

# The Real (of) Debt: Notes Toward an Ethics of Trash

Nathan Gorelick

**Abstract:** Drawing from Jean Baudrillard's critique of the National Debt Clock at Times square, Georges Bataille's *The Accursed Share*, and David Foster Wallace's novel *Infinite Jest*, this paper examines those material concretions of the debt economy for which it can find no use, to which it assigns no value, and that its fantasy of a future of infinite growth leaves behind in the accumulating wastes of the present. Expanding on Baudrillard's critique, the paper argues that the engine of neoliberal capitalism is a trade in *abstract negativity* that obfuscates its catastrophic consequences for both marginalized populations and the global environment. In this context, the task of criticism thus is not to enumerate political prescriptions for the immediate alleviation of the present and ongoing catastrophe but to advance an ethical sensibility that can situate what Bataille calls the "restrictive economy" of debt within a "general economy" that emphasizes expenditure over accumulation. Wallace's novel provides a literary frame in which to imagine such an ethics by suggesting that the first step toward addressing the end of the world is to assume responsibility for the excesses of consumerist desire, that is, to realign our attention away from the debt's abstract negativity and toward the mounting trash heap that literally and symbolically obscures the possibility of another future.

**Keywords:** Debt, Garbage, neoliberalism, Baudrillard, Bataille, Infinite Jest, Environment, Psychoanalysis.

Garbage – Everything subtracted from the  
present is added to the future with interest  
*Contradictionary*<sup>1</sup>

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow  
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,  
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only  
A heap of broken images...  
T. S. Eliot<sup>2</sup>

Does virtual reality live on after the  
catastrophe of the real world?  
Jean Baudrillard<sup>3</sup>

*What a waste*, I thought as I drove through an endless sea of sugarcane in the northeastern Brazilian state of Alagoas in the summer of 2016. Rolling hills of vibrant green left fallow and gone to seed, nobody to harvest the fields, nowhere to sell the crops. Between the planting and the expected harvest the ethanol market had collapsed. Hundreds of thousands of acres of what had been pristine rainforest was now nothing but worthless monoculture. Less than worthless, really, since even from the road I could see the toll the cane was taking on the otherwise rich tropical soil, thus on the earth's ability to replace what had been lost. Occasionally, a *fazenda*, one of Brazil's colonial-era plantation houses, could be seen presiding over the green wastes, overseeing the panorama of destruction its owner had wrought against his own lands. From the ledges of the *serras* overhanging the fields I could see sporadic encampments of Brazil's landless poor: shanties made of tarps and trash bags, occupied by squatters who, at any moment and without warning, could be forced from their makeshift homes, beaten or killed by police working in service to the cane fields' absent owners, their few possessions bulldozed or burned, their legal recourse nil.

I watched the landless peasants scratching a subsistence from their small enclave amid the vast verdant remains of unfortunate ethanol speculation. I drove past their modest gardens along the roadsides where, squeezed between the fields and the asphalt, they struggled to grow food instead of fuel. And it occurred to me that these fallow fields and their disposable occupants share a common ground—or better, a common groundlessness: both, in various ways, are the result of a globalised debt-driven economy. The cane fields were planted according to a trade in abstraction, based on projections in the commodity futures markets that proved ill-conceived. The peasants, dispossessed by a longer, colonial and post-colonial history of the same sort of abstractionism,

were perpetually vulnerable to dispossession because the land was not theirs to plough and because they did not have the credit, could not acquire the debt, with which to rectify their landlessness. But all this abstraction was not at all abstract. It was there in the overgrown forest of cash crops whose strange beauty was somehow compounded by its monotonous uniformity, in the plastic walls of the farmers' simple dwellings, in the people themselves. This, I thought, is the real of debt.

The following is an attempt to theorise this realisation. More precisely, I want to think the relation between the global trade in debt—both the most abstract and the most fundamental economic element, older even than money itself<sup>4</sup>—and the material concretions of the debt economy for which it can find no use, to which it assigns no value, and that its fantasy of a future of infinite growth leaves behind in the accumulating wastes of the present. The latter, the real of debt, it seems to me, is the real debt. It is neither abstract nor expiable; it cannot be absolved through repayment or forgiveness or bankruptcy or economic cataclysm or revolution or anything else. The real debt, the real of debt, the realisation of the debt, is garbage.

What can theory say about garbage? A great deal, no doubt, more and more all the time. A better question, then: What can theory say about it that has not already been said? Rather than rush toward the accumulation of new theoretical apparatuses to deal with the problem of garbage, thus adopting the same consumerist attitude of accumulation at the basis of the problem itself, it seems appropriate to our topic that we consider and adapt the theories and theorists we already have, whose critical value is far from exhausted. This, after all, is one indication of the value of a theory. It is not so much a conceptualising of the immediate exigencies of the present as it is an assemblage of ideas with which to think the *horizon* of the present—which is to say, the future the present imagines as the limit of its own thinkability. Theory is a challenge to the limits of the possibilities of thought. In this sense, theory does not posit a new future but instead is always digging through the present's garbage, looking for what the limits of the present have allowed us to refuse or ignore, for what within the horizon of the present has been pushed to the margins of conceptuality, or representation, or ethical solicitude. True thought takes place here, at the margins of the thinkable.

To my mind, the two theorists most acutely attuned to this theoretical sensibility particularly with respect to the question of the real (of) debt are Jean Baudrillard—for whom everything, in the last analysis, is garbage—and Georges Bataille, for whom garbage is everything. In what follows, our point of departure will be Baudrillard's consideration of debt's place within a global network of meaningless abstraction. Following his brief meditation on the National Debt

Clock at Times Square and its function within a larger “catastrophic imaginary,” the first half of this essay thus concerns debt as a paragon of what I call *abstract negativity*, the concrete violence it imposes against global populations in the context of contemporary neoliberalism, and what happens when this violence recoils against those populations whose colonial and neocolonial interests it had previously defended. Our first question, in other words, is the question with which I was confronted in the Brazilian countryside: What happens when the debt economy’s catastrophic imaginary collides with its catastrophic reality?

The purpose of this first line of inquiry is to examine how an abstract negativity like debt concretises itself. From here, we have to widen our inventory of concretions to include not only debt’s violence against the neocolonial periphery and its return to the neocolonial center, but also the actual material byproducts of the neoliberal ideology of endless consumption and growth. We have to move beyond Baudrillard’s necessarily restrictive economic perspective and follow Bataille into the wider field of general economy, where we can situate the debt economy *within* the mass of garbage it produces and show that the true limit of its abstract negativity is the irrecoverable expenditure of waste it tries, ever more desperately, to ignore.

In a place like Alagoas, such ignorance is impossible. So, as I drove through the material wastes of Brazilian agribusiness and saw, again and again, little islands of landless peasants defying their supposed disposability simply by trying to survive, cultivating a land that by any measure of social justice ought to have been theirs, building roadside homes out of scavenged materials, occupying the literal margins of their society—as I took all this in, my altruistic Americanism forced the question: what can be done about all this? For anyone familiar with Brazilian political and economic history, the question must seem tragically ridiculous. As it happens, though, I had been hauling a large brick of paper around Brazil to help pass the time at bus stations and airports, a heavy object called *Infinite Jest*, which realigned the question away from the urgency of altruism and toward the greater urgency of moral and ethical reflection. I found David Foster Wallace’s literary account of the relation between desire and its excesses, and his generalisation of this relation through precisely the question of garbage, compelling not because the novel offers any neat solutions but because it reveals that the question prior to any informed action with respect to garbage is the question of responsibility, thus of ethics, and more exactly of the ethics of desire. More than this, such an ethics cannot result from mere didacticism, from frightening statistics and thick descriptions of environmental disaster, from an ever more detailed account of the world picture, because such tactics only feed our addiction to the catastrophic imaginary and fuel the economy of enjoyment at the root of garbage. It must instead come about

through a move beyond the myth of an apocalyptic future and into the facts of the catastrophic present. Wallace's novel, expansive in every sense, provides just such an imaginary foundation, and can inform a radical realignment of ethics away from a concern for *having* and toward a contrary concern for *losing*. The lesson of *Infinite Jest* (which echoes the lesson of psychoanalysis and allows us to push it beyond its clinical frame) is that ethics, and the action it informs, begins with the problem of loss. Ethics means taking responsibility for the wreckage of one's desire.

Insofar as theory concerns the horizon of the present, thus the futurity of the future, garbage, in all its forms, is one of the great theoretical questions of our time. The following by no means claims to be a complete account of the question, but only a fragmentary and obviously personal arrangement of one of its possible iterations. The urgency of this subject cannot be understated, but not because the time to avert global catastrophe is running out. That catastrophe is already here. The problem for us therefore is not how to preserve the future but how to think the refuse of the present. If the future will be anything other than a repetition of the catastrophe, it first will have to invent new ways of relating to what remains of the end of the world.

## I. The Future Did Not Take Place

Baudrillard's short meditation on the National Debt Clock situates this rebuke against the excesses of government spending with respect to his wider appraisal of our contemporary reality—such as it is. What this representation of debt truly represents, according to Baudrillard, has nothing to do with the actuality of state spending, global capitalism, or the present's mortgaging of its future. Rather it is a window into a "parallel universe" in which the catastrophic economic collapse the clock supposedly portends has already taken place—not in actuality, of course, but in the sense that it instances the "catastrophic imaginary" that has supplanted the grand narrative of historical progress which once gave our society its coherence and direction. In place of the latter, which promised our collective arrival at some final truth or at least the possibility of that truth, the catastrophic imaginary orients our relation to the future around a perpetual meaninglessness. "The Times Square initiative is designed to make the state feel guilty about the way it runs the country," Baudrillard explains, "and intended to warn the citizens about the imminent collapse of the financial and public spheres. But, of course, the exorbitant figure deprives the billboard of any meaning (even figures have lost their credit line)." The sheer size of the number, ticking ever upward at around \$20,000 every second, renders its own message inconceivable. Despite its pretensions to monumentality, thus

its address on behalf of the indebted future, the clock's message never arrives at its destination. It is a doomsday clock, in other words, but one that counts indefinitely upward and therefore consigns the day of reckoning to an infinitely deferred future, to a future that never arrives, and therefore, not despite but because of its catastrophic forecast, guarantees futurity as such.

An obvious retort might be that the clock's message inheres precisely in the figure's incomprehensible enormity; its exorbitance and attendant unthinkability are the source of the guilt—and, no doubt, the terror—the clock's authors intended to instill. This, however, presumes that the clock is the sign of some actual referent, that its display corresponds to some real thing implicated within the global marketplace of goods and services, investments and returns, production, distribution, and so on, to which the future finally belongs. Only if this is the case and the debt is *real* will it have to be paid. Baudrillard insists to the contrary that the economy to which the exorbitant figure refers is an entirely symbolic one, that “the debt will never be paid” and there “will be no judgment day for this virtual bankruptcy.”<sup>5</sup>

This prediction is not a matter of pure theory or even prophecy. It is already borne out by the clock's own farcical history. In the first place, Seymour Durst, who installed the clock at Times Square in 1989, had no plans ever to remove it; “It'll be up as long as the debt or the city lasts,” he proclaimed. “If it bothers people, then it's working.”<sup>6</sup> This permanence indicates that the clock's purpose is to fail its own purpose. It is not supposed to halt the growth of the debt but only to irritate us with the constant reminder of an economic catastrophe as immanent as it is apparently inexorable. In short, Durst fully assumed his installation's position within the catastrophic imaginary. This was further confirmed when the national debt actually declined for the first two years of the new millennium and the clock was unplugged and concealed with a large red, white, and blue curtain because *it was not programmed to count down*.<sup>7</sup> The machine itself could dream in but one direction. The rising number presumes a ‘-’ at its left margin, so that the size of the number indicates not an astronomical quantity but an abyssal negativity, a much-less-than nothing. It is the sign of a debt beyond any possibility of remediation, a guilt without hope of expiation, a black hole from whose gravity not one dollar can escape. Despite its ceaseless upward climb, the clock can operate only an arithmetic of pure subtraction.

This radical *abstract negativity* does not even rise to what Slavoj Žižek might call a hysterical provocation, since this would imply that even if it is futile it nonetheless is something other and more than an inadvertently nihilistic cancellation of its own significance.<sup>8</sup> For even when functioning technologically and ideologically according to its intended design, the clock achieves the same

symbolic vacuousness: when it was reactivated and the U.S. debt rose beyond \$10 trillion in October, 2008, the digital display ran out of space with which to show the new number. To accommodate the new figure, the clock's manager (the Durst Organization) temporarily hacked the display and replaced the dollar sign at the front with an additional number. Could there be any more patent confirmation of Baudrillard's assertion that the figure on the clock is utterly divorced from any material reference, that it functions only as a symbolic index of the global debt network which unites and drives global capital, that "the acceleration of capital has exonerated money of its involvements with the everyday universe of production, value and utility"? Currency, of course, is already abstraction *par excellence*, but here even the symbol of the currency to which the number refers—the symbol of an abstraction—was replaced by the abyssal negativity of the number itself. And even this purely numerical reference could not keep pace with the acceleration of capital it wants to repudiate.

Finally, in order to realign all these symbols with the supposed reality they supposedly symbolize, the clock has since been fitted with a new display capable of counting to a *quadrillion*. Or, more precisely—since fiduciary matters, matters of trust, demand precision—to nine quadrillion and so on, thus:

\$9,999,999,999,999,999

We can already anticipate what will happen once even this preposterous number is exceeded: nothing much. Or rather, more of the same. Another few digits added to the display? Perhaps another change of location, this time from its admonishing position next to the IRS building on Sixth Avenue (a perverse accusation, insofar as responsibility for any debt surely belongs to the creditors and not the collectors) to some narrow alley capable of supporting the elongated, ever elongating façade. Maybe the software will again glitch out and the numbers will be replaced by the ceaseless blinking of a string of zeroes. Maybe then it would finally prove itself a fitting monument to the excesses of late capitalism, to a world order that operates according to an ever-accelerating process of dematerialisation, that increasingly no longer requires the illusion of any material supports for its amassment of revenue and instead follows a trajectory of pure monetization: money begetting money (dividend trading), loans against non-existent assets (subprime lending), wealth accumulation through defaults on those loans (credit default swaps), high-frequency trading, algorithm against algorithm....<sup>9</sup>

Though he was right about its place within the catastrophic imaginary, this late history of derealised capital shows that Baudrillard did not go far enough. Within this emergent schema, debt, whether public or private, makes money

not because it must one day be paid with interest, nor because it will never be paid, but because the debt *can* never be paid. To pay the debt would deprive capitalism of its trade in abstract negativity, thus the guarantee of its own future and the catastrophic imaginary that fuels its fantasy of limitless growth.<sup>10</sup> The debt clock is, after all, a clock, ticking ever higher/lower, claiming to remind us of the endless avalanche of obligation under which we are burying the future but in fact cynically extending its reach toward an unlimited futurity. The debt is the future.

## II. The Future Already Happened

This is an easy observation to make, no doubt, for any of us privileged to live at some remove from the lived realities of the debt economy, sequestered from the violence of sequestration, assured of our own future not despite but because of the endless ticking of the debt clock. Not so, however, for the vast majority of the world's population, to whom debt is certainly a negative quantity but also far from abstract.

Let us not commit the same mistake Baudrillard's critics made especially with respect to his *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*—namely, the erroneous claim that his insistence upon the Gulf War's hyperreality discounts or callously ignores its real human and environmental costs. In fact, the opposite is true. War's hyperreality replaces its reality not for its victims but for their aggressors, enabling the devaluation of life, livelihood, and property by replacing actual death and destruction with the disappearance of a few digitally rendered characters as if in a video game. Neoimperial warfare's total saturation by its own technological mediation is the condition for the possibility of its violence; its concretion is an effect of its abstraction. This comparison with debt is not merely an analogy. "Debt is war," as Susan George has argued, "because you can do everything with debt that you can with classical warfare except to occupy territory."<sup>11</sup> Debt is warfare by other means.<sup>12</sup>

The story of this widespread war is well-known. Across the so-called global south, decolonisation brought free trade two centuries after the latter's infrastructure and interests had been established, cynically applying *l'asseiz-faire* ideology to markets whose competitive capacities had been deliberately, often brutally minimized by their colonial managers. When these young markets faltered against inevitable shifts in the tides of commerce—shifts their more established counterparts were equipped to withstand—their governments, desperate to provide the people with the most basic human needs and deprived of the means to do so themselves, turned back to the colonisers. Loans were issued under strict conditions that exercised a transnational, neocolonial

authoritarianism under the innocuous heading of “structural adjustment programs”; subsistence economies were forced to convert into export economies designed primarily to service their debts, which they were obligated to do regardless of the massive trade-off in health and welfare this implied; increasing exports generated a feedback loop in which growing productivity drove down the value of the exported goods, locking indebted economies into a vicious circle of overproduction and devaluation. In short, the very means the creditors imposed to ensure that these (re)colonized populations paid their debt was the primary cause of the debt’s exacerbation.

As with any other instance of modern warfare, the debt’s abstract negativity enables the proliferation and perpetuation of its concrete consequences. In this regard, the debt can never be paid not only because to do so would deprive the global economy of one of its essential ingredients, but also because the costs of servicing the debt exceed the debtor nations’ financial capacities—with no end in sight, with no *imaginable* end, since the end is already here. While the National Debt Clock is an element of the catastrophic imaginary which promises an apocalypse that can never take place, for most of the world that apocalypse has already arrived.<sup>13</sup>

The recent encroachment of this peripheralized catastrophic reality into the center of the global catastrophic imaginary has not precipitated a reconsideration of the moral or practical consequences of predatory neoliberalism but rather a reassertion of the difference between virtual and actual bankruptcy. The collapse of the Greek economy, for instance, and its downward pressure on the whole of Europe occasioned a draconian reassertion of neoliberalism’s primacy over the older model of national sovereignty even as it brought the untenable realities of austerity into focus for a European and American audience that heretofore had been spared the obscene truth, the real costs, of the neocolonial politics of debt upon which its own wealth has been floating for decades. Under these circumstances, the recent explosion of reactionary nationalism on both sides of the Atlantic—Brexit and UKIP, the family Le Pen’s Front National, Trumpism, Islamism, militarized white separatism, isolationism—should come as no surprise.

The ugly reality of the everyday apocalypse, no longer constrained to the neocolonial periphery, galvanizes a desperate populism and makes way for a brash demagoguery that promises to reassert the center’s radical separateness from “the developing world.” We need not impose a simplistic equivalence to hear in this phenomenon a resonance with Aimé Césaire’s famous assertion that Nazism was not a historical accident but only the incursion of European colonialism into Europe itself; Nazism being a reminder “that no one colonizes innocently, that no one colonizes with impunity either; that a nation which

colonizes, that a civilization which justifies colonization—and therefore force—is already a sick civilization, a civilization which is morally diseased, which irresistibly, progressing from one consequence to another, one denial to another, calls for its Hitler, I mean its punishment.”<sup>14</sup> Today, the same boomerang effect is taking place apropos of neocolonialism. Having returned to its source, the neoliberal experiment produces in its metropolises (albeit to a smaller degree, for now) the same desperate economics under which the former colonies—and, it must be said, many among the metropolises’ own populations—have labored for generations. The result: a collective yearning for the quietude and stability of a past that never existed, a nostalgia as pitiable as it is dangerous, a xenophobic vitriol aimed at immigrants and refugees—the very populations whose livelihoods have been deliberately eroded by the same institutions the new nationalists accuse of eroding their own. What ought to be an occasion for globalised solidarity or at least empathy instead produces a recoil into a facile identitarianism among the disenfranchised middle classes, which is met by the intensification of an anti-democratic technocratic managerialism among the transnational financial elite.

We are living through the collision of the two parallel universes Baudrillard diagnosed according to the debt clock’s place within the catastrophic imaginary: the collapse of the future into the present, of the image of the infinitely deferred apocalypse into its ongoing realization. This is another kind of catastrophe, a symbolic catastrophe that threatens to overturn the futurity without which global capitalism’s endless accumulation of abstract negativity cannot persist. In this context the essence of political economy or economic policy is economic policing. This entails an amplification of the moralizing discourse of austerity, a refusal among the global network of financial institutions of any compromise with the pauperised masses, new or rewarmed rhetorical and representational strategies for the erasure of neoliberal, neocolonial violence and, when this fails, the delegitimation of any activism against it, which is dismissed as idealistic or naïve or terroristic or simply pathetic.

Thus, when in 2011 a group of financiers held flutes of champagne over the heads of the Occupy Wall Street demonstrators on the sidewalks below and toasted to their own legal and economic immunity, this was not a sign of either indifference or smug self-assurance; it was capitalism baring its teeth. Small wonder, then, that in 2016 bumptious demagogues offering a return to bygone days, a glorious future patterned after an idealized past, could convince the people (many of them, anyway, likely not the OWS crowd or their correlates in Europe) that by supporting the new demagogues and their nostalgic vision of another, less ferocious capitalism they could bite back. The obvious trouble is that, as with all objects of nostalgia, such a capitalism never existed. Even if

it could be made to exist, such a future would be no future at all, but only the reification of a repetition-compulsion, that is, of a fantasmatic desire to return to a mythical, primal state of complete contentment. Even more problematically, it presumes a concrete solution to an abstract problem—or rather, to a problem of abstraction. The institutions responsible for the debt economy are personified in a few emblems of the globalised financial and political elite, and it is onto these villains that the disaffected masses project their (clearly legitimate) anxieties while the systems of global trade in abstract negativity escape any real challenge. The debt clock ticks on.

### III. The Future From Now On

Debt thus entails three forms of catastrophe: the virtual, the actual, and the collision of the two. Only if it can resist the last and sustain the absolute division between the imaginary and the realised can the debt economy sustain the illusion of its own perpetuity. The debt clock is merely the most obvious and, in many ways, transparent weapon in the arsenal of symbols with which the cult of abstract negativity wages its war of representation. But while the figure on the clock presumes to go on growing without limit, the clock itself, the thing of metal and plastic and glass, is not immortal. Even the future cannot be delayed forever.

At this point, we have to introduce a further complication into Baudrillard's position—an observation regarding the conceptual foundations of his whole project that, to my knowledge, has escaped critical commentary, not because it is obscure but because it is obvious—that forces us to expand our conception of debt and futurity further into the domain of materiality, where the clock will not escape the reckoning this other, concrete domain of debt promises to exact.

My observation is this: most famously in *Simulations and Simulacra* and continuous throughout his major works Baudrillard's characterization of our modern condition as neither real nor unreal nor surreal but *hyperreal* presumes that meaning, however illusory, circulates within a *closed system of signs* wherein every instance of culture, every representation, references other signs within a larger framework of representations and therefore does not refer to any authentic, fixed reality outside that closed frame. There are a number of antecedents to this: Hegel's teleological quest for the pure self-motivated movement of the Concept, when all materiality will have been digested by its own ideality; Marx's investigation of exchange-value apropos of the commodity form; Nietzsche's announcement of the death of God, thus of the absence of any metaphysically guaranteed Truth at the core of Western reason; Freud's insight that interpretation is an indefinite procedure and that meaning therefore

is constructed rather than innate and discoverable; and, of course, Ferdinand de Saussure's inaugural semiotics, which established that signs are arbitrary, relational, and negatively defined, and therefore can only operate within a closed system the elements of which refer not to an extrinsic reality but only to one another. Though this list is far from complete, my point is that by appropriately situating his thought within this history of ideas we find that Baudrillard has simply extended this work on the Concept, commodity fetishism, the nihilism of the modern age, the limits of interpretation, and the conditions of the semiotic system to the actual conditions for the production, distribution and consumption of our contemporary reality. If we know there is no final guarantee of meaning, then everything comprising that reality can assume only a provisional meaning, and this only through its reference to other elements of itself. Reality is nothing but its own reflection. The ideological effect of this, according to Baudrillard, is that the *image*—void of any essential reference, radiating not some inner truth but only the light reflected by other images—reigns supreme.

All this is patent, but it allows us to introduce yet another idiom from Baudrillard's precedent intellectual history: his indictment of the catastrophic imaginary presumes a *restrictive economy* of debt. This, in a double sense: first, because it addresses an economic situation according to which everyone and everything are reduced to commodities (such is the essence and ethical thrust of neoliberalism) that, as Marx taught, assume their value only within a closed, abstract relational network of exchange; and second, because this condition mirrors the semiotic system that can function only if it is limited, restricted, to the play of relations among its constituent elements, a play around a center of meaning which history itself has rendered empty—whence the debt's brokering in abstract negativity.

Baudrillard therefore takes us only so far, and not far enough. To fully account for the properties and effects of the catastrophic imaginary, we have to move toward a *general economy* of debt. According to Bataille, from whom this distinction originates, the latter considers any restrictive economy, any closed system, within the larger frame of its relations to the totality of phenomena that implicate and are implicated by it. This is essential to any consideration of debt because no matter how abyssal the abstract negativity that sustains the catastrophic imaginary, the debt economy nonetheless produces a stubbornly material remainder for which it cannot fully account. This is not the same concretion at stake in neocolonialism and its recoil. Unlike the people and places it subjects to economic exploitation, it cannot assume this stubborn materiality and put it to work, cannot make *use* of it within its network of exchange. This is another kind of debt, in the strict sense that it imposes upon the future a responsibility for the excesses of the present, with interest. Trash, garbage,

debris, detritus, dejecta, dross, dregs, emissions, pollution, rubbish, runoff, refuse, waste, remains—everything that is disposed of or disposable, worthless, according to the logics of efficiency and accumulation, everything the restrictive economy of debt treats as merely epiphenomenal to its standard operations.

A few selected examples:

The problem with our global fossil fuel addiction is not that the oil wells may one day run dry but that it requires the rapid expenditure of energy that, originating with organic matter fueled by the sun, has been decomposed and concentrated over millions of years, locked in a kind of cold storage, and then reheated and released. What took eons for the earth to process into oil or coal is returned to its atmosphere in a geological instant without regard for the resultant disequilibrium. Climate change is the most measureable symptom of this literal excess of solar energy.

The end of this expenditure is nowhere in sight. The largest moving artificial objects in the world are survey vessels designed to detect off-shore oil and natural gas deposits.<sup>15</sup> The largest artificial objects *of any kind* are the massive sludge pools of mine tailings where residual materials isolated from a mining operation's target minerals are stored, usually indefinitely. These enormous ponds contain immense concentrations of toxic chemicals, cause an ecologically disastrous effect known as acid mine drainage, and can introduce additional atmospheric pollutants like the appetizingly named "polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons" (PAHs), in amounts that most environmental impact assessments have wildly underestimated.<sup>16</sup> Here, elements that have been present in the earth since its formation are freed from their geological entrapment and made to circulate in an aspect of the environment that cannot sustain them.<sup>17</sup>

Nor is this the end of the waste produced by mining. Beyond coal or iron or copper, the rare-earth elements extracted from the earth are converted into consumer electronics components that, thanks to planned obsolescence and the speed at which software development surpasses hardware capabilities, continue to bloat already clogged electronic waste disposal and recycling sites around the world. Here, PAHs and other toxins contaminate both the environments and the bodies of some of the world's most impoverished populations.<sup>18</sup>

Although these e-waste dumping grounds are immense, the largest landfill in the world—perhaps this deserves the title of largest artificial object?—is the Pacific garbage vortex, a massive and ever-growing flotilla of trash that occupies the largest ecosystem on earth, the Northern Pacific Gyre. Its monumental size is all the more astounding given that plastics were not developed until the mid-twentieth century. The candy wrapper skittering across a windblown street, the stray bottle cap tumbling toward the gutter, or the drifting shopping bag may

one day find themselves swirling in the vortex, or perhaps in one of the great garbage patches in each of the four other oceanic gyres. Most of this trash is comprised of plastics, which do not biodegrade but instead undergo a process of “photodegradation” under the sun’s heat; plastic objects are broken into ever smaller pieces, entering the food chain or crowding out marine biodiversity, serving as rafts for the transport of invasive species, setting off a cascade of unforeseeable but undoubtedly dire effects.<sup>19</sup>

Finally, we must be wary of reducing all this trash to a symptom of some lazy anthropocentrism since human beings, too, are wrapped into this logic of disposability. Whole populations are discarded as an irrelevant quantity within a global economic matrix that can find a use for them, if it finds a use for them, only as the hands that excavate reusable materials from the Chinese or African or South American e-waste dumps or the ship scavenging yards on the Bangladeshi coast. Let us not be tempted by disaster exoticism, however. The human costs of the pervasive logic of disposability are everywhere: in the United States, for instance, rates of air pollution are divided along racial and economic lines, “with over seventy percent of African Americans living in counties in violation of federal air pollution standards”;<sup>20</sup> abandoned and usually toxic industrial sites, so-called “brownfields,” litter the urban periphery, Native American lands, and rural landscapes since it is more economical for responsible parties to litigate than pay for cleanup or remediate affected communities; even conservationism is deployed in ways that exacerbate and solidify this environmental segregationism.<sup>21</sup> We need not enumerate the sad panoply of other possible examples to see that the globe is rife with zones of contamination and disposability. Étienne Balibar powerfully summarizes the situation: “the current mode of production and reproduction has become a mode of production for elimination, a reproduction of populations that are not likely to be productively used or exploited but are always already superfluous, and therefore can be only eliminated either through ‘political’ or ‘natural’ means—what some Latin American sociologists provocatively call *problacion* [sic] *chatarra*, ‘garbage humans,’ to be ‘thrown’ away, out of the global city.”<sup>22</sup> The confinement of valuation to the restrictive economy of the commodity thus enables an ontological devaluation, that is, the reduction of whole swaths of humanity—and therefore, of the human *as such*—to nullities on the ledger of global capital.

The source of all this trash is a market ideology that privileges accumulation over expenditure. Confined by its restrictive economic perspective to the logic and flow of commodities, fixated upon the ever-vanishing horizon of the limits to growth, the market cannot absorb these material expenses that its drive to endless accumulation exacts. In other words, the abstract negativity of

debt thinks like a restrictive economy with regard to its systems of account but behaves like a general economy with respect to its own byproducts. Because of its fixation on accumulation it practices an expenditure without reserve, giving to the environment without any expectation of return; indeed, such deadly, insupportable gifts are laden with the hope that they never will return. A hollow hope, to be sure, because *the earth itself is a restricted economy*. This is not an abstract hypothesis. Most life on the planet is dependent upon the general economy of the sun, which gives and gives without exchange, but while the stars and the universe are an open energetic system driven by entropy rather than recuperation the earth is a closed dynamic system, where energy is trapped, recirculated, or cast off. As Bataille observes, its capacity to absorb the sun's energy is limited by the amount of available space in which it can put that energy to use.

Solar radiation results in a superabundance of energy on the surface of the globe. But, first, living matter receives this energy and accumulates it within the limits given by the space that is available to it. It then radiates or squanders it, but before devoting an appreciable share to this radiation it makes maximum use of it for growth. Only the impossibility of continuing growth makes way for squander. Hence the real excess does not begin until the growth of the individual or group has reached its limits.<sup>23</sup>

On this view, "the only real limit" to growth is the biosphere's capacity to sustain it. Growth, Bataille explains, exerts *pressure* on its own limit, which results in either the expansion of the limit ("the clearing of a new space") or the "luxurious squandering" of the excess energy—for instance, in death, which "makes available to growth the place left vacant by death," and therefore does not really produce growth but only compensates for what has been lost.<sup>24</sup>

In this way, growth sustains life so long as it has somewhere to grow; death is the condition for the continuation of life only if it leaves a vacant space where life once again can take hold. Insofar as the economy of debt—of accelerating accumulation, indefinitely, into a limitless future—misunderstands itself as a restricted economy and mistreats its own material and energetic substrate as a general economy, however, it increasingly diminishes this vacancy by inverting the pressure operated by the biosphere. Industrial encroachment upsets the energetic equilibrium of the earth's restricted economy both by colonizing biotic spaces and by squandering the stored energy of the globe at a rate far beyond its capacity to recuperate it.

Once again, the debt cannot be paid. In this case, though, the source

of this impossibility is neither too little capital nor the normalisation of trade in abstract negativity, but *too much trash*: a stockpiling of excess energy that can be neither used nor destroyed, “and, like an unbroken animal that cannot be trained, it is this energy that destroys us; it is we who pay the price of the inevitable explosion.”<sup>25</sup> Bataille’s poetically eschatological prognosis suggests a final, great conflagration, but we can adapt his forecast to the present with the simple observation that the current androgenic collapse of the biosphere constitutes a slow explosion, irreversible and profound precisely because of its lack of spectacle.

#### IV. Gallows Garbage Humor

The end of the world is boring. Contrary to the apocalyptic delight with which it is sometimes imbued in cinema or literature, it fails to attract much attention from the vast majority of the consumer culture whose insatiable appetite for garbage, for what will have been garbage, fuels the slow explosion. This other form of debt, this ever-growing burden on the future, therefore cannot be reduced to its dull materiality. The root of the global trash pile is not the trash itself but the insatiability, the bottomless desire, that the debt clock represents, the desire for whose effects the consumer society refuses responsibility at all cost.

In short, we are enjoying ourselves to death.<sup>26</sup> Psychoanalysis—the art and science of this tendency to be pushed beyond the limits of pleasure and to enjoy what destroys us—would suggest that the ever-growing trash heap is not so much the revenge of objects as it is the return of the Real. To grasp what this means, however, we should not look to Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* or Lacan’s various characterizations of *jouissance*, but to David Foster Wallace’s colossal *Infinite Jest*. Though this novel is many things, it is nothing so much as a literary monument to the power and tragedy, and no doubt the beauty, of garbage. Anecdotes, testimonies, memories, thick descriptions of drug overdoses or sexual abuses, conversations that lead nowhere, dream narratives that defy interpretation, footnotes referencing books and academic articles that do not exist or that enumerate the chemical composition of actual existing pharmaceuticals, fictional film synopses, differential equations, fragments of correspondence, mysteries without solutions—everything piles up like so much refuse on the trash heap of history. The reader cannot, however, rest assured in the position of Walter Benjamin’s “Angel of History” who looks hopelessly backward upon the ever expanding rubble of the past, but is instead forced to look beyond the apotheosis of our collective contemporary obsession with the accumulation of abstract negativity, into a future world saturated and

reconfigured by its material remains.

The story concerns a plot by a band of ruthless Quebecois separatists to destroy the American public by disseminating a film so entertaining that its viewers want nothing but to watch it again and again, literally entertaining themselves to death. The United States government's ominously titled Office of Unspecified Services, meanwhile, works to frustrate the separatists' ambitions. Against this backdrop, dozens of characters intersect and diverge—with special attention to a rising junior tennis star at the Enfield Tennis Academy preparatory school in Boston; a recovering Demerol addict who works at the Ennet House treatment center down the hill from the tennis academy; and a legless Quebecois assassin—the relations among whom are usually obscure to the characters themselves. The secret struggle to find and contain the deadly entertainment (also called *Infinite Jest* and created by the tennis star's dead father) is not the red thread that truly binds the dizzying proliferation of characters. The film is only the emblem of an incapacity (a particularly American one, according to the Quebecois assassin) to limit one's own enjoyment, to not know when to stop or to not want to stop until one has moved beyond the point of no return. This is the real subject of the novel, framed in terms of *addiction*: to drugs and alcohol, or violence, or sex, or more socially acceptable fixations like lexicography, celebrity, and cleanliness.

By weaving these variegated instances of addiction together, Wallace shows that those who wander the streets of Boston looking for their next fix or are forced back into the streets when they fail to follow the Ennet House protocols, whose preferred modes of deathly enjoyment render them disposable, subhumanised—"garbage humans"—are different from the privileged prep school kids (many of whom are also into drugs) or the agents of government authority, or any of us, merely by a matter of degree. The basis of our universal humanity thus is not some Enlightenment ideal of inherent equality; rather it is the specifically human capacity to be carried beyond the limits of the useful or the pleasurable by our own desire. Although universal, the contours of such desire are singular to each human being, to what Lacan calls the logic of fantasy, which is why Wallace's characters all have their own stories about the traumatic origins of their various addictions and why those origins manifest a seeming infinity of possible symptoms. Everyone is implicated in Wallace's indictment. Nobody is excepted from the excesses to which the human may be driven by the logic of fantasy. Nobody is immune to such a deathly desire.

And at the core of Wallace's literary didacticism is the fact that nobody can take responsibility for the awful enjoyment to which their fantasy drives them but themselves. *Infinite Jest* expands this to the question of collective responsibility through the character of Johnny Gentle, Famous Crooner, an

American President and “founding standard-bearer of the seminal new Clean U.S. Party.” There is no way to avoid quoting the novel at length:

[The Clean U.S. Party is] the strange-seeming but politically prescient annular agnation of ultra-right jingoist hunt-deer-with-automatic-weapons types and far-left macrobiotic Save-the-Ozone, -Rain-Forests, - Whales, -Spotted-Owl-and-High-pH-Waterways ponytailed granola-crunchers, a surreal union of both Rush L.- and Hillary R.C.-disillusioned fringes [...] whose first platform’s plank had been Let’s Shoot Our Wastes Into Space, C.U.S.P. a kind of post-Perot national joke for three years, until—white-gloved finger on the pulse of an increasingly asthmatic and sunscreen-slathered and pissed-off American electorate—the C.U.S.P. suddenly swept to quadrennial victory in an angry reactionary voter-spasm [...] in a dark time when all landfills got full and all grapes were raisins and sometimes in some places the falling rain clunked instead of splatted, and also, recall, a post-Soviet and -Jihad era when—somehow even worse—there was no real Foreign Menace of any real unified potency to hate and fear, and the U.S. sort of turned on itself and its own philosophical fatigue and hideous redolent wastes with a spasm of panicked rage that in retrospect seems possible only in a time of geopolitical supremacy and consequent silence [...]. Johnny Gentle, the first U.S. President ever to swing his microphone around by the cord during his Inauguration speech. Whose new white-suited Office of Unspecified Services’ retinue required Inauguration-attendees to scrub and mask and then walk through chlorinated footbaths as at public pools. Johnny Gentle, managing somehow to look presidential in a Fukoama microfiltration mask, whose Inaugural Address heralded the advent of a Tighter, Tidier Nation. Who promised to clean up government and trim fat and sweep out waste and hose down our chemically troubled streets and to sleep darn little until he’d fashioned a way to rid the American psychosphere of the unpleasant debris of a throw-away past, to restore the majestic ambers and purple fruits of a culture he now promises to rid of the toxic effluvia choking our highways and littering our byways and grungeing up our sunsets and crudifying those harbors in which televised garbage-barges lay stacked up at anchor, clotted and impotent amid undulating clouds of potbellied gulls and those disgusting blue-bodied flies that live on shit (first U.S. President ever to say *shit* publicly, shuddering), rusty-hulled barges cruising up and

down petroleated coastlines and laying up reeky and stacked and emitting CO as they await the opening of new landfills and toxic repositories the People demanded in every area but their own. The Johnny Gentle whose C.U.S.P. had been totally up-front about seeing American renewal as an essentially aesthetic affair. The Johnny Gentle who promised to be the possibly sometimes unpopular architect of a more or less Spotless America that Cleaned Up Its Own Side of the Street. [...] A President J.G., F.C. who said he wasn't going to stand here and ask us to make some tough choices because he was standing here promising he was going to make them for us. Who asked us simply to sit back and enjoy the show.<sup>27</sup>

In this speculative future, the U.S.'s rage-spasm of disgust with its own mental and material wastes erupts only once it cannot project its rage and disgust onto some foreign enemy and is forced to look inward for a new abjection it can despise and around which its national identity can coalesce. Rather than accepting responsibility for the production and accumulation of its garbage, for the wreckage of its desire, the American people instead wish it away by electing a celebrity entertainer and obsessive germaphobe whose promise of aesthetic improvement at any cost transcends and disrupts established political ideologies. His candidacy echoes with a reactionary isolationism as much as with that old mantra of bourgeois environmentalism, "Not In My Back Yard." He is neither a conservationist nor an ascetic but a great showman whose schmaltzy swinging microphone recalls another time, a pristine past that we cannot see not because it never existed to begin with but because we can no longer see it over the mounting detritus of the present.

Upon taking office, Johnny Gentle is awakened to the fact that waste collection is much easier than waste disposal. Bataille has already prepared us to see why: because of a simple lack of space. Driven by both his campaign promises and his own germaphobia, Gentle and his administration deposit America's vast stores of toxic waste in the rural zones of northern New England, precipitating an unprecedented environmental and geological catastrophe known as "The Great Concavity." The Concavity engulfs Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, large swaths of New York and northern Massachusetts, and the entire populated area of lower Québec. To deal with the fall-out, the U.S., Canada, and Mexico are reorganized into a new Organization of North American Nations (O.N.A.N.) under the political doctrine of O.N.A.N.ism. Canada is forced to annex the Great Concavity by expanding Québec's southern border. Since Gentle's plan to launch all of America's garbage into space proved infeasible, it is instead collected and rocketed by immense sling-shots out of the U.S. and into the

Great Concavity, where giant feral infants roam the lands and whole forests grow and die in the space of a day. Its contaminants produce new, grotesque birth defects especially among the Quebecois. Massive fans are erected along the reconfigured United States' northern border to blow airborne toxins away from its population centers. Entire cities have to be relocated. To raise the funds for the mass evacuation of affected populations, Gentle sells *time itself* over to corporate sponsorship; thus, the first new year of "subsidized time" is the Year of the Whopper, followed by the Year of the Tucks Medicated Pad, the Year of the Trial-Size Dove Bar, and so on. With the advent of each new year, the designated corporate product is placed in the Statue of Liberty's raised, now torchless hand. Putting an ever-finer point on the thematics of waste, disposability, and that which refuses to be disposed of, the majority of the novel's action takes place at the close of the Year of the Adult Depend Undergarment, on the eve of the Year of Glad (as in the trash bag manufacturer).

Can there be a more fitting image of the neoliberal ideal of freedom than that of Lady Liberty holding a fast-food hamburger or, even better, an adult diaper? Like all great speculative fiction, the novel is set in the not-so-distant future in order to reflect the organizing principles of the present. This is indeed what is at stake in Wallace's dystopia, whose citizens behave as though nothing has changed despite the ongoing ecological catastrophe and for whom the solution to this self-wrought toxicity is a reaffirmation of the right to consume. The ambient hum of the giant fume-repelling fans, the thud of another massive waste disposal canister being shot into the sky, the calendar's advertisement of the Year of the Perdue Wonderchicken, the growing rates of mutation and disfigurement... none of this is remarkable either to the characters or the narrative voice. They are too enmeshed in their own quotidian struggles, their own addictions, their own fantasies and frustrations, to notice or care.

For our purposes, the lesson in *Infinite Jest* is this: for some, the death drive's favorite object may be a narcotic; for others, it is a self-destructive quest for fame, or a political eschatology, or a hoard of old memories, or a hyperbolic hygienicism; but for all of us, collectively, its lowest common denominator is trash. Trash is the cast-off remnant of that which was once imbued with desire but, since the essence of desire is the forestallment of its satisfaction, has since proved worthless. This is because desire aims not at fulfillment but at frustration. Frustration is the guarantor of desire's perpetuation. Trash, then, is the abject material trace of this constitutively unsatisfiable, universally human dimension of desire. Capitalism knows this very well. Its genius, the genius of President Johnny Gentle, Famous Crooner and the key to his electoral success, is his insight that desire adores a vacuum. His stupidity, our stupidity, is our refusal to admit that the dust in the vacuum will have to be deposited somewhere, and our collective

irresponsibility in the face of this dilemma.

This is what the end of the world looks like: a mounting aggregation of the trash we all inevitably produce in an era and according to an economic (and moral) mandate of seemingly limitless consumption. One day, the number on the debt clock will cease its downward climb not because the abstract negativity it indexes will have been reversed, not because the debt will be paid, but because it will find itself buried beneath a heap of garbage of which it also is a part. In this way, the answer to Baudrillard's question, "Does virtual reality live on after the catastrophe of the real world?" is *yes*. It lives on *in* the present and ongoing catastrophe of the real world, in the trash heap.

## V. Will the Future Have Been?

Two forms of debt, then: the abstraction which sustains consumptive desire and the concretion of that desire that is slowly consuming the future, without return. The conditions of the landless farmers in Brazil or the proliferating brownfields in the American heartland make clear that these are not parallel universes but two halves of the same reality. The first, the abstract negativity, is built upon a catastrophic imaginary according to which the worst is yet to come, an illusory apocalypse which obfuscates the fact that for many of those subject to its logic and commands the worst has already happened and continues to happen all the time. The second form of debt—the endless expanses of wasted rainforest and worthless sugarcane, the particulates and greenhouse gasses emitting from modern industry's every pore, the morass of old plastics littering the oceans—is one that cannot even theoretically be expiated, that moreover cannot be captured by any catastrophic imaginary since it belongs to that other domain of human experience Lacan called the Real. This is not to say that trash *is* the Real. I mean, rather, that its origin is the Real. It is the remainder of that domain of human experience which is organized by the logic of fantasy that pushes the human beyond the pleasure principle in its impossible quest for satisfaction. It is what happens when this logic is ripped from the singularity of the subject and colonised by the market ideology of endless growth, captured by the illusion that consumption will set us free. Free from what? From desire itself, of course; from the existential human experience of lack and into the plenitude of total satisfaction; into that same satisfaction, that perpetual happiness, proffered by the new demagogues, the Johnny Gentles of the disaffected masses.

If we know such freedom is an illusion, we must be wary of the question, *What is to be done?* Here, Baudrillard offers no solutions, but not because his is a hermeneutics of despair. Rather his insistence that our reality is only a fragmented and fragmentary reflection of itself ("A heap of broken images," as

T.S. Eliot writes), forces us to admit that there is no way out of the simulation, no going back to the good old days when signs meant things, no beyond of frustration. Such a time, like Johnny Gentle's pristine America, never really existed; meaning was only ever an effect of its own representation, not the other way around. The great terror of the present thus is capitalism's realization that this is so, which is why it brokers not in goods and services but in the emptiness at the core of the human, the hole in the human around which is traced the circuit of desire.

Within this context any supposed solution can only exercise the illusion of freedom, and thus cannot but replicate the illusion it means to dispel. We cannot opt out of this condition since voluntarism is never the answer to a problem of desire. Thus, before we forge yet another salvational discourse, another project to salvage what is left of the future from the trash heaps of the present, before we rush once again to act, let us contend with Bataille's assertion that what is first required is the "overturning of economic principles—the overturning of the ethics that grounds them."<sup>28</sup> This would require a realignment of economic values away from consumption and toward expenditure, or what Allen Stoekl describes as "a postsustainable state in which we labor in order to expend, not conserve," and "the channeling of excess in ways that ensure survival so that more excess can be thrown off."<sup>29</sup> In other words, it would mean a *conservation of the expendable* rather than of the indispensable.<sup>30</sup>

As I suggested at the beginning of this essay, every action entails an ethics, whether stated or acknowledged or neither. No action can presume to be responsible unless it is first squared with a framework of responsibility. Thus, foregrounding the question of our ethical relation to both the emptiness generative of desire and to the cast-off remnants of our endeavors to treat this emptiness is not a defense of inaction. It is a prior question about the values informing any action. Bataille continues: "The exposition of a *general economy* implies intervention in public affairs, certainly; but first of all and more profoundly what it aims at is consciousness,"<sup>31</sup> which means self-consciousness and historical consciousness, but also a rebuke of the false consciousness fostered by the catastrophic imaginary—it means a consciousness, first and foremost, of the real of debt. This need not be a salvational prospect. As the characters in *Infinite Jest* make clear, this ethical realignment must be undertaken without any guarantee that it will yield a desirable result. It requires a reconfiguration of our relation to desire as such and therefore cannot be calculated in advance. Against the Johnny Gentles of our world, we must insist that the wreckage of the past obscures our vision not of a time before the catastrophe but rather of a future beyond it. Will that future be another repetition of the past, thus no future at all? Is Brazil the future for all of us? Or

can we see past the logic and values of abstract negativity? If we could, would we even know what we were looking at? In any case, this much is clear: we have left the future a tremendous debt, a debt before which it will have no choice but to assume *our* responsibility for its amassment, a debt that can never be paid.

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- 1 CrimethInc. Writers' Bloc, *Contradictionary: A Bestiary of Words in Revolt* (Salem, OR: CrimethInc. Far East, 2013), 120.
  - 2 T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, ed. Michael North (New York: Norton, 2001), 5.
  - 3 Jean Baudrillard, "Global Debt and Parallel Universe," *Event-Scenes* (Oct. 16, 1996), <https://journals.uvic.ca/index.php/ctheory/article/view/14840/5711>; accessed October, 2016. Unless otherwise noted, subsequent references to Baudrillard can be found in this text.
  - 4 Money, in fact, was devised as an expedient with which to deal with debt, and not the other way around. See David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2011), esp. 18, 21-41.
  - 5 "Actually," David Graeber explains, "the remarkable thing about the statement 'one has to pay one's debts' is that even according to standard economic theory, it isn't true. A lender is supposed to accept a certain degree of risk. If all loans, no matter how idiotic, were still retrievable—if there were no bankruptcy laws, for instance—the results would be disastrous. What reason would lenders have not to make a stupid loan?" (*ibid.*, 3). In other words, lenders count on the inevitability that many debts will not be repaid; it is how they make their profits.
  - 6 M.J. Stephey, "A Brief History of The Times Square Debt Clock," *Time Magazine* (Oct. 14, 2008), <http://content.time.com/time/business/article/0,8599,1850269,00.html>; accessed October, 2016.
  - 7 The clock was temporarily deactivated both because glitches in the technology prevented it from properly counting backward and for ideological reasons. One news article on the shutdown, for instance, quotes a Wall Street investment economist (touted on his firm's website, by the way, as "the unquestioned Michael Jordan of federal debt projections") lamenting, "When the public debt was rising at the rate it was a decade ago, it was a great idea. But now it just becomes a basis for complacency" ("National Debt Clock stops, despite trillions of dollars in red ink," CNN [Sept., 7, 2000], <https://web.archive.org/web/20080129144855/http://edition.cnn.com/2000/US/09/07/debt.clock/>; accessed October, 2016).

- 8 Hysterical provocation means “addressing the Master with a demand which will be impossible for him to meet, and will thus expose his impotence. The problem with this strategy, however, is not only that the system cannot meet these demands, but that, in addition, those who voice them do not really want them to be realized” (Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* [New York: Verso, 2002], 60).
- 9 One could object that the clock represents the United States’ public debt and these examples of capitalism’s contemporary abstract negativity involve private debt. The Durst Organization’s symbolic reproach against government spending, however, functions only by collapsing this public/private distinction. The message, broadcasted to the anonymous crowds of New York City, is a common rebuke from so-called fiscal conservatism, namely that a financially responsible government ought to operate like a financially responsible household, spending no more than it earns. The symbol therefore should be read within its wider historical and economic context according to which debt is debt, and any shades of nuance between the public and the private spheres is a needless complication.
- 10 In truth, there is nothing especially modern about this. The Bank of England, for instance, which was the first of its kind, was founded in 1694 through a loan of £1,200,000 to the Royal Crown, in return for which the Bank was guaranteed a monopoly on the authority to issue banknotes. “To this day, this loan has never been paid back. It cannot be. If it ever were, the entire monetary system of Great Britain would cease to exist” (David Graeber, *Debt*, 49).
- 11 Cited in Ann Scholl and Facunda Arrizabalaga, “The Human Face of Economics in Argentina,” in *Beyond Borders: Thinking Critically About Global Issues*, ed. Paula S. Rothenberg (New York: Worth Publishers, 2006), 479.
- 12 Scholl and Arrizabalaga further argue that “international financial institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank and numerous private banks and governments, who knowingly lent billions of dollars, not only to the dictatorship in Argentina, but to Suharto in Indonesia, the dictatorships in Guatemala and El Salvador, Saddam Hussein in Iraq, Duvalier in Haiti, Pinochet in Chile, Somoza in Nicaragua, Noriega in Panama, and who continue to support the ‘drug war’ in Colombia, the illegal occupation of Iraq, Karimov in Uzbekistan and the apartheid in Israel, have not only contributed and continue to contribute to wars, massacres and despots, but were and are active accomplices” (ibid., 480).
- 13 This is not hyperbole. See, for example, George Caffentzis, “Neoliberalism in Africa, Apocalyptic Failures and Business as Usual Practices,” *Alternatives: Turkish Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 1, no. 3 (Fall, 2002), <http://alternatives.yalova.edu.tr/article/view/5000159448>; accessed October, 2016.
- 14 Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly

Review Press, 2000), 39.

- 15 According to its manufacturer, the title of “largest man-made moving object on earth” currently belongs to the *Polarcus Amani* survey vessel designed to detect off-shore oil reserves (Polarcus website, “Polarcus breaking production records with largest man-made moving object on earth,” <http://www.polarcus.com/news/polarcus-breaking-production-records-with-largest-man-made-moving-object-on-earth/>; accessed October, 2016).
- 16 Joseph Stromberg, “Mining Tar Sands Produces Much More Air Pollution Than We Thought,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, February 3, 2014 (<http://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/mining-tar-sands-produces-much-more-air-pollution-we-thought-180949565/?no-ist>; accessed October, 2016).
- 17 See Daniel M. Franks, et al., “Sustainable development principles for the disposal of mining and mineral processing wastes,” *Resources Policy*, Vol. 36 (2011), 114-122.
- 18 See, for example, Torsten Feldt, et al., “High Levels of PAH-metabolites in urine of e-waste recycling workers from Agbogbloshie, Ghana,” *Science of the Total Environment*, Vol. 466-467 (January, 2014), 369-376.
- 19 For a full account of the origins, extent, and chemistry of the Pacific garbage vortex, see David K. A. Barnes, et al., “Accumulation and fragmentation of plastic debris in global environments,” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society: Biological Sciences*, Vol. 364, no. 1526 (July 27, 2009), 1985-1998. This journal issue is dedicated entirely to the subject of plastics and the environment, and includes several additional articles on plastics and ocean pollution.
- 20 From the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation’s Report, “African Americans and Climate Change: An Unequal Burden,” July 21, 2004 (full report available at [http://rprogress.org/press/releases/O40721\\_climate.htm](http://rprogress.org/press/releases/O40721_climate.htm); accessed October, 2016).
- 21 Charles W. Mills, “Black Trash,” *Faces of Environmental Racism: Confronting Issues of Global Justice*, ed. Laura Westra and Bill E. Lawson (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 86-88. Thanks to Andrew Liu for this and the previous reference.
- 22 Étienne Balibar, *We, the People of Europe?: Reflections on Transnational Citizenship*, trans. James Swenson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 128. The proper Spanish term is not “problacion,” as Balibar has it, but *población*.
- 23 Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: Volume 1*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York:

Zone Books, 1989), 29.

- 24 Ibid., 29-33.
- 25 Ibid., 24. Bataille is gesturing toward the potential consequences of another war among the great powers in the context of the Cold War and nuclear proliferation.
- 26 Todd McGowan echoes this diagnosis in more broadly psychoanalytic terms. See *Capitalism and Desire: The Psychic Cost of Free Markets* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), esp. 157-175.
- 27 David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (New York: Back Bay Books, 1996), 382-383; also see pp. 380-410 and 436-442.
- 28 Echoing Kant's characterisation of his moral philosophy, Bataille continues: "Changing from the perspectives of *restrictive* economy to those of *general* economy actually accomplishes a Copernican transformation: a reversal of thinking—and of ethics" (*The Accursed Share*, 25).
- 29 Allan Stoekl, *Bataille's Peak: Energy, Religion, and Postsustainability* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), xvii.
- 30 "Garbage," according to Elizabeth Mazzolini and Stephanie Foote, "asks us to reorganize how we respond to commodities and goods across space and time. And that, in turn, asks us to see that our public and private identities as citizens, consumers, and organic inhabitants of the globe are enmeshed with our responsibility toward the objects we discard, and furthermore, toward the systems that make those objects that we love and discard, and toward the subjects made by systems that make those objects, systems that abject some people and privilege others" ("Introduction: Histories of the Dustheap," *Histories of the Dustheap: Waste, Material Cultures, Social Justice*, ed. Stephanie Foote and Elizabeth Mazzolini [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012], 5).
- 31 Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, 25.

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