



## Ecocide and Objectivity: Literary Thinking in *How the Dead Dream*

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A calamitous near future, already present for many, is wrenching art, literature, and the ways we talk about them. The more profound the emergency and urgency, the tighter the vise vitiating representation. Defictionalization, documentarism, expressivism, and a torqued “realism” appear as the available avenues for responsible representation. The planet is on fire, the accelerant monopolized and the burns socialized; art can be an extinguisher if only it slides into Instant Messages. Such conscriptions of art and literature as lovely adornment of ineffectual facts or as humanization of large-scale far-off problems are ubiquitous and beguiling, with creatives and critics alike beating the drum for more personalizing human-interest angles, more literalist disaster stories, more realistic climate depiction. Exigency declarations are de rigueur opening salvos for every humanities think piece, every critical theory monograph, and they are now becoming prescriptions for aesthetic production.

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Within this matrix of immediacy, directly presenting crisis and catastrophe is essential work. But what if literature is not employee of the month? Its qualifications slacken through indirection and tropes, defamiliarization and displacement, imaginativeness and mediation. It is a formal mode for syntheses, but not a communicative mode for propositions. If an edited collection on the ongoing matter of close reading could expectably incant these singularities and evanescences, this essay aims at something rather different: articulating literature's specific *objectivity*, the conceptual energies activated by its mediacy. Especially on the most pressing crisis—that of the ecocide—this mediacy, this distance from instrumentalism and resistance to extractive logics, this quality of being composed rather than expressed, this intervening in the ordinary, constitutes an exceptionally crucial competency.

Blossoming literary ecocriticism regularly underrates this talent for objectivity, enunciating instead more and more poignant calls for literalism. Critics like Amitav Ghosh lament that climate fiction has more often taken the particular shape of science fiction than of brutal mimesis, charging fiction writers with depicting the present or very near future in known settings.<sup>1</sup> Film scholars, newspaper critics, and even Hollywood producers now call for “more realistic”<sup>2</sup> representation, entreating the industry to directly feature “a successful transformation of society”<sup>3</sup> or effective acts for individuals, so as to surpass dystopia paralysis. “Realism” of the sort that volubly elaborates facts while “touch(ing) people’s hearts”<sup>4</sup> appears now in our critical gaze as the very best that art can do.<sup>5</sup> But literature affords more than the prettification of science or subjectification of the facts—it is the composition of new, unusual abstractions; the thickening and calibrating of thinking; the vectoring of our senses beyond the merely sensible. Such objectivity is arguably an even greater resource for the present than the various subjectivisms and literalisms activated by the demands for immediacy.

“Objectivity” in this sense means the quality of independence from individual perception or personal feeling; the quality of relating to the

<sup>1</sup> See Ghosh, *Great Derangement*.

<sup>2</sup> Ryzik, “Movies about Climate Change.”

<sup>3</sup> Buckley, “Scared of Climate Change.”

<sup>4</sup> Ryzik, “Movies about Climate Change.”

<sup>5</sup> This mimetic, referential, indicative conception does not exhaust realism.

object rather than the subject. Although literary critics—to say nothing of feminist epistemologists or historians of science—instinctually question such a divide and its implied differentiation between the arts and sciences, the regular mode of this questioning involves exposing the constructedness and unavailability of objectivity, its latent subjectivity.<sup>6</sup> It should, however, be possible to flip the question—to pursue the latent objectivity in the putatively subjective knowledge domains. Such at least was the wager of Theodor Adorno, who prized the internal necessity of an artwork's form as an aesthetic modality of objectivity. For Adorno intrinsic unity in good works actuates the object's own objectivity, a specifically intellectual agency: “art is rationality which criticizes rationality without withdrawing from it.”<sup>7</sup> Taking inspiration from Adorno, what I want to pinpoint with “objectivity” in these pages is a capacity for conceptuality, a faculty for synthesis, which runs perpendicular to, but also parallels, the quantitative or the empirical, the phenomenal and the embodied. Literature is capable of thinking, not only of eliciting feeling or immediately expressing the personal or contextual. Literary language exercises mediacy, soliciting methods attuned to mediation rather than fixated on immediate uptake in affect or data. We critics have widely accepted these two poles, championing quantification or empathogenesis as our best justifications in the time of post-disciplinarity and decommissioned education, of private knowledge and self-expression. But the objectivity of the literary itself opens a different avenue. Literature's mediacy and its intrinsic abstractions model the kinds of imaginative projection integral for responding to the dismantled university, social inequality, and climate catastrophe. We need literary objectivity if there is to be any hope of imagining better spaces and composing better states, of synthesizing different values and instituting infrastructure more conducive to human flourishing.

While these prospects of literary utopianism, literary world building, and literary conceptuality have always been modern, they look differently by the dusking light of the Anthropocene. Now the facts amass and the conceptual complexities swell: How do humans fathom their own

<sup>6</sup>In their book *Objectivity*, note both that “Objectivity has a history” and that “the history of scientific objectivity is surprisingly short. It first emerged in the mid-nineteenth century” (27). See also Donna Haraway's exploration of the pitfalls of constructedness in Haraway, “Situated Knowledges.”

<sup>7</sup>Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 55.

extinction? How do we cognize the murder of the ecosphere? What has caused it and what will obtain after? An enormity of interrelated factors, an unrepresentable totality with some nonetheless representable intensive tendencies: profit-maximization, extractivist ideology, inattention to the future. To begin to think of literary contributions to addressing ecocide, we might start at these biggest registers: literature, as the making of something more than the phenomenal world, is inherently speculative in ways that attune it to futurity; literary language, in its estrangement from ordinary language, harkens value systems other than the most instrumental or the most efficacious extraction; literary counterfactuals, fictional worlds, alternate signifiers provide infusions that check extractivism. Such interjections afforded by the literary in principle must of course be enacted in specific works and judged in specific readings, but keeping the general potential in mind can expand the ways we appreciate the contributions of literature and art beyond the literalist options.

Mediacy is the renewable resource that literature offers our resource crisis. This promise has been impressively indicated by Nathan Hensley and Philip Steer in their introductory essay “Ecological Formalism,” which sets aspirations for their edited volume by arguing for the coordinating, synthetic function of literary form, practicing the linkages among components of a system or temporal locations in history that are necessary for fathoming ecological destruction. In their account of the power of the novel specifically, the form seems to name a capacity *for* ecology, form-as-ecology: novels construct organized, structured, dialectical situations, grafting personal to social, local to global, past to present, quotidian to systemic. This ecological thinking resplendent in the form supersedes referential or thematic ecological content. Instead of reading for content then, literary critics inclined to ecological questions ought to read for form. In a crisis wrought of extractivism, it would be good if our critical methods were not themselves extractive, mining thematic ore from broader ecosystems, seizing on stray references in the margins. Rather, our specific skill as literary critics, and the specific force that literary works tender in social cataclysm, is an interjective making, the composing of thoughts, the mediacy of formalization.

What are the literary critical processes—and the apt literary objects—that can fulfill these aspirations? In pursuit of this ecological form, this essay takes up a novel that works outside the literalist paradigm, seeding its thought with neither the subjectivization of environmental degradation, nor with the prime coordinates of plausible contemporary

atmospheric experience, but with the particles of past worlding that objectively precipitate our present ecocide. Lydia Millet's *How the Dead Dream* (2008) conjures early 1990s Los Angeles as an epicenter of automobile fetishism, real estate speculation, animal cruelty, and social alienation, and weaves these relations together through a third person narration centered loosely on an obtuse, repugnant man. Refusing personalization and circumventing direct reference to climate crises, the novel resounds its different formal components of setting, narration, and figure into a devastating representation of resource recklessness and extinction.

Its shard-like lyrical prose and short total span compress these many aspects of environment and relationality into a literary thought that reckons with the truth of the irrevocable: a few decades ago, the American mania for oil-propelled land development reached a point of no return, that now imperils animals and humans. The peril is unevenly distributed but also random; man-made human extinction is the ultimate untimely death. *How the Dead Dream* articulates this concept of the causes and effects of climate crisis without referential dystopian scenes of displacement, without carbon facts, without words like "atmosphere," "greenhouse," or "fossil fuel," and without any likable victims courting our identification. It uses the concatenation of novelistic form to objectivize this concept, to activate it figuratively and mediately rather than iteratively and immediately. This is how literature thinks. Close reading embraces this thinking, asking of literature not literalism but mediacy, and giving in return not extracted direct messages of immediate salience, but affirmative regard for the constructions of alternative conceptuality.

Objectivity functions as a name for the aesthetic and conceptual project of *How the Dead Dream* in three ways that I will explore here. One, an intensified, problematized evocation of setting. Two, an impersonal "anti-protagonist" presented in third-person narration. Three, an elliptical narrative mode including constant elisions, eddying figures, and an ambiguous ending. In each of these vectors, the novel works to actuate dimensions other than the immediate, the personal, the literal. And the multidimensional object formed by the conjuncture of the vectors actuates the dialectic that cognizing ecocide and synthesizing alternative modes of production in the ecocorpse requires mediacy, impersonality, and figuration. Reified and habitual ways of seeing will not enable our response to the enormity of climate destruction. Prevailing authentications of literature as self-writing and autofiction will not tap the

creative objectivity that must fuel our making. The imagined communities, extraordinary logics, defamiliarized signifiers, and alternate universes in literature open portals to different dispensations. Literary critical enterprises in the environmental humanities predicated on offering anything less short sell the crisis and the vivifying, vital role of imagination, clever synthesis, and originative form for outpacing technocratic solutions and extractive paradigms.

If literary studies do not generally explore objectivity, this is no doubt because subjectivity has long been the celebrated epistemic virtue of both literature and literary study. On the side of the work, we find elaborations of the author's intent, of the specific refraction of specific social context, of the unparaphraseable, of the singularity of the literary event, of the resistance to theory, of the right to represent, of negligible sample size. On the side of the reader, we find reader response, affect theory, the right to recognition, MRIs, the passion of the critic, and the sympathy industrial complex. Across these disparate methods and movements in literary study, the field is determined by its unrestricted, roving, catholic approach to itself. Thus, some critics argue that epistemic pluralism, while grounds for frequent disagreements, is what makes literary study important, and others argue that the subjective basis of the discipline has enabled the public at large to believe they simply don't need the kind of knowledge we offer. Whether or not one believes it is possible to produce a coherent account of our method and our object, the fact of the debate thereupon contributes to the positioning of our field as subjective, not subject to syntheses, context-dependent (with larger political, economic, and cultural forces driving the intellectual trends and methodological innovations, rather than the core object or consistent discipline). Our findings are not replicable.

This methodological subjectivism entails of course the frequent thesis that literature itself does not exist. There are genres but not forms, there are institutions but not literariness, there are specific works but not a general category. Read and unread texts are equally promising for the scholar; manuscripts and journals and letters, to say nothing of train schedules and city records and magazine advertisements, all warrant consideration in interpreting a text; the written word dating before the invention of disciplines or the rise of fiction is as ripe for analysis as Netflix original content or Instagram poetry. We understand texts as expressions of an author's subjectivity, characters as having a right to be represented

by those who share their social location, and the function of literary creation to be empathogenesis.

Often literary critics connect this emphatic sense of the subjective and the singular to ethical and political positions. Following the lead of our objects, we understand our own knowledge as situated, constructed, and ephemeral. We understand the force of our cumulative knowledge as nuancing, qualifying, hybridizing, and de-reifying, moving against broader socioeconomic forces of abstraction and reification and broader epistemic tendencies of generalization and quantification. The task of the critic, we so frequently argue, is to linger with the fleeting, to cower before the sublime, to host an encounter, to resound intimations. Aesthetic judgment has long ago been forsworn as elitist, so our expertise should not culminate in it. We even undermine the hard-won authority of our own interpretations with constant declarations that literature is inexhaustible and will always court new alternative elaborations.

If this sketch of the contours of overarching notions in literary critical method and literary reception convincingly suggests the pervasiveness of subjectivist orientations and outcomes, it perhaps becomes clear why it is counterintuitive to think of literary study as trafficking in the objective. While this essay does not want to argue for objective method (since the computational turn has culminated that impulse), it does want to argue for the objectivity of the literary. Literary texts compose ideas in nonpropositional fashion. The specific mode of the novel is to produce this composing through the interrelation of different formal registers: setting resounding plot, point of view reinforcing figure, characterization repeating temporality. Novels implicitly pose the question of how their many pieces fit together, and this fabricated whole is a projection of the integral world they precipitate.

## 1 PART ONE

*How the Dead Dream* channels heightened energy into its craft of setting, inverting normal ratios of background–foreground and ordinary unadorned surveys of property. Hyper-attunement to and figurative description of landscapes, roadways, locations, buildings, windows, doors, design materials, blueprints, gardens, staircases, forests, parks, yards anchors the narrative, which also curiously suspends colloquial identity. For some time, no known setting is wholly named, even as a continuous movement between interior and exterior divines an interpenetration

between construction and consumption, endeavor and environment, bespeaking anthropocenic earth writing in another tongue. The novel's first sentence refers to an American president but no more specific location is given, until after around twenty pages, when the partially named protagonist (known only by an initial, T.) goes to college in "North Carolina"; eventually it is implied that his home town is on the east coast (of his mother the narrator relays: "She had grown up in a southern climate and the winters were long in Connecticut"<sup>8</sup>), though the banal fact in an independent clause is rather detached as a location. Both of these are states without cities. Eventually T. moves to Santa Monica, the independent municipality on the Los Angeles County coast, and the momentum of the plot takes off once the terrain of southern California becomes activated as the environmental domain. Though most iconic of Hollywood celebrities and the hegemonic cultural matrix, Los Angeles less directly but still viscerally evokes the capital of cars, the westward frontier, and the territory of artificial irrigation, a mirage of habitability in a superhighway desert. Later, an unspecified Central American country trafficking in many languages becomes the site of a resort development, of a surprise storm, and of the novel's ambiguous ending.

Within its diffuse environmental scope, the novel also precipitates a kind of historical uncertainty, a plotted temporal axis to complement its obscure spatial one. The events take place before cell phones, but that absence is the only clue for the first quarter of the book. Neither politicians ("the faces on the small screen were interchangeable") nor wars are named (53); branded technology, like the Mercedes S-Class that is T.'s beloved car in Santa Monica, puts the action after 1972 but not more pinpointed than that. Only a full third of the way through the book, when T.'s mother is convalescing after a stroke, does a nurse query ("can you tell me what year it is?"), revealing "1990" as an unconfirmed answer (68). The deferred establishment of time suggests a bidirectional relationship to the origin of the story—on the one hand, consistently anytime after 1972s oil crisis and the end of Bretton Woods, the American capitalist leadership class made catastrophic energy decisions leading to twenty-first-century ruin; on the other hand, the early 1990s specifically accelerate those decisions in individual consumer activity (desert homes, SUVs, personal debt). Coupled with the eccentric occlusions of

<sup>8</sup>*How the Dead Dream*, 19. Hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

T's familial origins (his mother in an emotional and cognitive fog, his father disappearing and reappearing as queer), the novel asserts a probing, suspended relation to origins and causes, a managed confusion as to our atmospheric coordinates. How did we get here, and how can we get clear? These probing questions of orientation and origin, of destination and destiny, of the present and its causes, are aroused by the book's figurative system, and accretively answered in its ultimate figurative fusions.

## 2 PART TWO

The uncertainty of time and even space is redoubled in the impersonal tenor of the narration, an aesthetic engineered not only by the ambivalent and exteriorized relation to the problematic protagonist but also by free indirect discourse. Imparting a figure for its own approach, a moment of transition from T.'s attributed mentation to the generalized abstraction of free indirect discourse intones: "a car interior should be smooth and well-ordered, not festooned with hopeful signals of the driver's personality" (89). T. emits little identificatory appeal and the narrative purveys little characterological depth, casting instead a generic type, ubiquitous, normal, indicative. T. is an agent of destruction of the planet, but not out of personal malice, just out of business as usual. He wants to leave a mark on the world, and like all the capitalists of the great acceleration, he appraises that mark in economic rather than ecological terms: "It wasn't that he needed to be well-known—he would be happy to be the gray eminence behind a publicly traded logo—more that he wanted to have a hand in the revolutions of the market itself, in the ebb and the flow" (31). He wants—and even the wanting is not a personal failing but an impersonal drive for ease. The generic and flawed protagonist refigures the uncertain and accentuated setting: what matters in this book is not the precious person, but the environment he has had a hand in casually destroying for future dispersed persons unknown.

The novel's opening quickly roots T.'s representativeness in his political economic drives, and wastes no time telegraphing that its focal character is no hero. The first sentence conjures a subject of indeterminate age and no proper name, with a puerile affection for genocide: "His first idol was Andrew Jackson." As the opening unfolds, the "his" becomes a "he" who attends school but with few geopolitical coordinates; his mother is minimally contoured as "the sole Catholic" on his block and eventually

he comes to be referred to as “T.” (with no referent for the abbreviation). A monster without a name, his only affections evidently for dollars and cents and ever foxier means to amass them, T. is an intriguing focal point busy with extortions, thefts, and schemes, underneath which rests only a blank of the personal; “it was crucial, he believed, to learn which aspects of his character to make available to sight and which to keep hidden” (15). A statement indeed of the novel’s own characterization strategy, this studied partial perspective propels the action indifferently to identifications of or with its own protagonist. Riveting representations of sensitive environments and marauding men need not hinge on subjective attachments.

The first very large development project T. undertakes illustrates the novel’s framing of the impersonal quality of his endeavors:

In the desert subdivisions would spread...in the distance homeowners in the settlement would be able to make out in the night sky the hulking shape of the Panamint mountains, the lights of the naval base winking beneath.

And in the morning, as the sun rose to the east over the national monument, automated sprinklers would come on and begin their twitching rotations, misting the putting greens and the fairways and the sculpted oases of red-and-yellow birds of paradise and palm, bringing songbirds out of nowhere to perch in the mesquite and palo verde trees lining the courses.

Hundreds of units were already presold.

[...]

Was it not a decent way for life to end, in the peace of all that slowness? That he would not wish for an end like that himself was irrelevant. The buyers were not him.

Never pretend to know better, had been the first lesson of real estate. His own preferences were only a private luxury. (60–61)

This sequence does not reveal what end he would wish, what his own preferences entail. Instead it shuttles between a conditional and a present, constructing in the current timeline of the future visions. Such shuttling is an exercise in ecologic: appreciating the ramifications in the future of the projects in the present. Because it is housing rather than commercial properties that T. develops, from his first minor transaction to his first huge venture, these passages also link the elementary relations of dwelling to the problematic enterprises of desert irrigation, asphalt composition,

and transportation infrastructure. Humans unquestionably need places to live, but at what scale, of what material, to what ends?

As the impersonal narration progresses, it frequently pivots, at passages of potential personal pique, into second-person pronouns, transmuting back into generic implication. When, for instance, T. has recently had a nauseating encounter with a customer in one of his developments demanding to pave over desert plants with asphalt, for ease of not having to turn the steering wheel when parking, the revulsion inspires shameful revelations of his and our own, species-generic, similarity:

He had never, he realized one night, been away from a road before, never in his whole life been out of sight of pavement [...] What place would that be, a whole world without roads. It was a panicking thought. A world without roads! He would go nowhere in such a place. He would be trapped where he was, he would have lived out his life only where he was born.

And the world outside the roads was not straight or smooth [...] it was whirlpools and washes of soil and the mass of the clouds, dispersing into each other and leveling distinctions. It was trying to invade him and he should be alarmed. He was in danger. What you needed more than anything, for the purposes of ambition, was certainty, was a belief that the rest of being, the entirety of the cosmos, should not be allowed to penetrate and divert you from the causes—the chief and primary cause, which was, clearly, yourself. (130)

T.'s deep thoughts are slashed as little other than self-promotion, social climbing that existentially defines a group smaller than the species but larger than an individual: the subset of wealthy, powerful, oblivious humans who have precipitated its extinction.

Aptly, reflections on the land and animals, rather than on human failings or human suffering, anchor this novel's few telegraphic statements on climate crisis. Ledgers of degradation ensue not personally but interspeciesly: upon learning that regulators will require one of his developments to set-aside "a mitigation" (a small plot of land to maintain a habitat for a rare rat species), T.'s thoughts again objectivize themselves in free indirect: "Cities were being built, built up into the sky, battlements of convenience and utopias of consumption—the momentum of empire he had always cherished. But under their foundations the crust of the earth seemed to be shifting and loosening, falling away and curving under itself" (125).

The interaction of these two dynamics we've thus far explored—intensified setting and impersonality—generates much of the objectivity effect. Emotional states are presented not in vocabulary of the interior, but through exteriority. For example, when T. is grieving the sudden death of a girlfriend, his affective state is less described than his fluctuating attunement to his environment.

He worked in order to keep up the pace and the focus, worked hard and steadily, and gradually the usual texture of rooms crept back - rooms, buildings, streets and the sky. In the office he watched as elements of the lobby lost their alien particularity. Turning to background again were the file cabinet, the phone, the television with ticker tape running across the bottom. In his own office was a relief map of the Mojave project; he put his hands on the hollow ridges of the mountain and felt the plastic peaks digging into his palms" (100).

Notably, the state of grief is figured here not as indifference to environment, everything is a blur, the bereaved often say—but rather as unusual texture, over-sensitivity, alien particularity of the streets and the plastic peaks. Grief and loss, the sequence seems to say, evince themselves not in intimate reflection or personal worship (there is virtually nothing said of Beth and certainly nothing of her particular qualities in these sequences), not in subjective experience, but in objective attunement, in the contours of objects and the totality linking file cabinets and maps to streets and the sky. In a typically lyrical moment, this environmentalized grief transfigures the ecosphere itself: "He thought of her then, watching flotillas of leaves drifting and bobbing on the surface, and it was less difficult than before -as though the shock, once absorbed, had spread so thin and wide that it was only the skin of the world" (113).

That skin fleshes out so many wounded relations. From childhood, T. stands estranged from other people. His father disappears near the beginning of the book, and it takes months for an adult T. and his mother to discover that their decades-long marriage was, as the father puts it, "only a dream" and that he has commenced a new life as a gay Floridian without further ceremony (50). The mother is an obsessive, condemning catholic among protestants, who attempts suicide and then descends into dementia and trichophobia. He has no friends but suffers the company of an abusive bigot because Fulton invests in T.'s

developments. He has two principal employees, one of whom he appreciates, and when she gives him a ride to the car dealership, he meets her daughter Casey, whom a bad car accident has rendered paraplegic. At an investor cocktail hour, he meets Beth, an investor's assistant; "she did not give her last name" and little of their exchange is relayed, but soon she becomes T.'s fond companion, and soon after that she succumbs to "sudden cardiac death" (91). In an accounting of dead relatives, orphans, and "estranged or distant" connections, "he tried to enumerate family members and came up with almost none" (195). A dog he uncharacteristically adopts is subsequently kidnapped and tortured, perhaps by Fulton, necessitating amputation. After a strange friendship ensues with Casey, she makes an advance on T., but when she detects a post-tryst flinch, she shuts him off instantly, including moving out of her own apartment. All the maimed and the lonely, the disaffected and the abandoned, evoke so many failed relations, doing everything wrong from the familial and the intimate to the professional and the societal. Personalizations and intimate scales will not clear the haze of the violently wet environment and the rapacious denialism; personalizations are also where those start. Every tie, every dreamlike alliance, every usurious partnership already encodes the private, instrumental, optimizations that rationalize carbon modernity.

### 3 PART THREE

Although narrative is often celebrated as a vehicle for exercising links between causes and effects—and therefore as the framework of causality and consequence for uniquely reticulating the known facts into a pressing message—part of the strength of *How the Dead Dream*'s modality of environmental objectivity is its delinked and even elliptical form. The book uses chapters to segment the action (two hundred fifty pages spanning ten parts), but it markedly also uses, at variable intervals, dinkuses for transitions unmade, and even more frequently, simple double breaks dividing paragraphs for gaps, skips, aversions. Via these ellipses, major transformations in T.'s projects, his thinking, and his relationships are often produced rather than narrated. Leaps between events and obscured decisions pitch the text over a set of questions: why these projects? Why these places? What motivates these or any people? Most shocking of all of the ellipses is the fading away of the action in the novel's final pages, after T. has gotten lost in a forest, his guide stricken dead in his sleep, and he lays down to sleep himself, shivering, starving, dehydrated, evidently dying.

The novel does not conclude so much as drowse, adopting a delirious cyclicity in place of its previous sharp leaps, and T.'s bed becomes shared with an unspecified animal:

He would let go, but never give up. A name, a life, the street he lived on when he was ten: goodbye then, soon, to all of them. This was what was occurring all over, as the world dwindled and its colors were stripped from it. People kept busy on their surface, but underneath it they were sleeping, sleeping in their billions. They were sleeping simply, as the other animals did, sleeping and dreaming of the life that might once have been.

As the animal slept its way through time until the end of it came, so would he.

[...]

Back to the beginning, and on to the end—home was flesh, was nearness. Poor animal. It thought he was its mother, but its mother was gone.

As, after a while, all the mothers would be.

T. sleeps, and may not awaken (that the novel some years later inspired a sequel, after other intervening books, and further a threequel, makes the question all the cloudier). The decrepit trope of death as sleep has been prefigured by the novel's title, whose twisted temporality denominates the failures of no-future thinking. The dead do not dream, they are not sleeping. But if they did, they would rehearse the occluded causes and partial objects that brought them to death. While human beings have been alive, a very small percentage of them—in the boardrooms of fossil fuel corporations, in the most powerful statehouses, in their asphalt drive-ways suffocating desert plants—have dreamed up a way of life that will mean only death for most. Untimely death ordained by the Haut Monde has for centuries been the fate of the poor and wretched of the earth, and thus scholars feverishly debate whether the present ecocide can have any distinction.<sup>9</sup> In consigning its obtuse, impersonal car-loving land-developing protagonist to uncertain undeliberate death in the deformed wild terrain after a hurricane, in an unspecified southern country, around 1990, *How the Dead Dream* hazes over a generic humanity and the specific class of humanity that has caused the current extinction event.

<sup>9</sup>Notably, Kathryn Yusoff, Dana Luciano, Donna Haraway.

*How the Dead Dream* thinks via setting, impersonality, and ellipsis. It isn't set in the future or even the present, but in that absolutely transformative period of the great acceleration, the early 1990s, and its intensified and problematized production of setting invites a lot of slow processing about when and where we are, and why. Similarly, it isn't personally narrated (not in the first person, like so much contemporary fiction, and not promoting identification with its sociopathic focal point), which is essential for making appear the privatizations fueling carbon modernity. *How the Dead Dream* asks us to laminate impersonality and estranged/attuned ecology, it asks us to read for connection and cause, to cognize the ecocide, to end the destruction. The novel's elliptical quality intricates these connections, while also sharpening our focus: this is not an international saga coordinating lots of locales Babel style, but a winnowed, harrowing concentration on the place and people that matter as the causal force: wealthy Angeleno real estate scions and their investors. Ecocriticism often cherishes complexity and interpenetrating agencies; *How the Dead Dream* offers the simplicity of conceptualizing fault, underlining what must be therefore unambiguously transformed.

Literary objectivity promotes this fathoming of causality, the very intellectual modality refused by the Latourianism of most ecocriticism. The problem of ecocide is enormous, but rather than the complexity of distributed agency and nonhuman-human continuums, this enormity poses the simplicity of rapacious, nihilistic capitalism practiced by a very small number of specific humans. Literary objectivity perceives connections of this structural sort; literary form works by the whispered insistence that its elements belong together, and asks for criticism to say out loud the syntheses and abstractions intoned by the formal interrelation. Such syntheses are vital for integration, imagination, and projection—the intellectual praxis for political determination.

*How the Dead Dream's* paradoxical title alludes to paradoxical intellection: not only dream logic, but the impossible temporality of unconsciousness after death, a modality of thinking unavailable in ordinary phenomenality. This literary objectivity obtains not through iteration of current conditions or probable futures, not through literalistic mimesis of rising tides and fossil fuel executives, but through the uniquely novelistic ecology of interfused setting, character, figure, and narration. *How the Dead Dream* intercalates its elements into a proposition that unplanned exurban development, private profit, psychic obtuseness, and the supervalence of the automobile cause untimely death, animal cruelty, human

disfigurement, and ecological abandon. With this thought, the novel's intervention in the world isn't sugarcoating facts, but tendering aesthetic objectivity, ideas which require contemplation to actualize. For what comes next, for promoting flourishing and for mitigating war, for any hope at all, we need entirely new syntheses, different vocabularies, structures of feeling, scaffolds of meaning, and world infrastructures—the very resources literary objectivity stores.

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