THE DARK ECOLOGY OF WILLIAM GIBSON'S *NEUROMANCER*: TECHNOLOGY,

OBJECT-ORIENTED ONTOLOGY, AND THE DAWNING OF ENTANGLEMENT

by

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The Dark Ecology of William Gibson's *Neuromancer*: Technology, Object-Oriented

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As titles such as *The End of Nature*, "The Death of Environmentalism," *Ecology without Nature*, and *The Death of Nature* evince, in recent years the validity of a socially constructed Nature, as separate from culture, has been extensively problematized. Paradoxically, the dilemma posed by the nature/culture opposition stems largely from environmentalist movements that locate Nature outside of the human sphere. In contrast to this mainstream division, science fiction author William Gibson's novel *Neuromancer* depicts its human characters as inextricably linked to their environment, albeit through their recognition of their creation of a new world order—one in which waste, pollution, and technology are inescapable. These characters' cohabitation with the intentional objects of their surroundings thus symbolizes an *ecological* worldview.

At the intersection of the call for an end to Nature and the dawning recognition of ecological entanglement, a new strain of philosophy, *object-oriented ontology* (OOO), stands to address humanity's urgent need for an engagement with the world around it. Defining all entities as objects with withdrawn qualities, OOO proffers a method for attending to the ways that objects (inter)act, free of presuppositions to totalized knowledge. Accordingly, OOO places all beings on equal ontological footing. Apart from its rejection of anthropocentrism, this nonhierarchical approach to being calls into question an exclusionary concept of nature, as well as the perception that nature exists in specific places, namely those untouched by humans.

Through an OOO reading of the objects in *Neuromancer*, the representation of information technology, and in particular cyberspace, is rendered comparable to the sort of globalized ecology that seems preferable to current environmentalisms. Through the novel's portrayal of technoculture's boundless connectivity, conflation of Artificial Intelligences and humans, and the character's necessarily incomplete knowledge, *Neuromancer* explores the ramifications of the entanglement of human, technological, and environmental objects. At the same time, it challenges conventional ecocriticism, which tends to privilege an aestheticized redemptive Nature, through its radically inclusive understanding of ecology. Accordingly, *Neuromancer* divulges its critical potential through a reinscription of nature that accounts for the coexistence of all things.

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Part I.
Introduction

The opposite of nature is impossible. –Buckminster Fuller

The death knell has sounded for the concept of Nature[1]. Titles such as *The End of Nature*, "The Death of Environmentalism," *Ecology without Nature*, and *The Death of Nature* are just a sampling of publications that evince this verdict. Bruno Latour summarizes the consensus of these works when he writes, "*under the pretext of protecting nature, the ecology movements have also retained the conception of nature that makes their political struggle hopeless*" (19). Indeed, environmental platforms have historically clung to stilted notions of Nature that ultimately reinforce the detachment that they strive to abolish. Furthermore, ecocritics have been hard-pressed to present a coherent critique, when "the whole field of ecocriticism is fraught with ontological anxiety," for, "to ask what *is* nature is, in essence, to ask what is *is*?" (Claborn 377). Cultural historian and theorist Raymond Williams has described the futility of delineating "nature":

> Nature is perhaps the most complex word in the language. It is relatively easy to
> distinguish three areas of meaning: (i) the essential quality and character *of* something;
> (ii) the inherent force which directs either the world or human beings or both; (iii) the
> material world itself, taken as including or not including human beings. Yet it is evident
> that within (ii) and (iii), though the area of reference is broadly clear, precise meanings
> are variable and at times even opposed. The historical development through these three
> senses is important, but it is also significant that all three senses, and the main variations
> and alternatives within the two most difficult of them, are still active and widespread in

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[1] I capitalize Nature to emphasize the social construction of the term.

contemporary usage. (219)

Indeed, an inverse ratio of certainty exists between nature (iii) and Nature (ii); nature seems to be comprised of specific entities while Nature conveys a whole greater than its parts. Both forms seem to exist elsewhere, as objects of our contemplation. In a radical departure from these prevailing views of nature, philosopher Graham Harman proclaims, "nature is not natural and can never be naturalized, even when human beings are far from the scene. Nature is unnatural, if the world 'nature' is supposed to describe the status of extant slabs of inert matter" (*Guerrilla* 251). Thus, at its core, the dismissal of Nature is a rejection of a concept of the natural. As Timothy Morton declares, "there are coral reefs and bunnies, but no Nature" ("Here Comes" 178).

Similarly, when science fiction author William Gibson proclaims, "The future is here. It's just not very evenly distributed," (Gladstone) he, too, refutes the illusion of a totalized Nature, in two distinct ways. First, he understands that different modes of existence, different time scales, comprise reality at any given time. Thus, the variable between these modes of existence is time, not space. In an age of global warming and ecological crises, then, it is only a matter of time until our future *is* "evenly distributed." The second implication of this notion is that, ultimately, nothing is entirely separate from the rest. The realization that matter does not disappear, but only changes form, has long been accepted in the form of the First Law of Thermodynamics. However, the concept of Nature devised by modern Western societies tends to suggest that there is an outside to Nature, a place where one is unaffected by human activity. Furthermore, this idea of Nature as somehow distinct from humans characterizes environmentalist movements, which continually stress the need to protect *particular* places, as if these places were not continuous with the rest of the biosphere. Thus, Gibson's affirmation stands in contrast to current

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environmentalisms, as it conveys an *ecological* impression of the continuity of all things, and by extension, a radically inclusive nature.

In fact, the aporia surrounding various concepts of Nature has led to internal divisions amongst environmentalisms. Although certain environmentalists champion pet causes such as global warming, wilderness conservation, or environmental justice, environmental policy largely involves the promotion of transportation, industrialization, urbanization, and other uses of environmental resources. As such, environmentalism appears to be another special interest group (Meyer 155). As Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus argue in "The Death of Environmentalism," "the roots of the environmental community's failure can be found in the way it designates certain problems as environmental and others as not" (25). Indeed, global warming has long been subsumed under the "environmental" heading, while global issues such as poverty, war, and the rapidity of technological advances are deemed "societal" concerns. As the aforementioned titles suggest, a common strategy for combating such myopia has been to abandon hackneyed terminology. Thus, along with Nature, "modern environmentalism, with all of its unexamined assumptions, outdated concepts and exhausted strategies, must die so that something new can live" (Shellenberger and Nordhaus 21). However, rather than concocting a new environmental vocabulary, moving beyond Nature requires a fundamental shift in cultural perceptions of being—properly speaking, a new ontology. Such cultural perceptions are deeply connected to cultural productions. That is, aesthetics plays a central role in constructing a culture's worldview (Morton *Ecology* 2). Accordingly, Timothy Morton offers an alternative rhetorical mode: "I call this transitional mode 'dark ecology'… Instead of perpetuating metaphors of depth and authenticity (as in deep ecology), we might aim for something profound yet ironic, neither nihilistic nor solipsistic, but aware like a character in a noir movie of her or his

entanglement in and with life-forms" (Morton "Queer" 279). In fact, such an aesthetic characterizes the aforementioned William Gibson's novel, *Neuromancer*. Just as "the future is already here, it's just not very evenly distributed," *Neuromancer* prefigures an ontology of dark ecological entanglement.

The first novel to win science fiction's triple crown of awards (The Hugo, Nebula, and Philip K. Dick Awards) (McCaffery 217), *Neuromancer* documents the convoluted scheme of Wintermute, an Artificial Intelligence (AI) that manipulates a cyberspace hacker named Case in order to merge with another AI, Neuromancer, and become the consciousness of cyberspace. Often cited as a dystopian narrative of ecocide, *Neuromancer* provides a textual laboratory for rethinking those unpleasant, and thus unaddressed, aspects of coexistence. As a tale of technological subversion that does not fit the standard mold of ecocriticism, the novel is particularly ripe for an exposition of dark ecology. The impetus for this "dark ecology" derives from the idea that "[i]f ecological criticism is to progress—beyond the idea of progress itself as the domination of nature, that is—it must engage negativity fully rather than formulate suppressants against perceiving it" (Morton *Ecology* 123). As the originator of dark ecology, Timothy Morton, describes its implications:

> The ecological thought permits no distance. Thinking interdependence involves dissolving the barrier between 'over here' and 'over there,' and more fundamentally, the metaphysical illusion of rigid, narrow boundaries between inside and outside. Thinking interdependence involves thinking difference. This means confronting the fact that all beings are related to each other negatively and differentially, in an open system without center or edge. (*Ecological Thought* 39)

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In the case of the technologically overridden environment of *Neuromancer,* thinking ecologically requires accepting the entangled relations between humans, artificial intelligence, and technological objects. However, technology has been particularly difficult to absorb into an ecological worldview:

> Ecological culture is supposed to be soft and organic, old-fashioned and kitschy, while technoculture is hard, cool, and electronic. But there are surprising connections between the imminent ecological catastrophe and the emergence of virtual reality…Both virtual reality and the ecological panic are about immersive experiences in which our usual reference point, or illusion of one, has been lost…Virtual reality and the ecological emergency point out the hard truth that *we never had this position* in the first place.
>
> (Morton *Ecology* 26-7)

Part and parcel of a dark ecology involves seeing the world as composed entirely of *real* objects that generate *real* effects. These objects may be living or nonliving, and an idea is an entity as much as a tangible thing. Objects do not exist *for* subjects, and thus, each object is self-determined. A dark ecology must not ignore the autonomy of objects, and in particular, those objects that exemplify the for-us fallacy: technologies. This view of objects as autonomous and independent has been theorized in a recent strain of philosophy called *object-oriented ontology*. In fact, dark ecology may benefit from joining forces with object-oriented ontology[2]. Indeed, the following examination proposes that reading the entangled relations of *Neuromancer* through the lenses of dark ecology and OOO illustrates that understanding technological objects *qua* objects confirms that, first, there is no Nature, only specific objects, and second, that these entities are autonomous, and thus there are always aspects of these objects that cannot be known.

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[2] Hereafter referred to as OOO

The literary value of dark ecology and OOO is that they allow us to see *any* text as ecological, insofar as these frameworks demonstrate that the environment is not "Nature," and thus cannot be forced into the background. Reading Gibson's text with attention to the ways its environment—its objects—act, proffers a narrative for our current technologically saturated environment. Thus, the following essay will demonstrate that the complex relationships enacted between humans, artificial intelligences, and technological objects in *Neuromancer* may provide a model for the recognition of *co*existence as a basic component of existence, and thus a defining feature of a specifically ecological, collaborative nature.

Part II.
No More Shakespeare after Chernobyl

The physicist Erwin Schrödinger has identified two central axioms that inform the sciences' view of nature. The first, that nature is objective, led to the separation of subject and object (Keller 141). This subject-object dualism, which is almost universally construed as a precipitant of environmental destruction, supposes a conscious subject, "over here," that contemplates its object, Nature, "over there." If the subject is taken to be human and the object natural, then this binary casts the human outside of nature. The second axiom, that nature is knowable, has exacted its own vengeance:

> Science is born out of the addition of Schrödinger's second tenet—out of the confidence that nature, so objectified, is indeed knowable. Not only is a connection between us as knowers and the reality to be known here posited, but the connection posited is of an extraordinarily special nature. For most scientists it implies a congruence between our scientific minds and the natural world—not unlike Plato's assumption of kinship between mind and form…that permits us to read the laws of reality without distortion, without error, and without omission. Belief in the knowability of nature is implicitly a belief in a one-to-one correspondence between theory and reality. (Keller 142)

While the dilemma that ensued from the splitting of subject and object has been well rehearsed by now, the belief in nature's knowability has created equally unsettling circumstances. Aside from the fact that scientific theory demands reductionism, such an assumption leads to a belief that humans are the only creatures capable of defining reality. Furthermore, it engenders the view that the human mind has the singular ability to comprehend nature. As will be shown in a later discussion, *Neuromancer*, dark ecology, and OOO undermine the validity of the sciences'