



## **Disposability: A Semiotic Account of Freeflow Ethics**

By David Cornberg, Ph.D.

“One needs to study what kind of body the current society needs.”  
Michel Foucault (58)

“Music used to be a collectible, now it’s a disposable.” Ron Stone (Levy 7)

“One bulldozer can do the work of ten men.” Victoria Pauli (Jacinto 2)

We begin our account of disposability with a look through the eyes of nature. Floods, earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, volcanoes and forest fires destroy human beings, human artifacts, domestic and wild animals, domestic and wild plants, rocks, soils and insects. Nature is indifferent. This indifference signifies the identity in the register of physical elements of all existing things in the physical universe. All existing things, whether as refined as a cut diamond and an opera singer or as rough as cold lava and arctic ice, are composed of a limited number of different elements. Existence in turn signifies a register of impermanence or transience. As far as we know, no existing thing lasts forever. As far as we know, not even the basic elements of the physical universe last forever because we do not know if the physical universe lasts forever. Our known physical universe could conceivably become the material for the creation of another universe with different basic elements.

Through the eyes of nature, everything is disposable. If nature is a divine creation, as maintained by some religions, or if nature is divine itself, as also maintained by some religions, then humans are not privileged by divinity. There is no logical basis in a theocentric worldview, in which nature is part of divine creation, for morally privileging human beings apart from other existing things. In nature’s behavior everything that exists, including humans and all of their products, is dispensable, disposable. Everything is potential material for transformation and for change into other uses and forms.

On a different scale of nature that affects human beings more than any other existing things, humans are even more likely to die:

Earthquakes and other natural disasters may grab the donations and headlines, but preventable diseases claimed 160 times more lives last year—13 million people, says a report published today.... Last year, 160 times more people died

from AIDS, malaria, respiratory diseases and diarrhea than were killed by natural disasters, including massive earthquakes in Turkey, floods in Venezuela and cyclones in India.... (Leeman 1)

AIDS in particular continues to be a focus of international groups attempting to cope with preventable diseases:

A stunningly grim new report issued by the United Nations says that AIDS has killed nearly 19 million people worldwide, but much worse is yet to come: The disease will wipe out half the teen-agers in some African nations, devastating economies and societies, the report warns. "There is a whole generation which is being taken out," said Peter Piot, head of the U.N. Joint Program on HIV/AIDS. He said vulnerable countries in Asia, Eastern Europe and the Caribbean risk a similar catastrophe unless they act now to control infection rates. ("In Africa..." 1)

In two aspects of contemporary human experience, children are more likely than others to die: "Children in the world's poorest countries are dying at the rate of almost 200 a[n] hour as a direct result of the failure of governments to fulfil their pledges to slash global poverty by 2015, the charity Oxfam will warn this week." ("Oxfam scorns..." 5) The increasing global use of children in mortally dangerous situations is the second of these two aspects: "An estimated 300,000 children are forced into labor or combat in conflicts around the world, including countries such as Colombia, Burma, Chechnya, the Congo, Sudan, Uganda and Algeria." (Abrahamson 2)

These two aspects of human experience differ in their significations of the component of human will in human mortality. Natural disasters are farther from human control than preventable diseases, but starvation and the killing of children as combatants in war are even closer to human willfulness than the mortality of preventable disease. Suicide bombers represent a further reconstruction of human choice around disposability. Suicide bombers construct a world in which they and their victims are disposable. The agents die and kill on behalf of an idea that subordinates human life to an invisible order of meaning, purpose and reality. Terrorism constructs a similar reality by categorizing living human beings according to their fidelity to an idea or a cause. Such categorization reinscribes human reality with a decision-making process that is under no obligation to consult the victims. The choice to live or die belongs to the acting out of the idea or cause, not to the particular persons affected.

In recent human history, disposability has functioned under many names: the "extermination" of Native Americans; the "enslavement" of Black Africans; the "final solution" to the Jewish problem under Nazism; and the various "ethnic cleansings". The mirror of the disposability process in peaceful, upright society is capitalism. Capitalists understood long ago that an economy could be organized around contingencies quite different than seasonal hunting and gathering or seasonal crop production. Instead, economy can be organized around the infinite satisfaction of infinite desires. However, a wide range of living and non-living entities must be disposable for such an economy to function. Forests, fur-bearing animals, mountains, rivers, non-exploitable species and indigenous peoples exemplify the natural side of disposability and last year's products represent the artificial side. Human beings as



employees and as customers must also be disposable, dispensable and interchangeable. Capitalism fosters an equality—of disposability. Does it seem to have been a coincidence that in the late 1970's The Weyerhaeuser Corporation, one of the world's largest producers of "forest products", was the first major US company to restructure, which included the "downsizing" of 5,000 middle management positions? And how difficult would it be for people with ready access to guns and bullets, and no future other than fighting, to regard the humans in their paths as disposable as their bullets?

Nature again however provides a counterpoint to both large-scale natural disasters and willful human action with a kind of routine human mortality on a much smaller scale:

Most newly conceived human embryos harbor colossal genetic defects that are incompatible with life, according to researchers who developed a novel test that examines every chromosome inside three-day-old human test-tube embryos. The findings may explain at last why **most pregnancies**—whether naturally occurring or the result of test-tube fertilization—quietly fail within days or a few weeks after conception. (Weiss 1; underline and bold added)

The fact that "most pregnancies...quietly fail" indicates that nature again does not privilege human beings as adults or as embryos—many more die as embryos than are born. If nature is a divine creation or is guided by God—whichever God you choose—then, from the standpoint of this evidence, God does not favor humans over other existing things. Moreover, the foregoing facts taken together show no logical basis in nature, with or without divine connections, for a morality, a moral code, or moral values that privilege human beings over other existing things.

How then are we to understand disposability? Disposable diapers, disposable packaging...disposable music? The second quote that opens this paper comes from an article on Napster, the Internet program and Napster Inc., the San Mateo, California company, that allow people to access, download, own and use files of popular songs without paying any money for the songs. Some individual artists and bands have hired lawyers and started lawsuits against Napster. Metallica, a hard-rock band, and Dr. Dre, a rapper, have also tried to have all users of the Napster program who have downloaded any of their music removed from the Napster program. (Levy 6-7) The context of Ron Stone's opening quote further enriches the semiosis of disposability:

While so far only Metallica and Dr. Dre have taken the step of moving against their fans, their lawyer Howard King says that at least five other artists have contacted him. Meanwhile, Ron Stone, manager of artists like Tracy Chapman and Bonnie Raitt, insists that the entire Napster movement is little better than thuggery. "Basically they're saying our art is worthless, it's free for the taking," he says. "Music used to be a collectible, now it's a disposable." (Levy 7)

Worth, freedom, collectibility and disposability all appear in this context. Worth and collectibility are ranged against freedom and disposability. Certainly a dirty disposable diaper is not a collectible and would willingly be given away for nothing if someone wanted it. Also, much of the packaging around toys and tools, for example,



is worthless for anything else, not worth collecting for its own value and therefore easily given away for free. But nature deals freely with all existing things, continually creating and destroying, forming and reforming, building up and breaking down in rhythms and cycles that emphasize the interchangeability of everything in the physical universe. Of course most artists want to insist that their work is somehow unique and in a commercial market this insistence is necessary to gain attention and motivate sales. They want to insist that their work is not interchangeable and that it is worth collecting because of its singular and independent existence.

In general, we might advance the proposition that human beings view members of their own species as non-disposable and human works as non-disposable unless those works can be specifically designated as trash, garbage or worthless. In the register of trash, garbage and worthlessness, things can be dealt with freely, that is, without regard for differences in value. Natural things, moreover, such as trees, water, soil and air, can be dealt with much more freely by human beings as long as the purpose of the dealing is to benefit humans.

These distinctions, however, are losing ground to an ethical point of view whose signifiers are precisely freedom, interchangeability, transience and—disposability. Music as disposable given non-commercial access has already exemplified this ethic. A closer look at the Napster controversy will amplify the significance of this example:

The fight over Napster has taken on a larger dimension, involving the future of music publishing, copyright law, 21<sup>st</sup>-century ethics and the relationship of artists to their audience. Pamela Samuelson, codirector of the Berkeley Center for Law and Technology, fears a “civil war” between artists, technology companies and desperate “copyright holders who want to control it all.” (Levy 3)

The antagonistic significations between control and freedom in this situation are further elaborated by the creator of a similar song swap program that will be even harder for anyone to limit:

Even more radical is Freenet, created by 23-year-old Ian Clarke, an Irish computer scientist living in London. His program is not only decentralized but has safeguards to protect the privacy and identity of users. The actual files to be downloaded will be encrypted and then randomly distributed among the community of Freenetters, who won't even know what information is stored on their own disk. (Could be songs, could be kiddie porn.) File transfers will be untraceable. Clarke's motives are political—his dream is to liberate intellectual property. “My opinion is that people who rely on copyright probably need to change their business model,” he says. (Levy 8)

The parenthetical mention of “kiddie porn” in the above citation converges this technological register with that of child soldiers. Part of the “estimated 300,000 children” who “are forced into labor or combat” mentioned above are child soldiers in Sierra Leone. In an attempt to bring peace to the country, Britain has offered \$15 million to Sierra Leone's government on the condition that child soldiers in pro-government forces be disarmed. But since that offer and its acceptance the war has



escalated with clear evidence that children are being recruited as soldiers on both sides of the conflict. The ironies of the situation and its display of the signifiers of freeflow ethics appear through the fact that a “team of some 200 British advisers has remained in Sierra Leone to retrain and equip the pro-government forces.... If the war intensifies again, the Britons could be dragged into a situation where they continue to arm and train child soldiers who will no doubt be fighting child soldiers on the other side of the frontlines.” (Abrahamson 3-4)

The range of signifiers deployed in freeflow ethics thus includes capital, human bodies, minimal restraints on human action and conflict. Guns and ammunition for child soldiers require capital just as office space, an Internet site, hardware, software and high-speed connections require capital. Conflict signifies not only legal and physical strife but also differences in values. The promoters of kiddie porn, free music and child soldiers all code certain things in a register of disposability that differs from the value register of human rights and dignity, the inviolability of human life, the private ownership of products and the variety of religious, ethical and legal sanctions against killing, forcing or hurting living things.

In order to more clearly situate this topic in a semiotic context, I want now to take three contextualizing steps:

First, I suggest that part of the answer to Foucault’s question in the first quote that opens this paper is that the “kind of body the current society needs” (Foucault 58) is a disposable body, human or non-human. Foucault may be faulted here with anthropomorphizing society as a living being that “needs.” But his point, which I treat in more detail elsewhere (Cornberg), is that pervasive tendencies in human populations act like needs such as hunger, thirst and sex in individual humans. Need here signifies a force that pervades contemporary social organization. That force is the effort to maximize difference and divergence and then to deploy human beings in the spaces opened by difference in order to maximize freedom of individual choice. But such a tendency requires a steep increase in risky activity which results in a steep increase in premature and accidental death. The more power this tendency accrues the faster divergent spaces appear. The faster those spaces appear the faster occur the premature and accidental deaths of human beings. The faster those deaths occur the less time and energy anyone has to treat those human beings as anything other than bodies. The dead ones must be disposed of so that live ones, not less but instead increasingly disposable, can take their place. Speed is therefore another value in the register of freeflow ethics.

My second step is to note that the word *disposability* is the nominalized form of *disposable*, an adjective whose primary traditional cluster of signifiers is “[c]apable of being disposed of; that may be got rid of, made over, or dealt with in some way; capable of being put to some use, available; at (some one’s) disposal.” (Compact OED 760; parentheses in original) Disposability thus suggests a direct relationship between a person and some other entity, human or otherwise, that is governed first and foremost by the utilitarian value of the other to the agent person. This register clearly includes the bodies used in child pornography and child soldiering as well as those used in contemporary (sex) slavery, prostitution, adult pornography and soldiering, drug trafficking and immigration scams.



The third step is to invoke a systematic semiotic framework for the purpose of clarifying the semiosis involved in disposability as so far understood. This framework I draw from Posner, Röbering and Sebeok's work, *Semiotik: Ein Handbuch zu den zeichentheoretischen Grundlagen von Natur und Kultur*. In this comprehensive handbook, the editors present the following 14 "elements" as necessary components of a complete description of a semiosis:

1. The semiosis as a whole; 2. The organism of the interpreter; 3. The interpretandum ("signal"); 4. The channel; 5. The signifier (the signal represented in the organism); 6. The interpretant; 7. The signified (the object represented in the organism); 8. The interpretatum ("object"); 9. The disposition for instrumental behavior; 10. The disposition for signaling behavior; 11. Instrumental behavior; 12. Signaling behavior; 13. External context; 14. Internal context. (248)

We will now return to Sierra Leone and apply these elements to the story of Miriam. Her name is a pseudonym to protect her. She was sixteen years old when she was abducted from her village near Freetown, the capital of the country, by antigovernment forces of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF):

"Ten men raped me the day I was abducted. I was begging them to leave me alone, but they wouldn't listen. This happened for three days," Miriam told Peter Bouckaert, who recently returned from a fact-finding mission in Sierra Leone for the New York-based monitor group, Human Rights Watch. "Then they gave us 50 kilograms (110 pounds) of rice to carry." Later, Miriam was forced to be the "wife" of a 20-year-old RUF soldier named Mohammed. When she wasn't being physically and sexually abused by him, Miriam was undergoing intensive training at a RUF camp in Makeni, some 100 miles northeast of Freetown. "They taught us how to fire guns. There were over 100 boys and girls, the youngest 6, 7 and 8 years old. There were about 50 my age, and the others were all little ones," Miriam recounted from a rehabilitation camp for child soldiers. "They beat me at least 10 times. I was not interested in the training, but they forced me to do it." Rebels also forced Miriam to develop an addiction to narcotics like many child soldiers, according to Bouckaert. Rebels often pump them full of drugs before entering battle. "If you say no, they beat you," Miriam said. "It makes you feel strong, like a big person." (Abrahamson 1-2)

We now fill in the 14 elements using Miriam's story:

1. The semiosis as a whole: Miriam's story above and 2 through 14 following;
2. The organism of the interpreter: a male RUF soldier;
3. The interpretandum ("signal"): a young, defenseless, local female;
4. The channel: visual proximity of a RUF soldier to Miriam;
5. The signifier (the signal represented in the organism): an accessible female body branching into sex, work and fighting;
6. The interpretant: the perceptual apparatus of a male, rebel soldier;
7. The signified: a female body subordinate to a male body in sex, work and war;
8. The interpretatum ("object"): Miriam's body;
9. The disposition for



instrumental behavior: RUF soldier's history of treating similar objects in similar ways and the support for that treatment in the similar behavior of cohorts and their similar histories; 10. The disposition for signaling behavior: the RUF soldier wanting Miriam to submit to his demands; 11. Instrumental behavior: abduction (but see also #12 following); 12. Signaling behavior: some of it cannot be determined from the written account presented above but clearly verbal threats, physical beatings, rape, forced drug use and forced military training were among the RUF soldier's instrumental and signaling behaviors; 13. External context: civil war in an African nation with an established routine of abducting children to serve as soldiers; 14. Internal context: impossible to determine in the absence of interviews with and observations of the RUF soldier and his cohorts.

We reconnect with the quotes that open this paper by noticing that Foucault focuses on the body, the people who use Napster focus on the music as an object of use and the bulldozer replaces ten men who have no identity other than their bodies as laboring objects. Freeflow ethics signifies capital, human bodies, minimal restraints on human action, conflict and speed, but it also signifies objectification and power.

How are we to understand the emergence and ubiquity of freeflow ethics? If we look at the human channel alone, we see several different trends happening simultaneously. In some parts of the global population, life expectancy is increasing, in some parts it is decreasing. In some parts of the population birth rates are increasing, in some parts they are decreasing. In some parts armed conflict is increasing, in some parts it is decreasing. In some parts wealth is increasing, in some parts it is decreasing. In some parts physical environmental conditions are improving, in some parts they are deteriorating. There is no single, consistent, coherent, linear trend across the entire species. This absence of coherence signifies increasing difference and divergence on large and small scales of the global population, whether it is decreasing birth rates across over a billion mainland Chinese or increasing abduction of children for war in tiny Sierra Leone.

Increasing divergence in turn signifies increasing novelty, experimentation and innovation in lifeways, lifestyles and cultural practices. Increasing novelty, experimentation and innovation result in more errors, mistakes, wrong moves, misguided decisions, blind alleys and fruitless and destructive actions. As more and more power comes into the hands of divergent groups, whether the power is computer power, financial power, fire power, drug power or the power of abducted bodies, the frequency of error in the actions of the global civilization increases. As the frequency of error increases, more and more human beings are at risk. As more and more humans are at risk, more and more humans are marginal, dispensable and disposable. How is this last step taken as semiosis?

If we look at the mapping of Miriam's story across the elements of a complete semiosis above, we see that what the RUF soldiers need are bodies. What "the current society needs" according to Foucault, is a certain "kind of body" (58). What the bulldozer replaces are bodies. The bodies replaced by the bulldozer are potential laborers at mineral extraction sites in the Cordillera region of the northern Philippines. "Under the economic restructuring program initiated by the [Phillippine]



government in 1995, multinational mining companies have been encouraged to invest in the region.” (Jacinto 4) But some local people, such as Victoria Pauli, an indigenous Indian from the Philippines, are “not impressed with the new economic policies. ‘These corporations have been granted leases at minimal fees to extract resources and take home a hundred percent of the profits,’ she says. ‘We haven’t seen the economic benefits of globalization. Where are the employment promises? One bulldozer can do the work of ten men.’” (Ibid)

The larger stage of freeflow ethics is thus not an occasional truckload of illegal immigrants, several thousand child soldiers in Sierra Leone, or runners and clockers for drug dealers in large US cities. The larger stage is globalization that converges with freeflow ethics in its drive to minimize barriers to “the movement of capital, goods and services across borders.”(Ibid) On this scale, freeflow ethics can be seen as a generalization of a trend that started in the US in the 1970’s when large companies, such as Weyerhaeuser, began “restructuring” by terminating the employment of thousands of people in order to cut operating costs and increase profits. The functions that those people performed were translated into the job descriptions of other employees, the increasing power of computerization or they were phased out as unnecessary, that is, as disposable as the employees who had once carried them out in the company.

There is, moreover, a power law involved in this semiosis: the more power you have the more of existence you code as changeable, either creatable or destructible, either composable or disposable. Whatever is destroyed can, commensurate to your power, be replaced by something newly created. The male RUF soldiers, for example, who raped Miriam and many other female abductees, possibly created the conditions—the pregnancies of those females—that would result in new human beings replacing those children or adults killed in military conflict. Both (pro)creation and destruction are actions empowered by a global civilization increasingly characterized by the values of freeflow ethics.

We conclude our semiotic account of freeflow ethics by recalling that we began our account by coding nature’s value system as indifference. In nature, anything and everything can and is changed by nature’s forces into other forms and things. Nothing is exempt from nature’s forces. No existing thing is privileged by nature to escape from or be free of the cycles of birth and death, becoming and dissolution, creation and destruction. With this register in mind, we might now tease out the most interesting irony of all in the current flux of global ethics: Is the indifference of a RUF soldier toward a local teenage girl different from nature’s indifference toward the fate of all of its components? Nature subjects females of all species to sexual approach and consummation by their males and, in some species, such as the praying mantis, provides the male as a meal to the female after their mating. Nature subjects the tender fawn and the flightless fledgling in the nest to the raging flames of forest fires or the suffocating walls of water, mud or lava. Nature hurls hailstones at calves and foals and drops branches and entire trees on animals living in forests and jungles. Nature even starves its creatures and forces them to their deaths in droughts.

Let us not anthropomorphize nature by imputing it with signifiers such as cruelty and insensitivity. Let us stick to the register of indifference—that is, it makes no



difference to nature whether the animal that is impregnated, hurt or starved is young or old and, apart from impregnation, it makes no difference whether the animal is male or female. Likewise to the RUF soldiers it makes no difference whether the human is 6 or 16, male or female. Nor does it matter to the users of Napster whether a male or female, young or old, famous or obscure artist originally recorded the songs they download for free. Nor does it matter to the mining companies whether the 10 bodies they replace are young or old, educated or uneducated, handsome or ugly, fat or thin. Nor does it matter, on an even larger stage, whether the purchasers of most of the world's products are of any particular ethnicity, gender, or religious persuasion. Along with this indifference in the natural, commercial and freeflow dimensions of existence are individuals and groups calling for greater respect for nature, less destruction of naturally existing things and changes in the values of all human beings to reflect greater harmony with nature. What, paradoxically and ironically, could reflect a greater respect for and harmony with nature than imitation of its core value of indifference in relations among human beings? With this question, our account ends.

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