

*Narrating The Anthropocene:
Nature, Disposability, and Necropolitics*

By
Em Ingram

NYU Gallatin School of Individualized Studies
October 2024

Introduction

As I write this, a series of severe hurricanes have devastated the lives of millions in the Appalachian mountains and Southeast coast. Among images circulating online are scenes from North Carolina¹, where armed police stand guard outside a grocery store, barring entry, prioritizing private property over the basic needs of traumatized residents—a tragic symptom of our times. In the foreword of *Death of Environmentalism*, Peter Teague reflects similarly on the 2004 hurricane season in Florida, identifying the devastation as both a climate warning and a call to transform our approach to the crisis. Teague wrote, “It isn’t God we need to be addressing our concerns to — it’s us. The crisis we face is not an act of nature; it’s a reflection of our collective failure to act.”² His words resonate more urgently than ever today.

I often wonder whether there will be a breaking point or if tragedies will continue to escalate without meaningful change to our relationship with nature and each other. When drafting my Gallatin application essay, I related environmental degradation to the degrading ecology of digital and social space — as it coincidentally erodes into toxicity and becomes more unproductive. With diminished trust in each other, and in dominant media outlets, how might independent journalists, environmentalists, and activists like myself respond to the world’s crises in a meaningful way? Like the authors of *The Death of Environmentalism*, I’ve become concerned with the over-reliance on the ‘eco-tragedy’ narrative that permeates a collective understanding of environmentalism as a story that “begins with Nature in harmony and almost always ends in quasi-authoritarian politics.”³ Author Ted Norhaus argues that the environmental

¹ [Police officers blocking the entrance to Ingles market in Black Mountain](#), North Carolina, on September 28, 2024.

² Peter Teague, et. al. “Foreword,” *The Death of Environmentalism*, 2004, pg 1.

³ Ted Norhaus. *The Death of Environmentalism*, 2004, pg 103.

movement has moved beyond this conception of the crisis — although it was once successful, as seen in the narrative style of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* which begins by describing the progressive collapse of seasonal changes as observed in a fictional American town as a warning of the legitimate threat posed by chemical use proliferation, especially DDT. While Carson's seminal work went on to inspire vital policy changes like the Clean Air Act of 1963 and the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, which laid the groundwork for the modern environmental movement, today's challenges call for narratives that go beyond the familiar eco-tragedy.

In Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*, he explores how modernity has deepened the imaginary divide between "Nature" and "Culture," a partition that, he argues, distances humanity from the natural world and erases the reminders of our kinship with it. Ghosh suggests that this partition, which both propels us forward and hides its repercussions, shapes much of our environmental crisis. My concentration seeks to explore this constructed Western "culture of nature," examining eco-tragedy and apocalypse as cultural products reflecting our interactions with nature, society, and its material byproduct: waste.

Are humans separate from nature?

When I started at NYU in the Liberal Studies Program, I approached my understanding of nature from a classical interpretation, which I learned in standard high school biology class and AP Environmental Science. As an outdoorsy Californian, my relationship to nature was mediated through recreation. In the stereotypical fashion of white environmentalists, my concerns were primarily with the degradation of the physical environment, extraction of resources, decline of non-human populations, and human interference with ecological cycles; in

other words, I thought of nature as something outside of humanity, which people were ruining. There is nothing wrong with my early understanding of nature; in fact, it's close to the definition provided by Oxford Languages: “the phenomena of the physical world collectively, including plants, animals, the landscape, and other features and products of the earth, as opposed to humans or human creations.”⁴ But to say that humans are separate from nature never made sense to me.

As my engagement in Liberal Studies shifted my focus toward the production of arts, culture, and global works, I learned the origins of the idea that humans were separate from nature — particularly as an invention emerging over early modernity alongside social constructs of race and gender. In *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and The Unthinkable*, Ghosh responds to the question of what in modernity led to the separation of man from nature. He writes, “A possible answer is suggested by Bruno Latour, who argues that one of the originary impulses of modernity is the project of ‘partitioning’ or deepening the imaginary gulf between Nature and Culture.”⁵ Ghosh argues that conceiving time as an “intrusion of the age” enables the “work of partitioning” to absorb and “erase every archaic reminder of Man’s kinship with the nonhuman.”⁶ Ghosh acknowledges that the partitioning of nature and man ‘works’ along both sides of time: as it ‘hurdles’ us forward in the direction it wills and also conceals the horrors and repercussions its fracturing leaves behind. Coming into this perspective on the separation of man and nature reshaped my view of environmentalism, not just as a defense of the physical world but as a critique of modern ideologies that drive the separation of humans from their ecological roots.

⁴ https://www.oed.com/dictionary/nature_n?tl=true.

⁵ Amitav Ghosh. *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and The Unthinkable*, July 2016, pg 80.

⁶ Amitav Ghosh. *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and The Unthinkable*, July 2016, pg 80.

In particular, theologian and philosopher Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's discourse *Oration On The Dignity of Man* (1486) responds to the question about separation from nature as constructed through Christian Doctrine. Mirandola argued that humans were separate from nature based on the story of creation and distinction from the hierarchy of the Great Chain of Beings. God, as described by Mirandola as "the mightiest architect,"⁷ endowed humans with abilities of all creatures, as "chameleons of their own." To Mirandola, it is a human's God-given place to represent, imitate, and create similar to God — distinguishes that humans are of "neither Heaven nor of Earth,"⁸ meaning they can achieve close representation and imitation of Earthly or Heavenly beings and even God. To conceptualize humans as dynamic, mimetic, and beyond the static Great Chain of Beings, was a radical reconceptualization of the order of the universe and a highly controversial take during the early Renaissance. Reading Mirandola's views on humanity—and seeing how those ideas shaped and defined modern society—helps me address my question about humanity's separation from nature by revealing how narratives are constructed to shape our understanding of the world.

Ecofeminism offers insight into how the domination of nature parallels and reflects man's domination over women, highlighting how the relationship between nature and culture is shaped by gender roles rooted in Christianity. Ecofeminist theory has also evoked and responded to the question of humanity's separation from nature, particularly through the work of Carolyn Merchant. The personification of nature as female—embodied in "Mother Nature"—has deep biblical roots, especially in the story of the Fall from the Garden of Eden. Carolyn Merchant's essay *Reinventing Eden: Western Culture as a Recovery Narrative* explores how the story of Western civilization, particularly in the American continent, follows a narrative of fall and

⁷ Giovanni Pico della Mirandola. "De hominis dignitate (The Oration on the Dignity of Man)." 1496, pg 1.

⁸ Giovanni Pico della Mirandola. "De hominis dignitate (The Oration on the Dignity of Man)." 1496, pg 1.

recovery⁹. She argues that humans sought to "return" to Eden by laboring on Earth, driven by their mimetic quality, and responsibility over the land. Merchant traces how early zoos, botanical gardens, and later colonial enterprises aimed to reshape nature in the image of the Garden of Eden. She argues that science, technology, and capitalism, far from being purely secular, are tools to enact this vision¹⁰. Merchant's analysis helps me think through this question of humanity's separation from nature, not as a clear product of Christianity, but as something reinforced by the narrative structures embedded in modern systems.

What is the relationship of waste to the 'Anthropocene'?

The 'Anthropocene' is a proposed geological epoch meant to describe the era of human's ability to dominate ecological systems and transform the physical environment. While the Subcommittee on Quaternary Stratigraphy recently rejected the geological reclassification of our present era as 'the Anthropocene,' the colloquial or scholarly Anthropocene remains in conversation. The Anthropocene is often understood in terms of human responsibility in the progression of climate change and there are countless paronyms: Plasticine, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Thermocene, Thanatocene, Technocene, Pyrocene. I've grounded my understanding of the Anthropocene through the analysis of Marco Armiero in *Wasteocene: Stories from the Global Dump* — although I am not sure he would want to be given credit for what is really an interdisciplinary, material response. Where the Anthropocene is broad and abstract, Armiero's idea of "the Wastocene is embodied, material, carnal," and grounded by specific wasted people and place instances. Armiero examines how "the imposition of wasting relationships on subaltern human and more-than-human communities implies the construction of toxic ecologies made of contaminating substances and narratives"¹¹. Armiero's concept helps me

⁹ Carolyn Merchant. *Reinventing Eden: Western Culture as a Recovery Narrative*, pg 132.

¹⁰ Carolyn Merchant. *Reinventing Eden: Western Culture as a Recovery Narrative*, pg 135.

¹¹ Marco Armiero. *Wasteocene: Stories From The Global Dump*. 2021, pg 1.

to understand crucial features of the ‘Anthropocene’ and the current socio-ecological crisis and respond to my interest in reshaping narratives.

Armiero explores the potential for subaltern, marginalized, or ‘wasted’ communities to resist harmful mainstream narratives that obscure the systemic violence of the Wasteocene — especially by engaging in “guerrilla storytelling”¹². Armiero contends that “counter-hegemonic narratives,” those told by discarded people, are always embodied, as they are rooted in race and gender. He provided the *ToxicBios* project as an example where embodiment transcends the individual storyteller, forming a more “choral, bodily narrative”¹³. I agree with Armiero that embodied storytelling and narrative reformation are vital for challenging dominant narratives and fostering collective understanding in the context of the Anthro/Wasteocene.

In a similar fashion, I’ve responded to the question of waste in the Anthropocene through the ideas of Vinay Gidwani in *The Waste/Value Dialectic: Lumpen Urbanization in Contemporary India*. In this essay, Gidwani examines the Lumpenproletariat, or subaltern labor class, of post-colonial India — more specifically, the Muslim industrial and waste workers of Bholakpur in the city of Hyderabad. As a hub for offshored information technology, inundated with electronic waste, the dispossessed residents of Bholakpur perform informal waste and recovery as part of the ‘infra-economy’ as Gidwani describes it — an informal economy that is denied state recognition, but that is also “vital to the production of urban space such that it is conducive for capital accumulation”¹⁴. Gidwani understands waste as the antithetical and reoccurring ‘other’ of capitalist “value-making,” reiterated and transformed over modernity, “as part of capital’s spatial histories of surplus accumulation”¹⁵. The Anthropocene, often defined by

¹² Marco Armiero. *Wasteocene: Stories From The Global Dump*. 2021, section 3.3.

¹³ Marco Armiero. *Wasteocene: Stories From The Global Dump*. 2021, section 3.2.

¹⁴ Vinay Gidwani. *The Waste/Value Dialectic: Lumpen Urbanization in Contemporary India*. 2016, pg 113.

¹⁵ Vinay Gidwani. *The Waste/Value Dialectic: Lumpen Urbanization in Contemporary India*. 2016, pg 113.

the sheer scale of human-driven environmental change, hinges on this cycle of waste and value. Gidwani's waste-value dialectic underscores how anthropogenic activities drive these cycles, highlighting the disproportionate ecological and human impacts on marginalized communities. Gidwani discusses moments in time that signify this spatial history of surplus accumulation and, in turn, reinforced the waste-value dialectic — beginning with an analysis of the enclosure of the common land in England in the 1600s, then moving to Manifest Destiny, the 18th-century colonization of India and the Americas, and through post-World War militarism and industrialization. Through his historical tracing of the presence of waste-value-making, Gidwani exemplifies how racialized groups are rendered as disposable through spatial reconfiguration under European colonization and urbanization. This cycle of disposability and accumulation within the Anthropocene underscores how environmental degradation is inseparably tied to social inequities, especially among racialized groups systematically rendered as expendable.

In particular, Gidwani highlights the influence of the 'Father of Liberalism' John Locke, for perpetuating modern Western understandings of waste, use, and land rights, used to justify chattel slavery and the colonization of Indigenous or 'Ethnic' land. I, too, have come to view Locke's understanding of property acquisition in 'On Property' from *The Second Treatise of Government* as foundational for modern relationships to value-making and waste-making in capital production — particularly as justification for the expulsion and genocide of Indigenous peoples in North America, as well as the direct appropriation of Locke's phrase 'right to life, liberty, and property,' as 'right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness' in the American Declaration of Independence. 'On Property' explores how land may be converted from a state of nature to claimed private property through physical cultivation and labor—producing goods and, in turn, establishing a waste/value dialectic. Lockean liberalism thus set the foundation for a

worldview in which land, people, and resources are valued or discarded based on their utility for capital gain, an ideology that persists and shapes current understandings of waste and disposability within the Anthropocene.

Locke's account of private property acquisition is based on an epistemological and moral norming of space, a concept further explained by Charles Mills in *The Racial Contract*. Mills asserts that Europeans presuppose that true epistemology—of the universe, sciences, and reason—is restricted to spaces occupied by European academics, religious figures, and theorists, “[denying] significant cultural achievement, intellectual progress, to those spaces... locked into a cognitive state of superstition and ignorance”¹⁶. Europeans further justify this norming of space through “demonization in a way that implies Europeanization if moral redemption is possible”¹⁷. Locke denies Indigenous tribes property rights by concluding that they did not ‘cultivate the land’¹⁸ insofar as to extract goods — concluding the land was still in a state of nature.

I resonate with Gidwani and Armiero's assertions that waste is not just discarded material but a meaningful site and experience where labor and ecology intersect. Their historic framing helps me respond to how the Anthropocene can be read through waste production by highlighting how waste exposes colonial dynamics embedded in neoliberal and neocolonial racial capitalism and unequal global urbanization. They both complicate the class struggle and pursuit of liberation through their particular placing of the subaltern class. Unlike Western and even anti-colonial Marxists, Gidwani frames the subaltern not as a transient or redemptive figure but as a persistent and entangled presence within capitalist production, whose labor and survival strategies exceed the binaries of revolutionary potential or passive victimhood. His focus on informal labor, particularly waste work, underscores how subaltern people operate within and

¹⁶ Charles Mills. *The Racial Contract*. 1997, pg 44.

¹⁷ Charles Mills. *The Racial Contract*. 1997, pg 46.

¹⁸ John Locke. *Second Treatise of Government: On Property*. 1689, pg 80.

against systems of value extraction, often innovating within the very circuits that marginalize them. Like Armiero, Gidwani's perspective shifts the narrative from framing the subaltern as either a revolutionary subject or a hindrance to class struggle, instead emphasizing the dynamic ways subaltern laborers navigate and transform urban ecologies, albeit in ways that do not always align with traditional Marxist visions of emancipation. The discard studies perspective helps me reflect on how subaltern practices generate alternative economies and ecologies, pointing to forms of agency that lie within the everyday negotiations of survival and waste, challenging the notion of liberation as a singular, heroic rupture — and potentially offering new ways of navigating the Anthropocene.

How does humanity deal with 'the Apocalypse'?

The concept of the apocalypse — as explored in scripture, horror, science and dystopian fiction — has always fascinated and disturbed me, particularly the further I engage with environmental and political studies. My exploration of the apocalypse in media and literature has been grounded by an understanding of it as a response to separating man from nature. In *The Great Derangement*, Amitav Ghosh articulates that “the project of partitioning has always been contested, and never more so than at the inception, and nowhere more vigorously than in places that were in the vanguard of modernity”¹⁹. Complicating the notion that the Western project of partitioning from nature was swift and simply accepted, Ghosh articulates that partitioning was highly contested and critiqued through apocalyptic narration — particularly in Gothic literature, horror, and science-fiction. I am reminded of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* as an early cautionary tale against the potential horrors of modernity and unchecked scientific development — critiquing the tensions between Christianity and rational materialism in the modern era. The

¹⁹ Amitav Ghosh. *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and The Unthinkable*, July 2016, pg 68.

function of the apocalypse is complicated in Marco Armiero's *Wasteocene*, as he identifies waste not only as an outcome of production but as a material-semiotic process — new meanings and possibilities emerge from the interactions between laboring bodies, ecosystems, and discarded matter. Armiero regards waste as the aesthetic manifestation of the apocalypse or globalized ruin — an increasingly present and dominant future narrative²⁰. Through his articulation of waste, the modern cultural obsession with collapse and apocalyptic narratives over themes of recovery can be understood as a sign of deeper anxieties about the limits for reform under capitalism, especially with impending global ecological collapse.

I've come to recognize that collapse often exacerbates inequalities rather than fostering collective recovery, compelling me to examine how systems of control and (de)valuation persist in shaping our relationships with death and disposability. Discard scholars and post-colonial theorists like Armiero emphasize that modern epidemics and disasters frequently serve as mechanisms to enforce social hierarchies and practices of disposability, subverting and denaturalizing the socially equalizing potential of death. Scholar Suzanne Kelley's *Greening Death: Reclaiming Burial Practices and Restoring Our Tie to the Earth* contextualizes this as an environmental issue, highlighting how the American death industry's practices—embalming, vaults, and caskets—arose as mechanisms to counteract death's egalitarian force, especially in controlling the racial co-mingling of bodies post-Civil War. Kelley's articulation of the American death industry led to my introduction to the ideas of Michel Foucault — particularly biopower and biopolitics — describing how human life is governed and regulated by the state, particularly through mechanisms that manage populations, health, and bodily autonomy.

²⁰ Marco Armiero. *Wasteocene: Stories From The Global Dump*. 2021, section 2.3.

While biopolitics encompasses the management of life and populations, Cameroonian historian Achille Mbembe's concept of 'necropolitics' provides a crucial lens through which to understand how power governs not just the living but also the conditions of death and dying. In his book *Necropolitics*, Mbembe highlights how certain populations are rendered disposable, their lives and deaths controlled in ways that reflect broader social hierarchies and inequalities. A necropolitical framework becomes particularly relevant as my studies have shifted to a particular apocalyptic narrative — the zombie apocalypse. Author Sherryl Vint's article "Abject Posthumanism: Neoliberalism, Biopolitics, and Zombies" from *Zombie Theory* illuminates the figure of the zombie as a postcolonial critique, symbolizing the "abject" and discarded in societies governed by neoliberal capitalism. Under biopolitical systems, marginalized groups are subject to governance that reduces them to bare life, mere biological bodies managed and disposed of within capitalist structures. Vint argues that the zombie, in particular, embodies the subjugated and expendable labor force—those rendered as objects to be exploited and discarded. As both necropolitical subjects and symbols of resistance, zombies critique the ways capitalist and colonialist frameworks commodify bodies, reanimating them only as objects of horror, endurance, or resistance in apocalyptic settings.

Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* further reshaped my thinking of abject posthumans, as it explores how waste sites and bodies become scenes of both adaptation and defiance within capitalist systems. In addition, Haraway's concept of the Chthulucene—entangled life beyond the human—extends Armiero's *Wasteocene* by showing that waste is not merely a product of human activity but a site of resistance, where bodies adapt, endure, and reconfigure themselves within environments shaped by capitalism's extractive forces. Vinay Gidwani's work on waste labor also influenced my understanding of apocalyptic themes, particularly regarding survival in

marginal spaces. His emphasis on waste labor invites reflection on why contemporary narratives increasingly portray survival as a struggle within spaces of abandonment, where bodies are often dehumanized or transformed into symbols of resilience and resistance.

In our era of the Anthropocene, environmental crises, economic precarity, and social instability converge to intensify cultural anxieties, leading to a fixation on apocalyptic themes. Yet, viewing waste as both a byproduct of capitalism and a site of reinvention opens up possibilities for understanding collapse not merely as an end but as an arena where bodies and ecosystems resist, adapt, and ultimately redefine survival in the modern age.

List of Works

Central to Concentration:

1. *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*. Amitav Ghosh. 2016.
2. *Necropolitics*. Achille Mbembe. 2019. (HIST)
3. *Wasteocene: Stories From The Global Dump*. Marco Armiero. 2021. (CPC)
 - a. [ToxicBios](#).
4. “The Waste-Value Dialectic: Lumpen Urbanization in Contemporary India.” Gidwani, Vinay, and Anant Maringanti. 2016. (CPC)
5. *The Death of Environmentalism: Global Warming Politics in a Post-Environmental World*. Michael Shellenberger, Ted Nordhaus, et al.,. 2004.
6. *Environment and Society: A Reader*. C. Schlottmann et al., eds
 - a. *Reinventing Eden: Western Culture as a Recovery Narrative*. Merchant, Carolyn. (HIST)

Premodern or early modern:

1. Genesis (New Revised Standard Version).
2. *De Rerum Natura (On The Nature of Things)*. Titus Lucretius Carus. 55 BCE.
3. 道德經 (*Tao Te Ching*). Laozi. 200-500 BCE.
4. *Inferno*. Dante Alighieri. 1321.
5. “De hominis dignitate (The Oration on the Dignity of Man).” Giovanni Pico della Mirandola. 1496.
6. “Un Resoconto Generale Del Legame (A General Account on Bonding).” Giordano Bruno. 1588.
7. *Second Treatise of Government: On Property*. John Locke. 1689.

Humanities (Post 1600s):

1. Donna Haraway cluster
 - a. “Teddy Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York City, 1908-193.” 1984.

- b. *Cyborg Manifesto*. 1985.
 - c. “[Donna Haraway Reads The National Geographic](#).” 1987.
 - d. “Playing String Figures with Companion Species.” *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. 2016.
- 2. *Zombie Theory: A Reader*. Lauro, et al. 2017.
 - a. [White Zombie](#). Dir. Victor Halperin. 1932.
- 3. Fiction cluster
 - a. *Frankenstein*. Mary Shelley. 1818.
 - b. *Parable of the Sower*. Octavia Butler. 1993.
 - c. *Helicopter Story*. Isabel Fall. 2020.
- 4. *Greening Death: Reclaiming Burial Practices and Restoring Our Tie to the Earth*. Suzanne Kelley. 2015.
- 5. *The Culture of Nature*. Alexander Wilson. 1991.

Social/Natural Sciences (Post 1600s):

- 1. *The Racial Contract*. Charles Mills. 1997. (HIST)
- 2. “Slumdog Cities: Rethinking Subaltern Urbanism.” Ananya Roy. 2011. (CPC)
 - a. [Lagos/Koolhaas](#). 2004.
- 3. *Purity and Danger*. Mary Douglas. 1966.
- 4. *Assembling and Spilling-Over: Towards an ‘Ethnography of Cement’ in a Palestinian Refugee Camp*. Nasser Abourahme. 2015. (CPC).
 - a. [Spaces of Exception](#). Matt Peterson. 2018.
- 5. *Garbage Citizenship: Vital Infrastructures of Labor in Dakar, Senegal*. Rosalind Fredericks. 2018. (CPC)
 - a. [The Waste Commons](#). 2024.
- 6. Michel Foucault cluster
 - a. “History of Sexuality” 1976. (HIST)
 - b. “The Birth of Biopolitics”. 1979.