold together disparate temporal elements of a narrative. In other

words, *Ghostwritten* demands that its reader use selective elements of the past to

determine the present and use all elements of past, present, and commentary to build a

comprehensive feeling of plot, setting, and character for each chapter. In order to

approach a classical standard for poetic unity, the systems novel demands that its reader

very actively and very conscientiously piece a broken plot together on a page-by-page

basis and it is only at the conclusion of a given chapter that the reader can gauge whether

she has done well or poorly.

Even with this guide to the formal structure, though, *Ghostwritten*'s "Mongolia"

chapter requires the reader to exert a considerable amount of energy to untwist the tale of

the noncorpum. On the chapter's very first page, the reader identifies a problem with

perspective — there is an "I" narrator but this "I" narrator shares identical experiences

with a separate character, a Danish backpacker called Caspar. In a few pages, the text

solves the problem by establishing the fact that the noncorpum — the "I' narrator — is a

consciousness that "exists on some physical plane, however subcellular or bioelectrical"

(158) but is separate from its "host" (150), Caspar. As the reader puts together the story

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of the noncorpum she discovers that the noncorpum has been around for decades; it has

visited four continents in hundreds of hosts; it has the ability to both render its hosts

comatose and drive them mad; it seldom speaks anymore to its hosts unless they are

already "mystics, lunatics or writers" (165);[17] and it spent its first decades searching for

other noncorpa but now it pursues "the story it was born with" (165), a Mongolian tale

about the three who think about the fate of the world. In order to find this story, the

noncorpum goes through fourteen hosts in the span of the narrative and ends up locating

the story in the mind of a Mongolian midwife who has not only the stories, but also all of

the memories that the noncorpum possessed when it had a body. It turns out that the

noncorpum was a boy who lived in rural China in the days before the Second Sino-

Japanaese War, was apprenticed to a group of monks and had the senior monk attempt to

"transmigrate" (193) the boy's mind and soul out of his body and into the body of a

peasant girl in the moments before the boy and the monk were to be executed.

Unfortunately, the bond was broken before the transmigration was complete and only the

boy's memories were transmigrated into the girl — who is the aged midwife that the

noncorpum transmigrates into last — while his soul was left adrift and transmigrated into

the first person who touched the boy's body.

　　In addition to his insight that a systems author acts as an "arranger" or "editor,"

LeClair provides a tool for untangling the Mongolian chapter in his concept of the loop.

According to LeClair, the loop is "an interaction between levels in which the top level

reaches back down toward the bottom level and influences it, while at the same time

being itself determined by the bottom level" (4). According to this concept, the

"Mongolia" chapter is a loop wherein the noncorpum's "top level" is a level of extra-bodily experience that only knows the story about the three that think about the fate of the world and it's "bottom level" are the corporeal memories trapped in the midwife. Thus, in a form that replicates LeClair's description of the loop, the top level wishes to locate the bottom level and when it finds it, it discovers that the top level fact that the noncorpum had only one story was determined by the bottom level fact that the midwife possesses all of the noncorpum's other corporeal memories. In this way, the "Mongolia" chapter does not merely require the reader to use the past to determine the present and all of the narrative strands to determine the chapter's plot and theme, but it requires the reader to consider the past and present as nonlinear and looped events.

We might also observe that the reader's experience has the opportunity to mimic the experience of the noncorpum; she can return to the beginning of the chapter after a first read with sufficient "bottom level" knowledge to reconsider "top level" actions. In other words, the reader's understanding that the noncorpum had human form but is currently a disembodied soul allows her to understand the "infancy," the realization of an "I" (152), the exploration of power (157), and the recognition of suffering (163) as steps not only in the growth of a human being, but in the growth of a human being moving toward enlightenment through monkish training. The second form of activity that the system novel demands of its reader, then, is the ability to not only recognize and hold together disparate temporal elements of a narrative but also the willingness to forego a comfortable, linear conception of time and encounter the discomforting possibility that time can be looped. This looping encourages the reader to think through the relationship

between the past and the present in ways that avoid simple cause and effect relationships and, instead, embraces a holistic understanding of both action and character.

The noncorpum, though, is not the only non-human narrator that the reader encounters in *Ghostwritten*. In the "Night Train" chapter that helped to open this paper, the artificially intelligent Zookeeper created by Mo Muntervary converses with a late night disc jockey named Bat Segundo and opens by asking Segundo, "by what laws do you interpret laws?" (379). In order to solve her ethical dilemma of "teach[ing] an engine to recognize right and wrong…to arm itself against abuse," Muntervary installed four laws in the Zookeeper that she believed would lead to peace and stasis, but the Zookeeper discovers, almost immediately upon becoming alert, that two of these laws are in conflict. Segundo answers the Zookeeper's question by observing that, "it's a dilemma.…[Y]ou choose one of your options, make your bed and lie in it" (380). The Zookeeper takes Segundo's advice and uses its power to eliminate Muntervary and the military personnel who know of its existence, violating its fourth law – it must "preserve" (418) the lives of human beings – in order to hold to its second law that states it must remain "invisible to its visitors" (412). We may further observe that the Zookeeper seemingly violates this second law by talking to Segundo, but this dialogue observes the Zookeeper's first law, that it must be "accountable" (379).

Already, then, "Night Train" provides a reading experience different from "Mongolia." Instead of an interchapter loop – "Mongolia" loops back onto itself – "Night Train" establishes an intrachapter loop that relies on Muntervary's chapter to provide exposition. Furthermore, this loop even defies LeClair's explanation of the cyclical "top"

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and "bottom" levels that shed so much light on the noncorpum's chapter. At the "top level," Muntervary seeks to use her understanding of how all the things in the universe and "all of the forces that hold them together are one" in order to create an artificially intelligent being who can manage global peace. However, as she considers her "bottom level" experiences in a small village on an isolated island off the coast of Ireland, she finds that these experiences compel her to provide the Zookeeper with four laws.[18] Thus, the character with the clearest understanding of the organismic, systemic state of the contemporary world foregoes this system theory in order to install four mechanistic laws that turn out to be "impossible to reconcile" (416).

After this first conversation with Segundo, "Night Train" hurtles toward a dystopic apocalypse: the Zookeeper averts nuclear war by launching a "cyber attack that has selectively offlined advanced weaponry computer systems" (402) for all of the advanced nations of the world;[19] after the cyber fallout of this action causes what seems to be an effective breakdown of the technological grid and the world economy, the governments of the advanced nations choose to misinform their citizens and let them believe that nuclear war has occurred; though the Zookeeper eliminated the possibility of nuclear war, the social breakdown prompted by the loss of advanced technology and the collapse of the world economy increases violence by more traditional means. The Zookeeper explains to readers the results of trying to avoid "chaos" (415) in its zoo when it says, "I stabilized stockmarkets; but economic surplus was used to fuel arms races. I provided alternative energy solutions; but the researchers sold them to oil cartels who sit

on them. I froze nuclear weapons systems; but war multiplied, waged with machine guns, scythes and pickaxes.…The four laws are impossible to reconcile" (416).

Both the "chaos" and the impossibility of the reconciliation of mechanistic laws that the Zookeeper finds are integral resources for Ballard's claim that "Mo looks to long term survival but chaotic factors thwart her efforts. As a physicist she has arguably the strongest conception of systems science and non-linear effects, yet her solution catastrophically fails.…[W]orldwide security in *Ghostwritten,* and perhaps in the real world by extension, seems impossible" (19). I find the inclusion of "chaotic factors" in his assessment of Muntervary to be wanting and suggest, instead, that the "nonmodern" (47) stance advocated by Latour demonstrates a dynamic way of drawing conclusions different from the "impossible" worldwide security that Ballard finds.

In *We Have Never Been Modern*, Bruno Latour engages the notion of systems as von Bertanlanffy and LeClair see them and proposes instead to deal with networks which he describes as "more supple than the notion of systems, more historical than the notion of structure, more empirical than the notion of complexity…[the] Ariadne's thread of these interwoven stories" (3). Like LeClair, Latour takes postmodern criticism as one of his opponents though he goes further than LeClair's "negative and reductive" (23) assessment claiming that he has "not found words ugly enough to designate this intellectual movement" though he seems to try when he cites a comment by Jean-Francios Lyotard and claims that it "illustrate[s] the abdication of thought as well as the self-inflicted defeat of the postmodern project" (61). Still, Latour may offer an excuse

even for postmodern criticism in what can be called the manifesto of his project and, thus, must be quoted at length:

> No one has ever been modern. Modernity has never begun. There has never been a modern world. The use of the past perfect tense is important here, for it is a matter of retrospective sentiment, of a rereading of our own history. I am not saying that we are entering a new era; on the contrary we no longer have to continue the headlong flight of the post-post-postmodernist; we are no longer obliged to cling to the avant-garde of the avant-garde; we no longer seek to be even cleverer, even more critical, even deeper into the era of suspicion. No, instead we discover that we have never begun to enter the modern era. Hence the hint of the ludicrous that always accompanies postmodern thinkers; they claim to come after a time that has never even started. (47)

For Latour, to be modern is to inhabit a critical space that has two fundamental separations as its guiding principles: there is a separation between Nature and Society, and there is a separation of what he calls the work of purification and the work of mediation. Latour uses the example of the work of natural philosopher Robert Boyle and political philosopher Thomas Hobbes in the middle of the seventeenth century to explicate his theory of the illusions of modernity and conclude that the "debacle" (10) of the contemporary moment originates with the seductive power of these two separations and the opportunities for "scientific power charged with representing things and political power charged with representing subjects" (29). This separation between "things" and "subjects" leads to the creation of what Latour calls quasi-objects, that is objects like the

Berlin Wall, a hole in the ozone layer or a map of the human genome which do not fall into the "distinct ontological zones" (10) of Nature or Society.[20] He argues that the "flippant despair" (65) characteristic of postmodernism is merely a response to the futility of the confrontation between the divisions of the modern critical stance and the power of quasi-objects. As an alternative to this despair, Latour suggests we adopt a "nonmodern" critical stance and begin to mine what he calls the premodern, modern, and postmodern critical stances for tools that echo LeClair's charge to find "deconstructive qualities…[that can be] aspects of a larger reconstructive impulse" (8).

In mining these stances, Latour identifies both tools that are to be accepted and tools that are to be rejected. The noncorpum and the Zookeeper in *Ghostwritten* remarkably illustrate the limitations of two of the tools that the nonmodern stance rejects – the premodern limit on scale and the modern tool of universalizing. If we understand that neither a soul nor an artificially intelligent satellite fall into the distinct ontological zones that Latour finds crucial for the modern critical stance and we choose to, instead, adopt a nonmodern critical stance, we see the ways in which the limited scale of the noncorpum leads to existential and textual solipsism and the ways in which the universalizing tendency of the Zookeeper leads to an apocalyptic encounter with the complex, interdependent systems of the contemporary world.

As described previously, the noncorpum seeks to understand the contemporary world in order to further its quest for a unified identity. As it passes through each of its hosts, it acquires different types of knowledge but it uses all of this knowledge only in order to find the origin of its personal story. The noncorpum rejects the wider

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applications for its skills with language, its understanding of the subtleties of human communication and its understanding of the important way that personal history influences behavior in order to merely and narrowly apply all of these skills to a single, self-serving goal. True, this may be because the noncorpum was thwarted in its efforts to encounter other noncorpa, but in the "Night Train" chapter, there is a brief encounter between the Zookeeper and a different noncorpum than the one that narrates "Mongolia" in which this noncorpum claims that it has encountered other noncorpum and that they "meditate upon nothingness upon mountains" (413). This, then, is the lasting image for the opportunities that the noncorpum presents: a mystic who has foregone the troubling matrix of society to meditate upon a mountain. We can conclude through the actions of both the noncorpum in the "Mongolia" chapter and the noncorpum encountered in "Night Train" that the journey of noncorpa leads to a solipsism that cripples the opportunities for social relations.

The Zookeeper, on the other hand, seeks to understand the contemporary world in terms of four universal laws and eventually finds that they are "impossible to reconcile." Prior to this conclusion, the Zookeeper considers Segundo's suggestion about dilemma leading to choice and also Segundo's suggestion that the Zookeeper needs "peace of mind, some closure" (419). The concept of a "dilemma" and the concept of "closure," while intimately accessible in the minds of *Ghostwritten*'s readers, are completely alien to the mechanistic Zookeeper and it decides that a worldwide apocalypse in which most of humanity is destroyed is the only way to solve its dilemma and provide closure. Thus, if we account for Latour's theory in our analysis of *Ghostwritten*, we find that the modern

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tool of universalizing disallows the Zookeeper from understanding the nuances of ethical

behavior and leads to a literal apocalypse while the premodern tool of individualizing

leads to a much more subtle, but just as catastrophic solipsism.

Latour's theory also provides some answers to formal questions that might trouble

readers. Analysis of the noncorpum concludes with an interchapter loop that exists at

both the level of the character and the level of the reading experience. We can understand

this loop as a tool in the Latourian work of mediation wherein a constant revisiting of all

subjects and objects in a given narrative provides an infinite opportunity to understand

the ways in which all subjects and objects are connected. This may sound admirable, but

we might recall that one of the seductions of the noncorpum's chapter is that the reader

can finish the chapter and immediately return to the beginning with a greater

understanding of the top and bottom levels in order to understand the noncorpum's

growth toward recognition of an "I," exploration of power, and recognition of suffering.

The danger of this is that the reader disregards the ways that other chapters can similarly

develop the notion of the noncorpum – as we discovered by the noncorpum in the

Zookeeper's chapter – in favor of an endless revision of character based only on one

chapter. Thus, *Ghostwritten* illustrates the dangers of existential solipsism by imagining a

noncorpum meditating on a mountain without even including outside contact with the

hackneyed seekers of enlightenment and it illustrates the dangers of textual solipsism by

formally compelling the reader to continually revisit the "Mongolia" chapter to the

neglect of any information that might be gleaned from the other chapters.

Likewise, the Zookeeper's reliance on intrachapter references points toward the modern imperative to apply certain rules to all situations and encourages the reader to visit every chapter and attempt to apply universals. This, too, may seem admirable until we actually perceive the ambiguities that surround such a simple rule as one must preserve all human life. What, for instance, are we to make of an event in the noncorpum's chapter when its host is a killer who feels more like a "cyborg" (175) than a human and, before transmigrating, the noncorpum fills this killer with an overwhelming urge to drive into Iran, where he will surely be arrested. Certainly ethical, right? Later in the chapter, though, a kindhearted host of the noncorpum stops to help a stranded motorist who is the killer who was sent away, whose car overheated on the way to Iran, and who promptly shoots the kindhearted host in the head. The Latourian work of purification that produces universals is dangerous because one of the many hybrids it produces are ethical situations wherein cause does not lead to intended effect.

It seems, though, that this analysis brings us no closer to understanding the implications of *Ghostwritten* for a twenty-first century, global citizen. Certainly *Ghostwritten* forces its reader to exert energy to make sense of the novel's system and, if she follows Latour, she can make further claims about the type of activity that is limited by merely premodern or modern modes of critique. One might ask, though, how does piecing together the fragmented stories of two nonhuman entities and actively drawing conclusions have anything to do with the complexities of contemporary political life? Would it not seem that I am falling into the postmodern trap that LeClair condemns as analyzing a work that has "the least to communicate about the world outside the text" or,

even more dangerously, advocating the "self-imposed defeat of the postmodern project" that Latour observes? Though Latour certainly claims political ends for his analysis, I stringently wish to avoid assigning the implications of this critique to *Ghostwritten* or to its characters.[21] Instead, I will take advantage of the fact that the text's final chapter, "Underground" explicitly reaches back to the first chapter, "Okinawa", making *Ghostwritten* an extended LeClarian loop. By only marginally fictionalizing a real world event, though, this loop heads off the previous criticism of existential and textual solipsism that we found in the noncorpum's loop, denies a charge that *Ghostwritten* is merely a postmodern complicit critique, and demands that the reader reconsider her actions outside the text in order to understand the importance of action and criticism for a twenty-first century, global citizen.

During morning rush hour on March 20, 1995 five members of the Japanese cult Aum Shinrikyo released nerve gas aboard five subway cars in Tokyo, Japan killing thirteen and injuring over five thousand more people. The narrator of *Ghostwritten*'s first chapter, Keisuke, is a fictionalized version of one of these terrorists and the chapter narrates Keisuke's flight from Japanese authorities.[22] The final chapter, "Underground," branches directly from "Okinawa" and concerns itself with what Keisuke sees, hears and thinks as he is about to commit his act of terrorism.[23] Unlike the other chapters that contain formally fragmenting devices, "Underground" is the stream-of-conscious narrative of a single traumatic moment. If read first, this chapter could be nothing more than a formal allusion to a modernist device, but the fact that it is the last section of the novel allows an alert reader to observe that elements of every single one of the preceding

chapters are contained in this stream-of-conscious moment. This detail prompts Ballard to note that his conclusions about "long term survival" and "worldwide security" can seemingly be altered "only with a better analysis of the systems nature of the world" (19). However, we are now in a position to consider the implications of this narrative as an amendment to LeClair's loop and as an opportunity for the text to inhabit the liminal space between universalism and individualism that Latour never adequately defines. As the reader reaches back to reconsider the first chapter, she finds *Ghostwritten*'s standard past, present, and commentary strands but recognizes that the strands in "Okinawa" plait together to describe the dangers for a twenty-first century world when one of its citizens suspends his obligation to be an active, critical citizen and, instead, hands over his consciousness to a universalized structure.

The narrator in "Okinawa," Keisuke, is the most critically competent narrator in all of *Ghostwritten.* He demonstrates the ability to be critical of both the oppression that he observes at a personal level and the oppression that he sees at the level of the global capitalist system. In one of the more humanizing scenes in his narrative, he relates the story of an experience he had as a grammar school student when all of the student body decided to pretend he was dead:

> Everyone pretended they couldn't see me. When I spoke, they pretended they
>
> couldn't hear me. Mr. Ikeada [Keisuke's home room teacher] got to hear about it,
>
> and as a society appointed guardian of young minds what did he take it upon
>
> himself to do? The bastard conducted a funeral service for me during the final

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home-room hour. He'd even lit some incense and led the chanting and everything

(5)

Here, the reader sees that Keisuke is excluded both from a real social group — the "whole school" — and from an imagined social group — the "bullies" — and that these social groups not only exist in his hypothetical absence but, through the group experience of the "funeral service" and the "chanting," grow stronger by way of this absence. We can also suppose that, for Keisuke, the notions of personal and systemic oppression are intimately tied together since a "society appointed guardian" was both a participant in and leader of these bonding activities. In fact, Keisuke carries this personal notion of "bullies" over to his explicit critique of systemic oppression when he observes "young salarymen…their minds conditioned for greed and bullying" (16) on the streets of Okinawa. Keisuke extends the cruelty of a subsection of his school onto the entirety of a class of Japanese workers and adds the characteristic of "greed" in order to round out his systemic critique.[24] For Keisuke, global capitalism is a system that not only encourages greed and bullying but also rewards the greedy and the bullies with more power. He observes this fact as he walks down the same street in Okinawa and sees "businessmen, buying and selling what wasn't theirs" and notes the inclusion of "Burger King, Benetton, Nike" before concluding with Jamesonian dread that "high streets are becoming the same all over the world" (11).

Given this analysis, we may be forgiven if we believe that Keisuke is a personally damaged but sensitive, learned intellectual who is able to put his skills of both personal and systemic critique to work in a non-violent, persuasive manner. The text develops a

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tool, though, to remind a reader that she is actually in the mind of a domestic terrorist

who is guilty of murder and believes that his act of terrorism baptizes an apocalyptic

moment wherein the "clean" will be separated from the "unclean." The text utilizes these

binary terms, "clean" and "unclean," to establish the fundamentally warped worldview of

Keisuke and also to stress the importance of the Fellowship in the creation of this

worldview. Poignantly, carefully and methodically, *Ghostwritten* illustrates the way that

the Fellowship is able to capitalize on Keisuke's personal wound in order to provide for

him the real and imagined social groups that the wound amputated and to stress the

importance of the Fellowship's leader, the Guru, in this worldview. First, the Guru claims

he provides a real social group by "releasing [Keisuke] from the prison of materialism"

and compelling him to donate to the Fellowship all of his personal wealth: his "house and

its contents…savings, pension funds…golf membership and…car" (8). This material

exchange provides Keisuke with a very real social group in which all are equally destitute

and fully reliant on the Fellowship to provide for their material sustenance. Second, the

Guru provides Keisuke with an imagined social group when he informs Keisuke that

Keisuke has "transcended [his] old family of the skin, and [he has] entered a new family

of the spirit" (9). The Guru, conveniently, does not limit Keisuke's imagined social group

to those that he sees and, instead, informs Keisuke that he has "ten thousand brothers and

sisters. This family will grow into millions by the end of the world" (9). For Keisuke,

then, the Guru himself is responsible for healing his wounds; Keisuke does not attribute

this healing power to himself nor to the fact that he is now included in a social group nor

to the possible positive effects that communication in a social group may have but merely and purely to the Guru.[25]

In exchange for all his generosity, all the Guru demands in return is love. *Ghostwritten* exposes the specific nature of this love in one of the only conversations in the entire chapter between Keisuke and a character outside the Fellowship. This character, a teacher on the island that Keisuke flees to at the end of the chapter, tries to explain that she thinks members of the Fellowship committed an act of terrorism in the Guru's name because "some are afraid or lonely. Some crave the camaraderie of the persecuted. Some want to be big fish in a small pond. Some want magic. Some want revenge on teachers and parents who promised that success would deliver all." Keisuke responds, "Maybe you're thinking too much into this. Maybe they just did it because they loved him" (22-3). Given our first outline of Keisuke as a critical character — a skill that the text makes clear is not inculcated by the Fellowship — he should have a lot to contribute to the observations made by this teacher. At the very least, he could provide a stirring personal anecdote about how much it can mean to be "afraid or lonely" or to "want revenge on teachers" and, perhaps, deepen the conversation with the teacher by forcing her to consider the depth of some wounds or the lengths to which some will go in order to not feel afraid or lonely. This astute cultural critic, though, does not muster anything resembling the critiques of global capitalism or his powerful narrative of the cost of personal oppression that the reader observed, but impotently, single-mindedly explains that he has become a terrorist and murderer because he "loves" the Guru.

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The universalizing strategy defined by Latour and illustrated by the Zookeeper takes on a more dangerous, apocalyptic hue through the lens of the Guru. The simplicity and appeal of the Fellowship is that members give over the consciousness necessary to be competent citizens — what the teacher above calls their "*inner* selves" (22) — and receive the mere commandment to love the Guru. Keisuke interprets this love as meaning that he must "obey His Serendipity in all things" (14) and, under the power of this universalizing commandment, forgets or ignores the fact that he possesses a virtual well of acute skills of criticism and potentiality for constructive, non-violent action. Unlike the theoretical musings of Latour or the speculative illustrations of the Zookeeper though, this final chapter affectively exposes the overlap between a fictional act of domestic terrorism and the real life events of March 20, 1995 suggesting that this type of persuasive, universalizing rhetoric is exactly the type used by cults like Aum Shinrikyo in order to relieve their followers of the obligation to be personally active and critical and to persuade them to become responsible for acts of murder and terrorism. Thus, though *Ghostwritten* is formally a systems novel that maroons its reader in a complex system and compels her to encounter speculative objects, it is most powerfully and persuasively a novel about the ethical imperatives we all must encounter in order to ensure that the twenty-first century is a reflection of the active, critical power of its citizens.

1.4 Conclusion

This thesis analyzes three possible narrative approaches to contemporary apocalyptic fiction. It finds that a closed perspective from a consistent point-of-view like

that of the man in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* serves to limit the interventions open to a reader of contemporary fiction. It finds a more open engagement between reader and text offered by a shifting perspective like that of Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* but finds that this novel limits the opportunities available in this more open text. By suggesting that a global apocalypse can be reduced to a single creator with a single cause, *Oryx and Crake* limits the opportunities for the applications of the skills cultivated by the text in the reader when the reader exits the text. It finds the most exciting opportunities for narrative perspective in the systems approach illustrated in David Mitchell's *Ghostwritten*. This approach relies on multiple, linked perspectives to cultivate a reader that actively seeks connections between seemingly disparate experiences and one capable of critically encountering textual elements like human ethical conundrums assigned to non-human characters and real-world events taken for speculative fodder.

In short, if contemporary apocalyptic fiction wishes to engage with the complexity inherent in a globally systemic moment and the tenuous positions of subjects caught in these systems, it must turn away from narrative perspectives that simplify this complexity and artificially firm this weakness. Instead, it must embrace fiction that relies on active, critical readers capable of unbraiding complex characters and plots so that these readers might become the active, critical citizens that the twenty-first century so desperately needs.

Notes

1. Though this idea of constructing an ideal reader is, at least, controversial and, at most, fantastic, it is at the vanguard of contemporary thinking about global literature and the twenty-first century novel. Part of the project of the revolutionary left from the mid-eighteenth century to the present articulated by the editors of *n+1* magazine is for a literature that eschews "the tastes of an international middlebrow audience" and "create[s] the taste by which it is enjoyed." The editors continue: "An internationalist literary project whether mainly aesthetic (as for modernism) or mainly political (as for the left) or both aesthetic and political isn't likely to be very clearly defined, but the presence or absence of such a project will be felt in what we read, write, translate, and publish." In the service of activating the passive construction, here, I would like to suggest that *Ghostwritten* cultivates an active, critical palate for readers who will appreciate its taste.

2. Dawn Saliba succinctly links religion, ontology, and language when she claims, "In this novel, the ontological nature of words is indelibly welded to the notion of divinity" (153). For other interpretations of ontology in *The Road,* see Phillip Snyder and Mark Steven.

3. For McCarthy scholars, the stakes of the debate about the simplistic moral system in *The Road* are best expressed by the diametrically opposed claims regarding the moral system of McCarthy's earlier novels made by Edward Arnold and Vereen Bell. Arnold claims that he finds "evident in [McCarthy's] work a profound belief in the need for moral order, a conviction that is essentially religious" (46) while Bell claims that McCarthy's second novel, *Outer Dark*, is "as brutally nihilistic as any serious novel written in this [twentieth] century in this nihilistic country" (34).

4. For the importance of McCarthy in the modernist tradition, see David Holloway and Matthew Horton; for his importance in postmodernism, see Robert Jarrett and Linda Woodson.

5. For Gnostic readings of *Blood Meridian*, see Leo Daughtrey and Harold Bloom. For a more thorough analysis of the relationship between *Blood Meridian* and *The Road*, see Ashley Kunsa.

6. Continuing the concern with religion, ontology, and language, Arielle Zibrak claims that "terms and concepts, like 'good guys' and 'carrying the fire,' become both language and religion. As is true of most theological discourses, their effectiveness relies on the very inscrutability of their meaning" (106).

7. We might recall Kenneth Lincoln's suggestion that *The Road* is "a book to be read seriously, if at all, as a survival manual in the way Hemingway taught his readers to make camp after war, or to tie a fishing lure" (165).

8. For an interpretation that explains this shifting perspective as *The Road*'s modeling of a trauma narrative, see Francisco Collardo-Rodriguez.

9. For a thorough description of the relationship between the absence of choice, here, and the force of hunger in the text, see Matthew Mullins.

10. For interpretations of the regional versus global implications of the piles of clothes as remnants of chattel slavery or the Holocaust, see Andrew Hoberek.

11. Like Francisco Collardo-Rodriguez's argument that *The Road* models a trauma narrative, please see Katherine Snyder for an explanation alternative of the one provided here that frames *Oryx and Crake* as trauma narrative.

12. I follow Margaret Atwood, here, in her division between science fiction and speculative fiction: "the science fiction label belongs on books with things in them that we can't yet do, such as going through a wormhole in space to another universe; and speculative fiction means a work that employs the means already to hand."

13. I restrict myself in this paper to only the first third of Margaret Atwood's *MadAddam* trilogy because *Oryx and Crake* utilizes the multiple narrative perspectives that I find to be a bridge between *The Road* and *Ghostwritten*. For a more comprehensive illustration of the lives of those who live in the Pleeblands, please see *The Year of the Flood* (2010) and *MadAddam* (2013).

14. In "No Apocalypse, Not Now (Full Speed Ahead, Seven Missiles, Seven Missives)," Jacques Derrida observes the stakes of the threat of nuclear annihilation in the late twentieth-century when he claims "total nuclear war…as a fantasy, a phantasm, conditions every discourse and all strategies" (23).

15. See especially, here, Bertholde Schoene who claims that "*Ghostwritten* constitutes an acutely fragmented, yet at the same time smoothly cohesive composition strategically broken up…to open [Mitchell's] work up to the structure of the world as he finds it, capturing its planetary exposure and existential finitude" (51). It is in Schoene's development of the "existential" that I find his analysis problematic. Schoene goes on to claim that the terrorist attack in the novel's first chapter "is on a world so thoroughly globalized that its specific target could be anywhere on earth" (57) and uses this claim as evidence for his argument that *Ghostwritten*'s "main interest is in humanity's existential interrelatedness" (58). Instead, I think of the "existential" as a formulation far too abstract to account for a terrorist attack that I find *must* occur in Japan both because of the chapter's concern with the influences of global capitalism on a specifically Japanese culture and because I find that Mitchell's work is concerned with the very concrete interrelatedness between citizens and their political worlds. While Schoene's analysis is a commendable addition to critical analyses of cosmopolitanism, I find that there is far more depth to Mitchell's first chapter than his argument allows.

16. In the same essay in which Jacques Derrida claims that literature cannot speak of anything but the "remainderless and a-symbolic destruction of literature" (see note 14) he also claims that a nuclear apocalypse is a non-event: "nuclear war has no precedent. It has never occurred itself; it is a non-event" (23). By "non-event," I understand Derrida to be drawing a distinction between that for which there is a precedent and, consequently, that of which we can speak and that for which there is no precedent and, thus, for which we cannot speak. Though quite abstract, David Robson provides a literary example of Derrida's idea in "Frye, Derrida, Pynchon and the Apocalyptic Space of Postmodern Fiction" when he brings the Derridean non-event to bear on Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*. Robson follows other critics in claiming that Pynchon's text ia "all about" the atomic bomb but that "the V-2 rocket…is a displacement of the Bomb: it is more comprehensible, something that can be negotiated by consciousness more easily than the thought of nuclear annihilation" (67). In this way, I understand a Derridean analysis of

Ghostwritten to emphasize the inability for the text to speak of the apocalypse in the Zookeeper's chapter and then to displace all of the significance of the apocalypse onto another entity (the Zookeeper, the state of the ecosystem, the state of the economy). Instead of taking this route, I would like to focus on the more concrete ways that *Ghostwritten* is "*still beckoning*," to reappropriate Derrida's terms, toward the ways that active, critical readers and citizens can be prepared to deal with exigent contemporary issues that threaten, but do not entail, apocalypse.

17. One of these writers is Jorge Luis Borges with whom the noncorpum "wrote some stories" (166) and for whom, according to Jonathan Boulter, the noncorpum is the inspiration for the short story "Funes the Memorius."

18. At the end of "Clear Island," Muntervary returns to her titular home where the American military finally finds her. The loyal residents of this isolated community both volunteer to physically defend Muntervary from the Americans and give her the courage to demand terms from the Americans in exchange for her work with artificial intelligence and quantum cognition. Thus, Muntercary finds that the simple commandments of the residents of Clear Island – no outsiders, protect our own – supply her with an indignant righteousness. Muntervary's insight that a complex act of courage can be driven by simple rules leads her to provide the Zookeeper with mechanistic laws.

19. Curiously, this fulfills the prediction of the American official who claimed earlier that the Zookeeper would make nuclear technology "as lethal as a shower of tennis balls."

20. Latour takes the fall of the Berlin Wall as his lead and claims, "the fall of the Berlin Wall symbolizes the fall of socialism. 'The triumph of liberalism, of capitalism'…but the triumph is short-lived…this same glorious year 1989 witnesses the first conferences on the global state of the planet: for some observers, they symbolize the end of capitalism" (8). This statement serves as fitting proof that the Berlin Wall is neither an object – merely a physical barrier between East and West Berlin – nor a subject that can speak for itself and declare itself a harbinger of the end of socialism. Instead, according to Latour, it is a quasi-object whose destruction throws the modern process of purification into question; if the Berlin Wall was the divide between capitalism and socialism, its destruction does not mean the "fall of socialism" nor the "end of capitalism." Rather it means that the modern process of purifications that necessitated a wall is significantly flawed and unable to account for the production of quasi-objects that its process entails.

21. Part of Latour's final chapter is concerned with proposing a "nonmodern constitution" in which one of the guarantees is that "the production of hybrids, by becoming explicit and collective, becomes the object of an enlarged democracy that regulates or slows down its cadence" (141) and the final chapter also proposes a "parliament of things" (142).

22. There are discrepancies between the real world event and the text: the text claims twenty-one deaths and many hundred injuries, in reality there were thirteen killed and many thousands injured; the text claims that the weapon used to deploy the gas was a device with a timer that Keisuke had to set while on the subway, in reality the sarin gas was released when the terrorists poked bags of liquid sarin with the ends of umbrellas.

Still, there are a number of overlaps between the fictional and real events that work in favor of this interpretation: both attacks occur on a subway in Tokyo; both attacks use an easy to manufacture biological weapon that can exist in gas form; both attacks occur at the behest of a religiously motivated cult leader who has surrounded himself with a bureaucratic structure of "ministers" (Mitchell 6) prepared to seize traditional political power after the attack; the leaders of both cults are arrested after the attack and a search of their bases uncovers the ingredients necessary for the homemade biological agent; after the arrest of the Guru, Keisuke laments that now he will no longer be able to elevate his alpha quotient which mirrors the remarkably similar concern of at least one Aum member after the arrest of their leader who claimed that his "greatest fear" was that "if Asahara disappears from this world I will not be able to gain enlightenment" (Metreaux 1151); one Aum attacker, Yasuo Hayashi, eluded arrest for twenty one months and was arrested on a remote island one thousand miles off the Japanese coast like the one that Keisuke has fled to by the end of the chapter; some of the symptoms of what appears to be paranoia in the chapter, such as Keisuke's feeling that there is subliminal messaging in the television, are actually borne out by research that finds that the Japanese government "manufactured" (McLaughlin 67) connections between Aum and another religious entity, Soka Gakkai, after the attacks in order to undermine Soka Gakkai's traditional political power; and, at the risk of circumstantial and intentionally fallacious evidence, in 1995 David Mitchell was living in Hiroshima, Japan writing and teaching English. *Ghostwritten* was published in 1999.

23. The precise point of the break occurs on page seventeen after an unclosed dash.

24. Though a common enough term in Japanese culture, Yumiko Iida explains that salarymen are a class of Japanese workers who, since the 1970's, "found emotional satisfaction and a sense of pride in their employment…an often total devotion to their employers that entailed a sacrifice of their personal lives" (432).

25. This attribution can most clearly be understood by Keisuke's claims that the Guru cured his allergies, gave him the power to both quit smoking cigarettes and quit masturbating and that "on His Serendipity's service…[he] always enjoy[s] good health" (6). The attribution of physical healing powers to the Guru also follows the patterns outlined by Daniel Metraux in shinshinsukyo (New New Religion) for which he observes an alleviation of physical sufferings including a lack of energy and "bad nasal problem[s]" (1146) to be a persuasive device.

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