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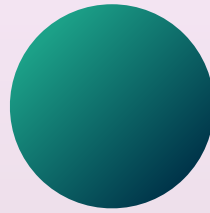
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ECOLOGIES OF LIFE AND DEATH IN THE ANTHROPOCENE

Ecologies of Life and Death in the Anthropocene

edited Peggy Karpouzou and Nikoleta Zampaki

Editorial

Peggy Karpouzou, Nikoleta Zampaki
National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece

Living organisms conceive death as part of their mortal nature, experiencing feelings of uncanny, fear, grief, mourning, melancholy, and even depression for a loss. Cross-cultural approaches to life and death vary through time and space as death has been perceived as a 'transition' to other forms of existence (afterlife), various burial and preservation practices, and so forth, often obscured by mystery and superstition. Thanatology (the field that studies the death matter) delves into issues of death found in various frameworks, e.g., cultural, religious, philosophical, psychological, anthropological and so forth, focusing on how death affects human culture diachronically. Specifically, the indeterminacy in investing more in the phenomena of life and death shows that human interest and attention are oriented to human existence and its future and how humans can increase life expectancy. Life and death are situated in the context of Thanatology to interpret them in their interplay, often conceived as an 'immunity-building exercise' accompanied by various cultural imaginaries and affordances.

Death studies typically take a human subject as their object of study, often overlooking the broader networks and webs of

relationships involved in social and natural processes surrounding death. In the threshold of the Anthropocene, life and death are related to planetary crises, pandemics, ecocide, extinction, extreme violence and so forth, addressing that all life forms are vulnerable. For example, current environmental humanities scholarship explores how species extinction – caused by humans – transforms knowledge over death, time and generations (e.g., Heise 2016; Rose et al. 2017), while other scholars are working on the degradation of environments (e.g., Tsing et al. 2017), poisonous toxicities and waste that affect human and non-human bodies (e.g., Alaimo 2010; Armiero 2021) and social, political, cultural and so forth moves that make some lives "killable" (e.g., Haraway 2008, 77-82). Each of the above strands deals with death and dying, challenging death studies not only on human death but also non-human ones, seeking to investigate further the boundaries that construct and maintain categories of dead, dying, undead places, and so forth, the modes of existing between life and death, the implications of reconfiguring of our understanding of death to a more ecological frame that accommodates non-human lives and deaths, and also the challenges that alter ethical approaches and values attached to death.

Although human mourning is linked to the loss of another human, mourning for non-human deaths and ecological loss have somewhat different approaches. It is often described as "disenfranchised grief" (Doka 1989), not conceived or understood by humans. A sense of grief becomes tangible in a context where climate change and destruction 'transform' certain species' habitats into a non-livable space featuring non-human vulnerability. It is during the last decades that literary and cultural studies, philosophy, psychology, anthropology, among others, have started to discuss terms like "environmental grief", "ecological grief" or "eco-grief" (e.g., Kevorkian 2004; Rosenfield 2016; Cunsolo, Landman 2017; Cunsolo, Ellis 2018; Harris 2019; Barnett 2022; Pihkala 2024) that is a form of grief experiences about present losses of non-humans and the ecosystems, resulting from severe anthropogenic environmental change. According to Kriss A. Kevorkian (2004), "environmental grief" is a reaction stemming from the collapse of ecosystems caused by humans. The latter is driven by the meaning and significance of present ecological losses and our relation to non-humans and ecosystems, shedding light on our ethical approach to non-humans.

The study of eco-grief with environmentally based grief and other forms of grief and mourning related to different modes, e.g., "necropolitics" (Mbembe 2003), problematizes more about the non-human death that "do not fall directly into the category of 'environmental loss'" (Radomska 2023, 10). At the same time, it zooms through the critical lens of "Negathropocene" (Stiegler 2018), beyond the 'dead-end' trap of Anthropocene (Stiegler 2018, 52). Neganthropocene

describes the global systemic crises, calling for a reevaluation of the social, economic, and ecological structures, aiming to enhance 'negentropy' (or negative entropy) and, thus, counteract the 'entropy' of the current cultural paradigm, i.e. the acceleration of the natural tendency towards disorder, chaos and death. Using concepts transferred from the natural sciences, like 'entropy' and 'negentropy', facilitates environmental humanities in pointing out the fact that living organisms are striving through various mechanisms (e.g., adaptation) to maintain their internal order and complexity and thus preserve life. It also enhances our understanding of the complexity of organization and evolution of living systems and their entanglements with the environment (Karpouzou, Zampaki 2023, 22-4).

In Cultural Studies, Humanities and Arts, both entropy and negentropy are conceived in terms of complex interactions and processes between nature and culture. Under these premises, the conceptualisation of ecologies of life and death describes a complex arrangement of relationalities between entropies and negentropies, entities and their environments, including power formations such as social and political ones. Consequently, these enmeshed ecologies of life and death aim to raise awareness about the urge to implement global and local policies and practices that support the complex biological organization to mitigate the entropic effects of the catastrophic Anthropocene.

This special issue addresses such a multifaceted notion of ecology: life and death involve numerous entities, processes and relationalities that cannot be analysed separately. Grounded in the theoretical frameworks of literary and cultural studies, environmental humanities, blue humanities, continental philosophy, arts and film studies, this special issue explores life and death eco-imaginaries and entanglements of the human and non-human world, addressing an eco-ontology that exposes these entanglements where ethical territories of eco-grief and eco-mourning are unfolded. Moreover, this special issue sheds light on how humans and non-humans deal with the death matter in nature through the literary and artistic conceptualization of the ecologies of life and death in western and non-western discourses.

Exploring the existential aspects of death in the Anthropocene, Rahul Pillai's article "Existentialism and the Anthropocene: An Appraisal of Two Humanisms" examines death as 'philosophical humanism', retaining the possibility of creating grounded, subjective politics in the seemingly intractable Anthropocene. Moreover, Rachel Holmes, in her article titled "Bataille's Laughter: Comedy, Irony, or Wonder? Examining Ecstasy as an Anthropocentric Limit" applies a reading of Georges Bataille's laughter of death to explore humanism (wonderful), postmodernism (comedic) and posthumanism (ironic), identifying an ecology of death in which we are situated. By

investigating environmental approaches concerning the intricate relationship between death and life in water narratives, Simon Estok's article titled "Slimy Fertility: Lagoons and Climate Change" explores literary lagoons, represented often as spaces of horror and death, to showcase their complexities in understanding how human behaviour and representations impact them. Jesse D. Peterson, Sarah Bezan and Kate Falconer's article titled "Blue Death Studies: Theorising the Water-Corpse Interface" explores how water impacts the ir/retrievability of the dead by analysing liquid and frozen deaths and indicates future directions for blue death studies approaches. Moss Berke, in the article titled "The Ongoing Grief of Boglands: Re-Interpreting Ecological Grief with Lessons in Sympoiesis and Wetland Ecology", studies the boglands as spaces to reimagine ecological grief, proving that death can be recognized as an agential participant in crafting alternative futures.

The notion of eco-grief is examined in the following articles concerning literary and inter-medial discourses. María Torres Romero's article titled "The Price of Extinction and the Epic Journey to Mourn Beyond the Human in Ned Beauman's *Venomous Lumpsucker*" explores how contemporary speculative fiction contributes to the current debates about the extinction crisis and death by examining ecological grief beyond the human in Ned Beauman's novel *Venomous Lumpsucker* (2022). Rosy-Triantafyllia Angelaki, in her article titled "Loss, Grief and Planetary Literacy in Informational Picturebooks for Children", explores how informational picturebooks for children approach life, loss, mourning and death beyond human supremacy, aiming to make young readers aware of how humans and non-humans are fundamentally enmeshed and interdependent with one another. Human and non-human relationship in films is also elucidated in Kevin Anzzolin's article titled ""I Can't Control It": Lila Avilés's Feature Films as Environmental Mourning" where it is argued that Lila Avilés' films (*La camarista* [*The Chambermaid*] (2018)) and (*Tótem* [*Totem*] (2024)) are representative of showing the boundaries between humans, non-humans and nature by reading also Avilés's films as instances of eco-mourning. The latter is also studied by arts and specifically, Robin Jiskoot in the article "Mourning the Mounted: An Analysis of the Taxidermy Exhibition *Dead Animals with a Story*" examines a taxidermy exhibition named *Dead Animals with a Story* to discover the subversive potentiality of taxidermy by highlighting features of human and non-human relationship such as extinction and loss while considering animals grievable. "Slow violence", (Nixon 2013) thus, can be read as a form of late-modern necropolitics, where communities are exposed to the power of death-in-life. Resisting eco-grief through activism, Holly Nelson, in her article titled "Slow Violence, Sacrifice, and Survival: Environmental Catastrophe as (Eco)Feminist Freedom in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their*

Eyes Were Watching God", explores issues of environmental racism and, specifically, the intersectional battles of Black women who are victims of both environmental and patriarchal violence.

Further exploring alternative ecologies of life and death beyond the Anthropocene, Michael Kane, in his article "Seeing beyond the Anthropocene with Joyce and Beckett", suggests that James Joyce and Samuel Beckett's insights about life and death could offer a means of 'seeing beyond the Anthropocene' and its discontents by reconsidering a posthuman approach to humans and non-humans' relationship. The ethics of reciprocal care for humans and more-than-humans in a future world of ecological disaster examines Andrea Ruthven's article "Narrative Agency and Storied Becomings in Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves*". At the same time, the enactment of a 'communal being with' in the narration exposes the structure and content of a necropolitical colonial narrative of indigeneity. Revealing the processes of colonial violence and dispossession that have culminated in the eruptive event of eco-catastrophe, Indigenous literature conceptualizes and reimagines the Anthropocene. Sayan Mazumder's article "Life, Death and Sustainability through Indigenous Literature. An Ecocritical Study of Selected Works from Northeast India" analyzes Indigenous literature using myth, religion and conceptual categories such as 'ecopsychology' and 'topophilia' in search of sustainable ecologies which would reformulate the ideas of life, death and the cycle of continuity. Lastly, non-western artistic discourses view ecologies of life and death in terms of unity and co-existence of life forms. In the article "Beyond Life and Death: Humanistic Care of Eco-Arts in China", Xiantian Liu studies Chinese eco-aesthetics, seeking to explore ecologies of life and death in Chinese eco-art.

In this special issue, ecologies of life and death move across boundaries, considering that all research fields involve forms of expression that somehow 'disrupt' entrenched patterns while at the same time 'revealing' their contingency and opening the discussion about life and death, '(un)settling' dominant grief imaginaries and 'mobilizing' different sensibilities for the humans and non-humans. We would like to give special thanks to our special issue contributors, reviewers and *Lagoonscapes. The Venice Journal of Environmental Humanities*' editors for their collaboration to make this special issue a 'zone' for accommodating various ecologies of life and death.

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Existentialism and the Anthropocene: An Appraisal of Two Humanisms

Rahul Pillai
Indian Institute of Technology Madras, India

Abstract   This paper reframes environmental problems, moving from a crisis of habit-ability to a problem of ethics, and thus suggests the possibility of creating grounded, subjective politics within the seemingly intractable Anthropocene. To this end, the paper juxtaposes Roy Scranton's *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene* with Simone de Beauvoir's *The Ethics of Ambiguity* in order to critically examine Scranton's "philosophical human-ism" as a distorted mirror of existentialist "ethical humanism". Focusing on death and existentialism as central themes, the paper offers a comparison of their conceptions of humanist meaningfulness – conceived as an affect of transcendental capacities in the case of Scranton, and as everyday acts of freedom in de Beauvoir's philosophy.

Keywords   Existentialism. Anthropocene. Ethics. Humanism. Death.

Summary   1 Introduction. – 2 The Climate of the Anthropocene. – 3 The 'Learning to Die' Project. – 4 The Question of Freedom. – 5 A Reframing Through Violence. – 6 By Way of a Conclusion.

1   Introduction

In Murakami's (2003, 69-90) short story "Thailand", Nimit, a mysterious chauffeur, tells Tatsuki, a doctor on a spiritual getaway, that she has spent enough time thinking about life; now she must give her due to death (86-7). Roy Scranton comes across a similar suggestion while reading Tsunetomo's *Hagakure*: "Meditation on inevitable death should be performed daily" (Scranton 2015, 7). In Tatsuki's case, death as the ultimate question arrives noiselessly in her journey of interiority; in Scranton's, it resonates loudly with the destruction and danger that surrounds him in a war-torn Baghdad. Both are deeply personal moments, as any reflection on one's mortality is bound to be. Yet, while *Thailand* retains this tenor, Scranton shifts his register to a different scale. In a deft move, Scranton asks, what if we were to extrapolate this question to a larger stage, where mortality looms over us as a species in the form of the climate crisis and think of death as a civilisation? What can our ever-present but now accelerated and impending transience as a species tell us about how we have lived and how we are to live? For Scranton, the task before us is much the same as what Nimit tells Tatsuki; as the title of his tracts suggests, it is in *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene*.

Ever since its inception in geological sciences at the turn of the century as a term indicating the pervasive influence of human systems on planetary processes, the Anthropocene has expanded outwards rapidly to become a cross-disciplinary concern. There is, of course, considerable irony in that the humanities have had a relatively minor voice in this proliferation, considering the conceptual implications of the arrival of an 'age of humans'. As Noel Castree (2014) argues, the disciplinary engagement of the humanities with the Anthropocene has mostly focused on inward conceptual possibilities and revisions rather than outward 'engaged-analysis'. Roy Scranton's text is not an outlier to this schema; his proposal of a "philosophical humanism" performs the same tasks of an "inventor-discloser" and "deconstructor-critic". This is to say that while it engages with the Anthropocene, it ultimately remains fixated on disciplinary ends. It is, however, a peculiar text in that, one, it turns toward humanist possibilities at a time when the Anthropocene is seen to have all but thoroughly validated antihumanist perspectives (Ferrando 2016), and two, it does so through a modernist faith in human exceptionalism and technological optimism. Part of the attempt of this paper is to critically lay out how the humanism conceived in Scranton's text treads this curious line, specifically how it attempts to bridge the personal and the collective interestingly in an ethical project for a time of environmental collapse. I contend that despite its existentialist framing, Scranton's program remains bereft of any substantive, grounded imagination of human agency. I argue that employing

the motif of death to pose the Anthropocene as an existential problem ultimately leads him to dilute his emancipatory project vis-à-vis capitalist modernity by placing faith in transcendental possibilities rather than transformative ones. To pose the Anthropocene problem differently, I suggest that it may be worthwhile to look at alternative accounts of ethical subjectivity.

Simone de Beauvoir's ideations in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* are particularly useful in this regard as her notion of ambiguity allows us to reformulate the Anthropocene subject as marked by a dilemmatic agency of being caught between one's apparently insurgent species-being and the practical limits of sustainability, that then invites resolution through transcendence as we see in reading Scranton. The key difference, however, is that for Beauvoir, it is precisely this ambiguity that we need to embrace. Rather than speaking of agency as a problem of either having the capacity to act freely or not, existentialists like Beauvoir suggest that the real question before a subject is to think through the freedom we always already possess.

By articulating freedom as a constant, substantive action that speaks reflexively to the ambiguity of our existence without needing to resolve it, she places it firmly as an ethical category. This conception of subjectivity, I argue, is greatly useful in developing grounded political counterprojects that humanistic programs like Scranton's lack and in reframing the Anthropocene as a concern of life rather than habitability. The purpose of bringing these two texts together critically, then, is not to present a rejection of humanism but to reaffirm the need for a more rigorous humanist imagination in relation to the climate crisis.

2 The Climate of the Anthropocene

That Roy Scranton approaches the Anthropocene from the very outset as a philosophical question of death is not particularly noteworthy in a context where it is seen as a crisis of planetary habitability (Chakrabarty 2021, 83). And yet, at first glance, the mode in which this is framed, as a need to learn to die, is an unfamiliar formulation in the conversations around the geological phenomenon. Part of the reason for this may seem self-evident: the Anthropocene is still in the realm of being a proposed crisis rather than a fact, and so it most immediately summons responses that look for solutions, which treat its catastrophic horizons only as threats and not inevitability. A fixation on death is hardly conducive when looking for useful contributions to this discourse of diagnoses and fixes. This logic holds even when the Anthropocene, as manifested in ocean acidification, biodiversity loss, rising sea levels and so on, is sublimated to broader questions about human existence – a move Scranton makes to establish the

otherwise "ill-suited" humanities as relevant to our times (Scranton 2015, 6). The out-of-placeness of Scranton's framing is symptomatic of a pervasive feeling that discursively, the Anthropocene is an exigency that demands our attention in specific ways.

Dipesh Chakrabarty (2018) reviews the conversations around the concept of the Anthropocene in these very terms, as positions marked out vis-a-vis how the 'anthropos' in the term is understood. The first of these takes the idea of the Anthropocene as an epoch where human productive activity takes on planetary roles to mean that the human species is now embedded in a network of geo-biological processes (Lewis, Maslin 2015; Steffen et al. 2011). Given the vast physical and temporal scales over which these processes unfold and the complex systems that they constitute, the argument goes, it is no longer possible to speak of the human as being agentic in the sense of possessing causal powers. Certainly, the Anthropocene has human productive activities at its roots, but having constituted it, the phenomenon subsumes human capacity to dictate it. Essentially, transformation to a planetary force is an ontic shift, whereby the human species is now part of the Earth systems, which are "all process without a subject" (Chakrabarty 2018, 25). It is this understanding that makes it possible to argue – as Hamilton (2015) does, for instance – that the scope of the Anthropocene and that of environmental crisis are not congruous. For, in having become synecdochous to the planet (Chakrabarty 2018, 28), the human species now simultaneously occupies both the plane of existence that it has known so far – of the political, the world-historical – and an entirely novel one – of geological processes. In the latter, the question of habitability is not quite the same concern that it is in the field of environmental studies. To be sure, earth systems scientists are interested in the conditions that support life, but from a planet-centred point of view – the one that we are forced to adopt in the Anthropocene – it makes little sense to fixate on life as the ultimate function or property of planetary systems (Zalasiewicz et al. 2017). Like Rick Deckard in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* (Dick 1996, 31), we encounter the 'tyranny of the object' but with the odd twist that we are ourselves this object in some sense.

The second position is what Chakrabarty identifies as the "conscious Anthropocene". Here, adherents maintain that the implications of the Anthropocene are dire but not necessarily a reason for despair. Unlike the earlier position, where responsibility is irrelevant in light of the pure processual nature of the Anthropocene, here, it is significant. The avowal of human responsibility as a causal factor of the Anthropocene implies that our capacities also extend to the ability to respond to planetary disruptions. A typical example of this approach is found among the ecomodernist group, who propose that the human collective can pave the way toward a "good Anthropocene" (Asafu-Adjaye et al. 2015). Rather than see the human as being subsumed

in the planetary, this perspective holds that the Earth has become more of a *human planet* in the contemporary context. For the ecomodernist ilk, the task before us is to accelerate and deploy our technoscientific capacities to mitigate climate change and establish a more equilibrious relationship with Earth's systems. What appears to be at work here is an evolutionary logic. Human communities are understood to have always shaped the world around them in a bid to secure a good life, so it is natural that we do so today too; only, with the means that our technologies afford us, we can pursue growth in eco-conscious ways. The central problematic that organises action in this stance is the question of how to delink our productive infrastructures from the carbon energy sources that drive climactic upheavals. In this regard, even as the human agent becomes more relevant than ever, the imaginations of agency vary, but nevertheless, they broadly align with the existing liberal-democratic framework of states, global institutions, and civic bodies as avenues of environmental action. The language of "acting together" that the International Institute for Sustainable Development uses is archetypal of this stance (IISD, s.d.).

The last of these positions is characterised by attempts to politicise the Anthropocene, a move that Chakrabarty calls a transformation of questions of "force" into "power" (Chakrabarty 2018, 9). This is in keeping with the larger impetus of the human sciences to – in James Baldwin's words – "lay bare the questions that have been hidden by the answers". Dismissing notions of common species culpability when it comes to the climate crisis as an oversimplification at best and ahistoricity at worst, the attempt here is to disclose the Anthropocene as not so much a timeless product of human species-being than a more limited politico-historical formation emerging from specific complexes of power operating in the world (Davis, Todd 2017; Malm, Hornborg 2014). This is to say that the categorical nature of the Anthropocene is as social – if not more – as natural. Thus, a range of voices have demanded that we speak of this contemporary moment in more accurate representative terms by substituting the misnomer Anthropocene for more suited, if awkward, names such as Capitalocene (Moore 2016), Plantationocene (Haraway 2015; Tsing 2016), or Econocene (Norgaard 2019). It is clear that responsibility remains a crucial element here, as it is in the approaches described previously. Just like them, responsibility is invoked not only to designate blame but also to imagine responsive action. Even as historical explication reveals that the benefits of exploitative extraction of natural resources by capitalist productive systems have disproportionately fallen among the populations of the planet, it indicates that environmental action has common stakes with acts of resistance along other axes of social exploitation such as class, gender, race, and caste. Thus, the Anthropocene renews and reinforces the revolutionary demands on the marginalised subject.

It should be evident in this heuristic spectrum plotted between the inhuman, the conscious, and the political Anthropocene that the question of agency is a fundamental concern in the Anthropocene discourse. However, this is not simply in the sense of whether we have agency or not, but more specifically about how human subjectivity is recomposed by the particular agentic forms demanded by the Anthropocene. Thus, agency is not done away with in the networks of a processual Anthropocene, but in being imbricated in planetary forces that resist epistemic mapping and thereby technological control, the subject as a coordinated and contained figure is destabilised. Similarly, when agency in the conscious Anthropocene is to be articulated on a planetary stage in distinctly techno-scientific modes, the subject has to absorb a more concerted sense of being and belonging to the species rather than as mere abstraction. In the political Anthropocene, the subject seems to be formulated in familiar registers of a resisting agent, but counterhegemonic action must now be organised within a contracting natural horizon of "tipping points". Understood this way, it becomes possible to see that the Anthropocene discourse is not inhospitable to Scranton's project as it first appears. For, as I will detail below, 'learning to die' is also preoccupied with similar questions of subjectivity.

3 The 'Learning to Die' Project

A fundamental conceit at work in *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene* is the way it transposes individual death to a notion of civilisational death, a move that it has to validate by arguing that death is as certain for our civilisation as it is in our individual lives. In this regard, Scranton makes a threefold case. One, hard data shows that emissions have continued unabated over the last few decades despite scientific consensus that climate change is a very real and pressing crisis, and they are likely to continue in this fashion (Scranton 2015, 22-9). Second, its various consequences, such as melting ice sheets, rising sea levels, changing weather patterns, etc., are fast approaching tipping points, after which it would be impossible to mitigate or predict resulting feedback mechanisms (17-18). Third, political will has shown itself to be uninterested in making necessary headway in dealing with the problems, and popular will is too constrained and paralysed by a general atmosphere of anxiety to force its hand (31-40). As a result, he says, we are facing a future of almost certain doom (8). Civilisational death here is not necessarily the death of the

species.[1] Scranton is instead calling attention to the deeply unsustainable order of things under carbon capitalism. The two come together only in futures where we continue holding on to "fantasies of perpetual growth, constant innovation, and endless energy" (8, 11). In any case, the purpose of transposition becomes clear here. Just as how, even though our very condition as human beings is grounded in the fact of our inevitable death, we do not know how to die well (56), our civilisational death also needs charting. Learning to die is not, then, a literal project as much as it is a figurative, philosophical mandate (57). And so, subjectivity, as it forms in relation to human mortality, is made to speak with the notion of civilisational transience.

It may seem peculiar that such certitudes – of civilisations being beyond redemption – are important to establish in order to sketch out roles and possibilities of subjects. Yet, as Slavoj Zizek (2017, 2) argues, utter hopelessness is a useful place to arrive at, for it is from here that we can launch meaningful projects of transformation. This logic may be better explained by the distinction that Terry Eagleton makes between optimism and hope, saying that optimism retains various degrees of faith that things will somehow take care of themselves as historical necessity, whereas hope is the grittier work of effecting changes through wilful struggle (Eagleton 2015). And sure enough, we see this familiar dynamic of hopelessness-hope working in the text. Scranton says that the very acceptance of the Anthropocene collapse of capitalist systems leads us to see that civilisations are always transient. And, rather than being a cause for paralysis, this transience is indicative of a broader truth: human existence across time has always been about working and reworking ways to live. We lose sight of this collective spirit of which every civilisation is only a contingent manifestation (Scranton 2015, 63). Our present system is particularly insidious in making us blinkered to the "press of the present" (70). Scranton argues that the "social energetics" – social forces flowing among and through us, shaping our subjectivity (30-1) – of our "photohumanist society" is peculiarly strong for two reasons. One, they create a pervasive atmosphere of fear, anxiety, and violence rooted in various sources of unrest, including climate change (46-9). Two, within this atmosphere, we occupy roles as "vibrations, channelers, tweeters and followers" (69) whose subjective expressions are limited to the forms enabled by this system. This has dire implications: these media technologies are ideological instruments which, by both form and content, circumscribe our ability to practice autonomous reflection and ultimately offer little

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1 In fact, on this count Scranton is inconsistent. In different parts of the book, he is convinced that climate catastrophe cannot be avoided (Scranton 2015, 11), that humanity can survive (9), and that we may or may not (74-5).

in terms of true political action (52). Even when they do become the base of politics, they mystify the true systemic nature of the environmental crisis: that "the enemy isn't out there somewhere – the enemy is ourselves" (53).

The philosophical humanist strategy against this myopia is to practice "interruption" (53-5). This involves disturbing the social flows that we become conduits and vessels to through "critical thought, contemplation, philosophical debate, and posing impertinent questions" (70). The target of these acts is the reason why interruption is translated as dying. By choking the arteries of social subjectification, one undoes the self (58). That this is ultimately a hopeful project is indicated by the fact that such a death allows the self to emerge from the "hive" (53) and begin to see "a web of being that connects past to future, them to us, me to you" (57). It is the first step in re-emplacing oneself in the larger collective self of humanity. Though we are transient as individuals and even as cultures, we possess technologies that allow us to belong to a transcendent human spirit, from our "our first moments in Africa 200,000 years ago, and living on in the dim, fraught future of the Anthropocene" (59). The ultimate task of philosophical humanism is to reclaim and reconnect to this vast cultural memory, the only thing that Scranton sees as subsisting beyond the collapse of civilisations. After all, despite the relentless advance of time in which "wars begin and end", "empires rise and fall", "buildings collapse, books burn, servers break down", and "cities sink into the sea", the histories that we leave behind survive (70). In Scranton's understanding, this is what learning to die is fundamentally about: the building of "cultural arks" (70).

To sum up, against the catastrophic futures of carbon capitalist growth, Roy Scranton offers the counterproject of a civilisational death, which is put into practice by de-subjectivising selves and re-embedding them in the transhistorical legacy of human social being. Elementally, then, philosophical humanism, as an act of both reclaiming and producing cultural memory, is a reminder of alternative possibilities. In this, it shares much with the humanist sciences, whose purpose in delineating the social constructedness of things has also been to highlight that what pass as unbending realities are malleable, and therefore alternative desires for better worlds are not only possible but incumbent upon contemporary subjects. Scranton's specific point regarding the vicious grip of our digital cultural space is, in fact, quite resonant with the body of literature that has attempted to understand the paralysis of "capitalism realism" (Fisher 2009). One would expect that the "anarchic" nature of his philosophical humanism, as he puts it, should have something to say to the capture of imagination that these works identify as a central problem of the late modern, neoliberal world. Yet, it is curious that ultimately, *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene* has almost no substantive

politics to propose for the world as it is. Instead of the engaged philosophy of creating 'new worlds in the shell of the old' that one expects of anarchist intentions, we are presented with an entirely different program of cataclysmic changes. Neither is this in the kind of paradigmatic shift that is associated with revolutionary programs (Graeber 2004, 42). And so, while the transformation of the subject and the collapse of civilisational structures appear to be concrete agendas of transformation, they are finally committed to merely as facilitative actions – the building of arks signifies both that substantive existence today is already beyond our grasp and that the future appears only as a cautious space.

I argue that the reason for this slippage from transformation to transcendence as a social goal is based on an underlying sensibility of the text, where history as a civilisational memory comes to supply meaningfulness to life in the present. The most telling evidence of this is an aphorism Scranton offers: "We are humanity. We are the dead. They have become us, as we will become the dead of future generations". In speaking of life as a cycle of remembering and anticipating past and future lives, its solidity as something lived in the world is eroded. One begins to see here that the text's acceptance of the transience of life relies on a field outside existence where the latter hosts a primordial spirit in relation to which individual lives manifest. There is not enough in the text to suggest that this spirit supersedes the latter, and yet, the idea of reconnecting the self with broader rhythms of human history within the context of *surviving* the climate crisis implies that it is nevertheless a vehicle of meaningfulness on account of its resilience. It is possible to speak of the effect of this broadening of fields in terms of the different Anthropocene subjectivities that I discussed earlier in this essay. Where Scranton initially works with the political subject, who apprehends both themselves and the wider social collective as the grounds for imagining agentic action, this conviction is corroded by elements of the other two approaches, which slip in when the boundaries of existence are loosened.

So, for instance, the optimism that he furnishes his project with, of historical legacy outliving a civilisational collapse, is a humanistic parallel to the conscious Anthropocene subject, where advocates are convinced of the human capacity to surpass natural limits technologically. Of course, here, transcendence is far more macabre. The philosophical humanist is an inverse in that they bequeath only dystopian parables where the conscious Anthropocene subjects produce technological mastery. Yet, they resonate in the fact that for both, the subject always exceeds itself; it is a part of not only a contemporary collective but a relationship between temporal kin. Yes, one imagines this as an accretionary relation and the other more as a reflexive sublime, yet for both, existence is only a part of these

larger teleological/transcendental rhythms of history. As a result, the Anthropocene gets positioned as a boundary condition on an already existing path of progress/human spirit rather than as an emphatically current figure of reckoning.

Similarly, the philosophical human once again loses some of its political subjectivity when Scranton invokes elements of the processual Anthropocene subject. In his coda, Scranton shifts to a perspective whose gaze falls upon an even wider landscape than just the history of humankind. It apprehends the universe, its birth, the formation of celestial bodies and the coming of life on planet Earth. This is the eternity in which humans are born and die. Although Scranton moves to look at how, despite any external validation, we create meaningfulness (Scranton 2015, 73), the planetary vantage persists in his narrative. It is present in the notion that the history of humankind is only an appendage of the mathematical movement and design of the universe (75); it insists that the subject, beneath all the layers of life, is ultimately matter (74); and it holds that amid the fundamental entropy of the cosmos, life and death are only energy flowing into different patterns (72). These disturbances loosen Scranton's grip over the Anthropocene as a specific manifestation of the "toxic, cannibalistic, and self-destructive" capitalist systems. Instead, it is given slack to claim more neutral grounds as just another crescendo in the long symphony of the planet.

Transcendence, then, and not transformation, becomes the defining character of Scranton's philosophy as he allows his conceptual frames to exceed the bounds of existence. Little of the deeply personal and grounded register of unlearning photohumanist cultural embodiments remains in the celebratory embrace of the transcendent human spirit as the ultimate site of meaningfulness. The reflexive transformation that Scranton urges through a wilful engagement with figurative death is counterintuitively undercut in his account of human subjectivity conceived both as an oft-violent, ahistorical manifestation in the world and an enduring, diffuse legacy of wisdom. There is a familiar Original Sin-esque aspect to this ambivalence (in contrast with Beauvoir's ambiguity), a trope that abounds in the moral language of popular environmentalism, which, on the one hand, speaks of planetary limits and human hubris and, on the other, humanity's inexplicable grotesqueness in failing to imbibe the values of the natural order. In the clash between our insistent proclivity to transgress and the given order, we must either learn to live in compromise or fall from grace. The choice, then, is to live with constrained potential or to die burning bright. Both these formulations essentially articulate the human condition as a schizophrenic capacity for astonishing emancipation and ironic self-destruction. Insofar as the Anthropocene is placed within this narrative as yet another manifestation of this species-being, not only does Scranton's critique

of contemporary capitalist culture in relation to the environment and human civilisational health lose its edge, the universalist pretensions of his humanism also become rather thin.

I contend that if we are to instead retain faith in the idea of transformation as a possibility not just in-the-world but also for-the-world, we must jettison death as the pivot in thinking about the Anthropocene problem. To "stay with the trouble" (Haraway 2016), we must stay within the ambits of existence. It is in this regard that I propose that it may be worthwhile to distinguish between an existential approach as found in Scranton's narrative and an *existentialist* one that I will outline by drawing from Simone de Beauvoir. The latter, despite being just as cognizant of the affects of death, understands the central problem of being not in terms of mortality as much as the notion of freedom. This alternative frame is particularly relevant in that it widens the scope of what a question such as the one Dipesh Chakrabarty asks in *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* can mean

> Is the Anthropocene a critique of narratives of freedom? Is geological agency of humans the price we pay for the pursuit of freedom? (2021, 33-4)

As such, this provocation seems to pit freedom against the boundaries of the planet, in which case we do not move away from the configurations of transgressive subjectivity mentioned earlier. Existentialist philosophers like Beauvoir offer us a different insight.

4   The Question of Freedom

Toward the end of her book, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Simone de Beauvoir, working through questions of conceiving existentialist ethics, turns to the notion of freedom. For her, freedom is that which lies beyond the confines of facticity (Beauvoir 2011, 79). Facticity is an existential concept which denotes all the various 'givenesses' to which we are born and in which we exist – the very context of our lives (Bakewell 2016, 157). In order for a person to be more than just a product of facticity, Beauvoir suggests, they must undertake projects of meaning-making, actions that denote their agency as a subject. This should not be taken to imply that subjectivity is in opposition to facticity. Rather than see material conditions as limiting factors, existentialists understand facticity as an indispensable part of articulating freedom. Existence is meaningful because it is a series of choices made in relation to the world; in a vacuum, without choices, one cannot speak about existence in any useful sense. To do so would be to equate existence with a notion of an abstracted being, and this goes

firmly against an indispensable existentialist tenet: existence precedes essence (Bakewell 2016, 157). And yet the existentialist conception of being is such that "man is always outside of himself, and it is in projecting and losing himself beyond himself that man is realized" (Sartre 2007, 52). Existence, then, is not just that we *are*, but that we are constantly *becoming* in this matrix of a shared human condition and our particular facticity. Thus, when Beauvoir speaks of freedom as a transcendence from facticity, she does not mean a state that irons out the self. She details it more delicately as an ambiguity that requires us to hold together both the sense of our unique sovereignty and our ultimately insignificant worldly existence.

I find this formulation interesting for how it draws out two meanings of transcendence: as practice and as perfectibility. The latter of the two is ubiquitous in the modern world. Beauvoir discusses its emergence as a particular relationship with the idea of the future. One of the ways of conceptualising the future is to understand it as a temporal extension of the present; it is the horizon to which our life and its projects tend and in which they accrue and find new ends. Another is to see it as arriving suddenly from without, as a Messianic figure, such as the Last Judgement in Christianity. In the eighteenth century, Beauvoir says, these two senses of the future coalesced in the idea of progress, which was at once evolutionary and teleological (Beauvoir 2011, 80). This was a potent mix that came to have very crucial consequences. She argues that when the future is seen as an assured positivity, it becomes indifferent to the present, thus justifying ends over all means in a bid for freedom. This indifference is, of course, a matter of common discussion with regard to the environment, most evident in the criticism that at the roots of the climate crisis has been a tendency by capital production systems to write off natural costs as externalities. And yet, in highlighting both the evolutionary and the teleological aspects of progress, Beauvoir is making a keener point. It suggests that while the future as an assured utopia certainly dominates modern notions of progress, the present also remains salient in it on account of it being immanent in human ingenuity and action in operation today. It is as if, while human history unfolds in a series of transcendental moves toward a better future, this future is also always its unique due as a species set apart from the rest of nature. In such a formulation, yes, the Anthropocene is a 'cost' of our freedom, but insofar as the underlying assumptions remain intact, the real failure is simply that we must pay this cost. Akin to the argument that something is wrong or immoral only because we fail to do it, the Anthropocene is a 'critique' only to the extent that we appear incapable of surmounting our planetary conditions. Which is precisely why popular sentiment places faith in the conscious Anthropocene and its "failing forward" (Fletcher 2023) narratives. Our wild hopes that perhaps we may yet devise ways

such that we will not have to surrender our desires for growth, that technological marvels may yet subvert the planetary limitations, and that the chaos in our systems is just temporary are all indicative of this attitude. The modern idea of freedom, in how it is articulated as the pursuit of cumulative but ultimately abstract and total progress, one that is its own end, understands transcendence not primarily as a relation of the subject to themselves but between the subject and their facticity.

The existentialist idea of freedom works with a different premise: rather than assuming any totality to human being, it embraces the notion that we are in a constant state of lack: "Man is a being who makes himself a lack of being in order that there might be being" (Beauvoir 2011, 4). By this account, we are born into an existence that has no external validation. Its meaning can only be constructed by the projects that we choose to undertake. Man emerges from an "original helplessness" where "no outside appeal, no objective necessity permits of its being called useful. It *has* no reason to will itself" (4; emphasis in the original). And still, rather than be a cause for paralysis, this "nothingness" becomes the ground for our freedom. Our lack of being comes to define the character of our existence in that we then *choose to be*. In a paradoxical move, by uprooting ourselves from the world, we make ourselves present to it (5). For, our "being is lack of being, but this lack has a way of being which is precisely existence". It is important to understand that "choice" here suggests more than its usual connotation. Rather than merely being able to select courses of action from the many available to us, what is at stake in choosing is the very affirmation of our existence. For, the freedom of choice, as Sartre argues in *Being and Nothingness*, is not about obtaining one's wishes but what the act itself means as one determines oneself to wish. In this schema, "success makes no difference to freedom" (Sartre 2021, 564). In letting go of a "foreign absolute" – say, Enlightenment man as progress – that defines our existence and informs our actions, freedom is released from its ties to teleological ends. Instead, it is rewritten as an expansive category which relates to our capacity to constantly make and remake ourselves. The move here reprioritises the present and thereby rejects any allure of ends-over-means logics. The failure of being anything absolute here is assumed as the very truth of our existence, and so, insofar as we do not have to surpass this failure, nothing can be rationalised as a necessary cost of our being.

But, even more importantly, relating freedom to existence as constant becoming makes it possible for us to introduce to ethics questions of value. This is one of the central arguments of *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, where Beauvoir sets out to defend existentialist philosophy from charges of formalism and solipsism. In my earlier assertion, it should be noticeable that while freedom does not have to cut its

way toward any predetermined end, it does become an end in itself. After all, when it is defined as a fundamental quality of our existence, it must also then be defended against any attempt at minimising it. Beauvoir counters this criticism by asserting that existentialist freedom is more than mere form; it also has content in that when man is his own sovereign, he also bears the responsibility for his actions (Beauvoir 2011, 7). The existentialist belief that freedom is, in fact, the heaviest of burdens that man carries is symptomatic of the ethical duty that it entails. And so, it cannot be said that existentialism contains a blanket sanction in the name of freedom.

But what about that other slippery slope – relativism – whereby even ethical culpability escapes any real answerability? This is a question that Beauvoir brings up quite early in her text: when she says that much of ethics in philosophy has been wrongly discussed in relation to the demands of given natural orders (3-4), we see that existentialism invites a complicated problem by locating the source of ethics in the individual. To be of use, ethics must be intersubjective – after all, responsibility is more credible when it includes answerability to others. Intersubjectivity may be charted along a temporal line to the lives that come after us or, spatially, to those with whom we live in the world today. In both cases, Beauvoir says, to escape the "absurdity of facticity", we must acknowledge and communicate with the freedom of others. She seems to suggest that we must follow through on the unboundedness of freedom to any telos and insist on its complete open-endedness (48). "The movement of freedom which wills itself infinite" means that freedom cannot be constrained to egotistical solitude (44). Once again, the point is not to ensure formal freedom; it is that individualistic freedom privileges the object of its passions over other men. Writing in 1947, with the clear intent of developing a humanistic philosophy, it is unsurprising that Beauvoir takes a strong stance against even the possibility of dogmatism. But she goes one step further: this intersubjectivity reveals that the freedom of others impinges on one's own in such a way that "to will oneself free is to also will others free" (49). Her existentialism then assumes a universal humanist politics, whereby "the existence of others as a freedom defines my situation and is even the condition of my own freedom" (62). For oppression is a situation where the ability to transcend oneself is cut off; the oppressor defends it as being natural, but it is not (55-6). Her argument here is also straightforwardly moral: when one does not question the various oppressions whereby the freedom of others is undercut, one's abstention is as good as complicity (59). Freedom, thus conceived as an ethically loaded capacity of shaping our actions in the present that also accounts for the freedom of others, is far more capacious than the Enlightenment notion of freedom in that it is inherent to the very act of being free. In place of the end-over-means principle of human growth and progress, we

have ethical freedom as the very means and end of existence here. For freedom here is not a state; it is a practice.

It is not enough, then, to say as Chakrabarty does, that the reality of the Anthropocene is such that we will ironically need the Enlightenment legacy more than ever, even while giving up precisely some of its freedoms (Chakrabarty 2021, 34). There is a tinge of tragedy in this proposal, which once again suggests that our choice is, in fact, a dilemma. We should certainly explicate the Anthropocene as a critique of freedom, but in the sense that it turns the question inward to disclose that freedom is not a conquest of our environments. Treating planetary boundaries and our relatedness to life on Earth as obstacles has, in fact, obscured freedom as a more expansive category. Existentialists like Beauvoir remind us that freedom as a human condition emerges not from the fact that we are in a state of imperfection but from an inexorable lack at our core. Existentialist freedom is a sense of constant, fluid becoming of the self against itself rather than the pursuit of futures where its ultimate articulation resides. As an expression of transcendence, then, it does not carry us away from the world; it places us firmly in it.

5   A Reframing Through Violence

How can we draw from this idea of transcendence as an ongoing practice to reframe the Anthropocene crisis? It allows us, for one, to pry apart the seemingly commonsensical centrality of death within an existential formulation of the climate crisis and instead pose it as an existentialist problem of freedom. Certainly, the horizons of climate change are dire enough to make such a focus sensible, and yet, there are incongruences here that allow us to make this distinction. In the way that things stand today, the Anthropocene has spatio-temporal logics to how it manifests. On the one hand, it looms as a series of cataclysmic horizons – rising sea levels, heat waves, droughts and so on. On the other, it occupies uneven geographies and identities; the figure of the climate refugee attests to this fact unequivocally. In either of these senses, it is utterly disjunct with the deeply personal imminence that is Death (Gray 1951, 120, 123). Moreover, even in a scenario where the crisis becomes an inevitable fact, the questions that it will evoke will be of a predictable tenor – Why did this happen? Who is to blame? What could we have done differently? – Can the same ever be posed to Death? The point here is the same as that made by political critics of the Anthropocene narrative: the climate crisis is a geological phenomenon with a history. We relate to it through questions about how much we can control it and who is truly accountable because it emerges from and reflects structures of differential power. It is this disparity that *Learning to Die in the*

Anthropocene flattens by claiming that the "problem is us" (Scranton 2015, 40). The text sees the capitalist system as so all-encompassing that each of us is joined in its violent mechanisms. In fact, it is said to be so pervasive that we no longer even have "choke points" in the system where political action can be concentrated (53). And thus, individual interruption of social energetics becomes our only recourse. This escape from the "hive" offers, as we have seen, only the false consolation that we may rescue and leave behind some humanist legacy for the future.

It is undeniable that the processes of capitalist productive systems are such that even the exploited come to feel that they have a stake in it (Berlant 2011). Existentialists would describe this as a problem of "bad faith" (Sartre 2021, 72-3) whereby subjects deny the basic fact of their freedom and instead ascribe external signification to their choices. To act against bad faith is incumbent upon us. Although Scranton's philosophical humanism is in keeping with this idea, it fails to grasp its full implications. It misses, for one, that bad faith is not quite the same as violating others' freedom, that there is a qualitative difference between the violence of capitalist exploitation of subjects, and the subjects' desire for this system. It also forgets to heed the intersubjective responsibility of freedom, where one's own freedom is sensible, secure, and moral only when the other, too, is free. And finally, it loses sight of the sense that to reclaim freedom is really to forgo any sense of powerlessness about the world. To remain with the violence undergirding the Anthropocene and posing it as a problem of freedom allows us to imagine more positive and emplaced political counterprojects. To take just one, a possibility that Scranton leaves undeveloped in his narrative, we see that the subjective possibilities of freedom align closely with the anarchist notions of direct action, which maintains that the beginning of all politics is to act "as if already free", that it is possible to create alternative spaces even within overbearing hegemonic structures, and indeed, that it is necessary to do so in order to allow us to forge new subjectivities and to enable others to see that such freedoms are very real possibilities. This is only a brief indication; a more detailed discussion of these political potentials requires drawing from more than just a singular work of existentialist philosophy. I have limited myself to Beauvoir's specific text in this paper to make the specific and, really, the preliminary argument that her formulation of ethics is not only a productive but, really, an exigent position from which to think of subjective action at a time when the nature of the environmental crisis appears to be reinforcing an earlier paralysis of imagination in relation to the scalar complexity of capitalist structures (Harvey 2000). I argue that straddling the personal and the collective as ambiguous valences of existence rather than as antagonisms in need of synthesis is a compelling stratagem in this regard.

6   By Way of a Conclusion

In a sense, Beauvoir's motives in detailing the ethical implications of existentialism share the spirit of what I have attempted to argue in this paper. It is not merely that existentialist thought needs to be defended from the often-unkind criticism of it being damp tinder when it comes to the 'actualities' of life, but that even a fairly well-meaning existential account such as Scranton's finds itself slipping before the appeal of terrains beyond existence as it is, and as a result, undercutting the material political possibilities that it possesses. If existential modes of thinking are to be relevant to an Anthropocene age, it is necessary to establish their concerns as primarily being about the immanent world rather than transcendental ones. To this end, some insights from existentialist philosophy are indispensable. Most vital is the clarification that death is not a central problematic in existentialism; it is merely the facticity par excellence that constitutes the human condition. Our various life projects do not come together to justify the meaningfulness of existence *despite* it – almost always a move that seeks to minimise death as a figure – but very much within its affects and implications. This shifts the existentialist gaze squarely to the field of existence, where it identifies a different central problem: freedom. The questions of transience and of having no external validity describe a hopeless condition, surely, but this hopelessness feels most heavily the burden of being free. Which is to say that the question that haunts us perpetually is how to live life when we can live it on our own terms and in relation to the world we are born in. The way in which this fact leads us to the ethical implications that Beauvoir lays out is instrumental to the sense that something must be *done* about the Anthropocene. To this end, existentialist illuminations that freedom is not something to be attained but to be practised and that the purpose of politics is not so much to build ethical worlds as it is to realise that the contemporary world is always already the only ground for ethical action is fortifying.

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Bataille's Laughter: Comedy, Irony, or Wonder? Examining Ecstasy as an Anthropocentric Limit

Rachel Holmes
Kingston University London, UK

Abstract   This article applies a reading of Georges Bataille's *Laughter of Death* to the comedic, the ironic, and the wonderful, to determine whether these functions are amenable to the dissolution of subjectivity that his laughter implies. This dissolution, in turn, repositions humans within an ecology of death identified as the food chain. Bataille's laughter thus serves as a litmus test for the extent to which these functions – representing humanism (the wonderful), postmodernism (the comedic), and posthumanism (the ironic) – rely on identity and, consequently, anthropocentricity.

Keywords   Georges Bataille. Bataille. Alenka Zupančič. Søren Kierkegaard. Caroline Walker Bynum. Comedy. Irony. Wonder. Laughter. Continental Philosophy. Posthumanism. Postmodernism. Humanism. Posthuman. Postmodern. Anthropocene. Ravencene. Immanence. Hegel. Clowns. Clown. Val Plumwood. Plumwood. Philosophical Animism. Crocodile. Eye of the Crocodile. Cyborg. Donna Haraway.

Summary   1 Introduction. – 2 Humanism and Wonder. – 3 Postmodernism and Comedy. – 4 Posthumanism and Irony. – 5 Animals and Trickery. – 6 Conclusion.

1 Introduction

Sherryl Vint's publication *After the Human* (Vint 2020) presents a collection of essays that delineate the contemporary research field of posthumanism and its influence on the humanities. In Vint's introduction the ecofeminist Donna Haraway is described as playing an indispensable role in the emergence of scholarship on human-animal relations (3), while various essays cite her *Cyborg Manifesto* (Haraway 1991) as an originating text for the posthuman movement. Therein Haraway presents the posthuman subject, the cyborg, as "a hybrid creature, composed of organism and machine" (4). This essay asks if cyborgs can laugh, more specifically, it asks if they can laugh in a particular way. It does this because laughter abolishes anthropocentric codes oriented around identity, by dissolving subjectivity. As posthuman subjects which allegedly deconstruct anthropocentricity, it therefore becomes pertinent to ask if cyborgs can laugh; and what posthuman alternatives can we imagine in the case that they cannot. However the nature of this laughter is also examined in the context of its inheritance from humanism and postmodernism, in terms of the transformation of the function of ecstasy that they exhibit.

Laughter is expressive of an ecstatic state, where ecstasy is understood according to the Medieval historian and documentor of shamanic rites, Claude Lecouteux, as derivative of "the Greek *ekstasis*, which literally means 'straying of the spirit'" (Lecouteux 2001, 12). Laughter is thus presented in this essay as an inversion of anthropocentricity insofar as it removes us, or 'strays', from anthropocentric codes. In doing this, laughter abolishes objectivity and identity defined in relation to utility; Georges Bataille describes this state of dissolution as immanence which he identifies with the intimacy of nature as being "*in the world like water in water*" (Bataille 2004, 34). Bataille thus formulated the laughter of death as the sacrifice of identity, and on the basis of this ecstatic commitment to the impossible loss of self (Bataille 2001, 24), described his philosophy as a "philosophy of laughter. It is a philosophy founded on the experience of laughter, and it does not even claim to further" (138). The Bataillean capacity to laugh, is therefore the capacity to (ecstatically) transcend codes oriented around (utilitarian) object schemes, thereby instituting a sovereign relationship with the impossible and unknowable which furthermore, collapses anthropocentricity.

This ecstatic preoccupation positions Bataille as a philosopher of environmental humanities, concerned with relocating the human subject in the intimate ecology of nature. This preoccupation motivated Bataille's ritual and meditative practices, as well as his discipleship to Nietzsche on the grounds of Nietzsche's tragic thought which posited "the ecstatic revelation of the impossible which ruins the separation between subject and object" (Lotringer 1994, x). The blossoming

of this Nietzschean lineage in Bataille's thought, resurrects the significance of the animal for modern philosophical discourse.

In *Nietzsche's Animal Philosophy*, Vanessa Lemm emphasises this significance, contending

> the animal is neither a random theme nor a metaphorical device, but rather stands at the centre of Nietzsche's renewal of the practice and meaning of philosophy itself. (Lemm 2009, 1)

In *Animal Philosophy* Matthew Calarco and Peter Atterton express their astonishment that conversely, postmodernism

> has only rarely given serious attention to the animal question [despite] the tremendous reception it has given a thinker as seemingly pro-animal as Nietzsche. (Calarco, Atterton 2004, xv)

Joseph D. Ycaza thus argues in *The Ecological Nietzsche* (2022) that indigenous perspectives are a better starting point for an understanding of Nietzsche than the Western European worldview, on the basis of the ecological orientation of indigenous ontologies.

Ycaza's view can be substantiated by the postmodern absence of critical philosophising around the animal question, which Calaraco and Atterton identify in Continental philosophy. This is problematic for the posthuman movement which Vint describes as an attempt to "take account of the more-than-human world and to redefine its concepts and methods beyond anthropocentrism" (Vint 2020, 1), on the basis that posthumanism is the contemporary prodigy of the postmodern "reluctance to embrace traditional humanism and anthropological discourse" (Calarco, Atterton 2004, xv) which Calarco and Atterton describe. Stefan Herbrechter thus characterises posthumanism as a new participant in "the still-ongoing deconstruction of [the humanist] subject by critiquing subjectivity's inherent anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism" (Herbrechter 2020, 39), which it has furthermore, inherited from poststructuralism (as the precursor of postmodernism).

What is at stake therefore, is a threat that posthumanism will reproduce the implicit anthropocentrism of postmodernism by excluding the value of the animal as an ecological subject. This of course has a ricochet effect, insofar as the human being *is* and has been identified as a human-animal by writers like Vanessa Lemm, David Abram (Abram 2011) and, indeed, Georges Bataille. As such, Bataille's commitment to Nietzsche's ecstatic thought – which relocates the human subject in an intimate order Bataille equates with animality in "Hegel, Death and Sacrifice" (Bataille 1990) – offers a sort of renegade factor which can critique the systems (including posthumanism) founded on Nietzsche's thought from within. It does this by restaging the significance of the animal in his thought; in this essay this renegade

factor is presented as Bataille's laughter of death which is as impossible as the animal, insofar as they both collapse the utilitarian order.

The methodology undertaken herein can thus be described as ecstatic insofar as it is concerned with the extent to which laughter can relocate the objects it critiques, from an anthropocentric order into an immanent order identified with our natural ecology. I furthermore, employ the work of the ecofeminist Val Plumwood to characterise this ecological system as the food-chain. Plumwood's food-chain is commonsensical, but also true to Bataille's fixation with sacred experience as a form of violence. The crocodile which death-rolled Plumwood three times, changing her philosophical commitments and resulting in her conception of the food-chain outlined in *The Eye of the Crocodile* (Plumwood 2012), is native to Bataille's erotic conception of the sacred as the experience of both horror and ecstasy (Bataille 1986), which Plumwood also describes in *Being Prey* (Plumwood 2008).

This analysis of laughter is interpreted through four humours; wonder, comedy, irony, and finally trickery. This is on the basis of their correspondence with humanism, postmodernism, and posthumanism. Comparing these movements means we can see more clearly their individual relationship to laughter, and thereby, critique their capacity to escape anthropocentricity (or not). It also allows us to identify the transformation of the ecstatic function which has resulted in our current predicament, exemplified by the symbolic crises of The Anthropocene which I will critique. This comparison will be mediated primarily through the work of Caroline Walker Bynum, Alenka Zupančič, Donna Haraway and Val Plumwood; and interpreted through a Bataillean framework.

Bynum's theory of wonder is presented as humanist insofar as it is derived from the Medieval epoch wherein humanism developed and is thereby representative of its ecstatic values. Zupančič's theory of comedy is presented as postmodern insofar as it is cognizant with the predicament of the clown as a postindustrial construction which furthermore, is still expressive of the Mediaeval function of wonder but beginning to lose its ecstatic function. Haraway's theory of irony is presented as posthuman insofar as she describes it as such and her work has been generative for the movement; which furthermore, completes the vanishment of the ecstatic function. By contrast Plumwood will also be positioned as a posthuman writer, but one capable of salvaging the ecstatic function, thereby offering trickery as an alternative to irony.

What emerges from this analysis, is the predicament whereby wonderful humanism appears more posthuman than Haraway's ironic posthumanism, insofar as it is more ecstatic and thereby less anthropocentric. This is an important alarm for posthumanism, which may be informed by examining the origins of humanism as a struggle

against tyranny which emerged during the Florentine Renaissance, and developed into a panetheistic materialism which Arran Gare has characterised as 'nature enthusiasm'. Gare identifies "Giordano Bruno, who was burnt at the stake in 1600, [as] the foremost proponent of this" (Gare 2021, 3). To this end I have offered Plumwood's view on the food-chain as a solution to the posthuman return of anthropocentricity, on merit of its capacity to reposition us in a living ecology identified with the food-chain.

In the following I will describe the function of wonder for the humanism of the Medievals, predicated on the experience of hybridity which triggered ecstatic states, "as a response to 'majesty', to 'hidden wisdom' or significance" (Bynum 2005, 55). This is correlate with Bataille's conception of laughter as a response to *the unknowable* (Bataille 2001, 135).

2 Humanism and Wonder

We begin this analysis in the Mediaeval epoch, as an ecstatic time concerned with the paradox of the miraculous and the monstrous, and the divinatory states their coexistence induced. Bynum's *Metamorphosis and Identity* (Bynum 2005) is a study of concepts of change among Western Mediaevals in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, organised by the encounter between the monstrous as finite experience, and the miraculous as infinite or divine experience. This paradox was representative of the Mediaeval predicament of the finite human being having an infinite experience, personified by Jesus Christ as the Son of Man and embodiment of God; resulting in a wonderful view of hybridity which "lingers at the highest levels of *unitas*" (175). This doubled hybridity, both miraculous and monstrous, resulted in the experience of wonder as a significance reaction (55), and was generative of the popularity of the werewolf in Mediaeval entertainment literature. Bynum thus refers to Angela Carter's suggestion that Christmas day is the werewolf's birthday, on merit of the hybridity shared by both Christ and the werewolf (159).

Bynum characterises Mediaeval hybridism as the simultaneous holding together of contradictory parts, which evokes a wonder reaction associated with the sublime in "which ontological and moral boundaries are crossed, confused or erased" (69), evocative of "paradox, coincidence of opposites" (43). Wonder was attributed to sublime experience as a

> signification-reaction – which is only another way of expressing the tautology that things are signs or portents not because of their natures or their causes but because they indicate or point. (71)

Bynum points out

> As every Mediaeval schoolboy knew, monsters are named from the verb *monstrare* (to show) – that is, not from their ontology but from their utility. (71)

In this regard the werewolf (as paradox) was monstrous not so much because of how spectacular it was, but what this portended to as the negation of human knowledge; Bataille's ecstatic experience of the unknowable. In the Mediaeval era of humanism, identity was thus inscribed with negation in terms of its orientation to the beyond-human; it was thereby not an anthropocentric position. Rather, this paradigm necessitated humanism as the humanising of hybrid beings toward infinity, as opposed to finity.

Michel Foucauilt similarly identifies the function of the monstrous before the seventeenth century; which defined madness as expressive of a divinatory relationship with a 'Beyond' (Foucault 1988, 36). This Beyond existed in an antagonistic relationship with the state, insofar as it began to be associated with unemployment, idleness, and finally madness. However these zones of deviance mapped the site of humanist struggles of resistance against state despotism. Silvia Federici has demonstrated how this was descriptive of the heretical movement "aspiring to a radical domestication of social life" (Federici 2014, 33) following the crisis of feudalism, which offered an alternative to the development of a money-economy which eventually triggered capitalist industrialisation. Federici argues that the transition from the persecution of heresy to witch-hunting, was facilitated by the demonisation of folk practices previously associated with the wonder paradigm (40), including ecstatic rituals of divination.

Nevertheless, apart from hybridity, the Mediaevals did also conceive of forms of transformation and metamorphosis as metempsychosis and shape-shifting; or what Bynum describes as identity-replacement. However, for the Mediaevals these feats of transformation still assumed

> an atomism according to which nothing disappears. Things merely aggregate or dissolve, returning to the elements, the ultimate parts or bits. Hence, in a sense, there cannot be change; a thing is merely more or less of what it is. (Bynum 2005, 144)

Change was thus often only a revelation of a disguised state; expressed by shape-shifting allegories of "overclothing" (103) which were discarded to reveal an authentic, preexistent nature. Bynum subsequently laments that

> we seem at the present moment to lack images, metamorphosis, and stories that imagine… a self that really changes while remaining the same thing. (166)

This self that really changes while remaining the same thing in terms of spatio-temporal location, is important insofar as its metamorphosis generates stories which "involves *metabole*, the replacement of something by something else" (181). For Bynum, "without it there is no story; nothing happens" (177). In this regard, we need more stories of metamorphosis as thirdness; an absence which postmodernism can be described as trying to compensate for, with the non-binary obsession it has plausibly inherited from the Mediaevals.

Nonetheless, Bynum's theory of Wonder is capable of producing laughter insofar as it is concerned with the divinatory implications of paradox and the ecstatic states it evoked for the Mediaevals. Wonderful monsters transcended anthropocentric codes and symbolised a Beyond. In so doing, they animated a living ecology woven by beyond-human relationships; including the relationship between the monstrous and miraculous as "a likeness moving toward like, or a midpoint in the chain of being between animal and angel" (129).

However this wonderful 'coincidence of opposites' would be castrated of its ecstatic function in modernity, resulting in the postmodern predicament of the clown, haunted by its opposite or double. Bataille also refers to the hybridity of Jesus Christ, but as a comedy which cannot reconcile the infinite nature of God with his death (Bataille 1990, 13), but instead mocks it (2001, 23). This construction of comedy is based on Bataille's reading of the labour of the negative (as death) for Hegel, which Zupančič similarly invokes to characterise the comic as the personification of the negative. For Bataille this personification "reveal[s] to the living the invasion of death" (1990, 19), identified by him as Jesus Christ.

Comedy thus personifies the negative as the "acting subject" (Zupančič 2008, 27), thereby collapsing the ecstatic experience of contradiction or negation, into the postmodern experience of timeless, endless space; for which there is no Beyond. In this regard Jesus is described by Bataille as comic instead of wonderful, insofar as he is no longer representative of an ecstatic Beyond, but a postmodern 'here, now' instituted in the absence of God (Bataille 2001, 23). This is consistent with the transformation of divination which characterises modernity. While this is a degradation of the status of ecstasy and thus the possibility of laughter, it nonetheless persists as the haunting which traces the space of a vanished double that once offered the wonderful experience of hybridity.

In the following I will analyse the possibility of ecstatic experience for postmodernism, through the function of comedy. This transformation from wonder to comedy was foreseen by Nietzsche in *The Birth*

of Tragedy (Nietzsche 2003) which laments the degradation of trage-dy Nietzsche associates with divination, into comedy. However, I will conclude that postmodernism is ecstatic, insofar as it is concerned with the destruction of experience. While this is not divinatory and thus not wonderful (or in Nietzschean terms, tragic), it is neverthe-less expressive of Bataille's laughter of death.

This counterintuitively positions postmodernism as an animal ex-pression concerned with the unknowable. From this perspective, postmodernism's lack of animal theorising can be understood as a lack of the self-consciousness Nietzsche attributes to the tragic art-ist as a hybrid-satyr of the Apolline and Dionysian orders (43); de-rived from their (wonderful) encounter with a Beyond. According to Nietzsche's tragic theory this undoubtedly stems from moderni-ty's rejection of the Apolline world of divination and dream, which offers the dualistic complement to the Dionysian realm of intoxica-tion from which the hybrid derives self-consciousness, as "the weird fairy-tale image of the creature that can turn its eyes around and look at itself; he is at once subject and object, at once poet, actor and audience" (32).

This points to the sobering problem that as animals begin to ap-pear as literary devices or inventions, our self-consciousness on-ly confesses to our realtime alienation from them. They are once again instilled with the nostalgia and alienation Bataille ascribed to Pleistocene man's cave-paintings of deified animals (Bataille 2005, 76). This transformation is representative of our anthropocentric predicament, as we watch the disappearance of animals into myth.

3　Postmodernism and Comedy

Richard Schechner's identifies the postmodern appetite for "retrib-alisation" in *The End of Humanism*, which replaces the order of nar-rative with ritual (Schechner 1979, 12-13)

> in its its ethological sense of repetition, exaggeration (enlarging, diminishing, speeding, slowing, freezing), use of masks and cos-tumes that significantly change the human silhouette. (13)

The dizzying space such suggestive techniques open, animate the ver-tigo of postmodernity as a performance of crisis, disintegration of the basis of truth and destruction of experience (13), whose effervescence is comparable to the circus. Therein we discover ritualistic, painted clowns 'running into themselves' in the classic gag of the clown who slips on a banana peel, suddenly *finding themself* on the floor.

This coming to consciousness through a violent encounter with an external force, initially described by Schechner as the invention of

the atom bomb (9-10), but represented in this case by the banana – inaugurates the zone of the double which is native to comedy; with comedies of disguised doubles such as Plautus' *Amphitryon* representative of the genre. Comic effect issues from the fractured identity of the double, whose abjection manifests as invisible traces that undertake a symbolic vandalism toward self-expression. In his essay *On the Psychology of the Trickster* Carl Jung describes the predicament of the modern man, secularised yet nonetheless haunted by

> countertendencies in the unconscious, and in certain cases by a sort of second personality, of a puerile and inferior character, not unlike the personalities who announce themselves at spiritualistic seances and cause all those ineffably childish phenomena so typical of poltergeists. (Jung 1956, 201-2)

Jung refers to the influence of this unconscious force as 'the shadow'; yet its omnipresence is inscribed in Western culture, with James Frazer identifying it in his encyclopaedic study of folklore and myth, *The Golden Bough* (Frazer 2009), as "ghost" or "shade" (Wittgenstein 2018, 48). In his remarks on Frazer's canonical study, Wittgenstein attempts to disenchant Frazer's superstitious choice of terminology by comparing it to the relatively normalised inclusion of the words soul or spirit in ordinary language (48). Heonik Kwon argues that Wittgenstein undertakes this comparison so that

> the distance between secularised modern society and the world of natural religions [to which concepts of ghosts, shades and spirits is native] is finally put behind us. (Kwon 2018, 90)

However, while this distance maintains, comic effect lies in the state of double negation occupied by a subject coming to a kind of consciousness which is not permitted in our hegemony. This is the comic juxtaposition of two mutually exclusive realities; one in which I have recognized my double, and one in which my double (the shade, shadow, spirit, soul, or ghost; Beyond) does not exist. This crisis describes the (forbidden) craft of ritual, which doubles the symbolic fiction as its theatre, in order to institute the uncanny return of the double as a mirror of self. However, the postmodern clown regulated to the circus, discovers that they are also a mirror, and their reflection is a reflection of the other's reflection who is a reflection of their reflection in a ricochet effect *ad infinitum*, which conjures a wormhole in space. In *The Semiotics of Clowns and Clowning*, Paul Bouissac corroborates

> It is probable that modern clowns are the continuators of secularised ancient rituals, without being aware of their origin, because

their cultural memory rarely goes back more than two or three generations. (Bouissac 2015, 139)

While Nietzsche attributed a tragic effect to this haunting voice of the other in *The Birth of Tragedy*, he conceded its transformation into comedy which castrated tragedy of its essential divinatory nature. Bereft of this divinatory function, the double becomes a clown; a caricature of its own revelatory function, in the comic spectacle of an excluded part visibly trying to integrate, but trapped in its own exclusion becomes ridiculous. In the comic performance doubles never meet, never experience the 'coincidence of opposites' as the invasion of the unknowable. They only run into its eerie traces like strange clues pointing to a pending symbolic crisis, where references are mixed and become senseless. However, this very ridiculousness represents the terrific aspect of the clown, whose excluded spectacle is both hilarious and threatening;

> … the clown is perceived as standing both out of time and out of space, to the extent that an outcast is always out of place, in the margin of the socio-spatial categories that assign statuses and functions to slots in the virtual grid of the social order. (Bouissac 2015, 24)

Bouissac identifies the term clown as originating from the English 'peasant' (54) drawing out the historic identification of clowns with a "class of uneducated peasants" (171) demeaned by city dwellers who enjoyed making fun of them as farmers lacking in social graces. Such 'clowns' became stable characters in British pantomime of the eighteenth century, appearing in European circuses by the nineteenth century as representations of emerging class relations embodied in the tradition of the 'whiteface' and 'auguste' doubles. The *auguste* clowns

> drew their name from the antiphrastic use of the noble name August as a way of ridiculing a person as slow-witted, clumsy, and possibly inebriated. (171)

While the *whiteface* represents their opposite, the aristocratic personality who

> is articulate, moves graciously, and is elegantly dressed. In contrast, the garb of the auguste is gaudy and ill-fitting, his behaviour is awkward, and his way of speaking is unpolished as well as impolite. They form a semiotic couple in which the signs that define one are inverted in the other. (39)

The ridiculous appearance of this double is representative of the social crises that conjured our postmodern abyss. They mirror the transformation of society during the centuries of industrialization which not only disenfranchised the foreign populations of colonies abroad, social deviants at home, but also excluded peasant labourers and conservative aristocrats from capitalist progress concentrated around cities, and galvanised by the industrial promise of meritocracy. Those left behind in the 'countryside' are represented by the pair's performative critique of "the conjugated forces of cultural inertia and nostalgia" (38) represented by the caricatured peasant and lord, whose exploitative codependency is satirised in the circus ring; but whose irrepressible presence also destabilise reality within the circus. As the haunting image of exploitation disturbing contemporary allusions to 'meritocracy' in a classless society, Boussiac reminds us that zombie-like, "The auguste is by essence both dead and undead" (164). The comic value of the auguste thus diverts attention from the contradictions of the economic system whose early effects were brutally impoverishing, to a scapegoated and nostalgic image of the whiteface lord as the personification of feudal exploitation. Occupying this absence of God, they are *nowhere at all*, exiled to the timeless realm of the negative.

Zupančič's characterisation of the comic in *The Odd One In* suggests that this timeless, negative space becomes personified in the acting subject as the clown, thereby offering a synthetic Hegelian state described as 'the odd one in' which subsumes difference; the double has become the acting subject (clown). Echoing Nietzsche's description of the evolution of the tragic into comedy, Zupančič formulates this transformation as such,

> To recapitulate: in the epic, the subject narrates the universal, the essential, the absolute; in tragedy, the subject enacts or stages the universal, the essential, the absolute; in comedy, the subject is (or becomes) the universal, the essential, the absolute. Which is also to say that the universal, the essential, the absolute becomes the subject. (Zupančič 2008, 28)

Yet for Hegel, in this very state of personified negation, is the emergence of being "outside meaning, yet inextricably from it" (182). This position outside meaning is the site of the negative, which Bataille describes as being founded on the animal in *Hegel, Death and Sacrifice*. Emergence through this negativity, is thereby emergence through the animal as an immanent being indistinguishable from nature. However the experience of this immanence offers "precisely human death" (Bataille 1990, 16). The laughter of death is thus expressive of Bousiac's clowns, and Zupančič's comics, but as a Hegelian emergence of being that transcends objectified human identity. The Comic

is capable of producing the laughter of death, precisely as the enactment of death; which conversely, makes us animals.

The wonder oriented humanism of the Mediaevals diverges from postmodern comedy here, insofar as it was concerned with humanising such animals as the experience of hybridity; for Bataille this was the possibility of sovereignty invoked by an *insidious* laughter (Bataille 2001, 186) and cognizant with the origins of humanism as a struggle against despotism. In *Against Posthumanism*, Gare reminds us that humanism originated in a republican struggle against despotism in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries in Northern Italy. This began as an attempt to humanise or culture subjects to participate in governance, when

> Petrarch introduced the humanities as a form of education designed to inspire people to develop the virtues of wisdom, justice and courage to defend their liberty and participate as citizens in the governance of their republics. (Gare 2021, 3)

In this regard the rejection of utility that Bataille ascribes to the laughter of death, is also descriptive of sovereignty as rebellion against systems of despotic tyranny; which finally, converts slaves into princes staked in governance. Lemm has shown how this also characterises Nietzsche's conception of culture as an animalistic resistance against oppressive hegemony or civilization (Lemm 2009, 11).

So while postmodernism expresses the laughter of death, it does not become sovereign; insofar as it is preoccupied with crises as opposed to rebellion. This failure is also descriptive of posthumanism whose loss of animality, enacted by its alienation from the food-chain, has instigated the symbolic crisis of The Anthropocene. In the following I will show how this operates as the realisation of Haraway's irony, and rejection of ecstasy.

4 Posthumanism and Irony

Following Hegel, Søren Kierkegaard similarly identifies "infinite absolute negativity" in the function of the ironic (Frazier 2004, 418). However, irony utilised as pure negativity fails to respond to Kierkegaard's task of becoming, predicated on attaining historical actuality as a gift and a task (428). The ironic rejection of the feat of actuality as "partly a gift that refuses to be rejected, partly as a task that wants to be fulfilled" (Kierkegaarde 1989, 276-7) transforms into pure negativity, which suspends the ironist in a state of detachment which fails to realise positive freedom (Frazier 2004, 425) in relationship with a historical community. In this regard, the ironic becomes a narrative of detachment and rejection, which produces

ironic performances and rituals detached from positive freedom insofar as "everything becomes nothing" (419). This becomes interesting when we apply it to a reading of Haraway's use of irony in the *Cyborg Manifesto*.

Describing irony as a "rhetorical strategy and political method" (Haraway 1991, 149) Haraway positions the image of the cyborg at "the centre of [her] ironic faith, [her] blasphemy" (149). This ironic mascot has become a sort of prophetic vision for the posthuman movement, with her *Cyborg Manifesto* repeatedly quoted in *After the Human*, and similarly referenced as a sort of genesis event by posthuman critics like Arran Gare, Thomas F. Thornton and Patricia M. Thornton (Thornton, Thornton 2015, 66-85), among others.

Haraway locates irony besides blasphemy as an insistence on the need for community that rejects a moral majority, and is instead founded on holding together "contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes" (Haraway 1991, 149). It is in this vein that we can read her work *Staying with the Trouble* which seeks a response to "mixed-up times" (2016, 1). These mixed-up contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes are embodied by the cyborg as a hybrid of organic flesh and technology. However, can the cyborg laugh?

If Bataille's laughter of death is predicated on the animal as the induction of immanence, the cyborg seems incapable of accessing this experience. This can be simply determined from its exclusion from the food-chain. For Bataille, "That one animal eats another scarcely alters a fundamental situation: every animal is *in the world like water in water*" (Bataille 2004, 34). Jill Marsden shows how this immanent state of being *like water in water* is generated by

> the similarity between the eater and eater [insofar as] the animal that eats another does not distinguish what it eats in the same way that a human being distinguishes an object. (Marsden 2004, 38)

This indistinction, experienced as "the dissolution of boundaries in poetic and erotic activity is not a reduction of difference to sameness, which would be to understand difference conceptually" (42); it is rather, representative of the collapse of identity altogether, from which becoming emerges. Insofar as the cyborg is omitted from the food-chain, it is separate from immanence and hence the laughter of death.

By contrast, Plumwood describes a form of philosophical animism founded on the food-chain, and the vulnerable position of the human being within it. She developed this idea following a gruesome encounter with a crocodile that death-rolled her three times. Subsequently, she critiques forms of Ontological Veganism (Plumwood 2012, 79) which attempt to displace human-animal relations from the food-chain, thereby generating a sterile and ultimately ironic view of nature in Kierkegaard's terms which does not achieve positive freedom,

insofar as it excludes the agency of nature as a historical fact and limit of becoming; as a gift and a task. The structure of Ontological Veganism is repeated by Haraway's cyborg, as an entity removed from the food-chain. As a foundational text for posthumanism, it implicates the movement, despite Haraway's allusions to play, as a little bit laughter-less. It also shows that Haraway's irony functions much more closely according to the system Kierkegaard describes for which "everything becomes nothing" (Frazier 2004, 419). This is in contrast to Bataille's view, which could be described as 'nothing becomes everything'.

This paradox is epitomised by the very ironic problem that one of the founding tenets of posthumanism, regarding the onset of the age of The Anthropocene which "combines the Greek root for humans, Anthropos, with the term for new 'cene', and is usually glossed as 'The Age of Humankind'" (Thornton, Thornton 2015, 3) was rejected by its examining community of geological scientists on 20th March 2024 (Witze 2024). In effect, we are not in the Anthropocene according to the scientific community. This can of course be disregarded by sociological theorists, however posthumanism and its cyborgs are also voluntarily predicated on scientific method inaugurating the cyborg "technosubject as a hybrid composed of flesh and machine" (Hollinger 2020, 18). This problem reinforces an ironic reading of posthumanism through Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Irony*, insofar as

> In irony, the subject is continually retreating, talking every phenomenon out of its reality in order to save itself – that is, in order to preserve itself in negative independence of everything. (Kierkegaarde 1989, 257-8)

Posthumanism cannot salvage The Anthropocene without contradicting its own premise of scientific method, except to "preserve itself in negative independence of everything" thus becoming pure irony.

Most optimistically we could hope this collapse of posthuman language may forestall an emergence from negation, but one which will surely be poetic; divinatory, and thus wonderful. At any rate, it exceeds the parameters of posthumanism as the remainder of difference; or the attempt to differentiate itself from a historical lineage which already critiques human identity and its relationship to the environment; including through the humanist movement itself. Herbrechter thereby remind us "'after the end of man' or 'after the human' also need to be understood as *before* the human" (Herbrechter 2020, 40).

In comparison to divinely inspired ecstatics electrified by the laughter of death as an encounter with the Beyond, cyborgs appear as ironic representations of an allegedly ahistorical present, and yet

nevertheless constructed by Mediaeval hybridity. The wonderful and the ironic thus double as werewolves and cyborgs in a comic performance. It is at this moment it seems fitting to ask, but who is laughing? Who occupies the limit of knowledge as the unknowable? It is at this boundary we discover the emergence of another being; an other that haunts this text, beneath its rippling surface, peering up at us through its murky web with a monstrous and yet miraculous eye; the third. The being capable of metamorphosis as identity-replacement; or, predation. The crocodile – laughing an insidious laughter of death, *at us*; at our limit of knowledge. To this end, Plumwood described the crocodile as her teacher (Mathews et al. 2012, 10).

I will now offer a posthuman alternative to Haraway's irony, which is capable of ecstatic experience (and thus the laughter of death) insofar as it is constructed in proximity to the food-chain. This is an attempt to rescue the status of the animal in the postmodern legacy which has detonated the problem of The Anthropocene, as the absence of coherent theorising about our position in a living ecology. I have traced this to a misreading of Nietzsche, however also indicated my misgivings that as we imagine animals into theory and literature, we compensate for their extinction. In effect, animals need to speak for themselves; however the nature of this language complicates our relationship to writing as problematically, "pre-eminently the technology of cyborgs" (Haraway 1991, 176). As Plumwood has shown, death is more properly the language of animals; or in Bataille's terminology, sacrifice.

5 Animals and Trickery

In his essay *The Sovereign*, Bataille introduces *insidious* laughter (Bataille 2001, 185), which he associates with sovereignty and rebellion as "the condition of loving death more than slavery" (188). This condition fuels the caprice of sovereign princes, who "gamble even with their lives" (188). This is related to Bataille's laughter of death insofar as it is organised around the unknowable and the impossible, as that which exists outside the possible and the order of utility. Insidious laughter is therefore native to the order of death, but as the gambler's caprice that risks death on his sovereignty. For Bataille, this discipleship to impossibility is animal (217) which in "putting life to the standard of the impossible, [and] renouncing the guarantee of the possible" (23) deifies him as sovereign. In this regard, the crocodile serves as Bataille's deified animal "image of an impossibility, of the hopeless devouring implied in *what happens*" (217). This impossible image of devouring illustrates Plumwood's attack, which she miraculously (or impossibly) survived. Furthermore, it expresses the insidious laughter of the crocodile who gambled life on its caprice before arbitrarily releasing Plumwood from its jaws. Plumwood

would subsequently come to describe the crocodile as both a teacher and a trickster (Plumwood 2012, ix).

In this vein, the crocodile is not straightforwardly generic to the category of wonderful monsters Bynum delineates. Rather Plumwood describes her

> saurian teacher [who] was a wrestling master and a far better judge than I of my incautious character, the precarious nature of human life, and of various other things I needed to know and have striven to pass onto others. (Mathews et al. 2012, 10)

The crocodile thereby exceeds the monstrous category insofar as it does not appear as a hybrid being, but was rather native to

> what seemed a parallel universe, one with completely different rules to the 'normal universe'… the universe represented in the food-chain. (Plumwood 2012, 13)

Whereas the hybrid can be identified with Plumwood herself, who was exposed to a Beyond and irreparably changed.

The crocodile is furthermore capable of the identity-replacement absent from the wonderful view of hybridity, as metamorphosis. In effect, the crocodile could have instigated Plumwood's identity-replacement by consuming her, whereby she would have metamorphosed into a crocodile. We can also imagine the crocodile could have been eaten by another predator and similarly, replaced. In this regard its position in a food-chain is metamorphic, insofar as it "live[s] the other's death, die[s] the other's life" (Plumwood 2012, 13). The repression or loss of this experience of being in the food-chain in philosophical discourse – reflective of our anthropocentricity – renders metamorphosis (as identity-replacement) unthinkable for our cultural systems of change, as Bynum has pointed out. Emanuele Coccia has attempted to address this problem with his recent publication *Metamorphoses* (Coccia 2021), emphasising evolution and birth as forms of human metamorphoses. This contrasts with the invasion of the impossible and death, which characterised Bataille's work as a philosopher of laughter and sacrifice.

The crocodile thus offers a fourth framework expressive of Bataille's laughter of death, and one which haunts posthumanism in the distance between Haraway and Plumwood. This is the insidious laughter of the trickster, which qualifies the sovereign as he who "puts his life in the hands of his caprice" (Bataille 2001, 188) and whose "first phase of autonomy is trickery" (168). This trickery is written in these pages as the sovereign voice of the crocodile.

Thomas F. Thornton and Patricia M. Thornton similarly present trickery as an alternative to posthumanism and the Anthropocene.

They describe the *Ravencene,* invoking the trickster-demiurge Raven described in "indigenous and pre-modern narratives and myths disseminated across the north Pacific and East Asia" (Thornton, Thornton 2015, 1). Raven offers stories of survival, adaptation and change based on an understanding of our mutual dependence in a "web of relations that constitutes and maintains life on earth" (18). Thornton and Thornton thus argue,

> we are better served by understanding the present in continuity with the past, instead of within the context of an unknown and unknowable future. (16)

Tony VanWinkle has also described a Trickster Ecology, which

> applies our present socio-ecological quandaries to the teachings embedded in traditional trickster stories. For our present realities are characterised first and foremost by constant change, contingency, and ambiguity – precisely the domains where trickster consciousness thrives. In various Native American traditions, these stories might revolve around Coyote, Raven, or Rabbit. (VanWinkle 2023, 291)

Plumwod's narrative of her encounter with the trickster crocodile is presented as a viable alternative to Haraway's posthumanism – one capable of enlivening the insidious laughter of death that marks the boundary of the unknowable; turning us into coyotes, ravens or rabbits, navigating a complex food-chain and living ecology. As Thornton and Thornton contend, the character of the trickster underscores the timeless problem of change and adaptation which continues to face us today, as it has always faced the animals competing with us in our planetary food-chain. By contrast, Harway's insufficient theorising around hybridity and its historic representation of our relationship with a Beyond which transcends anthropocentric codes, is demonstrative of naive conceptions of change – derived from postmodernism's theoretic alienation from our living ecology.

In effect, if we cannot laugh; we cannot change.

6 Conclusion

This essay has attempted to show that anthropocentricity should be analysed in terms of what exceeds it; this is the function of Bataille's laughter of death in this text, which demands ecstatic experience as the sacrifice of identity and the stake of becoming. I have tried to show that while this is logical to the wonderful and comic, the ironic fails to offer this flight and thus implicates the irony of posthumanism

as identity-centred, and subsequently anthropocentric. In this regard it does not represent the experience of immanence as participation in a living ecology, or the possibility of metamorphosis; conversely identified herein with the crocodile. However, Plumwood's writing offers an alternative posthuman system based on an encounter with the impossible, generative of the insidious laughter of sovereignty and death. I therefore encourage the environmental humanities to review the significance of ecstasy for a contemporary posthuman agenda as the staying of spirit.

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Slimy Fertility: Lagoons and Climate Change

Simon Estok
Sungkyunkwan University, Seoul, South Korea

Abstract   Lagoons breed many things, both in the imagination and in physical reality. Often spaces of horror and death, lagoons are also places of leisure and life. Literary representations of lagoons merit attention because, as climate change continues to melt ice across the planet, new lagoons are being created even as existing ones face increased threats. This article examines several significant literary and actual lagoons to highlight both their complexity and their importance, emphasizing the need to better understand how human behaviors and representations impact these fragile ecosystems.

Keywords   Slime. Eco-horror. Ecophobia. Literary lagoons.

Lagoons breed many things. Even while they burst all rational limits of expectation with the excess of life that they boast, lagoons – with their mosquitoes and threats of disease and death – are a fertile breeding ground of morbid fantasies. To understand better why this is the case, it is necessary to recognize that often at the center of lagoonal horror is slime. In Jack Arnold's 1954 horror classic *Creature from the Black Lagoon*, there is a monster that is threatening because of its incomprehensibility, and because of its origins in the muck and slime of a lagoon in a distant and therefore threatening foreign landscape. As the world continues to warm, slime is on the increase. We are beginning to recognize that the waters that are frozen will melt and that this will cause sea level rises – hardly a new or debatable idea (notwithstanding the claims of proponents of a "climate change debate") – and this will result in water diverting from its expected courses and states. The growth of lagoons has long been imagined as a result of climate change.

The first inklings of climate change and global warming began to take shape in the early 1800s, and while rising sea levels was perhaps not initially a part of such discussions, evidence was clearly piling up by the 1960s. In 1962, J.G. Ballard wrote *The Drowned World*, the first book to depict flooding caused by global warming, and although the warming was caused by solar flares rather than by pollution, the book has become a climate change fiction (cli-fi) classic with lessons that continue to have value – albeit, lessons that perhaps were never intended as such. It is these inadvertent lessons that bear scrutiny here.

The Drowned World begins on a couple of bad premises. The first is that nature can adapt quickly (biologically) – quickly enough to be seen in a human generation or two. The second is that humans cannot adapt (behaviorally) quickly enough to survive. The result of these two bad premises is that Ballard produces a novel that is at times laughably ridiculous, one character at one point explaining that

> one could simply say that in response to the rises in temperature, humidity, and radiation levels, [that] the flora and fauna of this planet are beginning to assume once again the forms they displayed the last time such conditions were present – roughly speaking, the Triassic period. (Ballard 2014, 42)

Radical and cascading species extinctions resulting in what we now recognize as the sixth major extinction event in history was neither a part of the conversation of *The Drowned World* nor of the era that produced it. The other unsubstantiable premise of the novel is that we are simply unable to change our behaviors – hence the lack of any vision of a survival strategy for us in an age of anthropogenic climate change. Of course, this is an unfair criticism, since the climate

change in the novel is not anthropogenic. The result is that the novel puts humanity into the passive position of victim living in a newly Triassic world – the same kind of passive victim position that the dinosaurs were in when the catastrophic asteroid hit them. The thing is, we know that humanity can live in watery cities. Venice is a good example. We know that humanity can live in places below sea level. The Netherlands and New Orleans are good examples. We know that we can live sustainably. The fact that we did it better before than after the Industrial Revolution is a good example. And we know that we can live in places of extraordinary extremes – of heat and of cold, of dry and of wet, of still and of windy. So, positioning humanity as victim to the environment in the way that *The Drowned World* does seems nothing short of ecophobic: it blames nature for our misfortunes.

Crammed to the gills with sham science, *The Drowned World* nevertheless floats as a plausible narrative (rather than sinking as deadweight idiocy), in part because of the quasi-science it offers. The discussion of hard-wired fears – important to anyone who dares to examine the parameters of ecophobia –[1] takes fairly accurate form in the novel:

> everywhere in nature one sees evidence of innate releasing mechanisms literally millions of years old, which have lain dormant through thousands of generations but retained their power undiminished. (Ballard 2014, 43)

Dr. Bodkin explains, asking further

> how else can you explain the universal [...] loathing of the spider [...or the] hatred of snakes and reptiles? Simply because we all carry within us a submerged memory of the time when the giant spiders were lethal, and when reptiles were the planet's dominant form of life. (43)

As a senior biologist and one of the last survivors who have a memory of living in cities now flooded in the novel, Bodkin seeks to understand the genetic encoding of fears that have ensured human survival. The memory, of course, if it is to be called such, is genetic memory – hardwiring, in other words – and is housed in a part of the brain called the amygdala.

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1 Ecophobic practices are those that imagine without cause the nonhuman as hostile or threatening to human safety, control, and so on; many fears of nature, however, have a reasonable cause and are, as the Author has explained in *The Ecophobia Hypothesis*, solidly embedded in our genetic material, encoded in our genes, saturated into our heritage – fears that have enabled us to survive. It is these that come under discussion in the novel.

It is the amygdala that houses our genetic heritage of fears that today are otherwise unaccountable – children's seemingly irrational fear of the dark, most people's ability to perceive spiders and snakes quicker than keys and wallets, horror at the bees when they transgress proximity limits, and so on. We have good reasons to fear these things, and these reasons are written into our amygdala. In this sense, these fears have a solid basis and are, therefore, not examples of ecophobia. Fears, however, do easily morph into phobias. Evolutionary biologist E.O. Wilson has explained that

> people acquire phobias, abrupt and intractable aversions, to the objects and circumstances that threaten humanity in natural environments. (Wilson 1992, 351)

Ecophobia drips in *The Drowned World*, and it is almost always toward water that has gone awry, left its expected states and morphed into something less known, less predictable, less friendly. "The green jelly of the water" (Ballard 2014, 49) hardly inspires cheerful confidence. "The green-ringed lagoons" (52) are not happy green fields. Images of rot fill the pages, the bizarre evolution-defying jungle laying "like an immense putrescent sore" (49). There is "oozing" and "fungus-covered sludge" (53) and all sorts of nastiness that these lagoons breed, and the "huge patches of fungus […] looked like an over-ripe camembert cheese" (59) – an image that at best evokes disgust but, given the size of it all, is more likely to engender a sense of horror.

Lagoons are a good site for horror. In his classic *The Philosophy of Horror, or Paradoxes of the Heart*, Noël Carroll explains that:

> Within the context of the horror narrative, the monsters are identified as impure and unclean. They are putrid or moldering things, or they hail from oozing places, or they are made of dead and rotting flesh, or chemical waste, or are associated with vermin, disease, or crawling things. They are not only quite dangerous but they also make one's skin creep. Characters regard them not only with fear but with loathing, with a combination of terror and disgust. (Carroll 1990, 23)

Lagoons, like their cousin swamps, promise all of these things. Hiding the murky and the unknown in their mud, lagoons are dangerous. Yet, while throughout history, as Sharon O'Dair has explained, "danger has lurked" in mud, paradoxically "mud is [also] generative, fecund" (O'Dair 2015, 135). Like the slime it often generates, mud involves the agency of nature just beyond control and domestication. It houses the unexpected and the uncontrolled. Out of it grows slime, an outright defiance of the elements, of order, and of safety, an uncanny

convergence of meaning across changing elemental media. Slime, what, Jean-Paul Sartre called "the agony of water" in his 1943 classic *Being and Nothingness* (Sartre 1966, 607), horrifies because it is a site of contradictions with appeals and repulsions. To know the powers of horror is both to know the appeal of the repulsive and to understand the draw of those things Julia Kristeva describes that do "not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (Kristeva 1982, 4). It is an appeal and repulsion not simply of elemental crossings and contradictions but of the very possibility of such agonistic relationships, such possibilities of both degeneration and regeneration embodied in one substance. These dual possibilities evoke responses that Christy Tidwell has insightfully identified as a "tension between fear and hope" (Tidwell 2023, 246). One of the reasons that the sliming of our oceans[2] horrifies, to be sure, is that it reveals a loss of human control to nonhuman agencies; but lagoons have always been – to varying degrees – the shallow sites of muck and slime.

Perhaps it is the shallowness itself that renders lagoons and swamps such versatile playhouses of horror and disgust. We don't see the rot and decay that happens among the bottom-feeders twenty thousand leagues under the sea, but we *can* see it as we row our boats across a lagoon on a pleasant, sunny Sunday afternoon. Representations of this are the stuff of horror. Robert Rawdon Wilson has explained that

> representations of decay, rot, deliquescence, all things that tend slime-wards, are the basic building blocks in the creation of a horror-world. They occur so often in horror films, even when not necessary to the action, that you can scarcely think about the properties of horror-worlds without beginning with the indications of slime. (Wilson 2002, 225)

Slime and horror are virtually inseparable.

In a narrative such as *Creature from the Black Lagoon*, it is clear that there is nothing innocent – in terms of gender and race – in the conception and representation of Hollywood things that tend slime-wards. Part of the threat of corruption from the slimy monster in this film is that it is foreign, a monster from the shallows of a lagoon in

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2   As I noted in *Slime: An Elemental Imaginary*, slime is on the rise as our global climate changes: "as the high end of food chains in our global seas disappears, jellyfish proliferate, and there is an increasing presence of oceanic slime" (Estok 2024, 1). Indeed, "global oceans continue to lose diversity and become play houses of slime to such a degree that University of British Columbia marine biologist Daniel Pauly has gone as far to suggest that our era be termed the 'Myxocene', the age of slime (Pauly 2010, 61) instead of the Anthropocene" (Estok 2024, 5).

the depths of the Amazon jungle. 'Gill-man', as the creature is called, is not from Seattle. He is a monster from abroad, a monster because he bears human form but clearly is not human, a monster because he breathes both in and out of water, a monster – worst of all and most threateningly – because he has his horny little eyes set on a helpless white woman. Playing into a long tradition of sexism and xenophobia, such figures have a long history in legend, myth, art, and literature the world over.[3]

Figure 1 From Johann Zahn, *Specula physico-mathematico-historica notabilium ac mirabilium sciendorum*. Augsburg, Germany, 1696. Image ID: libr0081, Treasures of the NOAA Library Collection Photographer: Archival Photograph by Mr. Sean Linehan, NOS, NGS National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), USA. http://www.photolib.noaa.gov/library/libr0081.htm

3 A quick internet search of "piscine and amphibian humanoids" reveals the entanglements of sexism and xenophobia with slimic (often lagoonal) monsters. See, for instance, https://www.artandpopularculture.com/List_of_piscine_and_amphibian_humanoids.

Figure 2 From *Creature from Black Lagoon* promotional shot, directed by Jack Arnold. Universal Pictures, USA, 1954

Yet, even when it is not so distant as the depths of the Amazon, lagoons threaten rot and degeneration. The lagoons that the floods in London create in *The Drowned World* bring effects whose enormity is only revealed when the waters retreat. There is "black slime oozing down the escalators below the office blocks" (Ballard 2014, 126), and we know that where there is slime, rot cannot be far behind. Indeed, the "cloak of rotting organic forms" (127) makes it seem that "time doesn't exist here now" (130). Effaced are all boundaries, temporal and physical, and "everything was covered with a fine coating of silt, smothering whatever grace and character had once distinguished the streets", "a great viscous mass lifting over the rooftops", with "sluggish pools across the street" (126). Gone is the organization – indeed, the civility – that characterized London pre-flood and pre-lagoon. Of course, the nature of floods is to produce disorder – and lagoons. Indeed, disorder is often the first thing flood narratives represent. There are many, many examples, but for the sake of brevity, Nathaniel Rich's *Odds Against Tomorrow* offers a sufficient example. In this novel, New York becomes an area of lagoons, and many of the same issues from Ballard appear in this novel. One key difference, of course, is that the floods in *Odds Against Tomorrow* are clearly the result of anthropogenic climate change. Whatever the cause of the flooding, however, the effects are equally staggering.

The recent phenomenal growth of horror as a genre is producing literary lagoons. This phenomenal growth is perhaps an effect of the fact that world itself is becoming more horrific, our corals bleaching and dying, our oceans becoming slime to such an extraordinary extent that University of British Columbia marine biologist Daniel Pauly has proposed "a new name of this new era, the age of slime" instead of the term Anthropocene (Pauly 2010, 61). Whatever the cause of the phenomenal growth of horror as a genre, cities and coastlines are flooding, slime is proliferating, and rivers are swelling. In some ways, representations of swollen rivers share many features with the lagoons that such rivers produce in the popular imagination. Academy Award winner Bong Joon-ho shows these similarities well in his 2006 film *The Host* (괴물, in Korean).

There are a couple of issues that need addressing here: firstly, the film uses or implies slime in the horror that it produces. The Han Gang (Han River) is the source in the film of a genetic mutation that has resulted in a monster, the water having become corrupt because of a shady foreigner urging the dumping of chemicals into the river. Not confined to the river, however, water is pouring down constantly in the film. The characters are soaked, the monster often slipping on unsure footing, the sense of saturation complete. The watery excess magnifies the horror by invoking slime, a staple in the horror genre, as I have been showing. Secondly, water becomes both the great equalizer and the great divider in the story. Water has the effect in this film of bringing into visibility a world unseen yet present before our eyes, both disorienting us and, to borrow a description from Melody Jue's description of immersion in water, "shaking up the conditions of interpretation" (Jue 2020, 163). The film shows the borderlessness of environmental issues (even in a country riven with divisions) and reveals starkly the continuing disproportionate burden of hyrdrological injustice carried by communities of the poor. Cecilia Chen, Janine MacLeod, and Astrida Neimanis discuss in their edited collection *Thinking with Water* the borderlessness of "water as a matter of concern shared across our differences" (Chen et al. 2013, 7), and, as Bong shows, those shared differences are not *equally* shared. Anyone who lives in Seoul knows that the Han Gang (Han River) divides the city into Gangnam, the affluent south (popularized globally by the song "Gangnam Style") and Gangbuk, the less affluent north (where the Author lives and teaches). As a poisoned public waterway in the film, then, the river divides but it also *unites* people through a shared threat of vulnerability.

Bong's *The Host* seems to be set during *jangma* (Korea's rainy season), and so the rain is perhaps perfectly plausible; even so, the effect is to create a sense of saturation and sliminess. It is useful to understand saturation in the sense that Melody Jue and Rafico Ruiz use it in their introduction to their edited collection entitled *Saturation: An*

Elemental Politics: "while saturation begins with water and watery metaphors", they explain,

> it is useful beyond water as a heuristic for thinking through co-present agencies, elements, and phenomena that traverse ideological systems and physical substances alike. (Jue, Ruiz 2021, 11)

In *The Host*, the excess of water leads to a sense of saturation that is complete, and this sense of saturation and excess carries with it a sense of slimic rot, a diversion of water from its proper course and state.[4]

An important part of this film has to do with notions about dilution, perhaps even reflecting post-IMF-crisis era anxieties of Korea about cultural dilution, making the dumping scene as much culturally metaphorical as environmental.[5] Shortly after the old white man urges the dumping of dirty formaldehyde into the public waterways, we see some people fishing and noticing mutations, and soon a monster appears from the river. It quickly becomes evident that something different is going on in this film than in *Creature from the Black Lagoon*. In neither film is there anything innocent (in terms of gender and race) in the conception and representation of filmic things that tend slime-wards; however, if Bong is "writing back" to and resisting colonial impositions, Arnold is playing right into them. The long tradition of the sexism/xenophobia entanglement reveals a trajectory, perhaps, that leads to people like Mr. Trump and his followers. At any rate, Arnold's foreign monster and Bong's domestic one (created by the actions of a foreigner) each emerge into the world, covered in slime and slipping on it, creating both a sense of disorientation and of horror and disgust, producing the affect of both disgust and the general disorientation slime evokes – and both of these make us see differently.

To return to lagoons proper and their horrors, it is useful to address some of the implications of *The Life of Pi* by Canadian writer Yann Martel. In this novel, horror appears from – of all places – a

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4   This paragraph appears in Estok 2024, 45-6.

5   The East Asian Financial Crisis of 1997 (what in Korea is called 'The IMF Crisis') was a brutal and sudden jolt into severe economic challenges and monetary shortages. One of the results of this period was a new era of foreign direct investment, accepted with reluctance and perceived as a forced condition of the IMF (International Monetary Fund) 58 billion dollar bailout. This foreign direct investment would have substantial cultural impacts. A country long known as 'the Hermit Kingdom', Korea was suddenly subject to unprecedented outside influences. Western fast food franchises (and domestic imitations) sprang up everywhere, lower middle class American eateries (such as the Costco food court) became popular among Korea's fashionable upper middle class, and there was a very real perception that Korean culture was under threat of dilution to Americanization.

lagoon on the island. What I want also to suggest here is that even when slime is absent (that is, even when it is implied), it invokes horror. There is much that could evoke horror in this novel – not the least of which is having to share a lifeboat with a hungry, full-grown 450-pound Bengal tiger. Yet, this charismatic carnivore, with its big sharp teeth, is a kind of slap-stick horror compared to the toothless slime that almost appears on the island where Pi and Richard Parker (the tiger) land. There is something eerie about "the island's complete desolation", save for the "shining green algae" (Martel 2001, 300, 301), the meerkats, and the dead fish in the pulsating pond. Eerie, however, is not horror. The horror comes wrapped in oyster slime:

> at the heart of a green oyster. A human tooth. A molar, to be exact. The surface stained green and finely pierced with holes. The feeling of horror came slowly. [Pi] had time to pick at the other fruit. Each contained a tooth. One a canine. Another a premolar. Here an incisor. There another molar. Thirty-two teeth. A complete human set. Not one tooth missing. Understanding dawned upon [him. He] did not scream. [He thought] only in movies is horror vocal. [He] simply shuddered and left the tree. (311)

The slime here is not so toothless after all. The horror here, however, is wrapped in slime that does not actually appear, since the "green oyster" is a metaphor and not truly an oyster. Even so, the first thing most people think of with oysters is either something sexual (that they are an aphrodisiac, with their morphic and aromal evocation of female genitalia) or something about slime – or both. In terms of gender and disgust, there is nothing innocent about Martel's mention of oysters.

The mention of oysters (oysters with teeth yet) – whether or not Martel intended it – evokes (and cannot fail to) a dangerously misogynistic conflation of disgust and female genitalia that has a very long history with the vagina dentata trope. Vagina dentata, the vagina with teeth, is a misogynistic fear of loss of masculine control to the sexual volition of women, a profound existential worry that the materiality of the vagina engenders in men (not all, to be sure), a fear that dates back to the ancient Greeks. It is a fear of envelopment, death, and dissolution, a fear that grows out of a kind of myxophobia (fear of slime) and no doubt of cannibalism too (I mean of penises getting eaten – actually eaten – by vaginas).[6]

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[6] Barbara Creed describes vagina dentata as "male fears and phantasies about the female genitals as a trap, a black hole which threatens to swallow them up and cut them into pieces" (Creed 1993, 106). Creed explains the deep classical roots of the vagina dentata trope and notes that "the notion of the devouring female genitals continues to exist in the modern world; it is apparent in popular derogatory terms such as 'man-eater' and 'castrating bitch'" (106).

Like many literary lagoons, the one in *Life of Pi* breeds danger and horror. Lagoons breed many things. A story such as Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* breeds desire, and for the main character, Gustav von Aschenbach, this desire itself reshapes the image of the lagoon as a space of profound fecundity. After seeing the boy, Aschenbach is in a daze and sees around himself

> a tropical swampy region under a vapor-laden sky, damp, luxuri-ant, and uncanny; it was like the portrait of a primitive world of islands, morasses and silt-laden rivers. From lusty fern clusters, from bottoms in which grew thick, waterlogged plants with out-landish blossoms, he saw hairy palm trunks rising near and far; he saw strangely misshapen trees sinking their roots through the air into the soil, into stagnant waters that reflected the green shade, where amid floating flowers as white as the milk and as large as platters, birds of an exotic species, with hunched shoul-ders, with monstrous beaks, stood in the shallows and gazed off to the side, motionless; between the knotty, tubular stalks of the bamboo thicket he saw the eyes of a crouching tiger sparkle – and he felt his heart pounding with fright and a puzzling desire. Then the vision receded... (Mann 1955, 3)

Aschenbach, arguably a pedophile, is haunted by desires that grow like the wild and formless flora he imagines in the Venetian lagoons. Aschenbach,

> leaning back, with hanging arms, overcome and repeatedly shud-dering, [...] whispered the formula of longing – impossible in this case, absurd, perverse, ludicrous, and even here still sacred and respectable: "I love you!". (Mann 1955, 42)

The unchecked growths that happen in this place prove dangerous, and Aschenbach's lagoon experiences, while transformative and mys-terious, intense and seemingly beyond his control, are also fatal.

The love that lagoons breed is the topic of many syrupy narratives. Henry De Vere Stacpoole's *The Blue Lagoon*, which has spawned four film versions, is among these syrupy stories. With its idyllic repre-sentations of childhood in a place that looks very much like para-dise, its depiction of innocent love, dangerous sharks, and poisonous fruit, this is a narrative that hits many of the registers of *Genesis* with its Garden of Eden. The "arita" berries the children in De Vere Stacpoole's story have been told are poisonous, but clearly there is both literal and metaphorical forbidden fruit in this story. These two children (cousins) are marooned on the island, grow up, fall in love, and bear their own child. The child they bear is the issue of incest. Not quite so syrupy anymore. The three of them end up stranded on

a boat in the lagoon, having fought off a shark, lost the oars, and eaten the poison berries, and then, after all those years, rescuers arrive. The final words of the story are deeply ambiguous. The reader knows that family has eaten the fatal berries, but when asked if they are dead, Captain Stannistreet says that "they are sleeping" (De Vere Stacpoole 1996, 114). The lagoon is a playhouse of fecundity, to be sure. It was "perhaps more than a third of a mile broad" (35), and surrounding it was a profound richness of life that lent the forest

> a deeper twilight, and all sorts of trees lent their foliage to make the shade. The artu with its delicately diamonded trunk, the great bread fruit tall as a beech, and shadowy as a cave, the aoa, and the eternal cocoa nut palm all grew here like brothers. Great ropes of wild vine twined like the snake of the laocoon from tree to tree, and all sorts of wonderful flowers, from the orchid shaped like a butterfly to the scarlet hibiscus, made beautiful the gloom. (38)

Yet, as in Mann, the lagoon here and the anarchic life and unchecked fecundity that surrounds it offer danger as well as deeply ambiguous beauty. No less is there great ambiguity in Hiromi Goto's lagoon in her short story "And the Moon Spun Round Like a Top".

The subtlety of Goto's representation of Vancouver's famous Lost Lagoon is perhaps lost on any but the locals – and, indeed, lost on many of the locals too. Lost Lagoon and the adjacent "enchanted forest" are gay cruising areas, a fact to which most straight Vancouverites are perhaps oblivious. There is a finely crafted and incredibly subtle scene in Goto's story, in which the main character – Bernadette – takes a "walk around Lost Lagoon in Stanley Park" (Goto 2023, 115). The subtlety is in how this walk characterizes Bernadette. She is a presumptive heterosexual – she has only been straight in the past and doesn't identify as anything else. According to Bernadette's friend, Glenda, however, "who referred to herself as queer" (119), Bernadette herself is also queer: "even though she might not be gay", Glenda says, "jeez was she ever queer" (119). The lagoon makes but one appearance in the story, but it is a highly symbolic one – and it is like a code for the queer community of Vancouver's Lower Mainland.

There is something magical about lagoons, both the real and the fictional ones. Lagoons breed many things, including fantasies of leisure and refreshment. Lost Lagoon has nothing of the horrors commonly associated with slime and degradation and has long been a tourist spot with alluring and spectacularly blue water, friendly raccoons on the shores, ducks, geese, and every manner of waterfowl (the lagoon was proclaimed a bird sanctuary in 1973, before which time row boats could be rented on its shores), and the kind of peace and tranquility that one wouldn't expect to find at the center of a

bustling metropolis (but it does have homophobic men with baseball bats lurking in its reeds). Like Türkiye's Ölüdeniz (Blue Lagoon), still-ness characterizes Lost Lagoon.

The sense of peace lagoons breed is uncanny, unsettling, and sometimes illusory. In a BBC piece on Ölüdeniz, Brad Cohen laments that this once "untouched paradise" with its calm glass-like waters has become "a particularly depressing example of paradise lost. The town is filled with neon lights and English-themed restaurants. The sea is dotted with faux-pirate ships and booze cruises. The beach is marred with drunken, sunburned tourists, and the clear skies are polluted with seemingly infinite paragliders launching from the sur-rounding green mountains" (Cohen 2022). There is something about the calm that compels us to make waves, something that compels a child to break the calm and throw a rock in. Lagoons breed resist-ance and change.

Change is central to Nnedi Okorafor's 2014 sci-fi novel *Lagoon*. Out of the waters of Lagos Lagoon in Okorafor's story, aliens emerge shortly after a meteorite strike. With this emergence is change – a lot of change. As one reviewer poignantly explains, what emerges from the lagoon are "themes like disability, coming out, religion, violence, politics, history, race, environmental impacts, and most of all change. This on the surface is simply what the aliens bring as they change the sea and its creatures as well as themselves. There is a plethora of transformations", changes to the "society and [the] environment",[7] with new creatures appearing suddenly and old and oppressive struc-tures collapsing. No less in Sharanya Manivannan's *Incantations Over Water* is it a sense of freedom that lagoons breed, with a mermaid emerging out of the waters of the lagoons of Mattakalappu, Ilankai (Sri Lanka). From the waters, she sings of peace and freedom for a land riven by war and treachery. Lagoons breed many things, and it is hard not to think of the "gestational milieu" that Astrida Neimanis and Mielle Chandler describe in their chapter in a diverse "blue hu-manities" collection entitled *Thinking with Water*. Indeed, often what emerges from lagoons defy the kinds of intellectual and material control that so much of the extractive ethics of science and capital-ism embodies.

When water goes awry and thrashes in an agony of metamorpho-sis away from its three natural states, it is the stuff of horror (and no-where is the agony of water more resplendent than in slime), but it is also the stuff of re-birth, growth, change. Lagoons are complicated, and while they proliferate under the effects of climate change, exist-ing lagoons are also under threat – and not only by climate change

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[7] https://www.deviantart.com/confusedkangaroo/art/ Lagoon-by-Nnedi-Okorafor-A-review-926351613.

but by our unbridled expansion. We need to pay more attention to them, but the problem is that so doing often results in the destruction of the very thing that we need so desperately to preserve – the hordes of tourists in Venice and Ölüdeniz being examples. Fools rush in where angels fear to paddle, but one thing is certain: we need to paddle carefully, both in how we represent lagoons and how we relate with the real ones. Imagining them as sites of horror hasn't served us well, but neither has selling them in travel guides as pristine sites of calm and beauty.

With the changing of global water cycles, weather patterns, and relationships among atmospheric, terrestrial, and hydrological processes, scholars in what has come to be known as "the Blue Humanities" have stressed the importance of taking what Serpil Oppermann has called "a conceptual plunge into the overlapping salt and freshwater ecologies" (Oppermann 2023, 4) that constitute global hydrologies. The relevance of such a plunge becomes apparent when we consider the increasing preponderance of flood narratives in popular culture that attends both the rise of sea levels and the shifting of freshwater/saline balances. Part of these changing popular narratives relies on a growing fascination with the imagined morbid potentials of lagoons and what they might breed. Even though lagoons may be less permanent and stable than oceans and lakes, how we imagine and therefore interact with them is important: lagoons are ecologically (and socially) important coastal ecosystems that are extremely vulnerable to the effects of climate change and human interference. At this point in our climate change apocalypse, it is not merely enough to pass data and knowledge amongst ourselves; it is critical to change the trajectories of how people think and act in the world. There is something increasingly wrong with how we think and act with lagoons; with how we see them as breeding sites of horror, disease, and death; and with how these ecophobic imaginaries texture and contour our behaviors toward aquatic geographies around us.

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Blue Death Studies: Theorising the Water-Corpse Interface

Jesse D. Peterson
University College Cork, Ireland

Sarah Bezan
University College Cork, Ireland

Kate Falconer
University College Cork, Ireland

Abstract   In this article, we theorise a Blue Death Studies approach to investigate deathly concerns and the people, places, and practices connected to them. Doing so highlights possibilities for rethinking death as watery and mobile rather than sedimentary and sedentary. To ground this theorisation, we explore how water impacts the ir/retrievability of the dead by analysing liquid (sea drownings and alkaline hydrolysis) and frozen deaths (cetacean samples, mountaineers, and cryopreservation). From this, we underscore how waters affect the ir/retrievability of matter and meaning in death and indicate future directions for a blue death studies.

Keywords   Water. Human and nonhuman animal corpse. Death Studies. Blue humanities. Multispecies studies.

Summary   1 Introduction. – 2 Towards a Blue Death Studies. – 3 Liquid Deaths. – 3.1 Submersible Bodies. – 3.2 Aqueous Bodies. – 4 Frozen Deaths. – 4.1 Stranded Bodies. – 4.2 Exposed Bodies. – 5 Conclusion.

1 Introduction

A terrestrial bias inflects our understanding of the dead. In Western civilisation, the space of the dead is traditionally underground, deep in the dirt. Placing bodies in the ground paves the way for memorials (e.g. headstones), cemeteries, human composting, and other practices that intimately connect corpses with earthly places and multispecies processes of decomposition. By no means unique to death, this terrestrial bias exists, we argue, as an expansive and yet also deeply limiting hegemonic lens. Although it assists in the ordering of time and space for humans and for the health of the planet, the geologic record represents a 'history' of the earth by which ages, epochs, periods, eras, and eons are determined through the metrics of quantifiable sediments embedded in layers of strata. But what of the fluid and mobile ecologies of water, and of their circulatory pathways? What of the potential for interspecies and cross-elemental exchanges at the water-corpse interface? Proceeding from the vantage point of a hydrological (rather than geological) critique of the Anthropocene, in this article we theorise a Blue Death Studies (BDS) that views the human and nonhuman animal corpse as a site of fluid undertakings between bodies and elements. In doing so, we seek to move beyond the dirt and dust fetish of Anthropocene discourse that interprets planetary and species death through solely geologic remains and incite a renewed critique in which we ask how, and in what ways, the dead might come to matter through alternative forms such as water.

Our motivation to develop BDS (Part 2) is guided by emerging scholarship in the blue humanities and critical ocean studies, areas that explore the complex meanings of seas and watery ecologies as they are represented in creative texts, historical archives, and cultural events across the globe. We are also inspired by proponents of queer death studies, who draw upon transdisciplinary methods to "attend to the problem of death, dying and mourning in current environmental, cultural, social, bio- and necropolitical contexts" (Radomska et al. 2020, 81). By bringing blue humanities and queer death studies together, we posit that an understanding of death might be reoriented by thinking how the dead interface with substances beyond earthly elements. Our aim is to explore the human and nonhuman animal corpse as a site of focused and prioritised critique within these two broadly conceived fields, and to make a case for the abundance of meanings produced at this interface.

What a theorisation like this can risk is sketching parameters too wide, or too narrow, to be of much use to researchers across diverse fields. We aim to mitigate this risk by employing an analytical approach that explores the ubiquity of water and focuses on evocative case studies that illuminate its deeper meanings. Hence, we offer a theorization of BDS that interprets human and nonhuman animal

material cultures *synoptically* (presenting a non-reductive indexical assessment) and *diagnostically* (offering an analysis of specific contexts and processes) (Bezan, McKay 2022, 4). This dual method allows us to open up a new intervention in the field while avoiding overly prescriptive terms that might limit further investigation and analysis by other scholars.

In line with this dual method, in Parts 3 and 4 we use a BDS lens to map the water-corpse interface to offer some diagnostic depth. The specific intervention we make addresses water as a substance that offers significant challenges for retrieving the dead but also the promise of retrieving life and/or meaning from 'dead' bodies. Retrieval in this sense therefore demarcates both possession (to 'gain ownership') and restoration or recovery. From our perspective, water offers an example *par excellence* of death as ir/retrievable because it creates conditions by which retrievability becomes im/possible. First, we inquire into water as liquid, touching upon the submerged bodies below the surface of water and bodies turned aqueous through alkaline hydrolysis – a funerary technology that liquifies corpses. We then inquire into water in its solid form, exploring frozen bodies on mountaintops and human and nonhuman animals subjected to cryopreservation. Analysing both liquid and frozen death allows us to expose the necropolitical and ecological limits and potentials of ir/retrievability. In this analysis, we ask how water makes the deceased ir/retrievable, examining whether such ir/retrievability matters and for whom.

2 Towards a Blue Death Studies

Taking care of the dead is a spatialising practice that has – for many, and for millennia – been primarily defined in relation to earth. In traditional burial, for instance, humans treat their deceased by transporting their bodies from the domicile to the underground. This practice has roots deep in our ancient past: humans have long felt an innate urge to place their deceased into the ground to define time and place (and the place of humans in both) (Harrison 2003). Particular understandings about particular categories of dead bodies flow from this concomitancy of earth, death, and meaning. Missing bodies, for example, are often regarded as being untethered from place. No longer rooted geographically, the unlocated remains of the missing dead also remain categorically abstracted from death, creating uncertainties about how to move on or grieve such lives (see, e.g., Weiss-Krejci 2013). Little, however, has been said about bodies, the whereabouts of which are well-known, but that resist typical death care practices that re-spatialise the dead (both human and non-human), such as those in a submersible at the bottom of the ocean or frozen atop the world's tallest mountain peak.

The problem, we argue, is that studies of death (and the academic field of death studies) are often overwhelmingly focused on terrestrial sites and burial practices. These themes pervade the pages of the major journals that service the field – indeed, the very first special issue of prominent death studies journal *Mortality* addressed cemeteries and "their significance in both time and space" (Rugg 2003, 107) – and ground much of the current interest in 'deathscapes' and their constitution (Maddrell 2020).

However, recent scholarship is starting to undermine this terrestrial focus. From our perspective, the emergence of queer death studies challenges us to move beyond the norms that have traditionally grounded studies of death (Radomska et al. 2020). Applying queer theory to death provides a lens to view it and its place in the world sideways (Leckey, Brooks 2010). It is "relentlessly norm-critical" (Radomska et al. 2020, 82), with the verb-form 'queering' understood as a process of critical defamiliarization that may open other, more affirmative horizons (Radomska, Lykke 2022). With this in mind, the nascent field of queer death studies aims to advance conventional death studies in three key areas. First, through its emphasis on necropolitics and necropowers and their systematic workings to position particular bodies as left to die; second, by moving beyond the normative and exclusionary notions of the sovereign human subject (usually envisaged as white, able-bodied, cishet, and at least middle-class), and third, by engaging with the developing fields of posthumanities and environmental humanities and the ethico-political dimensions of more-than-human death these fields highlight (Radomska et al. 2020). Hence, we notice a tidal shift of interests swirling around water and death, including "posthuman mourning" (Lykke 2019) and "worlding waters" (Fredengren 2022).

If we look to the more-than-human influence on queer death studies, we also identify efforts to destabilize the fixity of earth-centric analyses. Rather than seeing soil as something fixed and static, new materialist engagements within ecocritical scholarship have helpfully moved towards a conceptualisation of ecologies in terms of 'place' as well as, increasingly, 'process'. In her essay "Dirt Theory and Material Ecocriticism", Heather Sullivan argues that despite the appearance of soil as grounded or stuck in place, "the small-scale earth-forms of dirt, dust, and sand are highly mobile aspects of our material surroundings" (2012, 516). Instead of "concentrating solely on 'place'", Sullivan writes, "dirt theory acknowledges ongoing processes through time and across space" (516). As an example of "prismatic" ecology (Cohen 2014) that moves beyond "green" ecocriticism, developments such as these signal a shift towards an all-encompassing view of the environment as a site of fluid mobilities and multispecies assemblages. However, what is often not emphasized is that mobilities, especially that of earth, rock, and sand, depend upon

cross-elemental and multispecies relations that facilitate their movement. Water, for instance, is a major agent in transporting other materials through suspension and dissolution. In this way, we note that attempts to destabilize the fixity of earth still utilize earth as the grounds upon which they build their foundations.

To further develop a blue death studies approach that draws on queer death studies and more-than-human influences, we turn to blue humanities scholarship, with its focus on watery geographies and ecologies. As an explicit act of resistance to the geological turn, stories of the ocean work by estranging familiar stories and narratives of humanity and nature, tapping into the "alienating pressure of the deep ocean", which in turn "removes human actors from controlling heights and plunges them into uncertainty, movement, and dissolution" (Mentz 2018). From Stacy Alaimo's material-feminist analysis of ocean acidification (2016) to Ian Buchanan's description of the blue humanities as a "movement in literary and cultural texts" that "re-establish[es] a kind of poetics of the ocean" (2018), the blue humanities has brought a narratological focus to ocean studies that accounts for the rapidity and global magnitude of Anthropogenic change. Aesthetic representations of the hyper-optical 'Blue Planet' have likewise opened ways of viewing oceanic space in terms of its scale, temporality, materiality, and its multiplicity of mediations, as evidenced by the connections between blue humanities and science studies (Opperman 2019). Further scholarship on other beings – such as, but not limited to, water-borne bacteria (Bear 2015), seaweed (Åsberg 2020), or whales (Ojrzyńska 2021) – highlight the deep connections that tie humans to the lives and destinies of sea dwelling organisms. These interventions in the blue humanities harbour potential to decentre human narratives and have critically extended the humanities into the territory of the posthuman, the inhuman, and the more-than-human.

More specifically, within blue humanities scholarship the water-corpse interface has already begun to rise to the surface. There has been a focused attention on the meaning of the corpse in the context of histories of the Middle Passage and the transatlantic slave trade, along with the rising cases of recent migrant drownings amidst escalating refugee crises. Christina Sharpe's compelling analysis of "wake work" (2016) and Alexis Pauline Gumbs's poetic renderings of "undrowned" crossings and marine kin (2020) offer reflections on water necropolitics that expose the extent to which water encapsulates political (in)action that causes death but also echoes through the afterlives of the corpse in its watery resting places. In Edouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation* (1997), for instance, water is understood as both a kind of womb and an abyss. Drawing on Glissant, Elizabeth DeLoughrey's analysis of the co-authored novella *The Deep* treats this transoceanic abyss as the holding zone and a "multi-relative"

(to use a term of Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate scholar Kim TallBear's, quoted in DeLoughrey 2023, 353) archive for those thrown mercilessly overboard from slave ships to become carrion for the sharks that trailed behind (2023, 352). Texts like these represent queer formations around death that are sharply juxtaposed to what DeLoughrey elsewhere has theorised as *aqua homo*, the "unmarked masculinity" that has shaped the ocean into "a historical space of transnational capital, empire, and slavery" (2017). In the watery abyss, there are possibilities for queering forms of relation across the species divide and the life-death distinction. What these treatments of death in blue humanities scholarship so far indicate is an awareness of the embeddedness of watery ecologies in necropolitical systems shaped by colonial trade, oceanic exploration, and undersea extraction.

Evidently, there is already overlapping space between the fields of blue humanities, more-than-human scholarship, and queer death studies in their consideration of non-normative approaches to death. We further interrogate and extend this space of overlap as the basis for theorising BDS. Here, we note that an analysis at the intersection of blue humanities and queer death studies is particularly significant given the ubiquity of water. Indeed, roughly 71% of the earth's surface is covered in water. Additionally, water vapor floats in the atmosphere, circumnavigating the globe while groundwater also percolates below the surface, forming underground rivers, lakes, and pools. Water is understood as necessary for life and – as primordial soup – has been at the centre of debates about life's origins (do Nascimento Vieira et al. 2020). Moreover, the cellular makeup of all living bodies is impregnated with water; without it, humans die in approximately three days.

However water is also a corrosive agent that can wear away at the body. As literary scholar Edwige Tamalet Talbayev writes, seawater is a space of "borderization" and increased surveillance in a time of migration (2024, 23), but it is also a "viscous, form-altering substance" that can "distil lethality, physical disintegration" (2021, 213). In a moving assessment of Youseff Amine Elalamy's novella *Sea-Drinkers* (a narrative that explores the untimely drownings of Moroccan emigrants who are attempting illegal passage from Morocco to Spain), Talbayev contends that the decomposing bodies of the drowned migrants

> speak to the dissolution of bodily matter into the sea, its inescapable absorption into the brewing water compound: organic molecules scattered across the ocean by the ever forming currents of the sea, turning alluvium, fertile sediment, feeding the deeptime memorialization of the tragic loss of life under biopolitical violence. (Talbayev 2021, 214)

Water encompasses the body itself but is also an agent of its unravelling. At the same time, water is a vehicle for zoonotic disease transmission, inhaled by its host through respired droplets as in the case of life-threatening contagions like COVID-19. Even water itself can be viewed as living or dead (see, e.g., Peterson 2024). In other words, water is fundamental for understanding water necropolitics and ecologies; hence, approaching death through a 'watery' lens has potential for expanding, subverting, and mixing these manifold meanings.

Our synopsis follows the pull of scholarly currents intersecting blue humanities, queer death studies and the more-than-human. BDS thus understands death as a corporeal and cross-elemental condition that is invariably characterised by the mobility, flux, and multi-scalarity of water (and other substances). Hence, we can analyse the relationship between the places and processes of death through these three characteristics. First, we underscore the mobile capacities of water to re-spatialise deathly matter through flow, infiltration, permeation, evaporation, or freezing, while simultaneously stressing the specific water qualities and properties that differentiate waters and inform our recognition that water must always be understood as a waterbody (Peterson 2020). Second, following Tim Ingold and Cristián Simonetti's inquiry into 'solid fluids' – of which we take the paradigmatic example to be water – BDS is interested in the ways in which matter "exists in a continuous flux" (Ingold, Simonetti 2022, 3) on the solid-fluid continuum, but is made intelligible through their duration as "forms [that] last long enough to be recognizable" (10). In doing so, BDS walks with the staccato interruptions and long-flowing durations of and in time that solid fluids represent. Finally, BDS instils a multi-scalarity that recognises both individual and collective death in a more-than-human framework, drawing from what literary ecocritic Louise Squire describes as "death-facing ecology" (2020). Death-facing ecology is a move towards an acceptance of death that is "a grounded engagement with the loss of nature, one that recognises the implications of this loss for all life on Earth, humans included, and one that takes action to address this loss" (15). This acceptance of death at multiple scales, from the personal to the planetary (Olson 2024), allows us to understand and co-produce different forms of memory making, cultures, processes of grief, and levels of biodiversity loss. More generally, mobility and changing states of water require us to move away from thinking of death as a form of grounded permanence – codified in fixed coordinates, burial plots, or bounded identities – and instead hint at significant implications for ways of dealing with loss in novel ways.

The position we take in theorising BDS, then, is to think through but also beyond watery spaces and introduce a broader material-discursive understanding of water (but also other substances) in its various states and its site-specific instantiations with the hope that

such awareness will expand the borders of death care to include human and nonhuman animals and the environment itself. To facilitate a glimpse into how a BDS lens might be applied, therefore, we turn to the issue of ir/retrievability of the non/human corpse in the following two sections. The case studies we choose are linked through challenges that occur when death and water are brought together. To structure our analysis, we attend to water in two of its three states, as liquid and as solid. By focusing on liquid and frozen deaths, we point to how these different states of water invoke alternative manifestations of ir/retrievability, which provoke alternative considerations for the dead, their environs, and those who care for them.

3 Liquid Deaths

1.1 Submersible Bodies

In its liquid state, water settles and runs into the valleys, bowls, and crevices of the earth. Forming a variety of waterbodies, such as lakes, seas, and oceans, the spread and voluminous aspect of these places poses a fundamental barrier for the living to reconnect with the dead residing within their depths. More specifically, the vastness of the sea's watery depths constitutes swathes of (mostly) inaccessible spaces where countless bodies (human and otherwise) settle, drift, and decompose.

Many bodies are given over to water in peace and celebration. Burial at sea is permissible by law in various nations, performed by navies, and, in some places, may be subsidised (Asser Institute 2013). Those who give themselves to the sea follow different rationales. Some argue that having coordinates where someone was 'buried' makes more sense than owning/leasing a cemetery plot. Others give environmental reasons for being buried at sea, including not emitting CO_2 from cremation, assuming the sturdy, weighted-down caskets will become habitat for marine life, or expressing desire to "[become] a drop of rain one day […] in the ocean […] on the mountaintop" (Netburn 2022). Ultimately, for the families of many of those intentionally buried at sea (or scattered at sea, in the case of cremated remains), the sea itself becomes the grave marker – the body may be physically irretrievable, but the deceased is retrievable in the abstract by way of water (see, e.g., Høeg 2023).

Lakes, rivers, swamps, and seas also claim the lives of those not yet dead. From rip currents to tsunamis, to swells and mountainous waves, water has taken the lives of swimmers, seafarers, slaves, and soldiers. These bodies are no match for water's capacity for erasure – where erasure signifies not only disappearance, but the

inability to mark the site of that disappearance (Harrison 2003, 12). The main difference between the deaths of those underwater, however, amounts to the significance of their drowning. For many individuals, especially the poor and disenfranchised, their deaths have largely been ignored or unrecorded. Nearly two million enslaved Africans died while traveling the Middle Passage, the histories of some remembered only in more recent times (see Smith 2015) However, the majority are consigned to the deep, figuratively stored in Davy Jones' locker for safekeeping until the memories of their lives can be recovered. In many ways, those conscripted to the depths both in memory and in the sea are a result of social inequalities played out in the geopolitical realm. We mentioned earlier that in the cases of migrants and asylum seekers attempting to cross the Mediterranean, their journeys are partly manufactured through the securitisation of their activities by nation states within the EU (Pugh 2004; Vives 2017). Underwater realms offer an opportunity for the powerful to submerge and forget unpleasantries, as both pollution and the bodies of the 'undesirable' attest.

Nonetheless, how waters pose a barrier to the retrievability of human bodies is also conspicuous in the lives of those remembered. These tend to be high profile disasters, such as large shipwrecks, or 'tragedies' that become part of the public imaginary of the deep. In 2023, the submersible Titan and its five occupants were lost to the sea (both figuratively and literally) on an expedition to the Titanic, one of the deadliest shipwrecks in human history with an estimated death toll of 1,500 persons. Purportedly, the dive was initiated to attract attention to the activities of the operating company, OceanGate, and fund its activities – including finding and then exploiting undersea resources (e.g. rare minerals, fossil fuels, gemstones) as well as scientific exploration and disaster response – through deep sea tourism (tickets cost US $125,000) (Perrottet 2019). Nonetheless, the CEO of OceanGate, Stockton Rush, admitted that the impetus for building submersibles was partially to fulfil his desire to be "nice and cozy, and having a hot chocolate with you" instead of "freezing and going through a two-hour decompression hanging in deep water" during cold water dives (2019). In other words, the death of those on the Titan was predicated upon turning the death of others into a leisurely (more or less) underwater spectacle as much as it was an idiosyncratic preference to inhabit underwater space at a standard typical for humans with more financial resources. Parallels with DeLoughrey's aqua homo are inescapable.

Of course, the Titan is just one diving journey that went horribly wrong. Today, companies that specialise in submersibles still operate and both depend upon and target wealthy patrons to fund their work (Halff 2024). That the tragedy of the Titan did not quell but rather spurred parallel activities is telling. This quest for manned

deep-sea submersibles displays a fetish towards making certain lives and stories retrievable, in spaces where humans ought not to survive. Underwater spaces no longer represent barriers to human life but promise to envelope it in a liquid layer, offering, in the words of Rush, "a very protected environment" available to humanity if dry land ever becomes uninhabitable (Perrottet 2019). In this imaginary, the oceans and seas no longer constitute an inaccessible cemetery for those drowned. Instead, they represent spaces for the living, whereby the cables that supply electricity and air to the deep become lifelines for humans that seek to traverse and ultimately occupy underwater realms and other spaces previously understood as deathly.

1.2 Aqueous Bodies

Liquid water also intersects with the dead through death care practices that intentionally convert the deceased into aqueous bodies. 'Cremation' by water, best known as alkaline hydrolysis, has a long history, having first been practiced on farm animals to produce gelatine, glue, and fertiliser and then later as a quicker, more efficient disposal mechanism for laboratory animals and pets (Kaye et al. 1998; Oster 2022). A process that occurs in the digestive track of animals and moist soil, alkaline hydrolysis has been developed by industry to speed up and break down any proteins, DNA, RNA, fat, cells, prions, pathogens, viruses, chemotherapy drugs, embalming fluids, and bacteria into their component chemicals (Arnold et al. 2024). The process involves submerging a corpse in a solution consisting of 95% water and 5% of an alkaline substance, typically sodium hydroxide (aka lye/caustic soda) or potassium hydroxide (aka lye/caustic potash). The corpse and solution are then heated to approximately 1,500° C, pressurised, and (sometimes) agitated, which dissolves the flesh and forms a 'sterile effluent' while leaving the body's bones behind. The effluent itself is a hydrolysate (a generic term which describes any substance whose chemical bonds get broken apart by water), which contains amino acids, peptides, sugars, salts, and fatty acids. To make the pH level of the effluent more neutral, sulphuric acid gets added to the mixture, where it then can be disposed of in modern sewer systems as a 'benign' liquid.

Importantly, this process hinges on controlling temperature, time, and the movement of the solution and corpse within the retort (the device in which the deceased are liquified). These processes, albeit unique to alkaline hydrolysis, typically are treated as similar or dissimilar to cremation, what death studies scholar Philip R. Olson refers to as "assimilationist" and "separatist" perspectives (2014). The messaging, however, is clearly separatist in nature, emphasising that alkaline hydrolysis is natural and not violent like burning bodies. The UK's Resomation Ltd., for example:

position their products in an environmental narrative and appeal to a widespread desire and consumer sensibility to be environmentally responsible. (Arnold et al. 2024, 450)

Nonetheless, the alkaline hydroxides used in alkaline hydrolysis likely originate from industrial production of these compounds using electrolysis on sodium/potassium chlorides through an energy intensive chloralkali process. The source and production of these substances therefore complicate the 'naturalness' of the solutions at use in alkaline hydrolysis. Heating and circulating the solution as well as pressurising and agitating the retort also offer a sense of natural processes sped up, albeit in a high-tech fashion or in a more "aesthetic and emotionally 'gentle'" manner (Arnold et al. 2024, 450). This speeding up of decomposition, of separating flesh from bone and dissolving it into liquid, serves to readily retrieve the bones of a corpse but conversely is intended to do away with the body, turning it into something to be dispersed rather than disposed (Rumble et al. 2014), thereby rendering the dead as irretrievable.

After the bones are removed from the effluent, this liquid has potential for significant symbolic meaning. Typically, the effluent gets stuck between the idea of it carrying the deceased's soul or identity and the more chemical understanding of the liquid as 'sterile'. Hence, alkaline hydrolysis has encountered resistance regarding pouring humans 'down the drain' (see, e.g., Powell 2017) as well as support from those who treat the effluent as "merely a solution of organic and inorganic chemicals from which all traces of humanity have been eliminated" (Scarre 2024). In this latter purview, by being poured down the drain, the effluent further intermixes with storm water, sewage, and other substances in the sewer system, becoming nothing that could be classified as human. The argument pivots on the need to differentiate the liquified substance from the person, reflecting concerns over mingling remains with taboo or impure substances (Olson 2024; Warren, Van Deest 2014). That said, other possible options exist for the effluent to take on other meanings, such as that of agricultural fertiliser (Rumble et al. 2014, 249). Here, the effluent can be ascribed a more life-giving potentiality, functioning similarly to the promises of bodies as compost (Krupar 2018). Nonetheless, the diffuse quality of water, its inability to stay put in any location for any length of time, defies both place and permanency. Hence, bodies that would become 'water' challenge overriding concerns related to "what [the corpse] is to be transformed into and where it is to be relocated" (Rumble et al. 2014, 251). In other words, to become water, in a modernist sense, cannot occur because water gets conceptualised as a pure (molecular) substance (Linton 2010) while its mutability offers a wide variety of interpretation and connection to identity, personhood, and more (see Bachelard 1983; Illich 1986).

4   Frozen Deaths

1.3   Stranded Bodies

In the previous section, we discussed how bodies become loosened from place (either through submersion or dissolution), becoming irretrievable. But what happens when a body, normally underwater and therefore a largely irretrievable scientific object, becomes retrievable by becoming materially out of place, inviting attention through the pungency of its decay? Stranded bodies, such as those of dead cetaceans, offer a way of thinking about aquatic death, post-mortem movements, and the afterlives of dead nonhuman animal tissues.

In early November 2010, for instance, one of the largest cetacean strandings in Irish history occurred on Rutland Island off the coast of County Donegal. In a somber scene, thirty-three long-finned pilot whales were stranded and washed ashore, their carcasses coming to rest along the sandy beach. The reason for this mass stranding event remains undetermined to this day, but speculations arose at the time about the use of sonar technologies wielded by a Royal navy vessel nearby in the Outer Hebrides (McCann 2010). According to the Irish Whale and Dolphin Group (2010), several stranded pilot whales were removed from the beach and transferred to a rendering facility. Before the carcasses were removed, however, several tissue samples were recovered from the bodies and immediately transferred to the Irish Cetacean Genetic Tissue Bank (ICGTB) at the Dublin Natural History Museum to be frozen for scientific research purposes.

This story, like other incidents of Unusual Mortality Events (UME), exemplifies how dead nonhuman animal bodies transform into what Sophia Nicolov describes as an "environmental tool of measurement" (2021, 72) and a "scientific object" (2021, 68). In her assessment of UMEs, Nicolov argues that stranded whale bodies become "evidence" through post-mortem analysis (2019, 21), revealing the health and state of marine environments particularly in relation to increasingly damaging anthropogenic activities like deep sea mining and resource extraction. These cryopreserved samples, which are held in 96% ethanol and frozen at –0.7°C at the ICGTB (Geraghty et al. 2022), represent an abstracted *ex-situ* afterlife of the stranded cetacean body; a spreading out of death that remediates aquatic life into a diminutive sample, staved off from decay, to lie suspended *multo tempore* in the banal blackness of an ordinary freezer.

The frozen sample, once thawed and subjected to study, becomes a liquid portal into the past lives and deaths of the stranded cetaceans, allowing scientific researchers to map gene flow but also to understand the effects of sea level rise, increasing sea surface temperatures, and anthropogenic effects on cetacean populations. In a

paper on the post-mortem analysis of frozen samples stored at the ICGTB, scientific researchers report that by using a "carcass drift prediction model", they can assess the time and presumed location of death based on "cetacean body parameters" such as "thickness and floatability" (Louis et al. 2014, 2). Reading back through the sample frozen in time and interpreting it through a "biopsy darting system" that maps the sites of strandings, other researchers have discovered that cetaceans that die at sea may not be precisely geographically pinpointed to where they lived due to effects of shifting water currents on the post-mortem body (Mirimin et al. 2011, 8). The mobility of water, both within the cetacean body but also surrounding it through its immersion in water, is furthered in the post-mortem process as the body becomes pulled along the currents, stranded, sampled, frozen, and thawed. While static and frozen in time, the samples reveal the potential of water to constitute a body, but also to trace its flow backwards in time, thereby making the death of sea creatures proximate and, to a certain degree, knowable.

Such strandings offer a rare opportunity for epistemological retrieval given that, like most aquatic species, cetacean lives and especially deaths are still largely unknown to humans (Alaimo 2011). This is despite increasing human-cetacean contact since the inception of the whaling industry and its presence in museological displays and sideshow exhibitions since the nineteenth century (Jones 2017). Studying the ocean is a scientific challenge but also poses a representational problem, Bogna Konior suggests, since the sea remains an inhospitable environment for humans and even for some remote technologies like undersea cameras (2019, 50). To "retrieve" in this sense is to see and by extension to gain knowledge not only *in spite of* the death of cetaceans but precisely *because* of it, through their surfacing and stranding. In all its vibrant odiferousness, a cetacean carcass brings with it the chance to "freeze" a stranding as a knowable moment in time.

As an example of retrievability, stranded bodies make visible the cross-elemental shifts of death and its post-mortem processes. These cross-elemental shifts are happening on the macro level of rising sea temperatures (an effect of human-driven climate change, which is in turn linked to an increase in cetacean strandings) as well as on a micro level through cryobiological sampling that turns liquid deaths into frozen afterlives. In theorising BDS, we are invested in death-facing ecologies (Squire 2020) that accept rather than deny human mortality and the potential of the human body to submerge or dissolve. Such death-facing ecology accounts for the fact that human activities have fatal effects on nonhuman life (especially in oceans, rivers, and lakes). Thrown upon the beach as material reminders of anthropogenic climate change and placed in labelled sample tubes in the freezer for scientific study, stranded cetacean

carcasses illuminate the mobility, flux, and multiscalarity of water and its connection to biodiversity change in the Anthropocene.

1.4   Exposed Bodies

As anthropogenic climate change warms the oceans, so too does it melt the glacial ice that covers 10% of the earth's surface. As the ice recedes, refreezes, and retreats again, the dead are disappeared and revealed in concert. Perhaps the most famous example of these frozen dead emerged from the ice in 1991. In September of that year, hikers in the Alps came across the preserved corpse of a man who had died over 5,000 years previously. Nicknamed Ötzi, the man lay surrounded by his possessions – a flint knife at his belt, a fur hat underneath the boulder on which the body lay, belt pouch, a quiver, arrows a bow, a copper axe, a backpack frame – all within meters of him and all frozen in time by, and still partially suspended in, the glacial ice (Pilø et al. 2023). On Mount Everest history repeats itself, with the frozen bodies of around two hundred people who died in their attempts to scale the mountain remaining on and in the ice. Just like Ötzi, the dead of Everest lie surrounded by their material belongings – their multi-coloured polyester mountaineering suits, their metal oxygen tanks, their cameras, tents, and guide ropes.

The ice froze and receded over Ötzi's body many times in the 5,000 years he lay in the Alpine gully (Pilø et al. 2023), each (un)freezing event becoming an alternative history of discovery or decomposition. In this way, Ötzi represents an icy paradox. If his body had not been preserved in ice, it would long ago have decomposed. Its preservation relied on the presence of ice, but this ice also concealed its existence and prohibited its retrieval for over 5,000 years. Likewise, the ice that freezes the bodies on Everest in their all-too recognisably human death poses can be the very thing that prevents their recovery. Those bodies that do make the journey home are painstakingly chipped from the ice and dragged down the mountain – often at a higher cost than that initially paid by the deceased to make the climb (Branch 2017).

Precisely because they cannot be retrieved from the mountain, some of Everest's frozen dead persist as permanent way markers to the summit, known affectionately by their posthumous nicknames – Green Boots, Sleeping Beauty. Others are pushed off the precipice in a sombre cliff burial, their bodies now hidden from view in the frigid crevasses below. Still others are shoved out of the way of oncoming climbers or collected alongside tonnes of trash in the Nepali army's ongoing attempts to clean up the mountain (Kuta 2024). Each of these actions reveal the material force of water expressed as ice. The frozen bodies atop Everest have moved through

a state of flux. As the water contained within each body has expanded and crystallized, the body has undergone a change in state and meaning from their previously fleshy, warm selves. The frozen corpse accrues new meaning in the form of object – way marker, obstacle, trash – rather than person.

The inherent liquidity of the human body also figures in the new death technology of cryopreservation, which seeks to suspend the bodies of the dead for potential resurrection at an unknown point in the future. For these bodies to be successfully suspended, they must be protected from their own corpulent moisture. After draining the blood, a cryoprotectant anti-freeze solution is perfused throughout the body to prevent the formation of ice crystals that will wreak cellular havoc. Following this perfusion, the body is placed in a dewar and suspended in liquid nitrogen at –196° C. While the cooling agent is not water, there are strong cross-elemental ties. Like water, liquid nitrogen can move across and between various states of being: solid, liquid, and gas. Though cryonicists are quick to reject the colloquial understanding of cryonic bodies as 'frozen', they acknowledge that the popular conception of cryopreservation is fundamentally linked with water and ice (O'Keefe 2022). The combination of anti-freeze and liquid nitrogen that promises the frozen dead a possible future thereby preserves the bodies by simultaneously suppressing the hydrological while relying on its symbolic evocations.

However this preservation also renders cryopreserved bodies irretrievable. These liquids put bodies in stasis outside of chronobiological norms. Cryopreserved bodies become irretrievable through their massive, ultra-material presence in stainless steel dewars. The liquid they are suspended in acts as a barrier, requiring ongoing maintenance by technicians with exclusive access. At the same time their inability to decompose removes the cryopreserved from the mortal condition shared by all living organisms and transforms them into something transhuman that nonetheless retains an intimate relation with more-than-human elements. This is liquid-facilitated irretrievability on multiple scales because they are placed outside the living memories of loved ones but also the biosphere. Across our discussions of Ötzi, Everest, and the cryopreserved, then, we demonstrate that water both as an internal and external force upon bodies plays temporal tricks. It preserves corpses and prevents decay. At the same time it endangers the reconstitution of some bodies, threatening to cause irreversible ruptures. It also removes the bodies encased in its frozen embrace from their own time and allows them to remain in stasis into an unknown future. The frozen dead interrupt the linear understanding of time in a powerful way. While inhabiting a fragile existence, they persevere in the face of all – in the face of time, and the memory of their loved ones.

5 Conclusion

In this paper we have sought to theorise BDS to erode the terrestrial bias that pervades much of the fields of death studies and the environmental humanities. Drawing on the first steps being taken towards the establishment of a queer death studies, as well as the more developed blue humanities, we have proposed what we take to be the core tenets of this new theoretical approach. A focus on the characteristics of mobility, flux, and multi-scalarity has allowed us to analyse how water shifts and subverts deathly concerns related to materiality, personhood/identity, symbol/meaning, memory and access.

We have applied a BDS lens to the specific question of ir/retrievability to illustrate the insights that this approach can generate. We have shown that the possibility of retrieval when water is involved is inherently linked to water states, temperature, time, and spatialities. Each fundamentally impacts the literal, physical retrievability of a non/human corpse, as well as retrievability in the abstract – the retrievability of *meaning*. Water is thus inherently capable of both "[bringing] meaning and matter together again" (Ingold, Simonetti 2022, 6), as well as rendering them permanently asunder.

This specific interrogation of the ir/retrievability of bodies at the water-corpse interface through the lens of BDS invites further, broader questions that can assist in developing this approach, including:

- Beyond the characteristics of mobility, flux, and scale, what else needs be mapped out for BDS?
- How do we connect ecologies with water necropolitics as part of BDS?
- Are there more appropriate ethical underpinnings for BDS other than death facing ecology?
- How might BDS further queer understandings of death?

Answering these questions and others can further develop this approach. We anticipate and hope to instil further work in this important, but overlooked, area.

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The Ongoing Grief of Boglands
Re-Interpreting Ecological Grief with Lessons in Sympoiesis and Wetland Ecology

Moss Berke
Independent researcher

Abstract   This article ventures to boglands to reimagine ecological grief. Thinking with bogs points to an alternative way of imagining ecological grief as sympoiesis with the dead which disrupts capitalist temporalities and integrates what is 'past' into futures of multispecies livability. Acknowledging that previous scholarship has succeeded in establishing an understanding that nature is grievable, The Author contends that establishing the grievability of nature does not sufficiently intervene in patterns of ecological destruction, if current paradigms for experiencing grief itself are not also troubled. Thus this article asks how ecological grief can be informed by ecologies themselves, so that chrononormative regimes can be disrupted and the dead can be recognized as agential participants in the crafting of alternative futures.

Keywords   Boglands. Sympoiesis. Ecological grief. Relationality. Wetland ecology.

Summary   1 Introduction. – 2 Submersion; Meeting the Bog. – 3 Ecological Grief as Sympoiesis: Methods for Relational and Resistant Grieving. – 4 Unending Conclusions.

1 Introduction

As planetary scale ecological death and destruction proliferates, grief often feels too small or too human a word to describe the feeling of witnessing, experiencing, or being an accomplice to environmental destruction. Thus far, scholarship regarding the phenomenon of ecological grief has been effective in pushing forward Judith Butler's call to trouble the normative differential distribution of grievability that has previously dictated what kind of subject is grievable, and what kind of subject is not (Butler 2004, xvi). Yet, troubling the question of the subject of grief is no longer enough. Even as the phenomenon of ecological grief provides a much needed expansion of the possible *subjects* of grief, if the framework for understanding, discussing, and living through ecological grief remains informed by other normative limitations (such as those regarding acceptable timelines for grief) that are routinely applied to humanist definitions of grief, the phenomenon will remain not only misunderstood, but politically impotent.

Despite the varied and expansive contributions of previous scholarship,[1] in mainstream Western discourses feelings of ecological grief tend to remain defined through, and thereby constricted by, neoliberal medicalization apparatuses.[2] This constriction via pathologization ends up imposing temporal limitations on ecological grieving experiences by discursively shaping ecological grief along a path of mythic temporal linearity. It is framed as a process that one moves through; a process that comes with an ideal end result wherein the griever overcomes environmental losses. How one could overcome losses, when it is these losses and environmental destruction that shape our present and construct our future is left largely unaddressed in normative literature; literature that siloes ecological grieving experience in the field of 'mental health'. In the United States of America and the Industrialized Global North more generally, this leaves ecological grief defanged. It is relegated into being

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1 For example see Cunsolo 2012; Cunsolo, Landman 2017; Craps 2020.

2 For example of this well-intentioned yet constrictive framework see Anderson 2001; Clayton et al. 2017; Comtesse et al. 2021; Esposito, Perez 2014. The phenomenon of ecological grief being siloed into normative mental health institutions is perhaps best illustrated by the report *Mental Health and Our Changing Climate: Impacts, Implications and Guidance*, published by the American Psychological Association in 2017. This report pathologizes ecological grief and frames it as analogous to other mental health struggles. Seeking resolutions for ecological grief, this report encourages individuals to "build resiliency" and foster a sense of "optimism" (Clayton et al. 2017, 7). It does not mention or encourage environmental activism or collective action. This point is similarly evidenced by the plethora of online resources which frame ecological grief as a process of mourning and overcoming, using the traditional 5 stages of grief model to describe it, and thereby ultimately encouraging 'acceptance' as a token of health.

a process of overcoming the emotional effects of witnessing environmental destruction (see Clayton et al. 2017). So long as humanistic and medicalized understandings of grief as a *process of overcoming loss*[3] continue to influence mainstream understandings of ecological grief, there will remain an implied directive to resolve these feelings in order to restore a normative sense of 'health'. This flattens ecological grief into being most readily understood as a mental health response to climate change, rather than an affect that could be mobilized to resist the forces underpinning such climate change. Within this flattening the disruptive potential of ecological grief is lost to a culture that prioritizes a neoliberal, capitalist vision of health and wellness that is dependent on adhering to narrow norms of behavior that do not disrupt the market economy (Lykke 2022). If we remain contained by these neoliberal regimes of health, ecological grief will remain stalled with a potentiality unrealized. It will remain largely reduced to an injunction to mourn for, and overcome environmental losses. This, the Author fears, sets up a permission structure to ultimately naturalize environmental losses through grieving for them and thereby accepting the natural world as *ruined*,[4] which further cements the concept of nature in general, (or whatever specific ecology is being mourned) as inert, passive, and already lost. In these instances, ecological grief further cements Modernity's victory, and reasserts a hierarchy of Man over nature by reaffirming – through the very act of grieving – the death of nature (Sandilands 2010, 337). Herein, rather than being a vehicle for interrupting environmental exploitation, ecological grieving may approach a "nostalgic, sentimental or utilitarian *process* – a *process* that does not challenge or change the intersecting necropowers that cause planetary-scale death and destruction" (Radomska et al. 2020, 95; emphasis added).

Scholarship in environmental humanities has contributed greatly to the understanding of ecological grief as a phenomenon that makes

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[3] Scholars such as Nina Lykke, Ida Hillerup Hansen, Marietta Radomska and others, especially in the Queer Death Studies network have recently made helpful contributions to theoretical work that aims to disturb the notion that grief is a process one can engage in and come out of 'healed' from the experience of loss. Scholars in the emerging field of Queer Death Studies contend that framing grief as a process in and of itself imposes a linear temporality that does not leave room for alternative, long lasting, or temporally diffusive experiences of grief. For an especially instructive example and introduction to the field of Queer Death Studies, see Radomska et al. 2020.

[4] Building from the foundational work of anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, 'ruin' should be seen as the binaristic opposition to 'progress'. This dualism frames progress as a force that orients individuals always ahead, and frames 'ruin' as a site of complete destruction; a place to move away from, to leave in order to find a new site for progress. This dualism does not encourage curiosity regarding what is 'ruined' and does not see ruins as potentially informative or instructive. For an in depth explanation of the many failures of the relationship between notions of progress and ruin consult Tsing's 2015 book *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*.

clear that humans grieve for the more-than-human world.[5] Therefore, the question no longer needs to be, *is nature grievable?* As we have collectively come to understand that, whether a normative subject or not, humans around the world are grieving ecologies, cultures, and ancestral ways of life interrupted by planetary ecocide. If we no longer need to question the grievability of nature, we must turn towards the question of the ecological equitability of our present paradigms and methods for grieving. Could an ecologically informed re-formulation of ecological grief de-center humanism while rejecting the processual implications that remain stubbornly attached to normative understandings of the phenomenon? Could this reformulation instead serve to push the feeling of ecological grief towards being an effective mode of resistance to environmental destruction?

The question no longer needs to be *is nature grievable*, but instead it must be: can we learn from ecologies how to grieve differently? Or: can we learn to grieve with ecological methods; ones that integrate the dead as agential partners in the building of futures?

This article takes the power of grief seriously, and in so doing proposes an alternative way to approach the phenomenon of ecological grieving that refuses pathologization as well as stubbornly lingering Cartesian dualisms and their attendant hierarchies, such as active/passive, and past/present. This article sets out to begin a reformulation of ecological grief that does not inadvertently re-establish nature as passive, inert, or dead, through the grieving process itself. Building from the work of Donna Haraway, the emerging field of Queer Death Studies, wetland ecology, and remaining situated within ecological epistemologies, this article presents an ecologically based account of the generative possibilities for the phenomenon of ecological grief that displaces humanism and regimes of temporal linearity. This account may be interpreted as posthuman as it refuses to reaffirm Man as the singular actor who can form, or is at the center of onto-epistemologies of grief, or for that matter, experiences of loss. Yet, this article mobilizes a relational and ecological onto-epistemology, where humans, although not at the center, are necessary players in the game and are tasked with "response-ability" rather than displacement (Haraway 2008). This article seeks lessons in grieving differently from non-human teachers. It attempts to offer a reformulation of ecological grief useful for humans that is devised from the examples provided by the more-than-human world, therefore it travels along more-than-human lines.

This article started with the presumption that the widely felt affect of ecological grief has already demonstrated that nature is grievable, but that establishing nature as grievable does not ensure that the

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[5] For example see Tsing et al. 2017; Cunsolo, Landman 2017; MacCormack et al. 2021.

unnecessary destruction of nature is adequately resisted or even put into question. With this presupposition the crucial question raised by this article is how we may come to an alternative framing of ecological grief that is informed by ecologies themselves. To answer this question, this piece ventures into an oft-misunderstood, vital yet vulnerable ecology whose wellbeing is dependent on living within the tangle of life and death. This ecological adventure generates an understanding of grief that is outside frameworks of human exceptionalism and resistant to "chrononormative"[6] standards (Freeman 2010). Once outside the confines of temporal linearity, this article will conclude by reframing grief as an act of sympoietic relationality with the dead that tasks humans with the response-ability to carry forth the dead as active participants in the project of crafting futures defined by interdependent multi-species livability rather than rampant exploitation at the service of globalized capitalism. This reframing conceptualizes ecological grief as a force that may contribute to fostering "ongoingness": that is, nurturing, or inventing, or discovering, or somehow cobbling together ways for living and dying well with each other in the tissues of an earth whose very habitability is threatened" (Haraway 2016, 132). In this vision, by disturbing temporal distinctions between past, present, and future, ecological grief may offer a way to remain "attached to ongoing pasts" in order to bring the dead "forward in thick presents and still possible futures" (133). This presents a framework for attending to the overwhelming volume of loss in the Anthropocene that does not prioritize overcoming these losses, but instead gives due attention to the agential

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6 'Chrononormativity' is a term coined by Elizabeth Freeman in her 2010 book, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* as a way to describe capitalism's temporal logics. Simply put, Freeman describes chrononormativity as "the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity" (Freeman 2010, 3). Chrononormativity functions on multiple registers from the individual to the institutional, though it is naturalized through institutions in order to make it largely unquestionable. On an individual level adhering to chrononormative standards is taken as a measure of good health and morality, and comes to feel 'natural' though it is implemented with the goal of producing norm-adhering and productive subjects (3). Ensuring that this imposed time feels natural works to confirm the fiction that what is natural for individuals is to "serve a nation's economic interests" so that experiencing something along an alternative temporal schema is not only negatively associated as not contributing to "movement" or "change" but is easily pathologized (4). Crucially, Freeman asserts that in chrononormative regimes, "the past seems useless unless it predicts and becomes material for the future" (5). The predictive function of the past is particularly important for this paper, as this formulation ensures that the future stretches forward as a continuation of time, which eliminates the possibility for the future to be ruptured by the past. Further, in this paper specifically, we can understand the predictive function of the past as ensuring that grieving can only exist along a linear path, where one may reminisce on the past only while remaining oriented towards a preconstructed future. Other interpretations of grief are pathologized, such as suggesting that what is brought forward through grief may constitute the present or disrupt the future.

presence of the dead and destructed as equal players in the project of constructing alternative futures.

In the forthcoming section, this article wanders past muddy borders and slowly submerges itself into boglands, to wonder how we may think differently about grief when learning from ecologies who already live within atmospheres saturated by death. As a careful study of bogland ecology will show, bogs are sites that are constituted through a dynamic unfolding of more-than-human relationality, a relationality that defies imposed borders between life and death. Bogs live in defiance of temporal linearity, instead occupying a tentacular temporal zone of multiplicity and heterogeneity that arises when the lines between past, present and future are recognized as fictitious. Intimacy with a bog's ecology provides an epistemological foundation from which we can move towards a re-formulation of ecological grief. It is the Author's hope that this reformulation may serve to demonstrate that affect could be mobilized as a disruptive force into the ongoingness of capitalist temporal regimes, rather than weaponized to ultimately support the continuation of capitalist linear time. The capitalist temporality the Author aims to disrupt through this re-reading of ecological grief is one that continuously re-establishes the future as a singular and non-disrupted continuation of the present that one moves towards by always and only moving forward through time. This temporal regime is astonishingly under equipped to address the challenges of the Anthropocene, as ecological destruction has extended to the farthest corners of the globe, and there is, quite literally, no undisturbed future to look towards (Tsing 2015, 3). But bogs, when examined closely, when submerged into, may show their human interlocutors another way to approach death, another side of grief, and one possible alternative to the confines of the "chrononormativity" that is capitalist time (Freeman 2010). If we listen closely, look carefully and move slowly, bogs may reveal an alternative method for grieving, where ecological grief need no longer be how humans process through environmental losses, but may instead exist as a way for individuals to live alongside and with ongoing death. Boglands may give us instructive examples for how to refuse to abandon "the past in an ongoing search for new cathexes" and instead allow all that has been lost to inform the construction of a future(s) defined by interdependent multi-species livability (Sandilands 2010, 340).

In the final section, the Author brings the lessons gleaned from an intimate submersion into bogland ecologies to meet Donna Haraway's call for sympoietic relationality as a method for living, dying and grieving through the era of mass death that is the Anthropocene. Building from Haraway's science fiction storytelling in her 2016 book *Staying With the Trouble*, the Author demonstrates that boglands are presently enacting the relational, temporally heterogeneous grieving methods she advocates for, as bogs themselves reject processual mourning

in favor of bringing the dead into an "ongoing presence" in the present (Haraway 2016, 166). It is the Author's hope that this final section melds theoretical fabulation with evidence from the natural sciences in order to demonstrate that alternative ways of living with loss are already modeled for us, if we are willing to look for them ecologically. Using Haraway's vocabulary of sympoietic relationality as a way to understand the alternative method of grieving offered by boglands encourages a theoretical and ecologically grounded assertion that there are ways to experience the loss and destruction of climate crises that trouble the very possibility for this destruction to continue uninterrupted. These boggy, sympoietic alternatives refuse to prioritize 'getting over' such losses and returning to norm adhering, future oriented productivity, and instead see the absolute necessity of bringing the voices and ongoing presences of all that has been destroyed into any conversation that aims to address such uncertain futures as ours.

2 Submersion; Meeting the Bog

Staring at a bog, the Author's sense of scale and order is immediately distorted. The landscape feels empty, yet abundant. Rolling fog lapping low over an endless ground calls forth imagined scenes of future wreckage. Without knowing better, the landscape can seem like a wasteland; the thick air ominous, the seeping ground sinister. Yet, something generous and slow bubbles up through the cracks in the Author's perception, the bog feels more ancient than apocalyptic, it is a witness to timescales that humans cannot grasp. It is not timeless, but timefull. Spending time with a bog is to become intimate with indeterminacy. It is to witness an ecology that is neither land, nor water, but an indecipherable mixture of the two (Emory 2021). It is to witness an ecology that is neither alive, nor dead, but an inextricable mixture of death and life. It is to accept the invitation to "radically imagine worlds that are possible because *they are already here*" (Tsing et al. 2017, G9; emphasis added). But why journey to the bog to think and learn about grief? What can the ecology and temporalities encompassed by boglands have to show us about living (and dying) in the Anthropocene? With a closer look, the unique ecological features of boglands may have much to say about alternative ways to live through and with abundant loss.

Bogs, often called mires, moors, peatlands or muskegs are found typically in cool, northern climates (Evers 2022). Raised bogs, the most common type of bogs, are ancient landscapes that can take upwards of ten thousand years to reach maturity (Gewin 2020, 205). Most bogs throughout Europe began their long process of formation at the end of the last Ice Age, when retreating glaciers tore through land and left scars in the form of basins, which collected water and soon became shallow lakes (Egli et al. 2021). But, due to the method

of their formation, these basins often lacked the drainage and filtration abilities characteristic of non-glacial lakes, and instead became sites where deposited water grew stagnant (Robichaud, Bégin 2009). Stagnant water has very low levels of oxygen and high levels of acidity, because if water does not move, oxygen cannot permeate (Evers 2022). Therefore, aerobic bacteria that depend on the presence of oxygen cannot flourish, and it is this same bacteria that is needed for decomposition to occur (Evers 2022). And so, year after year, as the organic matter that grew on the perimeter of the bog-in-formation died and fell into the body of water, it was never able to complete processes of decomposition. Rather, deposited organic material remained inside the bog and compressed upon itself, forever only partially decomposed (Gearey, Everett 2021; Rolston 2000, 596). Dead, yes, but present in the fullest sense of the word.

The ancient conditions that shaped the emergence of boglands still characterize the ecosystem in the present. The continual deposition of organic material without typical processes of bacterial decomposition slowly transformed the water of the basin towards its state of present indeterminacy. The water of the would-be-lake instead became *not just water*, but not quite solid land either, it became the unfixable, boundary defiant body of the bog. By never arriving at the stage of complete decay – by never *processing*[7] what is lost – the bog preserves that which is dead within its watery body so that the dead composes its watery body. For the bog, the ongoing presence of death is the material agent that transforms a bog-in-progress towards an ecologically mature complex system. Over thousands of years, with neither aeration nor aerobic bacteria to engage in decomposition and filtration, all deposited materials slowly stack up in the body of the bog, eventually forming what we know as peat (Moore 1989, 89).

To submerge farther, let's sink into this suctioning peat, the deep-time mud that composes the majority of the internal bog. Peat itself is mostly made up of dead plant material (Malmer, Wallén 1993, 194). The heavy, waterlogged, muddish substance seems to be structurally sound, though if you linger too long you are often slowly, though noticeably, drawn deeper into the bog. Sinking deeper into layers of peat is an act of traveling backwards through time; because with an accumulation

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7   The analogous relationship between the terms 'decomposition' and 'process' are interesting to note in the case of bog ecology and discussions of grief. Understanding the decomposition of dead organic matter as a process similar to what one might go through in a normative understanding of grief underlines Author's thesis in the introduction to this article: that framing grief as a process encourages the complete decomposition of the dead so that they disappear from life in the present and can be abandoned and overcome in order to move towards a future that is temporally severed from the past. Boglands' inability to ever fully decompose the dead is an ecological example of a resistance to 'processing', one that reveals alternative lifeways and alternative ways of forming relationships with what is dead.

rate of only one half to two millimeters a year, boglands can take thousands of years to develop just a few meters of peat (Lindsay et al. 2014, 3). Falling deeper into the bog is to be met with peat from times far exceeding human lifespans, it is to physically touch a past that has proven itself to be uncontainable. A past that is present in this present moment.

Broadly speaking, bogs are categorized as peatlands (International Peatlands Society 2019). To be characterized as a peatland the production of organic matter must exceed the rate of its decomposition, which is quite a feat considering how slowly layers of peat form (Lindsay et al. 2014). To do justice to our ecological instructor, when speaking about the bog, word choice is of crucial importance. In much scientific literature on boglands, peat is referred to as 'growing' or 'producing' very slowly (Bonn et al. 2016, 40; Clymo 1978, 195). Yet terms like growth and production do not adequately address the temporal heterogeneity of boglands, and the Author contends that a more accurate way of understanding peat formation can be found within the term 'accumulation'. On the surface, this distinction may be small, but below the surface, it is crucially important if we are to adequately recognize the relations and intermeshment of many ongoing temporalities as they exist simultaneously within the bog. Recognizing peat growth instead as peat accumulation

> troubles a chrononormative organizational schema which offers a singular vision of the present as a distinguishable and separate moment from the past. (Berke 2023, 90)

As peat accumulates over times that far exceed the human, we are offered a more accurate vision of the ways that the past is materially constitutive of the present. Bogs offer a different conception of time itself, revealing that time itself "does not pass, it accumulates" (Baucom 2005, 24). Sinking deeper into peat brings humans into contact with materials from a deep past, reminding us, quite literally, that what is relegated to the past makes up the present: the past is *here, is now*. Peat troubles the very possibility that the past can exist as a bounded category because it *is* the retention and continuation of the past. The very existence of peat demonstrates that chrononormative temporal boundaries cannot, and do not hold. As Stephen Dillon asserts, "the past and present are not ontologically discrete categories… The present is not a quarantined, autonomous thing" (Dillon 2013, 42).

Whereas a humanistic and neoliberal vision of grief sees it as a process of reflecting on what is made inaccessible by death,[8] if we

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8   For those seeking more information regarding the limitations of normative and neoliberal definitions of grief, see Hansen, Lukić 2017; MacCormack et al. 2021; Mozessohn, Hoskin 2022.

allow layer upon layer of peat to influence our relationship to time past, we may see that we need not relegate the dead into inaccessibility in order to prove our health and wellness, but rather, that for some more-than-human others, healthy existence is defined by bringing the past into the present. Peats' relationship with the dead, its very dependence upon the dead for materiality in the present, unfolds "within the frame of an ongoing mutuality and embodied relationality" that defeats any notion that death creates a final divide between those who live in the present and those who do not (Hazekamp, Lykke 2022, 34). Recognizing peat on its own terms gives students of the boglands "a sense of deep time" that troubles the notion of a bounded present, past, or future (Rolston 2000, 595). Peat asks us to

> recognize that we are living in a present that cannot be cordoned away from the past, because this present is the accumulation of every leaf that has fallen into the mouth of the bog (Berke 2023, 90)

every reed that has fallen from the basin's edge. Peat reminds us that the separation between past and present is but a myth.

As peat forms within the body of the bog, eventually it meets the surface of the surrounding ground. Slowly mosses and grasses grow across its surface, making outcrops for vegetation in some areas and leaving pools of exposed muckish water in others. This surface is neither land, nor water; it is born from a substance that is neither solely part of the past or entirely of the present. It undulates in indeterminacy, and is able to reach the surface of the basin only because of the structural support provided by the ongoing presence of the dead.

For a second example of how the ecological makeup of the bog points towards an alternative framework for relations with the dead, let us look closely at the most prominent plant that grows across its surface. As we slowly rise back to the surface of this muddy time capsule, we can see a variety of vegetation covering the outermost layer of accumulated peat, perhaps a blueberry bush, an orchid, a pitcher plant, or the even more commonly found sedges and purple heather (Lyons, Jordan 1989). In an environment as nutrient poor and anaerobic as a bog, "higher classes" of vegetation – vascular plants with tissues capable of easily transporting water and other nutrients throughout the body of the organism – are rare, but so called "lower classes" of plants – that is bryophytes and other plants without root systems or true leaves – abound (Kimmerer 2021, 114). And nestled right within, or perhaps just under an intermittent canopy of grasses, lingers the most notable plant in the bog, the sphagnum moss, which is often referred to as the "architect" of the bog (112). Sphagnum, just like peat, may have an enormous amount to teach human students about ways to live alongside death. And despite its designation as a low class of vegetation, sphagnum moss has a complex nature

of its own. It takes a special plant to be able to build a surface over an indeterminate foundation, and sphagnum is the main plant comprising the spongy surface of the bog. Much like peat, sphagnum is neither simply aquatic nor terrestrial. In fact, by weight, the majority of sphagnum is water (112). Sphagnum doesn't grow despite indeterminacy, but it requires indeterminacy in order to extend its surface covering across the bog. The surface covering provides ground for other plants to grow. Without it, the ecosystem itself could not develop (112-14).

Interestingly, in the case of sphagnum, the majority of the plant is dead, only one out of twenty cells are alive (113). Sphagnum, like other mosses, is a bryophyte, meaning the plant itself cannot transport water from one part to another, but can only absorb water across its surface area (Crooks 2021). And here is where the dead cells of sphagnum find their ultimate utility. When discussing sphagnum, it is not useful to impose distinctions between alive and dead, as the dead cells of sphagnum are vital for the health of the entire plant; they are water retention cells (Kimmerer 2021, 114). It is these dead cells which make up the majority of the structure of sphagnum, as well as provide storehouses of water for the 'living' sections of the plant to draw from (114). The water retention abilities of dead sphagnum is what provides surface area and nutrients for new mosses to grow from; a cycle of life dependent on intimate comingling with the dead. Dead cells of sphagnum are as much a part of the 'living' plant as the cells which undergo photosynthesis. Although it does not serve us to make distinctions between the living and dead cells, it does serve us to recognize that, once again, sphagnum itself is "embodied relationality" between the dead and the living (Hazekamp, Lykke 2022, 34). As sphagnum dies, it too becomes incorporated into peat, extending the relationship between peat and sphagnum forward in time, through the preservation of what is 'past'.

Boglands demonstrate that ecologies recognize, value and depend upon the dead as agential players in the constitution of the present and future. In the bog, dead matter doesn't just co-mingle with the living, but provides the necessary conditions for life to be sustained. The Author suggests that this may point towards an alternative way for humans to experience ecological grief, where rather than overcoming loss and searching onwards for a new attachment, the lost object quite literally comes to "constitute(s) the self" acting "as an ongoing psychic reminder of the fact of death in the midst of creation" (Sandilands 2010, 333). Boglands do not just experience death, rather the bog as well as its possibility for ongoingness in the future depend on intimacy with the dead, continued presence of death, and the integration of what is lost into the core of the self. Bogs provide ample examples of other ways to remain in relation to death rather than seeing death as something to overcome or process through

grieving. Bogs push us to think of alternative frameworks for relating to the dead that do not cast the dead into a past made accessible only through memory. Bogs ask us to recognize that the dead are co-constitutors of the present and of any ecologically equitable future. They ask us to imagine an alternative to humanistic grief; a boggy revisioning, where the opacity of indeterminate terrain defies easy categorization and illuminates many possible alternatives for ongoingness that lurk underneath uncertain surfaces.

3 Ecological Grief as Sympoiesis: Methods for Relational and Resistant Grieving

In her 2016 book *Staying with the Trouble*, multi-species feminist scholar Donna Haraway contends that a sympoietic approach is needed if we are to move towards multi-species *resurgence*,[9] if we are to continue to develop the "arts of living on a damaged planet", a phrase Haraway borrows from anthropologist Anna Tsing (Tsing et al. 2017). For Haraway, sympoiesis is the act of "making-with" (Haraway 2016, 58). She explains, "Nothing makes itself; nothing is really autopoietic or self-organizing" (58). Sympoiesis is not necessarily a willful act, more so it is a way of understanding and recognizing the collaborative nature of the emergence of all creatures and phenomenon: it is a rejection of the very notion of bounded autonomy or the fiction that anything is autopoietic, that is, self made. Once recognized, we are left with the response-ability to develop the onto-epistemological tools to continue to reveal to ourselves the sympoietic relationality of the world, as well as a response-ability to stand in defiance of regimes and histories of solipsism and mythologies of bounded autonomy. We are beckoned to work, create, fabulate and imagine in sympoietic fashions as "approaches tuned to 'multi- species becoming-with' better sustain us" as we take up the task ahead: to live and die well on and with troubled and threatened terrain (63). A refusal of individuality, sympoiesis is needed now more than ever if we are to reconcile with the vast interdependent networks made abundantly clear by the crises laden Anthropocene. In fact, Haraway contends that the conditions of the Anthropocene "demand sympoietic thinking and action" (67). This section will elaborate upon boglands' ecological characteristics through the lens of sympoiesis and relationality in order to elucidate boggy lessons for an alternative way

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[9] "Resurgence" is Haraway's term for the planetary task ahead of us as we live and die within the Anthropocene. Resurgence is shorthand for the quest for multi-species, interdependent, non-exploitative livability for all the earth's creatures, human and more-than-human, past, present and yet to come.

to experience ecological grief. Taking up sympoiesis rather than autopoiesis decenters the human from our onto-epistemological foundations, a much needed task in order to adequately learn from and with ecologies.

Haraway provides readers with examples of sympoiesis ranging from crochet to bacteria, from camels to ornithologists and indigenous artists (58-98). Here, the Author wants to extend her theory to boglands. In this present case, sympoiesis can be read as a call to think and theorize in boggy methods; always in relation, as boglands themselves "render rigid delineation impossible" (Garibaldi 2024, 86). In the previous section, we recognized that bogs are not just sites where the dead have a chance to mingle with the living, but that the bog itself *is* the encounter; an ecology of life and death in dynamic relationality. After this recognition was made possible with the aid of natural sciences, this section ventures a few steps further. It moves towards Haraway's invitation to engage in "speculative fabulation for flourishing" (81). This section asks how human students of boglands can imaginatively enter this sympoietic web in search of alternative grieving methods. How can humans learn grief differently from thinking with the life and death sympoiesis of bog ecosystems?

Rather than assuming that the task of resurgence that stands before us requires "starting over and beginning anew", Haraway contends that moving towards resurgence "requires inheriting hard histories, for everybody, but not equally and not in the same ways" (150, 89). Resurgence requires an intimate relation with the past, as climate change itself is largely a question of how to deal with the past as it makes itself known in the present, and future. As Irish writer and researcher on grief Molly Furey asserts:

> The climate crisis is the result of past actions and thus, as much as it puts the future at stake, it necessarily demands a certain conceptualization of history and memory – as ongoing, incomplete. (Furey 2024, 241)

The climate crises demands that we recognize that history is incomplete, that the past *cannot* be put behind us. But without ecological examples, our methods for accessing this past – namely grief and memory – may inadvertently continue to repeat the patterns that confirm the past as over and gone. Our methods of grieving in the Anthropocene must take on a similar quality of incompleteness, of *ongoingness*. For as Furey continues:

> the ongoing failure to respond adequately to the generational challenge posed by the climate crisis is rooted in our failure to recognize it as a temporally diffuse one. (Furey 2024, 241)

With boggy methods in mind, we may be able to see the potentiality of ecological grief for how it may function as an affective step towards acknowledging the utter incompleteness of the past, its material and agential presence in the present and its role in the shaping of futures. If the unforeseeable consequences and impacts of climate change are communications with humanity's past actions, then perhaps our ways of grieving for this destruction can also be a way of communicating with humanity's past. Bogs may serve as a figure to remind us, in times of mass planetary death, how to "stay with the ragged joy of ordinary living and dying", by providing a lived and present ecological example of "sympoiesis with the dead" (Haraway 2016, 167, 157). To recognize the bog as a relational emergence between ecological life and death provides a pathway for understanding grief differently. Rather than a process of dealing with and overcoming loss, bogs invite us to reimagine grief as a vital and necessary task for living through the Anthropocene. Bogs asks us to reimagine grief as a way to take up the response-ability of ensuring that the dead are heard, seen and collaborated with as future spaces of multispecies resurgence come into being. Bogs encourage us to imagine the ways that what is lost or degraded may act agentially in the present and future, rather than disappearing and becoming that for which we mourn and therefore can come to abandon.

Boglands provide an ecological answer to Haraway's question regarding what we will do with our troubled inheritances by showing us that an alternative way of living alongside the dead already exists, and that for some, life itself depends on it. By so stubbornly refusing to abandon the dead, and instead integrating this dead into a heterogenous and expansive self, the bog lives in a time that may seem far from our contemporary moment, a time "of interspecies interrelationalities before hierarchical conceptions of human exceptionalism" (Delany 2024, 149). But going even further, the interspecies interrelationalities of boglands are extended past the imposed threshold between life and death. They provide an example of how we may live similarly as we are steeped in crises today. The approach requires creativity, imagination, and a willingness to resist ontological predeterminism. It asks us to remain curious regarding what internalized, intimate and ongoing relationships with the dead could look like for human beings. Bogs demonstrate a relational ontology that stretches tentacularly through time, one that offers humans a method for re-thinking, and re-experiencing grief as similarly relational. This may construct a future(s) defined by interruptions by the past, rather than a future of simple and uninterrupted continuation. The bog asks us how grief may be an act of carrying with rather than processing through. Whereas we may live in a fiction that imagines easy divisions between past, present and future, a temporal organization that will always encourage the renouncing of the

past in the ongoing search for a site for future conquest, boglands demonstrate a present liveliness that is constituted by a never-over past. As a landscape that lives only through ongoing relations with the dead, the bog becomes a site that demands an imaginative rethinking of death itself.

In the last chapter of *Staying with the Trouble*, Haraway crafts an SF[10] story entitled "Children of the Compost" (Haraway 2016, 134-68). This story imagines the lives of future communities who are living and dying through the mass extinctions of the Anthropocene. As a strategy for multispecies resurgence, some community members engage in material sympoietic bonding with endangered or precarious animal species. This means that specific humans are biologically altered so that they take on certain characteristics and abilities of their chosen more-than-human partner. These humans are materially altered by the integration of molecular and cellular materials from other species and kinds into themselves and are referred to as "syms" (140). The aim of this deliberate sympoietic biologic altering is to build a lineage of interwoven relationalities between human and non-human others in order to "recraft conditions of living and dying to enable flourishing in the present and in times to come" (137). Yet, these sympoietic beings cannot alone stop the mass death of the Anthropocene, and as extinctions proliferate around the globe, some of the syms transition from being sympoietically interwoven with their animals, to being sympoietically interwoven with the dead, as the entire species of their animal mate became extinct. This transition gives syms a new response-ability, and turns them into "speakers for the dead" (164).

"Children of the Compost" is a tale that uses science fiction to imagine ways that we humans may live and die differently through crises unfolding and still yet to come. In Haraway's vision for the future, speakers for the dead play a vital and indispensable part. Each speaker for the dead is tasked with

> bringing critters who had been irretrievably lost into potent presence for giving knowledge and heart to all of those continuing to work for the still diverse earth's robust and partial recuperation. (164)

Speakers for the dead bring these lost lifeways into "ongoing presence" by practicing "vital memory" (166). That is, they refuse to allow extinction to mean erasure and instead they move from "mourning

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10   'SF' is a term Haraway uses as an acronym that describes a multiplicity of terms, tools and concepts. SF is "science fiction, speculative fabulation, string figures, speculative feminism, science fact, so far" (Haraway 2016, 2). But it is also a method for tracing the unknowable, a "dangerous true tale of adventure… a practice…a figure for ongoingness" (3).

to represencing" (166). Speakers for the dead do not renounce grief, but they refuse to experience grief as a pathway towards overcoming loss. Instead, their grief is the work of not forgetting, it is the work of always carrying forth that which is lost. As Haraway explains, a crucial responsibility for speakers for the dead is

> not to forget the stink in the air from the burning of the witches, not to forget the murders of human and nonhuman beings in the Great Catastrophes named the Plantationocene, Anthropocene, Capitalocene. (166)

4 Unending Conclusions

The vision that Haraway gives of a future where humans are inextricably bound to lost species and take on the response-ability for carrying them into the present is a tale of science fiction. Yet, it is also a story already ecologically lived. Much like Haraway's "Children of the Compost", boglands provide pathways for thinking about the role of the dead and the uses of grief outside of present paradigms. Boglands gesture towards a different type of livability, one that is instructive as we occupy Anthropocene scenes of mass death. By providing material examples of ecologies that already exist in sympoiesis with the dead, boglands are Haraway's science fiction in present reality. They ask us to stop outrunning deathly realities, and instead learn to harness grief as a method for sympoietic more-than-human continuation. They ask us to re-imagine grief as the vital work of bringing the voices of the dead into the project of crafting a future defined by multispecies healing rather than continued exploitation. Following boggy examples and learning with Haraway's vocabulary of sympoiesis and relationality, we are left with a different understanding of the utility of ecological grief. Rather than the pathway to overcoming the emotional distress that accompanies the Anthropocene, by looking closely at a bogland's way of life, by recognizing its sympoietic intimacy with death, we may re-imagine the role of ecological grief as an affect that integrates histories and continuations of environmental destruction into the construction of alternative futures. Learning with boglands pushes humans into a recognition of grief not as a process of overcoming death, but as a method for sympoietic relations with the dead that may better equip us as we live and die together in the Anthropocene.

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The Price of Extinction and the Epic Journey to Mourn Beyond the Human in Ned Beauman's *Venomous Lumpsucker*

María Torres Romero
Universidad de Málaga, España

Abstract   This article aims to explore how contemporary speculative fiction contributes to the current debate about the extinction crisis in the context of the Anthropocene by the critical analysis of Ned Beauman's latest novel *Venomous Lumpsucker* (2022). First, it explores how in a future speculative world, where the exploitative drive of the neoliberal economic system interlocks with the latest technologies, the monetisation of life ends up detaching the notions of extinction and death. Additionally, it follows and interprets the epic travel of a cognitive scientist from apathy to environmental awareness and her complex journey towards mourning beyond the human.

Keywords   Extinction. Anthropocene. Necrocene. Ecological mourning. Speculative fiction. Ned Beauman.

Summary   1 Introduction. – 2 Speculative Storytelling and the Deathly Nature of the Anthropocene. – 3 Of Extinction Credits, Sanctuaries, and Biobanks. – 4 'Offloading the curse' of Extinction. – 5 Conclusion.

> Mourn then, what cannot be saved, but defend
> what remains and can be
> (Kretz, "Emotional Solidarity", 275)

1 Introduction

We are living in disorienting and unsettling times. The effective alteration of the planet through direct human intervention by means of extensive deforestation, continuous mining for resources, large-scale food production, and urbanization has resulted in the disappearance and destruction of countless species, landscapes, and biodiversity, as well as the displacement of thousands of individuals around the world. These are considered to be manifestations and direct consequences of the Anthropocene, a term increasingly used to refer to the current planetary epoch that is characterized by humans' influence on Earth's processes and bio-geophysical composition (Chua, Fair 2019). Timothy Clark signals that, even if the term has been rightfully adopted by the global community, at the heart of the Anthropocene still prevails an overwhelming incomprehensibility, since there is no "simple or unitary object" to confront, delimit, or 'tackle' but "only a kind of dissolution into innumerable issues" (2015, 10). Scholars in the Environmental Humanities, such as Tereza Dědinová et al. (2021), Gina Comos and Caroline Rosenthal (2019), or Joanna Zylinska (2014) have brought attention in their research to the potential of narratives and literature to act as critical tools that can actively shape a more concrete understanding of the present crisis, as well as offer mechanisms that allow us to determine ways of assuming individual and collective responsibility for the state of the planet. Among these narratives, speculative fiction appears as one of the most potent and fruitful forms of storytelling in the current literary panorama to "furnish solid contours to the yet only foreseen consequences" of the Anthropocene (Dědinová et al. 2021, 4). The genre opens the possibilities for the exploration of the causes and consequences of our planetary condition into horizons that are inaccessible to other literary forms. It does so by freely dismantling current societal structures and established laws and, most importantly, by asking a simple question: 'What if?'. As Michel Lincoln stated, "speculative fiction is realism" in today's world (2022)

and, as seen in the wide readership that the genre enjoys, there is no doubt that this narrative mode responds and attends in singular and appealing ways to some of our most urgent planetary concerns, including climate change and mass extinction, by producing texts that "timestamp current and lingering worries" (Callus 2022, 681) but that reach beyond catastrophism.

Following this line of thought, this article attempts to add to the discussions of the potentialities of literature to access the Anthropocene and "grasp the unimaginable" (Dědinová et al. 2021, 4) by assessing, more specifically, how the speculative genre is contributing to the up-to-date debate about nonhuman species mass death in the Sixth Mass Extinction. For that, an analysis of the novel *Venomous Lumpsucker* (2022) by the British author Ned Beauman will be carried out framing it in the context of the Anthropocene, and by extension the Necrocene, and as an example of a contemporary text that features, while at the same time ironically subverts, aspects of the literary epic genre. Written in Beauman's darkly comic narrative style, this novel follows two main characters who represent the opposite sides of the coin of environmental conscience: Resaint, a morally conflicted cognitive scientist, and Halyard, a selfish corporate consultant who advocates for profit rather than ethics. As they try to save from extinction the endangered venomous lumpsucker, a highly intelligent fictional fish, they traverse the European continent having to navigate and face the reality of environmental collapse and corporate greed. Beauman's novel, which has been described as a "cerebral eco-thriller" (Power 2022), has received the acclaim of the general public, obtaining the Arthur C. Clarke Award for science fiction a year after its publication. However, even if it features topics that might interest scholars in the Environmental Humanities, Posthumanism and Transhumanism, as well as Future Studies, the critical analysis of the text to the date, maybe due to its recent publication, is very limited. Among these, Erin James's research is particularly notable for using the entanglement of fiction and belief as a conceptual point of departure to examine the novel as a narration that might invite "skeptical readers into the pro-environmental behaviours" (James 2024, 332). In this article, however, the Author aims to approach *Venomous Lumpsucker* as a contemporary text that illustrates and epitomises the extinction crisis we are facing in the 'age of *anthropos*', and as a novel that offers an all-too-real imaginary picture of the death of thousands of nonhuman animal species within a necroeconomic system where death is transformed into a profitable commodity (Haskaj 2018, 1149).

Building on this, the first part of the article intends to analyse, by opening up Achilles Mbembe's necropolitics to the nonhuman, how death is utterly monetised and redefined in this future context of a technologically mediated mass extinction. Because of this

commodification, some of the positive aspects of today's species preservation techniques, such as global digital biodiversity databases, de-extinction, or rewilding, are undermined and swallowed by the neoliberal economic system of the novel. In connection with that, the second part of the research aims to follow and interpret the physical, yet symbolic epic travel experienced by Resaint from environmental apathy towards awareness of the mass extinction happening around her, and her subsequent commitment to mourn the nonhuman. Her process of eco-grief, complicated by her inability to work through her guilt and angst, will turn into a mock-epic journey across the European continent to obtain personal atonement and deliver animal justice. By retracing the radical boundaries between life and death in the Necrocene, and by making use of ideas that align with Ecopsychology, eco-grief, and eco-mourning, as they encourage a shift from a helpless pathologized individual (Cole 2023, 2798) towards collectively-oriented responsible action, Beauman's speculative novel, and a close analysis of these particular aspects, undoubtedly add an invaluable insight to the discussions of mass extinction and the power of mourning beyond the human for the twenty-first century.

2 Speculative Storytelling and the Deathly Nature of the Anthropocene

First proposed by the geobiologist Eugene F. Stoermer in the 1980s and popularized by the Nobel laureate Paul J. Crutzen in 2002, the term 'Anthropocene', which was used as evidence to denote that anthropogenetic climate change was changing planetary systems to the point of defining a new geological epoch (Spencer 2021, 46), has since then transgressed the limits of scientific discourse to develop, as Ursula K. Heise sustains, "a cultural life of its own" (2016, 204). Today, the concept encompasses much more than measurements of climate change coming from the burning of fossil fuels and the emission of greenhouse gases. The Anthropocene, with its entwined challenges and interconnected problems (Chakrabarty 2009, 27), draws attention to the complex networks of relations among humans, non-humans, and material processes, as well as their entangled co-existence. For scholars like Arne J. Vetlesen, the Anthropocene is "the historical product" (2019, 9) that embodies, while at the same time challenges, the economic, social, and moral practices ingrained in the modern humanist philosophy of anthropocentrism, which entrenches human centredness and superiority above all else "in all domains of modern Western society to this very day" (2019, 2). Thereafter, Vetlesen sustains that the philosophy of anthropocentrism has led directly to the onset of the Anthropocene, and he contends that this individualistic era has resulted in a modus operandi where exploitation,

jeopardy, and decimation are dominant on Earth. In this sense, death and destruction of both the biological and material environments and ecosystems are common denominators for our times, in which the large-scale ecological transformations caused by humans reach such a scale and rate that are comparable to previous mass extinction events like volcanic eruptions or the asteroid that resulted in the Cretaceous-Paleogene Extinction. This is why this geological moment is recognised in environmental discourse to be going through the 'Sixth Mass Extinction' (Leakey, Lewin 1996).

The effects of climate change and habitat destruction on nonhuman animals, fungi, plants, and other living beings are such that, even if extinction and death may have been "as much a part of life as growth, decay, mutation, and proliferation" (Colebrook 2018, 150), the human-induced mass extinction we face today is changing the dynamics between life and death by furtherly exceeding the "ebb and flow of life's creation and destruction" (150). Death as an onto-epistemological concept fails to encompass what extinction entails. According to Oriol Batalla, extinction, even if still inherently deathly in nature, is a negative phenomenon that stops the prevailing generative evolutionary process through the circumstantial "negation of both life and death" (2022, 2). Attending to this, scholars like Justin McBrien (2016) or Jonathan Crary (2013) have proposed a revision of the concept of the Anthropocene, stressing the interrelatedness between the neoliberal late-capitalist system and today's environmental catastrophe. Their critical position acutely recognises and signals the conspicuous alteration that capitalist extraction and accumulation have had on the processes of life and death on Earth. Consistent with this idea, the Necrocene, where the deathly nature of capitalism is avowed as the ultimate cause that has transmuted "life into death and death into capital" (McBrien 2016, 117), appears as a more appropriate critical tool where not humankind in general but the capitalist impulse that commodifies human and nonhuman as resources is responsible for the current global multifocal crisis. The Necrocene foregrounds the fact that we are living in an age of extinction, which is an inherent consequence of capitalism, and links, by this same reason, the alienated and at the same time vulnerable existence of humankind to the nonhuman world. As opposed to other narratives, the Necrocene also highlights – because the exploitation of resources in our planet can only be finite – the unsustainability and the inevitable extinction of the capitalist system itself "through the reproduction of accumulation and the inequalities" that exist at its core (Batalla 2022, 5). Inevitably, the Necrocene as a theoretical lens allows us to pursue analyses of death in a multiple and situated sense, and more importantly, it opens the considerations of death beyond the human. As consequence, the Necrocene also calls for a conscientious and resistant mourning (Spargo 2004; Rae 2007) on our part

towards the more-than-human since, as stated by Rosi Braidotti, this narrative bluntly places the "burden of *responsibility* on our species, which is the primary cause for the mess" (2013, 6; emphasis added).

The deathly force of the Necrocene, whose tangible effects become more evident as the century progresses, has induced a structural shift in some fields within the social sciences that has ended up opening the prospects for a more responsible accountability of environmental destruction and loss. The field of Death Studies for example, which traditionally had been closely connected with the analysis of grief and mourning practices resulting from the death of a close human person (Attig, Stillion 2015), has experienced significant realignment. Apart from a move away from pathologizing individuals and from Freudian, 'healthy' anthropocentric conceptions of mourning, the field has broadened its scope to include nonhuman entities (both biological and abiotic) in our necropolitical considerations as valid mournable bodies, possibly as a reaction to the capitalist hegemonic logic of death and thanks partly to Judith Butler's influential philosophical work (2004, xiv). In this respect, posthumanist oriented discourses within Queer Death Studies (Radomska, Lykke 2023, 124) question the profusion of necropolitical practices that strategically categorise certain bodies as marked for life while others are relegated to death and regarded as expendable excess. In parallel, other disciplines such as Ecopsychology, which have become more prominent in environmental studies in the last decades, pay attention to how ecosystems degradation and the mass eradication of nonhumans have impacted how we perceive biocultural processes of death. This field has specially attended to the way in which nonhuman losses are rising in humans what has been defined as ecological distress and other mental issues that reach beyond individual conditions, such as eco-anxiety, eco-guilt, eco-angst, or solastalgia (Wardell 2020, 189-91). Ecopsychology as correlative to Death Studies showcases a concern on the part of scholars and researchers for collective examples and examinations in relation to ecological awareness rather than on individual pathologies. Ashlee Cunsolo and Neville Ellis (2018) have emphasised precisely this entangled and collective dimension of environmental grief and mourning by giving a planetary and communitarian sense to loss while signalling not only "our ecological interdependency but also 'our ethical and political responsibilities'" towards the more-than-human world (quoted in Wardell 2020, 195).

This collective and posthumanist envisioning, taking into account that critics are still weary of over applying an ethnocentric English-language lexicon (Wardell 2020, 196) and of instrumental universalisation given that not all human beings and communities experience and process environmental loss and distress the same way (Williamson et al. 2020; Meloche 2018), involves an adjustment in the

anthropocentric and Eurocentric logics from early biopolitical discourses. Thus, now more than ever, we are in need of narratives that help us make sense of how these emergent postanthropocentric logics could inspire us beyond the fear of destruction and into a better way to live and die in our current times. It is here that cultural products like literature enter to play an essential role. As pointed out by Heise, different forms of artistic practices, including literary texts, can reorient what we as individuals and as local and global communities think and do in relation to planetary destruction and, with more emphasis for this research, mass extinction, thanks to their ability to help us culturally understand "how endangered species and extinction mean" rather than just observing what they represent in scientific terms (2016, 237). Narratives of extinction have long benefited from an alliance with the speculative fiction genre, which according to Ivan Callus is a form of narrative that introduces situations to the reader that 'could really happen' and are "traceable to the consequentialities of 'the way we live now'" (Callus 2022, 681). Additionally, he points out that speculative fiction "takes on aspects of a new realism", both in the mode or style of the narration and in the "unflinching scrutiny of what is confronted", upholding the logic of "if-we're-not-careful-this-could-follow" (681). A myriad of contemporary speculative fiction has called to responsible accountability by employing strategic narratives that offer a glimpse into the current extinction crisis, some moving far into the future and offering a bleak vision of a post-human world, such as Margaret Atwood's MaddAdam trilogy (2003-09), while others remain eerily close to today's reality, such as Jeff Vandermeer's *Hummingbird Salamander* (2021), James Bradley's *Ghost Species* (2020), or Charlotte McConaghy's *Migrations* (2020).

One of the most recent tendencies within the speculative mode that very distinctively covers narratives of the Anthropocene, and which needs to be briefly mentioned for the present research, is the proliferation of what Michel Lincoln has labelled "the speculative epic" (2022). This term, still in the process of being officially adopted by the scholarly community due to its novelty, refers to contemporary fictional texts that incorporate an epic scope (in time, setting, or cast of characters) while making use of speculative premises to tackle some of the biggest concerns of our days, with special emphasis on themes related to climate crises and extinction. By combining aspects of the ancient epic genre, like referencing mystical or supernatural motifs and connections, following the deeds or journey of a (heroic) protagonist, or having a distribution into parts with separate settings, these speculative narratives, such as Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future* (2020) or Sequoia Nagamatsu's *How High We Go in the Dark* (2022), participate with a grand-scope style in the reimagining of humans' complex and connected existence with the natural environment. Another characteristic of the speculative epic highlighted by

Lincoln is its genre-bending approach. These narratives, as is the case of *Venomous Lumpsucker*, mix science fiction, historical realism, literary fiction, or thriller, to convey the message of pressing urgency and of essential responsibility towards the nonhuman world that spans beyond any individual (Lincoln 2022, s.p.). This popular speculative subgenre in the form of a grand narrative is especially fitting today since, as Lincoln points out, it aligns with the size of the planet-wide problems these texts thematically examine. Certainly so, when confronting the multiple and immense focal points of the Anthropocene, one might be in need of "an epic novel to match" them (Lincoln 2022).

3 Of Extinction Credits, Sanctuaries, and Biobanks

Ned Beauman opens *Venomous Lumpsucker* with an "Author's Note" that goes:

> This novel is set in the near future. However… sums of money are presented as if the euro has retained its 2022 value with no inflation. This is the sole respect in which the story deviates from how things will actually unfold. (2022, s.p.)

This paratext, which concentrates the caustic narrative tone that the author adopts throughout the novel, gives readers a cue to be prepared for a playful and satiric story about the near future. As James points out about this Note, "[t]hings won't *really* be this way", however this paratext encourages readers to recognise the fictionality of this storyworld, also promoting a pretext to leave aside feelings like anxiety or fear that such scenario might in another way produce (2024, 334). And it is true that the author's request not to take this book too seriously is very appropriate given the plausibility of the reality that this near future unfolds. Human-induced climate change and global warming have altered every single aspect of life on this version of Earth, from weather patterns to food production, and from viruses and health issues to refugees' crises. To keep up, advanced capitalist societies have developed technologies that counterbalance the consequences of the Anthropocene, evidencing Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus' affirmation that ever since the Enlightenment (to name a starting point) the solution to the unintentional effects of modernity "is, and has always been, more modernity… and more technology".[1] 'Spindrifters' that cool the planet

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[1] Shellenberger, M.; Nordhaus, T. (2011, Feb 25). "The Long Death of Environmentalism" [speech]. The Breakthrough Institute, Yale University. https://thebreakthrough.org/issues/energy/the-long-death-of-environmentalism.

with ocean's water, a drug that helps eaters process unflavoured food, cloning laboratories, AI personal assistants, mind-uploading technologies, and more importantly, autonomous mining vehicles (Beauman 2022, 20) sustain the exploitative and ever-evolving neoliberal economic system that is still the foundation for this world.

The consequences of all this progress continue to be of course the loss of ecosystems and of thousands of lives of those that have been considered less, naming here other (normally racialized) humans, as well as nonhuman animals, plants, and other living beings. True to what Mbembe sustains in *Necropolitics*, the fictitious setting of this novel showcases the close connection between the late capitalist system and the dynamics of war. According to him, never before "has the symmetry between the market and the war been as evident as it is today" (2019, 12-13) since they both equally partake, as the text suggests, with an unlimited power of destruction in the exploitation and eradication of what has been othered. In the novel, thousands of nonhuman animal species die every year because of this unparalleled exploitation, and extinction reaches a rate never seen before which is why, although covering other relevant environmental topics, *Venomous Lumpsucker* can be fruitfully read in the light of the Sixth Mass Extinction crisis. In an effort to jointly solve the situation and as a compromise to put an end to this amount of death once and for all, also spurred by the extinction of the last giant panda in China, 197 states around the world gather to create the World Commission on Species Extinction (henceforth WCSE), which later, very much influenced by big mining corporations, approves the creation of "the extinction industry" as their first measure (Beauman 2022, 14).

This industry, as Beauman suggests in a recent podcast interview,[2] is inspired almost in its totality by the current carbon credit system that regulates and aims to reduce the emissions of CO_2 in Europe (EU ETS – Phase 4 2021-30). The carbon system sets limits on the amount of pollution that big companies can release and oblige them to purchase or trade carbon credits if they want to create emissions. However, the financial regulations that pressure businesses to find tactics to reduce their carbon footprint have given rise, like in other occasions, to markets that have turned CO_2e into trading offsets or credits through which corporations generate revenue and keep producing tons of pollutants (Sitarz et al. 2024, 637). Reimagined in *Venomous Lumpsucker*, we encounter an impeccably designed extinction market that allows corporations to pay for the right to lead a species to extinction. In this system, the lives of nonhuman endangered

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2   Morris, V; Skene, J. (Hosts) (2023, April 11). "Ep. 51 – Novelist Ned Beauman on Venomous Lumpsuckers and the Price of Extinction" [podcast audio]. *When We Talk About Animals*. https://www.whenwetalkaboutanimals.org/2023/04/11/ep-51-ned-beauman/.

species have been transformed into "extinction credits" that lobby-ists can buy at very low prices, just €38,432 "to wipe a species from the face of the earth" (Beauman 2022, 22), if they want to exploit and decimate their natural habitat. When an endangered species is catalogued as intelligent by a cognitive expert like Resaint, howev-er, these corporations will need to pay the price of thirteen of these credits, which is still very cheap considering the economic benefits they obtain from exploiting, mining, or acquiring possession of their natural habitat. This logic of sacrifice, where the idea that some lives are more valuable (in the monetary and metaphoric sense of the word) than others, such as 'intelligent' animals in this case, ech-oes Mbembe's idea of the unequal distribution of the "opportunity to live and die" at the heart of what he calls "necroliberalism", which in this particular fictional scenario reaches beyond the human form to other endangered nonhumans, openly considered "expendable" here (Mbembe, Bercito 2020).

Obviating the good intentions of the fictional 197 member coun-tries of the WCSE, this new monetary regulation of extinction ends up leading to

> fewer barriers now to eradicating an endangered species than there had been any time since laws of this kind were first enacted in the mid-twentieth century. (Beauman 2022, 23)

Apart from fictionalising the prevailing ethos of the contemporary moment where the logic of sacrifice is clearly powered by economic incentives (Mbembe, Bercito 2020), Beauman, in the same podcast in-terview and using his novel as a speculative example, also comments on the efficacy of financial instruments in the present day to fight cli-mate change and planetary destruction. According to him, and to put it plainly, these measures based on economic sanctions are not show-ing results, as seen is the above passage, because they actively con-tribute to the same apparatus that creates the problem. The current neoliberal system that led to the Anthropocene, which Beauman pic-tures as "a world of water",[3] 'captures' everything, working almost as a super intelligent AI that reprograms itself and finds constant so-lutions to overcome obstacles, as is the case with said economic re-strictions. No matter how rigorously these financial sanctions have been thought through and designed, money and economic profit al-most always find a way around them since, according to Beauman, this 'water' keeps moving until it finds a gap that allows economic exploitation. As highlighted in Batalla's study concerning the fero-cious destructive force of the Necrocene, Beauman fictionalises the

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3 https://www.whenwetalkaboutanimals.org/2023/04/11/ep-51-ned-beauman/.

capacity of the capitalist system to survive and expand by "absorbing everything at its reach" and by "sucking out living labour and resources" until they are depleted or not useful anymore (2022, 5). In this novel, life itself, and more concretely the life of those considered inferior, has an extremely low price, and corporations and governments show no remorse in paying to sacrifice the habitat and the last of these endangered species "for the sake of growth and prosperity" (Beauman 2022, 21). This 'cheapening of nature', an expression used by Donna Haraway, is a strategy developed from the inner mechanisms of the Necrocene "to sustain extraction and production" by any means in the contemporary world (2016, 100). However, as Anna Tsing argues, this idea of nature as cheap, where destruction actually costs almost nothing to big corporations, is reaching its end in the current geological era, since the scope of the damage has reached such limits that now most of the earth's reserves and refugia that could regenerate in some sort of way are completely drained (2015, s.p.). In our current world, the monetization and consequent cheapening of the environment has completely altered the evolutionary self-regulating balance between life and death, and this alteration is something the characters in this novel can legally pay for in order to keep the capitalist model perpetually going unaffected.

The World Commission on Species Extinction, as a way of undoing the 'whole mess' of planetary damage, also promotes species conservation by paying the price of one credit per endangered species saved to those governments and corporations that contribute to stopping biodiversity disappearance. This, unsurprisingly, originates a submarket whereby private companies build artificial nature reserves to house dozens of endangered species together in one place, "allowing for tremendous economies of scale" (Beauman 2022, 78). Real life projects for species preservation have also paid considerable attention to ecosystem restoration and the process of re-wilding, in which, as described by Clémentine Mutillod et al., natural ecosystems are rebuilt after human disturbances "by restoring processes and food webs" so that these ecosystems become self-sustaining and resilient and can house endangered species again (2024, 821). In the novel, Sanctuary North, described first as "an ark and an Eden" (Beauman 2022, 78), is created from the privatisation of Estonia's Peipsiveere Nature Reserve, which seems to comply to some of the principles of real-life re-wilding, like landscape-scale planning, or local engagement and support (Carver et al. 2021, 1885). Nonetheless, instead of becoming a self-sustained space for certain correlated endangered species, this sanctuary functions uniquely because "it was a panopticon" (Beauman 2022, 80) in which only controlled and artificial ecosystems can flourish with continual human and technological intervention. In addition, the novel later unveils that, since Sanctuary North is a strategic business that essentially

aims for economic benefit, the place, as a way of generating a secondary source of income, also secretly houses tons of toxic waste that results in leakage and eradicates many animal species. The way in which Sanctuary North malfunctions ends up ratifying the overall motif of the novel, in which the economic interests of a few prevail over the lives of many, and more decidedly over the defenceless nonhuman animals locked in these sanctuaries. The creation of this space, where the structural opposition between outside and inside is exacerbated (Mbembe 2019, 23), is so far removed from the genuine intention of saving these animals that it does not take much to recognise how the whole extinction credit system is a farce in which "[e]ven activists don't care about [these species]" (Beauman 2022, 16). This monetary 'sanctuarization' of perpetually human-controlled spaces to save some species while the limitless ransacking continues outside reveals, additionally, the hypocrisy and the unsustainability of this industry, vindicating Mbembe's affirmation that in the Necrocene one cannot 'sanctuarize' some species' home "by fomenting chaos and death far away, in *the homes of others*" (2019, 23; emphasis in the original).

The price of extinction and the redefinition of life and death in *Venomous Lumpsucker* take a drastic turn when they interlock with the latest technologies designed for human and animal brain scanning, called "[c]onnectome scanning" (Beauman 2022, 24). However, the animal preservations – that include a complete record of their genome as well as of their entire neural structure – were only useful, as Halyard reflects in a very anthropocentric way, for companies like the one he works for called Brahmasamudram Mining to legally argue in case they eradicated an endangered species that it "was in some sense *not yet lost*" (Beauman 2022, 16; emphasis in the original). The emergence of this technology, by blurring (even if only possibly) the boundary between being bodily dead or virtually alive, transforms this storyworld into a transhumanist reality, one where the biological body that sustains a living being is disposed of, and where the corporations that aim for profit at any expense end up taking advantage of this virtualization. As a consequence of these recent advances, the WSCE and the big mining company behind it prepare the ground for a reform in the extinction industry to create what Beauman calls a "biobank" (Beauman 2022, 29). These biobanks, which call to mind today's biological digital databases like the Global Biodiversity Information Facility for instance, are introduced as an extreme, and at points outlandish, fictionalization that accentuate how technological progress (and the digitization of life) characteristic of the contemporary necroliberal system, with its disruption of the fluctuation between creation and decay, or infinity and mortality (Batalla 2022, 22), can lead to a perpetuation and accentuation of the reigning structures of power that dominate the present-day

biopolitical and necropolitical frameworks. Beauman also gives room to question whether the many positive aspects of current (bio)technological practices for species preservation might in fact prevent us from recognising their unethical and extremely dangerous consequences if they end up in the hands of private companies with mere economic interests, as is the case with Sanctuary North. This proposed reform in the extinction credit system would then mean a triumph for corporations like Brahmasamudram Mining, as it sustains that from that moment forward

> even if a species didn't have a single living individual left on earth, it should still not be considered extinct, as long as it had been the subject of what was called 'multimodal preservation'. (Beauman 2022, 28)

Since species' information is kept in these servers, extinction, and by consequence death, adopts a new dimension that makes possible the belief that "a physical body breathing its last was not the same thing as The End" (Beauman 2022, 28), which then gives green light to these plundering corporations to continue their ransacking enterprise with a complete and free-of-charge access to all species' habitats in the world.

These fictional technologies, consequently, reframe death and extinction as in a transhumanist dream (García-Barranquero 2021, 179) by transforming them into categories not necessarily inclusive of one another, where extinction, or 'The End', as we know it today becomes completely detached from the idea of physical death. Batalla, as mentioned before, has maintained how in the Necrocene, death, as an evolutionary process, has been detached from extinction, which is still a deathly mechanism but one that participates with the complete negation of the generative and fruitful aspects of it, abruptly breaking the "connections and synchronizations" between life and death (2022, 3). Through these global biobanks, extinction has lost but at the same time acquired a new meaning, which, as seen, helps prolong the capitalization on the planet. In this sense, the novel seems to agree with Rafi Youatt's idea that biodiversity databases perfectly encapsulate the "extension of biopower to nonhumans" (2015, 68). Heise, for her part, focuses on how the database is culturally "associated with genocide and the trauma of pervasive violence" (2016, 61) and how it represents a continuation of the encyclopedic impulse from the Enlightenment. Franco Moretti, aligning with them, has theorised the explosion of the database as the new form of epic genre, which he calls the "modern epic" (1996, 5), by establishing how these grand-scope projects follow the humanist desire to capture the whole modern capitalist world, which in the end contributes to the perpetuation of nonhuman subjugation. The novel, in its own right, captures

this humanist rational impulse and goes beyond to suggest the point that even if extinction is detached from physical death thanks to technologies, species eradication entails considerably more than the disappearance of a mortal body; it also involves the loss of kin relations and symbiotic systems, which is something that goes beyond the individualistic organism as we know it. Beauman signals towards the general idea that these databases cannot categorically record, not even by a fraction, the physically entangled existence of nonhuman species in their natural biome.

Furthermore, the text reinforces this stance by endorsing the fact that even if these species are physically reproduced or rescued from their obliterated ecosystems, their reclusive and detached existence from their natural habitat would not be what is considered 'ethically fair', hence the affirmation: "The End could come before [death]" (Beauman 2022, 29). As Haraway asserts, "[n]o species…acts alone", they exist in "assemblages of organic species and of abiotic actors" (2016, 100), and by eliminating these environmental correlations within their unique ecosystems, these nonhuman species would be in fact extinct in life. The novel alludes to this proposition, as in this passage:

> Imagine a species of frog that can gossip back and forth with frogs in other trees – except that in practise the language is as dead as Cornish because none of them can ever find anybody else to talk to. All of these species would be missing some enormous part of themselves… Even if they survived – even if they could be perpetrated indefinitely in laboratories and zoos – their extinction would already be in progress. (Beauman 2022, 29)

On the other hand, Beauman also hints at the other possibility, that The End, or extinction, is not defined by physical death because of the records of these species' data in the biobanks, which in the future could be used in de-extinction projects to bring back or create an organism that resembles said extinct species – similar to today's passenger pigeons' project led by Revive & Restore, for instance –, as in

> didn't a connectome scan of an animal therefore mean that they were not truly extinct? After all, even if you never got round to *Jurassic Park*ing them from DNA, you could still [virtually] raise them anytime you wanted like spirit at a séance. (Beauman 2022, 29; emphasis in the original)

The parallel with Crichton's *Jurassic Park* (1990), which is the ultimate fictional example of the process of de-extinction, connotes the proximities of these biotechnological experiments to the literary framework and to speculative and science fiction. As seen, these processes of bio preservation, like digital databases or genomic interventions,

are intimately linked, as Heise successfully tests, to the cultural impulse captured in certain types of literature that range from the ancient form of epic to the most contemporary speculative texts (Heise 2016, 211). Beauman, in any case, does not provide definite answers. His skilful illustration of the close relationship between the possible real-life applicability of these technological projects and the speculative fiction imaginary keeps readers wondering about the not-so-clear limits between life and death in a world where digitization makes the boundary between the two become ever more diffuse.

4 'Offloading the curse' of Extinction

If *Venomous Lumpsucker* has readers thinking 'how are all these deaths happening and how comes that nobody does anything?', the novel also answers right from the beginning with a sharp affirmation that characters in this storyworld do in fact know exactly what their role in the endeavour of extinction is. Their inaction does not stem from their lack of knowledge, however, but from quite the opposite direction. The character of Resaint appears as the perfect example to show how the massive amount of data collected in scientific reports, percentages, graphs, and obscure language fail to communicate an effective message of ecological urgency, making it extremely hard "to grasp the reality of animal loss" at a personal level (Castricano 2024, 125-6). In the case of Resaint, her work in the extinction industry as cognitive evaluator of species intelligence actually makes her even more aware of the rate of extinction, for she is after all within the system that is perpetuating it. Her apathy, or even immunity, in response to mass extinction derives, instead, from "being *all-too-aware*" of it (Jensen 2019, 17 emphasis in the original). As pointed out by Tim Jensen, this awareness can cause inaction because individuals like Resaint feel less concerned and personally responsible when they observe that all others around, especially the biology experts that work with her, know exactly as well about the situation of extinction yet still do nothing (2019, 17). Resaint's environmental apathy is crossed, moreover, with a clear sign of 'species preference', in which aesthetically beautiful and distinctive endangered nonhuman animals and plants – certainly featuring in fictional narratives and other forms of environmental art more prominently (Heise 2016, 35) – are considered to have a higher status in extinction discourses. She confesses that she understands, even though she does not share the feeling, when people all over the world mourn the extinction of the giant panda, while at the same time none of them really care about the fate of other species like nonvertebrate, fungal, or microbial beings (Beauman 2022, 97).

This unresponsive attitude towards extinction changes drastically after Resaint discovers that a fascinating fictional wasp,

Adelognathus marginatum, will be starved out to extinction. The disappearance of the *marginatum*, which she feels as if it "had laid an egg in her brain" (Beauman 2022, 103), creates in her what she for the first time confronts as grief for the nonhuman. This abrupt turnaround of ecological grief as used by Cunsolo and Ellis (2018) is presented to the reader as a kind of revelatory environmental epiphany. As distinguished by Barbara Barrow, the environmental epiphany is a recurrent and very potent literary device in contemporary climate fiction where a character physically as well as emotionally realises their "role in planetary harm" (2022, 123-4). This revelatory moment allows characters to acquire a new environmental consciousness, which is then incorporated to the mundane or commonplace (Barrow 2022, 123-4). In this sense, Resaint's epiphany does not imply that she has acquired awareness of the extinction crisis around her, since she was very much conscious of it all the time, but of "the force" of the "great bonfire that was allowed to burn" without anyone doing anything (Beauman 2022, 105). The epiphany has overturned one of Resaint's most humanist and axiomatic beliefs in relation to her perception of extinction: a tragedy was only a tragedy if it hurt or impinged on the conscious experience of a living being (Beauman 2022, 104). From this human-centred and individualistic perspective, since in practice humans are the only 'conscious' beings on Earth who can grasp the meaning of extinction, the epiphany impulses Resaint's ecological awareness towards a planetary, or even cosmic, posthumanist dimension, recognising as from now that even if no conscious being, or human, had ever discovered the *marginatum*, its erasure caused by human irresponsible actions would still mean a terrible, irreparable loss to the universe (Beauman 2022, 104). This idea of leaving behind anthropocentric and at points catastrophic views of extinction to adopt a more planetary or cosmic perception of the disappearance of a species and the grief this conveys has been explored by environmentalist scholar Mick Smith who, through working on the idea of 'senseless extinction', suggests that at a planetary scale the disappearance of any nonhuman species by the hands of humans is in every possible way an "irredeemable loss, a loss that even eternity cannot rectify" (2013, 21), independently of the value that humans and their cultures ascribe to it.

As in any epic tale, a certain moment of revelation happens to overturn the hero's impetus and general view of the world, and this moment catalyses a positive shift "in sensuous perception that sensitizes" Resaint to the mass eradication of nonhuman species she is participant of (Langbaum 1983, 341). Nevertheless, Resaint has not only been 'sensitised' with a posthumanist perception of mass extinction but is now haunted by the ghost of her revelation and by the complexity of her grief, which is physically felt as a mixture of incredulity, culpability, and anger. In her mind, her newly discovered feelings of grief

materialise into what she calls 'the Black Hole' (Beauman 2022, 105). The metaphor of the 'hole' has appeared, like the ecological epiphany, as a symbol in ecological discourse and critical theory related to the sudden acquisition of environmental awareness and its subsequent mental effects on individuals. Timothy Morton has used it to refer, like Resaint does, to the moment in which the human mind becomes aware of the massive scope of destruction in the Anthropocene to such an extent that the person finds themselves "lacking a reference point" (Morton 2010, 31) and experiencing a "giant hole in the fabric of [their] understanding" (Morton 2010, 14). Resaint, in line with this idea, feels like she has lost her frame of reference, affirming that "in comparison [to the Black Hole], any other moral question seems irrelevant, vanishingly small" (Beauman 2022, 107), which aligns with Morton's assertion that once this hole has pierced our perception "[t]here is no way of measuring anything anymore" because no impartial measurement can be taken from "nowhere 'outside' this universe" (Morton 2010, 31). The uncontained power of this grief has transformed Resaint in ways that she could have never predicted or controlled, and she finds herself, in the face of mass extinction, disorientated. As she has become a *real* witness of the Necrocene and has physically experienced the inner gravitational force of the Black Hole, Resaint has also lost her former self which, according to Cunsolo and Landman, reveals how the process of "mourning-as-transformation" has suddenly altered her to become "more open to other bodies" and "to our transcorporeal connections" with them (2017, 10).

In just a few lines, Resaint transforms the work of mourning into something more than personal. For her, this work of mourning becomes a kind of protest against "the larger structures of injustice and oppression" that perpetuate environmental degradation (Cunsolo, Landman 2017, 14). This approach aligns with Rae's idea of 'resistant mourning' (2007, 19), for Resaint "refuses consolation" and holds on to the feelings of pain and grief "to spur a sense of responsibility for the loss" of so many species (Cunsolo, Landman 2017, 15). Fixated on the idea that she is an accomplice in the death and eradication of thousands of living beings for the mere fact of being a human, Resaint reaches a point where she is unable to find a socially accepted and appropriate avenue for the expression of her feelings of grief. In a social context that fails to recognise environmental grief, she realises that if she wants to do a proper work of mourning, she will need an unconventional way. Scholars in both Ecopsychology and Death Studies have precisely pointed out the lack of individual and collective rituals and practices in our Western society to "help address feelings of ecological grief" (Ellis, Cunsolo 2018), making these emotions seem at some points useless or even inappropriate, which is what Resaint experiences. These feelings, and the impossibility to accurately expressing them, together with the striking

realisation that the machinery of extinction – and by consequence the necroeconomic system – is unstoppable unless humans cease to exist, lead Resaint, moved as well by her newly acquired environmental responsibility, to devise a plan in which, following the capitalist logic, death must pay for death, and in which humans must respond "in blood" for what they have done and are still to do to nonhuman species (Beauman 2022, 108).

The work of mourning the nonhuman, then, adopts both a personal and a political extent of responsibility, for Resaint feels – as if she were a figurative modern version of Joan of Arc – that she is in charge of the reprisal of the nonhuman species that are perishing in 'the war' against the humans. She dictates, nevertheless, that if "the Black Hole was to have any terrestrial champion", it needed to be the animals themselves and that the revenge, in order to be appropriate, ought to be enacted by the crime's victims (Beauman 2022, 108). In her attempt to find a nonhuman animal that could consciously grasp their own extinction and kill the human species, Resaint, after years of research, comes across the fictitious venomous lumpsucker, which is the most intelligent fish on the planet – also very vindictive and poisonous – and which could certainly be taught about the reality of extinction (Beauman 2022,130). Beauman invites readers to confront the absurdity, and at the same time mastery, of this plan and plays with the literary expectations of 'the epic hero against evil' by presenting an "intentionally implausible solution to the real problem of biodiversity loss" (Heise 2016, 215) through the creation of a scenario that in a way acknowledges the seriousness and the scope of the environmental challenge but that refuses to enrol in the sombre tone of the elegiac mode as persistent in the climate fiction that treats the sixth mass extinction. As stated by Mark McGurl, this comic revenge plan makes us think of the humans as relatively laughable (2012, 548) and their portrait, or Resaint's, "is comedic in its basic thrust" (Heise 2016, 227). Yet, this novel manages to convey the premise that in a world where ecological death and destruction are the common logic, the avenues for mourning nonhuman bodies in a responsible way maybe need to be 'absurd' when realistic and sensible political action is clearly not working.

Resaint's "dream of vengeance" (Beauman 2022, 130) is torn, however, when she discovers that Halyard's mining company might have eradicated the lumpsuckers once and for all. In order to find out if this is true, Resaint and Halyard embark on a journey across the European continent to find the last specimen of the fish, even though Halyard's first motives to locate it lie more on the individualistic side and are far from Resaint's quest for animal justice. As a nod to the epic, once again, the two risk their lives several times along this daunting journey through a landscape of highly contaminated seas, migrant labours camps, and the future totalitarian state of "the Hermit Kingdom" (the

fictional United Kingdom) (Beauman 2022, 254), where they also encounter characters that mimic the supernatural aspect of ancient epic forms like a 'mermaid', a woman who affirms that can talk to animals, and finally, the ultimate archetypical villain who saves endangered species to later rejoice in the feeling of eradicating them himself. As their travel takes dangerous turns and the probability of recovering the fish almost disappears, Resaint is continuously asked whether her tireless determination to find the lumpsucker is motivated by her real and genuine solidarity with endangered species or by a personal necessity to pass on her guilt to the animals themselves, so she can atone and relieve her culpability, as in

> If you could get this endangered species to mourn for themselves, then you wouldn't have to do the heavy lifting for them... that's what you want to do with the animals. You want to offload the curse. (Beauman 2022, 245-6)

The novel's ending, in which Resaint dies in the least heroic way by slipping and falling from a cliff, readjusts the reader's perception of the epic dimension of the journey and her grand revenge plan. Even if Resaint turns into a kind of 'unredeemable martyr' of endangered species with whom her deed dies out, the reader is prone to believe that besides her personal atonement, Resaint's form of resistant mourning transformed her, and by consequence her travel companion Halyard, in such a way that her quest for the venomous lumpsucker turned out to be a journey towards courage and ecological hope, which are the "bridge from mourning to action" (Kretz 2017, 277) and the true catalysers for her transformation. Resaint's plan was in fact the product of her newly discovered urgent drive to responsibly defend "all the species on the list", as well as a hopeful campaign to find out for herself, in case "there was something beyond the Black Hole" (Beauman 2022, 252), if a brighter future for all planetary beings could in fact be possible.

5 Conclusion

The analysis of Beauman's *Venomous Lumpsucker* has revealed many affinities between the ideas of the Anthropocene, and Necrocene, and speculative fiction's imaginary, yet at times too-realistic, engagement with the future. Every so often, certain texts within the genre, as the novel under analysis signals, raise awareness of their own fictional nature, however, this acknowledgement of the non-realistic disposition of speculative texts is precisely what gives them the potential that other literary forms might not have to observe and explore current ecological problems with new perspectives. In

addition, and as it was claimed at the beginning of this article, speculative fiction texts, and by extension other literary pieces, offer a unique instrumental capacity to convey messages about environmental conscience that can reach audiences at levels that scientific data cannot. They offer a capacity to "imagine, interrogate, and implement" (Cole 2023, 2796) current modes of existence from an individual and collective perspective by creating settings, characters, and plotlines that question and mirror contemporary issues which might otherwise seem too removed for audiences to commit to. This novel, with its very unique and grand representation of the reality of the current extinction crisis, participates precisely in this trend through the fictionalisation of a credit system that seems, at first, too implausible to be true. However, as readers come to realise that the extinction industry does not deviate that much from the reality of current climate policies, the novel very directly adverts attention to present-day environmental regulations and overtly questions their real efficacy.

In *Venomous Lumpsucker*, life and death, by means of the extinction industry, are completely redefined when, as transformed into monetary offsets, the lives of endangered animals also intermingle with technological developments that disembody life from its mortal instantiation to succumb to the demands of corporations that aim to permanently expand the capitalist model, and its necropolitical power, as it exists today. Other than that, extinction has been transformed into a business model that absorbs some of today's species preservation strategies, such as rewilding or biological databases, for the profit of a few. Thus, the novel also efficiently adverts about the dark sides of these environmental strategies and projects if they end up in the hands of private companies that might not care about the ethical implications they carry in relation to the lives of many nonhuman others. Among all this, the analysis of Resaint's speculative epic journey from apathy towards her questionable and rather comedic plan to responsibly mourn the nonhuman also underlines how, in an anthropocentric and individualistic culture where there is no conventional way to express feelings of grief for the environment and the more-than-human, sometimes the most appropriate way of resistant mourning might require unrealistic, and almost absurd, measures on our part to responsibly grieve nonhuman deaths and defend what still remains.

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Loss, Grief and Planetary Literacy in Informational Picturebooks for Children

Rosy-Triantafyllia Angelaki
Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece

Abstract Death is an inevitable part of life with philosophical, cultural and religious dimensions and its problematic emerges differently in the contemporary era, since it is not only perceived as a fundamental aspect of human existence, but also as a consequence of human-made disasters, as well as an urgent environmental concern. Today literary and, in general, artistic narratives and expressions often explore death beyond human exceptionalism; ecocide; the triple planetary crisis; and the mourning for humanity's doomed relationship to nature. Several contemporary authors, with the help of the illustrators, write ironic and horrific stories addressed to children that alter the cultural significance of loss and death and propound dark ecological storyworlds, in which the ecological problems as well as the more-than-human vulnerabilities, aspire to make young readers aware of the functions of the *pale blue dot* they live in and perceive it as the true public space. This article examines how do informational picturebooks for children approach life and death in a more 'ecosophical' manner, proving that the planetary turn has made available to literary studies, aiming to make young readers aware of how humans and nonhumans are fundamentally enmeshed in and negatively interdependent with one another.

Keywords Loss. Death. Grief. Informational picturebooks. Planetary literacy. Dark ecology.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Planetary Literacy, the Problematics of Death, and Children's Literature. – 3 Nonfiction Picturebooks for Children. – 4 The Research Material. – 5 Aim and Methodology. – 6 Analysis. – 6.1 *The Book of Disasters*. – 6.2 *The Mess That We Made*. – 6.3 *Planet SOS: 22 Modern Monsters Threatening Our Environment (and What You can Do to Defeat Them!)*. – 7 Conclusion.

1   Introduction

The current geological era, called Anthropocene, is marked by significant, often irreversible, changes in terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems caused by humans, based on their false assumption that they are dominant on Earth. Human activity on the planet has led to the so-called "triple planetary crisis", which refers to (i) climate change, resulting in threatening consequences such as global warming, drought, and desertification; (ii) air and water pollution; and (iii) biodiversity loss (Plumwood 2002, 8; Hellweg et al. 2023). Recent studies suggest that the ongoing planetary crisis could be limited if people realized the interconnectedness of all living beings and became informed not only about the way the planet functions, but also about the impact of the global economy to all organisms' and Earth's ecosystems' health and longevity (Bohm 1980, 151; Lehtonen et al. 2019; Angelaki 2024).

It is deemed crucial to encourage children from a young age to adopt a so-called ecosophy, according to which human beings are not superior in value and status; death is not an event that distinguishes the human from other creatures; and hierarchical divisions between humans and other-than-humans, as well as between grievable and non-grievable lives, should not exist. According to David Sobel,

> if we want children to flourish, to become truly empowered, we should allow them to love the Earth before we ask them to save it. (1996, 36)

Since Children's Literature serves as a means for individuals to acquire values, ideals, and spiritual cultivation from a young age (Nikolajeva 2019, 23-6), many contemporary authors often problematise their readers about the triple planetary crisis, by discussing the relations between life and death and human and more-than-human in the face of the ecological devastation and environmental violence in their books. Their aim is to make children planetary literate and to encourage them to change their non-sustainable behaviour so as to prevent further ecological destruction (Kingsnorth 2017, 143).

2   Planetary Literacy, the Problematics of Death, and Children's Literature

Planetary literacy involves educating individuals and redefining their behaviour with the ultimate purpose of improving and preserving the health of the planet. In this sense, planetary health is defined

as the intersectionality between the health of the environment and the health of human individuals while recognising that the disruption of the environment is human-caused. (Séguin et al. 2021)

This particular form of literacy is considered as one of the key factors for ensuring sustainability and biodiversity (Prescott, Logan 2019; Lenton et al. 2022; Jochem et al. 2023). It is important to note that the reassessment of human behaviour towards the environment, including both biotic and abiotic organisms[1] within the framework of planetary literacy, has dietary, economic, social, and ethical implications (Kahn 2010, 18). For instance, changes in our dietary habits or quantity intake can lead to improvements in the lifestyle of other people, living in places far from our own (Seltenrich 2018; Walpole et al. 2019).

While staying informed and educated about the Earth's natural processes, and understanding that we all inhabit the same planet, which we will pass on to future generations, may lead to the awakening of our environmental consciousness towards its preservation (Dhawan 2017; Capetola et al. 2022), the realization that human actions, including wars, genocides, political turmoil, and economic downturns, have led to the triple planetary crisis gives rise to demands "for new kinds of stories of death, dying and mourning" (Radomska et al. 2019, 5), that may produce planetary consciousness inspired by the post-human ethico-politics of death, raising the question of what it means to live in ecological and social proximities of death.

As mentioned above, many contemporary authors seek to raise awareness among their young readers and make them planetary literate, while urging them to take a critical approach concerning the injustices of the world, the impending dangers, and the issues of un/liveability in more ethical ways. The production of the so-called 'ecological children's books' is, indeed, quite extensive. However, most of these books either end up articulating ecological crises, without promoting civic engagement, collective actions, or political programs (Bradford 2003, 116), or contain stories that not only imply that Nature is a force beyond human control, able to heal whatever humans inflict on it (Kerslake 2022, 39), but also prioritise capitalist, anthropocentric, and colonial interests (Doermann 2021; Midkiff, Austin 2021), failing to introduce planetarity as a different order of connection, or to address critical questions concerned with life and death and nature/culture.

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[1] Biotic resources refer to the living components, including animals, plants, fungi, bacteria, and protists. Abiotic factors are the non-living components of the ecosystem, including its chemical and physical factors.

Some authors strive to nurture children's common bonds with the planet by replacing "the imaginaries of exclusionary familialism, communitarianism, nationhood, ethnic culture, regionalism, globalization, or even humanism, with the ideal of planetarianism" (Miyoshi 2001, 296) and eco-grief imaginaries. They are inspired by dark ecology, a philosophical movement that draws attention to global pollution and the planetary ecocide brought about by capitalism, "that nobody seems able to prevent" (Kingsnorth 2017, 142). Dark ecology is also driven by the ecological devastation that renders all forms of life vulnerable, exploring how industrialization has damaged humans' relationships with nature (Morton 2010, 15; Kingsnorth, Hine 2017, 266). This is reflected in eco-dystopian narratives (Hughes, Wheeler 2013) that reshape the cultural significance of loss and death, while promoting dark ecological storyworlds where ecological issues affect both the planet's and humankind's future health (Gerhard 2012). The presentation of human and more-than-human vulnerabilities in their stories aspire to make children aware of the functions of the *pale blue dot*[2] they live in and perceive it as the true public space. This paper argues that those authors' aim is to help children become aware of the so-called 'global interconnectedness' and perceive Earth as

> a living organism, as a shared ecology, and as an incrementally integrated system both embracing and rechanneling the currents of modernity. (Elias, Moraru 2015, xii)

3 Nonfiction Picturebooks for Children

Admittedly, there are some ground-breaking fantasy environmental picturebooks that can possibly educate and motivate young readers to care about unsustainable living conditions and their root causes, such as Dr. Seuss' *The Lorax* (1971) and Bill Peet's *The Wump World* (1970), that both depict the environmental damage caused by corporate power in the twenty-first century, or Maria Gianferrari's *Be a Tree!* (2021), whose aim to enable children imagine and understand relations between human and other-than-human while blending a Deleuzian-Guattarian discourse of worldly territoriality and addressing critical questions concerned with the body in a more-than-human sense (Angelaki 2023a). This study focuses, though, on books whose authors attempt to inform young readers about the human actions that negatively impact the geological and biological processes of the Earth, contributing to the mortality of humans and

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2 As the Pulitzer Prize-winning astronomer Carl Sagan named Earth in his book *Pale Blue Dot: A Vision of the Human Future in Space* (1993).

more-than-humans, books that encourage children to reject anthropocentric practices, as well as to support their future resilience in the face of climate change impacts, through stories that evoke the feeling of 'solastalgia': a term used to express the anguish and despair one feels after the sorrowful realisation that the conditions at home have dramatically changed (Albrecht et al. 2007). Precisely because planet Earth is essentially the home of humanity, the term is now used to denote the negative emotions that overwhelm individuals when they realise that the climate change they have contributed to, is dramatically altering the balances in the environment they inhabit (Mortimer-Sandilands 2010, 332; Yazgünoğlu 2019).

This is, for instance, the case of Shaun Tan's picturebook *Tales from the Inner City* (2018): a work set within a speculative landscape, since the plot of each story in the book takes place in a "dark" ecological space (Cohen 2013, 272) that brings awareness to the Anthropocenic spectrum of anxieties; contains "negativity and irony, ugliness and horror" (Morton 2010, 17); concentrates on the ethical relationship with the more-than-human world, as well as planetary social and environmental justice, and animal rights; encourages hopeful imaginative reconnections between children and Earth, inviting readers to "undo the current ways of doing – and then imagine, invent and do the doing differently" (Taylor 2016, 6). In it solastalgia unfolds through the eco-dystopian story that highlight humans' and other-than-humans' vulnerability and goes beyond utopian visions merely suggesting the idea of a self-healing planet.

However, the study focuses on artistic or 'new generation' nonfiction picturebooks that prove that the planetary turn has made available to literary studies, books that provide children with a sign of hope which is required to make a change in an apparent hopeless world, where environmental grief, stemming from the present and anticipated environmental losses "caused by natural or man-made events" (Kevorkian 2006, 2) alters the cultural significance of loss and death, by disrupting the monument of human exceptionalist narratives on death; refutes the human/more-than-human binary; and directs children towards ecological and ethical more-than-human sensibilities (Radomska 2023). The reason for this focus is academics' interest in exploring what 'nonfiction' picturebooks are, since they tend to present the world "in a more artistic, metaphorical and unapologetically subjective way" (Grilli 2020, 81); and what do they have the capacity to achieve (Pappas 2006; Goga et al. 2021; Angelaki 2023b); how do informational picturebooks construct knowledge, acknowledging that its dissemination in these books varies according to the context in which the text was created? And how do they help "create an engagement with our world that will be crucial to the future of our planet" (Grilli 2020, 88)?

4 The Research Material

From the large corpus of children's environmental texts whose authors claim that they invite young children to examine the consequences of illogical human behaviour and "to consider how their own actions – or failures to act – might affect the future of the planet and humanity" (Cart 2010, 103), the books featured here are "beautiful objects as well as learning books, that represent a turning point in nonfiction" (Grilli 2020, 80), as they mesh information and imagination; whose scientific presentation of objective verifiable facts, full-page illustrations, choice of style, color and composition allow the world to unfold before the readers' eyes and seem to discard hegemonic discourses on death, loss and grief. The books have been discussed in the Greek media for the way they are designed to arouse children's senses with their colorful images and for provoking environmental melancholy to readers, while informing them about the ecocide with which humanity is nowadays confronted, stressing that everyone is part of this process that contains uncertainty and loss (Kingsnorth 2017, 216). The sample consists of three informational children's picturebooks addressed to children from 8 to 12 years of age: *Planet SOS: 22 Modern Monsters Threatening Our Environment (and What You can Do to Defeat Them!)* by Marie G. Rohde (2020) and *The Mess That We Made* (2020) by Michelle Lord and illustrated by Jullia Blattman and *The Book of Disasters*[3] (2022) by Maria Andrikopoulou and illustrated by Myrto Delivoria.

Since human senses underpin the way people relate to the world; are able to grasp its "ultimate unity"; enable readers to feel part of it and, therefore, care about it (Grilli 2020, 77-8), the selected books are visually imposing, lavishly illustrated informational picturebooks. However, they depict the current ecological condition marked by climate change, global pollution and biodiversity loss without embellishments, and try to avoid presenting the Earth as the planet that provides solace from negativity. Instead, Earth is depicted as the readers' residence who inevitably experience ecological grief as a response to the realisation that their landscape has dramatically changed because their ancestors and, most probably themselves too, did not adapt to it in a more respectful way. As the described societies are confronted with the prospect of unyielding ecological decline and the loss of environmental futures in the name of progress and development, idealised by some (Carol, Totaro 2003, 127-9), readers are called upon to consider the escalating ecological crises that may result in ecological and human loss, and to "mourn" for what they may lose (Cunsolo, Ellis 2018, 275). At the same time, they gain

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3 The original title of the book in Greek is *Το βιβλίο των καταστροφών*.

an understanding of how they can ideally live if they choose to act as "eco-heroes" (van der Beek, Lehmann, 2022) and try to fight for the elimination of the triple planetary crisis that threatens all forms of life on Earth.

5 Aim and Methodology

The study examines how the authors, with the help of the illustrators, talk "planet- talk by way of an unexamined environmentalism, referring to an undivided natural space rather than a differentiated political space" (Spivak 2005, 72) in their books. It also discusses how readers are prompted to mourn for the ecological destruction that has occurred due to anthropogenic actions and transform dystopia into utopia (Cunsolo, Landman 2017, 10). The article seeks to explore whether the dystopian narratives in the books, which "feed on reality by taking real issues, problems, and failings of the world, expanding and distorting them, and reflecting them back for readers to view anew" (Pullan 2015, 3-4), offer "a powerful commentary on the problems that actually exist in the world and the realities we face every day". It questions whether these narratives leave readers solely with a sense of doom, without providing substantial solutions to the current ecological crises. The study also discusses the structural and visual strategies, the allegorical literary devices, the narrative techniques, and devices of poetic impressions, with which the authors of the selected books not only demonstrate nonhuman death but also try to make children planetary literate, enabling them "to read the world as a text" (Iovino 2016, 350) and to realise that their health and longevity depend on the preservation of the planet's health.

The article draws on planetary literacy, eco-grief, and inter- and transdisciplinary research on 'planetarity': a term that signifies a worldly structure of relatedness and "affirms the planet as both a biophysical and a new cultural base for human flourishing" (Elias, Moraru 2015, xxiii). In addition, it draws on death studies, approaching dying and mourning as complex phenomena, as well as post-humanist approaches to Children's Literature. This approach recognises both humans (adults and children) and more-than-humans as an intrinsic part of nature. The study also employs the concept of eco-dystopia (Hintz, Ostry 2013) and the theory of dark ecology, which Morton (2010, 28) describes as "a vast, sprawling mesh of interconnection" "of all living and non-living things". Finally, it relies on the recent studies concerning the stylistic strategies in children's informational books, and how nonfiction for young readers proffers affordances for developing critical thinking skills (Kokkola 2018). The books' ideology is detected in the narrative voice of the text and the narrative content of the images (Stephens 1992, 200), while semantic content

analysis (Beyersdorfer, Schauer 1989) is opted for in order to identify the key components of literary dystopia, as well as to emphasise the concept of eco-dystopias and the ecologically driven grief that the authors deal with while attempting to make children planetary literate, enabling them to "grasp the world as a whole" (Robertson 2000, 73).

6 Analysis

6.1 *The Book of Disasters*

This awarded book[4] serves as a conduit for the author to impart knowledge about Environmental Crisis and Disaster Management to children, to whom a third-person narrator explains how disasters affect people depending on their socioeconomic status, as well as the capacity of environmental systems to cope with current or anticipated disasters. It includes scientific information, table of contents, index, maps, and suggested bibliography, and according to Meibauer's taxonomical model could be characterised as a "simple descriptive nonfiction picturebook", since its verbal texts, that are not very long, convey knowledge about the world in a truthful and comprehensible manner, with the figures elaborating the verbal information (Meibauer 2015, 67). In the introductory note, the term 'disaster' is explained, clearly making the distinction between disasters caused by natural processes on Earth, those caused by human activities, and those occurring after natural events such as hurricanes and earthquakes. The interconnectedness of all these types of disasters is highlighted, including technological disasters such as chemical and nuclear leaks or fuel spills. The book is structured in separate chapters providing information and explicit scientific descriptions about various disasters. Each chapter includes a glossary and guidance on what individuals can do to manage unavoidable disasters, while outlining measures to be taken "to restore normalcy"[5] in the environment (Andrikopoulou 2022, 8). Additionally, the book includes an appendix featuring world days that deserve human attention, related to the environment and climate change.

Conventional assumptions surrounding the issues of death, transformation, and grief are challenged from the book's first chapter

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4 The book received the Geek Reader Award 2023 as an informational book for children, and was referenced as an exceptional book of this genre at the IBBY 2023 Shortlist. More details at: https://www.protothema.gr/culture/books/article/1313956/maria-andrikopoulou-to-vivlio-ton-katastrofon/.

5 Original Greek: "για να επανέλθει η κανονικότητα".

since the third-person narrator discusses the loss of people, animals, and landscapes due to geophysical disasters, such as earthquakes, landslides, and coastal erosion, volcanic eruption, tsunamis, cyclones, and subsidence, whose management, according to the text, involves and requires special planetary education. The section covering the hydrometeorological hazards addresses extreme weather events such as drought, storm, extreme temperature, wildfire, wet mass movement and floods that threaten human and animal lives, as well as telecommunication, road, and electrical networks. The narrative emphasises that human activities, including "construction and the use of impermeable materials like cement and asphalt", worsen the impact of floods (Andrikopoulou 2022, 28).[6]

In the chapter concerning the climate-related disasters, the narrator exposes an ecological ontology of death as he mentions that they cause both human and more-than-human death. For example, he focuses on forest fires caused by human-induced climate change, resulting from environmental pollution and discusses the concept of "ecological degradation, leading to desertification", suggesting that "it can result in irreversible soil destruction" (Andrikopoulou 2022, 34).[7] The fact that this may cause eco-grief to the readers, who are encouraged "to reflect on the world as it is, and to imagine future scenarios if environmental degradation proceeds unabated" (Massey, Bradford 2011, 110) may pave the way for the development of an ecocritical worldview, urging readers to act against the triple planetary crisis.

In the chapter drawing upon biological disasters, the narrator unfolds ethical territories of eco-grief: he mentions that biological disasters involve epidemic, insect infestation, animal stampede and death among humans, animals, and plants and underlines that the infectious diseases arise from natural disasters, leading to additional problems such as economic issues.

According to Yazgünoğlu,

the ecological reality in the twenty-first century is indeterminate, encompassing ugly chemical plants, nuclear bombs, horror and terror that ecocatastrophes have inflicted upon humans and nonhumans. Dark ecology, therefore, illustrates how humans and nonhumans are fundamentally enmeshed in and negatively interdependent with one another with no boundaries between nature and culture. (2019, 45)

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[6] Original Greek: "η αποψίλωση του εδάφους από τη βλάστηση και η κάλυψή του από αδιαπέραστα υλικά, όπως τσιμέντο και άσφαλτο".

[7] Original Greek: "η οικολογική υποβάθμιση που οδηγεί στην ερημοποίηση, μπορεί να οδηγήσει σε μη αναστρέψιμη καταστροφή του εδάφους".

Consequently, Andrikopoulou informs her readers through the narrative voice that the anthropogenic disasters caused by human action or inaction and negligence may include famines due to droughts, caused by irresponsible irrigation and the construction of dams. They also result in riots, wars and genocides, terrorist attacks, nuclear incidents, technological disasters, and industrial accidents. The narrator provides examples for each disaster, such as the Asia Minor Catastrophe, the Chernobyl nuclear explosion, and the chemical factory explosion near Seveso, Italy, while underlining that these disasters "did not only result in the death of thousands of humans and animals" but also "in the disruption of normalcy in the ecosystems and in environmental pollution" (Andrikopoulou 2022, 40),[8] and "destruction of habitats and agricultural lands" (Andrikopoulou 2022, 44).[9]

Finally, the narrator mentions the natural technological disasters, that are termed "natechs", such as the second worst nuclear power accident in history that took place in Fukushima, Japan, which was caused by a severe earthquake and a powerful series of tsunami waves. According to Morton the realisation of how capitalist societies work provides a basis for an eco-grief, underlining the precariousness of human beings (2010, 80). Perhaps this is the reason why the narrator highlights the significant risk of the natechs' occurrence in densely populated and industrial urban areas, as well as the fact that the existence of these disasters underscores the impact of the "increasing human influence on the environment" (Andrikopoulou 2022, 8).[10] Arguably, as the narrative emphasises practices such as "inappropriate agriculture, deforestation, construction, and overexploitation of natural resources significantly alter ecological balance" (34),[11] rather prompts readers to realise that human vulnerability to catastrophic events is intrinsically related to environmental issues.

This book's illustrations invite readers to "to use their interpretation skills, relying on their literary knowledge as well as their knowledge of other art forms such as painting, music, or sculpture" (Cabo et al. 2018, 92) in order to construct meaning: "The illustrator decorate the book's pages using the technique of collage". This kind of art, "by definition brings diverse images together to form an aesthetically pleasing composition" (Panaou, Yannicopoulou 2021, 59). Arguably, depicting some of the mentioned disasters, such as tsunami

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8   Original Greek: "δεν αφαιρούν απλά ζωές ανθρώπων και ζώων και διακόπτουν την κανονικότητα σε όλα της επίπεδα" αλλά "μολύνουν και το περιβάλλον".

9   Original Greek: "οδηγούν στην καταστροφή βιότοπων και γεωργικών εκτάσεων".

10   Original Greek: "αυξανόμενης ανθρώπινης επίδρασης στο περιβάλλον".

11   Original Greek: "ακατάλληλες πρακτικές γεωργίας, κτηνοτροφίας υλοτομίας, δόμησης και υπερεκμετάλλευσης των φυσικών πόρων που μεταβάλλουν την οικολογική ισορροπία".

waves or erupted volcanoes, could help readers understand what they read about. However, the art of collage is also used in this book as an interpictorial reference with ideological dimensions that "helps children develop visual literacy and inducts them into epistemic and aesthetic communities, such as the world of art and culture" (Wang 2023, 84). Therefore, in the section about the anthropogenic disasters, the illustrator chooses this particular technique aiming to create a playful atmosphere and to enable children to obtain an artistic knowledge background, by parodying famous anti-war paintings such *Guernica*, by Pablo Picasso, who "responded powerfully to the mass death and violence of wars and totalitarianisms" (Radomska 2023, 8) and the accompanying grief and mourning, and Pieter Bruegel's *Triumph of Death*, a painting that symbolizes death's inevitability. In the end of the book, readers are informed that they should respect nature's rhythms and the biosphere's ecological limits and recycle, avoiding unnecessary water and electricity consumption, and refraining from littering in forests, seas, and roads, as this behaviour poses risks such as fire hazards, water pollution, and blockage of drains. The proposed actions may be in the child's purview but it will not solve any disaster of the magnitude just given. It might seem both overly simple for true solutions and overly complex for a child to manage the risks of extreme events and disasters. However, the narrative obviously challenges the conventional cultural framings of death and mourning, as it refers to extreme events interacting with exposed and vulnerable human and nonhuman systems.

6.2   *The Mess That We Made*

The Mess that We Made is an awarded[12] informational picturebook that falls into the category of the simple descriptive picturebooks (Campagnaro 2021, 209), as it contains author's notes, preface, bibliography, index, and appendix. This book's uses watercolor as a painting technique and its author arguably attempts to raise children's awareness and appreciation of nature; to encourage them to obtain a more sustainable and respectful relationship with the natural world; and to make them aware of human errors resulting from the lack of knowledge and respect for the planet. In order to achieve her goals,

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12   The book received an Honor in the 2023 *Storytelling World* Awards Program; the 2024 Northern Lights Book Award, Winner of the Environment Category; was at the Nevada Young Readers' Award List; the Pennsylvania Keystone to Reading Elementary Award list, 2021-22; the twenty-sixth Japan Picture Book Award Finalist 2021; and was selected as a mentor text by the Department of Education of NSW, Australia. Pictures available at https://susannahill.com/2021/04/23/perfect-picture-book-friday-the-mess-that-we-made/.

she attempts to activate children's "environmental imagination" – a seminal term, referring to the readers' ability to experience a sense of connection with the environment (Kerslake 2022) – by portraying the course of an enormous amount of plastic from landfills to the oceans through drainage systems with the help of rain. By reading the book, children are informed that the Pacific trash vortex is a collection of marine debris in the North Pacific Ocean, entirely created by us, "the people at work and at play, that stuff the landfill, growing each day, that spills the plastic thrown away".

The third-person narrator discusses the Great Pacific Garbage Patch and plastic pollution on marine life, highlighting that

> the ever-growing trash vortex, which contains an estimated 79,000 tons of plastic, plays a significant role in the larger climate change crisis (Anderson 2021, 172)

is made up of tiny bits of plastic called microplastics that are not biodegradable and affect our health. As the narration points out that these particles have entered the food chain through fish shellfish and other marine animals, travel through the human body and lodge in our organs since we consume foods with high microplastic contamination, children are encouraged to imagine and understand relations between human and nonhuman and life and death in a more ecosophical manner, while being informed about planetary environmental disruption.

In *The Mess that We Made*, words and pictures are presented in a "synergistic relationship" with which children can make meaning through sustained engagement with the text (Sipe 1998, 99). The visual modality is characterised by scientific and aesthetic accuracy since it depicts, for instance, sea turtles snared in discarded fishing nets and fish eating colorful bottle caps. The scientific facts regarding more-than-human vulnerabilities as well as the disruption of the planet's health and, consequently, our own are presented in the context of the journey of four young children to the Pacific Ocean "on a boat of welded steel". There, they see "the fish that swim in the mess that we made" which in the next double spread are eaten by "a seal that swims in the mess that we made". On the following page, according to the narrator,

> the current that swirls through the bay rocks the boat, that dumbs the net that catches the seal that eats the fish that swims in the mess that we made. (Lord 2020, s.p.)

The children's boat is then swept away by the current and eventually ends up in a coastal area. As the four children come across a

landfill growing each day that spills the plastic thrown away, that traps the turtle green and gray, that rides the current through the bay, that rocks the boat of welded steel (Lord 2020, s.p.)

it seems that the book opens up a space where mourning is considered in an ecological manner and in connection with the ever-changing social and cultural and economic conditions, possibly on the understanding that the ecological grief caused by dystopian ecocritical stories can serve as a catalyst for change, in view of the increasing ecological losses humans find themselves entangled with (Barnett 2022).

Then the narrative points out that

although we made the mess, we are also the ones who can save the day, reduce our waste at work and at play, recycle the plastic thrown away. (Lord 2020, s.p.)

In fact, this is the very point where the four children see themselves as 'eco heroes' and contribute to restoring the ecological balance; consequently, readers, are prompted to develop a socio-political stance towards climate change. The dystopian situation in the ocean becomes transformed into an idealised, purified "after" stage: the four children appear happy, greeting their peers playing ball on a clean beach next to clear blue waters, and calm turtles and seals swimming in clear oceans. This transformation according to the verbal and visual narrative takes place after the children "rescued the turtle" and "hauled the garbage from the bay". But the dystopian "before" stage of the narrative rather corresponds to our current situation, and the blissful "after" stage described in the book is in fact the planet's "before" stage, "until the first grain seed was cultivated, after which we slid into a future of hierarchy, control and ecological destruction" (Kingsnorth 2017, 37).

While Lord tries to establish a new framework for describing the so-called 'Garbage Patch' and the planetary crisis with which humans and more-than-humans are nowadays confronted, encouraging readers "to mourn while recognising the value of what has been lost" (Mortimer-Sandilands 2010, 333), she seems to fall into the aforementioned "trap" of suggesting that the planet is actually able to heal whatever humans inflict on it, taking into account her story's happy ending. She does though what all the authors of environmental texts for children think they should in terms of balancing an (over) abundance of proof of environmental disasters and the appropriate response, both from the adult world (e.g., government, social institutions) and from children. More specifically, in the back of the book, informational notes may be found about "OCEAN POLLUTION AND CALLS TO ACTION", highlighting the multiple benefits of recycling and managing waste for the health of the planet, and hence

the health of humans and nonhumans; the narrator advises readers to reduce the amount of stuff they use and throw away, to reuse stuff when they can, to recycle paper, bottles, cans, and even toys, while providing some interesting examples of such strategies, such as Mount Trashmore Park in Virginia, USA, created by compacting layers of solid waste and clean soil. However, what is not mentioned or implied in the book is the fact that recycling is both an "easy" solution, within a child's purview, and also a complex problem that we, adults, need to fix; for example, recycling facilities do need major infrastructure overhauling to reduce waste themselves, while a circular economy needs to be put into place to use the plastic being recycled- something that is omitted from the text.

6.3   *Planet SOS: 22 Modern Monsters Threatening Our Environment (and What You can Do to Defeat Them!)*

According to Colman (2007, 260) "nonfiction is writing about reality in which nothing is made up". However, Rohde's postmodern informational picturebook, *Planet SOS*, offers "more of a literary experience and may be read all the way through like a fiction text" (Mallett 2003, 92). It falls into the category of complex descriptive picturebooks (Campagnaro 2021, 213): it includes scientific information about the triple planetary crisis, sustainability tips and energy saving suggestions; glossary; index; a world map showing where pollution is more intense; and references citing the sources on which the author relied. *Planet SOS* also incorporates fantasy elements, intertextual and intervisual references. The scientific information in both the verbal and visual text of the book[13] explain how humans have become a geologic force changing the planet's ecosystems. Furthermore, they describe the unsustainable living conditions that contribute to the mortality of humans and more-than-humans. What is interesting, though, is the fact that this information is interwoven with the fictional primary narratives of the 22 monsters, who are wreaking havoc on our planet.

The monsters in Rohde's book, as is the Fanged Ozone Serpent, the Road Snake, the Glareworm, or the Logre, essentially represent the monstrous behaviour of all of us, humans, towards the environment, and their narrative enriches the reading experience, serving as a way "to critique the effects of advanced technology on humankind and the environment" (Ames 2013, 15). Each monster's identity

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13 The book was longlisted for the UKLA Book Awards 2021. Pictures available at: https://www.awordaboutbooks.com/blog---archive/planet-sos-22-modern-monsters-threatening-our-environment-and-what-you-can-do-to-defeat-them-marie-g-rohde.

derives from a different source of inspiration for Rohde: for instance, for Atmosdragon's identity (the monster who is heating the planet, causing global warming), the author became inspired by Chinese myths. When it comes to the names of the monsters, Rohde also plays with words, making intertextual references that activate the readers' imagination. The book's outside-the-box approach to destruction of Earth's ecosystems, biodiversity loss and mass extinction that aim to evoke readers' ecological grief rather verifies academics' assertions concerning the "new generation" nonfiction picturebooks' stylistic strategies, "in defiance of standard categorization into watertight compartments" (Grilli 2020, 86).

Rohde's choice to produce a grief imaginary and engagement with human and more-than human death while choosing to highlight the concept of monstrosity verifies the assertion that monsters have always formed part of both cultural and scientific imaginaries, crossing boundaries and exceeding containment in a metaphorical, conceptual and literal sense (Radomska 2018). It could be also argued that the work involves "parody, bricolage, irony and playfulness" (Dresang 2008, 44) and includes the anthropomorphic monsters' primary narratives that expose humans' and nonhumans' vulnerabilities in the text, not only because these are recognised trends in multimodal children's books (McMillan 2010, 5), but also because they are considered popular techniques through which uncomfortable truths are explained to children (Harju 2006, 181); as is the contribution of environmental violence to the extinction of species, the loss of entire ecosystems and the increased mortality rates.[14]

Arguably Rohde makes an effort to prompt her readers to "acknowledge the reality of the loss, and the pain it causes", probably having in mind that (eco)grieving is "the starting point for being able to move on and through, and to begin to rebuild yourself again" (Kingsnorth 2017, 98). Additionally, since all lives are grievable in the dark ecological vision, she demonstrates the present state of the planet through the monsters' first-person narrations, who acknowledge nonhumans suffering and mortality. For example, Acid sea dragon states that he "slinks about under the sea", and "feeds on the carbon dioxide that we humans make". He then explains how our actions "make the water more acidic, which is the perfect habitat for him, but is not so great for other sea creatures", "such as clams, oysters and coral" and clarifies that their "skeletons and shells are slowly dissolving" (Rohde 2020, 8). Accordingly, Nuclear Jinns claim that they "spread poison over our planet", "harm any wildlife that they come into contact with" and even "succeeded in making some areas

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14 Anthropomorphism is also employed in Rachel Hope Allison's picturebook/graphic novel *I'm Not a Plastic Bag* (2012), where the narrative takes up the issue of the ever-growing Great Pacific Garbage Patch.

completely uninhabitable", because nuclear power plants "are not super secure" (21) so as to keep the monsters inside, and because humans "have been looking after them" by "haven't eliminated nuclear waste". Atmosdragon, in his narration, explains what global warming is, stating that this causes problems such as "ice caps melting, which means polar bears have nowhere to live"; "seas are rising and large storms are sweeping over humans' homes". At the end of his presentation, he confesses that "he is very worried" because humans' "switching to renewable energy sources, like solar or wind power" and "eating less meat" would mean that he would "have less carbon dioxide to eat" and "would not be treated a particular delicacy- methane gas" (12).

While all readers might not be able to understand irony and sarcasm, the narrative does speak to what children are able to understand on the issue of human and more-than-human death and the accompanying grief and mourning, implying what they should appreciate, and change. It is through the Plaken's ironic primary narrative, where he admits that he has all-invading tentacles formed from thousands of tonnes of plastic debris, that Rohde attempts to inform children about marine species extinctions and endangered bird species; accordingly, Logre, whose job is to rid the planet from forests and jungles, informs readers about more-than-human death through his own ironic narrative, poetically tackling complex relations between ecology, dying, and grief. And it is E-waste Golem's ironic narration that prompts us to characterise *Planet SOS* as "a radical book about the environment", which according to Mickenberg and Nel (2011, 457) "does not just advocate recycling, but also consuming less" and evokes ecological grief in readers who are encouraged to think critically and to acknowledge their share of responsibility at the human-made disasters wrought upon the Earth, while staying informed about "the true consequences of pollution, resource depletion, decreasing biodiversity, unrestricted development, and lost animal habitats". Specifically, E-waste Golem says:

> You threw me away but I'm back to haunt you. I am made of millions of electronic gadgets, batteries, chargers, mobile phones, computer monitors and random electronic clutter. These things were expensive when you bought them with valuable metals hidden inside. You adored your gadgets and couldn't stop playing with them while they functioned. When they broke, grew older or ran out of batteries, you threw them out and forgot about them. Now they' re mine!.. Sometimes I need to rest my weary wires, and when I do, I leak toxic metals which pollute the air, water and soil...You humans could reuse my metals if you really wanted to... If you did that, then you wouldn't have to keep digging for metals and making new gadgets. Start recycling electronic waste – anything with a plug – and my motherboard will begin to malfunction. (Rohde 2020, 31)

The book also contains gatefolds highlighting monster-beating actions kids can take and a list of human actions that feed the monsters and help them grow. The fact that each monster admits its weaknesses, which are outlined in the Monster Cards[15] that accompany them, indicates Rohde's effort to encourage children to use each monster's weakness to the planet's advantage and consequently to theirs. For example, Smogosaurus' narration proves Rohde's intention to inform children about "humanity's doomed relationship to a nature" (D'Albertis 2017, 137) and impact on the planet, and to encourage them to behave in a way that does not "feed" the monsters that threat Earth's longevity. The monster states that he "is made of smoke and dust"; his body "is built out of tiny particles that hover in clouds over our cities"; he "feeds on exhaust fumes from cars and factories" as well as "on dust from construction work and sucks up smoke from wildfires or volcanic eruptions". The monster's confession that "a very good start to get rid of him" is people to "limit the numbers of lorries, cars and other traffic" and to "improve public transport and bike lanes, so people can travel without causing air pollution" (Rohde 2020, 20), signifies in essence Rohde's effort to educate readers about the environment, to encourage them to engage in problem solving, and to nurture their common bonds to the planet. The fact that Smogosaurus sarcastically states that he "finds smoke from burning coal extra tasty", "making pollution so thick we can't even see through it", makes us wonder, though, if children can comprehend written irony, and thus humans' ontological relationship with the world (Olkoniemi et al. 2023).

Accordingly Noisybird introduces itself to the readers, sarcastically stating that

> it hates it when can hear peaceful noises, such as birds singing. It needs loud noise to survive, and loves the wail of saws, the honk of car horns and the roar of airplanes. It is its job to make sure noises are turned up to the max,

encouraging children to

> raise their voices and turn their speakers up loud to keep cities and seas full of all those buzzing, crashing, whining and other delightful noises, keep their favourite monster alive and well. (Rohde 2020, 38)

Undoubtedly Rohde's intention is to inform readers that noise is the second largest environmental cause of health problems, and does

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15 Examples available at: https://missclevelandsreading.com/2020/03/31/planet-sos-by-marie-g-rohde/#jp-carousel-3560 and https://missclevelandsreading.com/2020/03/31/planet-sos-by-marie-g-rohde/#jp-carousel-3561.

serious damage to wildlife. However, irony might prove to be challenging for children to understand. It should be noted, though, that this monster is depicted as a bird with nine heads. Although the informative note at the bottom of the page states that it is the Nine-Headed Bird of Ancient China "jiǔ tóu niǎo", its depiction also refers to the ancient Greek mythical monster Lernaean Hydra. On its tails, there are also designs similar to the fireworks that affect human health and the ecosystem, causing anxiety, fear, stress and even death to animals. Therefore, it could be claimed that the in the book "science and imagination interweave as they always should" (Grilli 2020, 84) and illustrations, in addition to their great artistic value and decorative role, complement the narrative, prompting readers to actively interpret what they see, so as to understand the book's ideology and construct meaning.

7 Conclusion

One of the primary functions of children's environmental texts is "to socialize young people into becoming the responsible and empathetic adults of tomorrow, by positioning readers as ecocitizens, dedicated both to sustainable development in the local sphere and also to global responsibility" (Massey, Bradford 2011, 109). However, most of them end up articulating ecological crises without presenting the world in all its facets in an accurately detailed, yet artistic fashion, omitting to indicate as they should the dark aspects of humanity, stemming from its "delusions of difference, of its separation from and superiority to the living world which surrounds it" (Kingsnorth 2017, 266). This article examined three critically acclaimed informational picturebooks for children. All of them, are discussed for the way they demonstrate that death and loss have become urgent environmental concerns. The aim of the study was to explore informational picturebooks' capacity to enable readers to become planetary literate and to perceive climate change as the greatest health threat of the twenty-first century. The study also explored whether children were enabled to realise that human and more-than-human survival on the planet depends on the balance in the Earth's ecosystems and biological processes (Elo et al. 2023), while being informed on the issue of human and more-than-human death and the accompanying grief and mourning. Finally, the article examined whether children were prompted to take action on environmental issues (Echterling 2016, 286) in order to transform dystopia into utopia, by rejecting anthropocentric notions.

The information concerning the Earth's biological systems, climate change, pollution biodiversity loss and the issue of more-than-human death, is presented in the sample in a scientific manner, yet

in a poetic, artistic and original way: the scientific facts are communicated through the poetics of language and images (Kesler 2012), and combined with metafictive strategies, such as visual and verbal puns, polyphonic narratives, disruptions in the cognitive stereotypes and the playful narrative style (Allan 2018, 202), thus, confirming von Merveldt's argument that "the boundaries of what qualifies as an informational picturebook are fluid" (233).

Children are challenged to learn to evaluate what they read (Kokkola 2018) and "to use multiple modes (words and images) simultaneously to gain meaning, rather than prioritizing one mode over the other" (Shimek 2018, 519), while the pictures' artistic value verifies the notion that the visual mode's elusive, poetic quality in children's informational picturebooks contributes to the readership's understanding of the provided information (Angelaki 2023b, 36). The pictures visualise the meaning of texts, whereas textual information describes and/or explains what the illustrations depict. The two modalities bear both artistic expression and scientific dimension and the incorporation of elements from different genres within texts verifies Martins' and Abicalil Belmiro's argument that "it becomes routine to find fictional elements in the contemporary production of informational books for children" (2021, 16).

All three informational picturebooks seem to socially acknowledge loss beyond the frames of human exceptionalism, refuting the notion according to which more-than-humans "are mere means to human ends" (Callicott 2006, 119). All three of them discuss non-liveability in the context of the triple planetary crises without shattering "a sense of hope, without destroying… the *green* and replacing it with *gray*" (Platt 2004, 192).[16] Their dystopic narratives serve as mirrors upon the readers' environmental reality, enabling them to "acknowledge the reality of the loss, and the pain it causes" (Kingsnorth 2017, 98). The books urge readers to consider the complexities of environmental crises, lamenting what they may lose (Yazgünoğlu 2019, 44) if they do not adopt the principles of Environmental Ethics, as they portray the ecological problems of our world. Instead of depriving children of hope, they bring nature, its beauty and its suffering into children's everyday lives (Buell 2017) in a way that may evoke environmental melancholy, thus helping readers change the anthropocentric vision they might have already adopted and "look forward in the future and to something that could have an impact for future generations" (Prévost 2019, 16).

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16   The phrase is lifted from another context, in order to review the book with this language.

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"I Can't Control It": Lila Avilés's Feature Films as Environmental Mourning

Kevin Anzzolin
Christopher Newport University, USA

Abstract   Climate change has had a profound impact on Mexico. Notably, in 2024, climate scientist Claudia Sheinbaum was elected president. Mexican filmmaker Lila Avilés's two feature films – *La camarista* (*The Chambermaid*, 2018) and *Tótem* (*Totem*, 2024) – have garnered significant press attention but little scholarly analysis. Through a detailed examination of Avilés's portrayal of hygiene and animals, the author argues that the films highlight humanity's interconnectedness with nature and reflect the failed efforts – through religion, psychology, politics, and other means – to control it. In this sense, Avilés films the 'anthropological machine' in the making, and these works should be understood as instances of environmental mourning.

Keywords   Mexico. Cinema. Environmental mourning. Death. Lila Avilés.

Summary   1 Introduction: Screening Mexico's Environmental Apocalypse. – 2 Lila Avilés's Feature Films and Their Reception. – 3 To Control Nature: Labour, Hygiene, and Arbitrary Classifications. – 4 Conclusions: Environmental Apocalypse and Death in Mexico.

> Learning to die isn't easy.
> (Roy Scranton, *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene: Reflections on the End of a Civilization*, 21)

1 Introduction: Screening Mexico's Environmental Apocalypse

When Europeans first arrived to Mexico City in 1519, they marvelled at what they saw – a place full of flora, fauna, and life. In his letters to Spanish king Carlos V, infamous Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés describes the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán as having the waterways of Venice and the temples of Jerusalem. The city, built on marshlands in a valley, appeared to float atop Lake Texcoco. The ruler of the Aztecs, Moctezuma, kept a vivarium, stocked with exotic animals from throughout his kingdom, and meant to illustrate his wealth, his power, even his sanctity.

Some 400 years later – after decades of mining, drainage, the invention of automobiles and factories – the Valley of Mexico is a dramatically different place. With a population of over 22 million, Mexico City is covered in cement and chokes on polluted air. Lake Texcoco is estimated to have lost 95 percent of its area; some parts of Mexico City are reported to sink 20 inches every year, as some residents live in constant fear of running out of water (Wagner et al. 2024). Today, the Mexican capital faces an ecological apocalypse. Mexico's dire environmental situation has been well-documented (Vallejo 2022; Vitz 2018; Arroyo-Quiroz, Wyatt 2018). Given the imminent environmental dangers facing Mexico City and beyond, it is perhaps telling that in September 2023, Mexico's University of Guadalajara built Latin America's largest environmental sciences museum at a cost of 100 million dollars. Also revealing is that in June 2024 Mexico elected a climate scientist, Claudia Sheinbaum, as president. Of the pressing issues that the 61-year-old scientist-turned-politician will have to deal with are her country's reliance on fossil fuels and its ongoing water crisis.

Mexico's growing awareness of climate-related issues has also been televised and filmed. Notable productions include *Silent River* (2014), *Cuates de Australia: Drought* (2013), *Los hombres del pueblo que no existe* (2015), *El Remolino* (2016), *Resurrección* (2016), *Land and Water Revisited* (2020), and *El Tema* (2021). Recently, various of these offerings have been examined by Carolyn Fornoff (2022). Of these pieces is Lila Avilés's 2016 *La fertilidad de la tierra* (*The Fertility of the Land*), which won Best Documentary at Ecofilm Fest 2016. In recent years, the director has produced narrative films that, at first blush, appear to have very little to do with environmental issues. 2018 saw Avilés direct *La camarista* (*The Chambermaid*), a film

about the monotonous workdays of a young chambermaid in a luxurious Mexico City hotel, while in 2023, Aviles directed *Tótem* (*Totem*), a film about a 7-year-old girl who takes in the emotional instability of her family as it prepares a final birthday party for her moribund father. Although both of these feature films have garnered accolades in the press, scholars have yet to examine them. Furthermore, articles dealing with Lila Avilés's feature films have consistently focused on issues of gender – the fact that Avilés and her protagonists are females. Avilés indeed has a keen vision of gender; but this article takes a different course.

Inspired by both ecocriticism and death studies, I read *La camarista* and *Tótem* allegorically, arguing that the works' characters represent how distinct systems of thought – religion, psychology, politics, etc. – constitute failed attempts to control the natural world. The films parabolize our ecological death and philosophically interrogate the inhumane ways that we deal with others, especially knowing that earth's death is imminent. In this way, Avilés's art is understood as an example of environmental mourning.[1] Avilés's feature films are meditations on our ambivalent relationship to the natural world even as we learn to die alongside it. Furthermore, I activate a key concept found in chapter 9 of Giorgio Agamben's *The Open: Man and Animal*, in which the Italian philosopher describes humanity as constantly producing an "anthropological machine" – that is, a means of illustrating the dichotomy between human and animals. Here, 'Openness' is crucial for Agamben, as he understands our ways of experiencing the world as different from that of animals.

I conclude the article with a nod to scholars Ashlee Cunsolo and Neville R. Ellis, who argue that environmental grief varies among different geographical locations, cultures and communities; I speculate how Avilés's appraisal of environmental mourning is uniquely Mexican.

2 Lila Avilés's Feature Films and Their Reception

Beyond her two feature films, Lila Avilés (born 1982) has directed documentaries, such as *Nena* (2017) and *The Fertility of the Land* (2016), as well as shorts, like 2016's *Déjà vu* and *Dos ojos veces boca* (*Eye Two Times Mouth*), from 2023. With *The Chambermaid* and *Totem*, Avilés's stature has significantly and justifiably grown. Yet, scholarship on her work has not kept pace with her renown. Before examining Avilés's works, contemplating them vis-à-vis ecocriticism

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1 See Morton 2007; Lertzman 2015; Scranton 2015; Buhner 2022; Merchant 1980, among others.

and thanatological studies, a brief summary of both the films' – along with their respective reviews – is necessary.

The Chambermaid premiered at the Toronto Film Festival in 2018 before being screened at over eighty other international festivals that same year. Having garnered significant acclaim, the film went on to represent Mexico at the Oscars and at the Goya Awards in 2020. The film recounts the story of Eve, a 24-year-old housekeeper working at Mexico City's luxurious Hotel Presidente Intercontinental, where she spends her days meticulously cleaning the rooms of the hotel's affluent and rather picky guests. The film is slow-moving with scant dialogue, paying close attention to angles and moods; the entirety of the movie is shot within the hotel, its elevators, its rooms, its utility closets, thus giving the film a claustrophobic setting that emphasises the smallness of Eve's professional and personal life. Only the hotel's windows provide evidence of the metropolis beyond. Significantly, the film ends just as Eve is walking through the luxurious hotel lobby and toward the exit. For Eve and for viewers, the hotel is, effectively, where the film begins and ends. If we were to understand the film's setting as a type of ecological trope, the hotel is, like the earth itself, our forever home: there is no exit from what happens here in terms of labour or in terms of how we treat each other.

The camera hones in on Eve's attention to detail: the meticulous ways she cleans lampshades, bathtubs, and bedsheets. There is a disconnect between the seriousness with which Eve performs her duties as a maid and the detachment, even disdain, that guests show toward her. Eve is charged with scrubbing heavy stains from the bathtub in a room where an unnamed, rather demanding businessman-type is staying. Another guest, an Argentine mother named Romy, treats Eve well, but perhaps only to task the maid with babysitting (Romy's) infant. The guest will abandon the hotel abruptly, leaving Eve wondering where the young mother has gone. Amid Eve's constant cleaning, the tiring labour of a maid, her days are enlivened by two bright spots: a possible promotion and an opportunity to win, via an internal lottery, a red dress left behind by one of the guests. Eve also befriends a fellow housekeeper, Minitoy, whom she first meets in the hotel management's adult education programs. This relationship sours when Minitoy wins the position to care for the hotel's prestigious 42th floor, a promotion Eve had wanted. Minitoy's unique name also should not be ignored: is she, a housekeeper, but a plaything for wealthy hotel guests?

As noted above, critical attention to *The Chambermaid* has been very positive. Given the film's focus on the wearying professional life of a domestic labourer, and given that Avilés's work was released a mere two months before Alfonso Cuarón's renowned *Roma*, numerous reviews of *The Chambermaid* address Avilés's depiction of the workplace, and the plight of the protagonist, Eve. Thus, *Variety*

characterises the film as a 'complement' to *Roma* while *Remezcla* provides the necessary corrective: "While both films share connective tissue... they are completely different films".[2] Others have compared *The Chambermaid* to a long line of films dealing with servanthood and labour practices, particularly when servanthood is becoming contractual work in Latin America and when the region is experiencing "changing attitudes toward the ethics of hiring a live-in domestic worker, particularly among sectors of the Left" (Randall 2024, 139).[3] Somewhat less compelling are pieces that emphasise Avilés's gender and her inclusion of female protagonists – as if women have not done formidable work in the cinematic profession.[4] Yet, reviews fail to mention Avilés's film as concerned with environmental issues and, specifically, environmental mourning. Admittedly, the work's ecological messaging is muted and its truths are symbolic rather than literal. Ultimately, without knowledge of Avilés's more explicitly environmentalist films like 2016's *Fertility of the Land* and 2023's *Tótem*, the true message of *The Chambermaid* is occluded.

Tótem aids viewers in seeing the environmentally conscious messaging of Avilés's previous work – Avilés's primary concern as to how we mourn a dying planet – and helps in drawing together a constellation of themes and tropes central to the director. With *Tótem*, the allegorical language evinced by Avilés is less disguised. Still, this film's environmentalist message has also been ignored by critics; academic scholarship of the film remains nil, perhaps on account of the film's recent release. Thus, *NPR* praises Avilés's film as "even more touching vision of Mexican family life than you got in Alfonso Cuarón's *Roma*" (Powers 2024). *The Independent* correctly signals the film's employment of a child-like gaze and wonders whether the protagonist, Sol, is being protected or distracted from the "crushing calamity" that her father's imminent death represents (Coyle 2024). More compellingly, *The New York Times* signals that *Tótem* and *The Chambermaid* deal with similar issues and refers to Avilés's previous *The Chambermaid* as "set in a hotel... another ecosystem" (Dargis 2024). However, the review sidesteps any type of ecocritical perspective on the films: the fact that 'ecology' originates from the Greek word *oikos*, meaning 'house' or 'environment'. The term denotes the study of how organisms interact with their surroundings and focuses on understanding the relationships between organisms and their habitats. *Tótem*, like *The Chambermaid*, explores how beings interact with each other, even as the entire lifeworld they inhabit dies. Most welcome is Peyton Robinson's review, which

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2 See Debruge 2019; Martínez 2019.

3 Also see Betancourt 2020; Skvirsky 2020; Emmelhainz 2022.

4 See Patiño 2024 for this focus on gender.
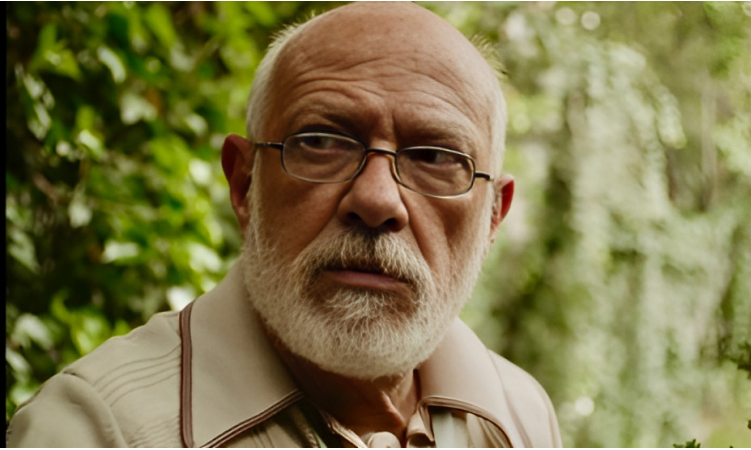
Figure 1 Roberto, the psychologist grandfather. Lila Avilés, *Tótem*. 2023. Credit @Limerencia Films. Courtesy of Alpha Violet Films

explains the film's 'animal motif' as a "reminder of nature's dominance" (Robinson 2024).

Tótem won the Ecumenical Award at the Berlin Film Festival, among numerous other awards, before becoming Mexico's submission for the Best International Feature at the 96th Academy Awards. In September 2024, it won Best Picture at Mexico's Ariel Awards. Similar to *The Chambermaid*, the film closely follows the perspective of its reserved, young and female protagonist. In the case of *Tótem*, Sol is a curious 7-year-old who is extremely attracted to insects and small animals – praying mantises, snails, parrots – and which she encounters throughout her grandfather's house. It is here that Avilés's second film will take place; similar to *The Chambermaid*, the film is set in a single location which provides a rather closed ambience.

The film opens with Sol and her mother, Lucía, sharing a public restroom, the two giggling through Sol's failed attempt to urinate. Sol is at an awkward stage of childhood, and finds herself unable to control her bodily movements. Ultimately, she cannot urinate, forcing Lucía to relieve herself in the sink; both laugh during the moment of tender taboo. The two continue on to a birthday party for Sol's terminally ill father, Tona, a well-known artist dying of cancer. There is a subtle acknowledgement that the event may also double as a farewell party. As Sol ambles through the middle-class house, the camera almost always close by, we witness the chaos within a family as they hurriedly arrange Tona's party and put up a good front for the dying artist.

Amid the frantic preparation, we meet Sol's grandfather, Roberto, a psychologist who receives patients at home. He bears a striking resemblance to Sigmund Freud – a thinker who, in his own right, explored the construction of civilization as well as the processes of mourning [fig. 1]. In hushed tones, the family debates whether Tona should receive another session of chemotherapy. One of Sol's aunts, Nuri, struggles to bake a cake as she sadly drinks herself into a stupor. Another aunt, Alejandra, dyes her hair between cigarettes. She invites a psychic into the house to vanquish any bad vibes from the residence and thus help Tona recover. Another family member, Uncle Octavo, leads an equally desperate attempt to cure Tona via a meditation session focused on capturing the ill artist's 'quantum energy'. Meanwhile, in a darkened back bedroom, an at-home nurse, Cruz, helps the skeletal Tona look presentable for the festivities. Although the trench coat he puts on to hide the effects of cancer is unconvincing, he puts up a brave face for the party, where he is lovingly celebrated by his bohemian and intellectual friends. The film ends with Sol and Lucía lip-synching an operatic aria. The concluding shot shows Tona's empty bed, the wind blowing into the room where he has ostensibly passed on. Neither spiritualism, psychology, or science could stop nature's toll.

3 To Control Nature: Labour, Hygiene, and Arbitrary Classifications

Both *The Chambermaid* and *Tótem* constantly focus on labour, personal hygiene, and the natural world. Avilés's films examine how we treat each other and the meaning and value we put on transforming our environments, even while we mourn the fact that our actions – our incomplete yet profound interventions in nature – have cast doubt on humanity's survival. Both films query how to forge non-alienating and non-abusive communities. How to create collectives not only among humans – families, places of business, among our 'totems' – but also across multiple species? As previously noted, although *The Chambermaid* and *Tótem* are not, at first blush, as ecologically focused as Avilés's earlier *The Fertility of the Land*, they also allegorize environmental mourning and the constant construction of the 'anthropological machine'. This is especially true given that

> [t]he idea of the environment is more or less a way of considering groups and collectives – humans surrounded by nature, or in continuity with other beings such as animals and plants. It is about being-with. (Morton 2007, 17)

In this way, it is incisive to see Avilés's films in line with the way Agamben 'anthropological machine', a mechanism that constructs the

human identity in relation to and in contrast with the animal: "*Homo sapiens*, then, is neither a clearly defined species nor substance; it is, rather, a machine or device for producing recognition of the human" (2004, 26). Often, the means humanity employs to control the natural world and thereby classify beings as kin or not-kin, natural or unnatural, worthy or unworthy of mourning is arbitrary: such is what makes it people possible to mourn, say, the loss of a family dog yet not the passing of a (human) neighbour.[5] That is, there are both companion animals and animals for consumption; there are weeds and there are plants; there are admired irregularities within nature (say, long eyelashes) and others that are unwanted (warts, cancers). To delimit our communities, we employ schools of thought, disciplines, and control mechanisms – we treat others and nature in arbitrary, illogical, and hurtful ways. All told, our efforts come to ruin our different ecosystems.

Biologists and historians of science have, like ecocritical theorists, interrogated humanity's relationship to the natural world, how we mark our differences from animal life, and how we approach cleanliness; the so-called anthropological machine is indebted to notions of hygiene – ideas that scholars across disciplines have examined (Smith 2007; Horan, Frazier 1998; Ward 2019). Katherine Ashenburg proposes, "[c]limate, religion and attitudes to privacy and individuality also affect the way we clean ourselves" (2008, 10). How we clean ourselves and how we clean (or fail to clean) our environment is related to how we build civilizations against nature. Ecologically speaking, everything is connected: our time spent in the shower, our grooming products, or the amount of trash we create have real, macro-level and multispecies consequences. Psychology and emotions, too, are at the centre of our hygienic practices, our ecological concerns, our understanding of the animal world. Thus, Morton notes

> ecology isn't just about global warming, recycling, and solar power-and also not just to do with everyday relationships between humans and nonhumans. It has to do with love, loss, despair, and compassion. It has to do with depression and psychosis. (2007, 2)

Effectively, there is no 'outside' of ecology – each of our everyday actions is consequential. Yet, humans remain driven to development, to invent, and unfortunately, destruction: our "fantasy is a world of absolute control and order" (83). Both *The Chambermaid* and *Tótem* examine this conflux of issues.

The Chambermaid is, as the film's title and summary above suggest, profoundly interested in our hygiene: how we discipline our

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5   Braun (2013, 68) explores this line of thinking: "that the distinction between the dog as person (in the family) and as pet (outside the family)".

urges, and how, in Foucauldian terms, socioeconomic relations are biopolitical in character. With Avilés's first feature film, Eve is constantly cleaning – after all, it is her job in the luxurious Mexico City hotel; unique for Eve, however, is the fact that hygiene mediates her social relations, her sense of labour and of self, her humanity. Eve's prowess as housekeeper is significant – even neurotic: she uses a toothbrush to scour a telephone's number buttons, a rag to literally whip the dust off of lampshades, and is tasks to scrub the bathtub that seems to have been left bloodied or defecated on by a guest. The stain is so significant that viewers are left wondering what the guest could possibly have been doing.

Issues of fairness, of taboos, and neuroses emerge as characters clean themselves, groom themselves, and disinfect their spaces; viewers see the anthropological machine being developed in small ways – vignettes, really – that provide the motor for Avilés's plotlines.

Acts of cleaning abound in Avilés's films. Thus, in both *The Chambermaid* and *Tótem*, we see characters realise risky, gravity-defying cleaning feats while others look on. With *The Chambermaid*, a repeated vignette involves a handsome window cleaner who, while Eve cleans hotel rooms, is hanging from the scaffolding outside. He completes his tasks, even as he uses a squeegee to draw heart shapes, hoping to attract Eve. *Tótem* includes a similar trope while preparations for Tona's party are underway. Nuri is in the kitchen, taking sips from a healthy pour of whisky – how she copes with her family's drama and her brother's moribund state. Her 4-year-old daughter, Esther, is balancing on top of the refrigerator, holding the family cat, Monsi. A bit glassy-eyed from the drink, Nuri fiddles around the kitchen before asking her daughter: "Do you want to wipe up there?" (13′33″).[6] The balancing act, like that of the window washer, in no way feels safe for such a young child. Esther requests, quite reasonably, that her mother take care of Monsi while she cleans. Nuri takes Monsi in one arm while continuing to cradle her tumbler of alcohol. We push back on our status as animals, crafting civilization via hygiene, and thereby cultivating the anthropological machine – yet ask others to do the heavy lifting. Later on, as preparations for the party continue, Alejandra scolds her children for being unable to properly use a vacuum (39′44″). Effectively, via the labour needed to clean ourselves, we perpetuate the anthropological machine; power relationships – telling others what to do – are constant.

The Chambermaid thus narrates the biopolitical character of civilization, where biological selves are governed in disparate ways: both humans and animals are afforded liberties unequally. For example, early on in the film, Eve receives notice that a guest has requested

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6 "Deja cuatro a seis de las chiquitas".

more amenities (mini bottles of shampoo, soap, mouthwash). Her rapid response suggests how seriously she understands her job: she takes great care, while guests merely take advantage of her. When she arrives at the guest's room, she finds a chubby, professional male fresh from the shower, dressed in a terry cloth bathrobe. He stares at the television while cleaning his ears with cotton swabs; he does not even look toward Eve, or really acknowledge her existence. He nods toward the bathroom. Only when she is there, off-screen, does he call out to her: "Leave four to six of the small ones".[7] When she reappears in the bedroom less than a minute later (17′00″), she asks if he needs anything else.[8] He does not reply. Intriguingly, this shadowy figure is crucial in terms of the film's meaning and message. During this scene, the man is watching a televised conversation about poststructuralist thought. Off-screen, we hear one of the televised interlocutors quote from philosopher Alexandre Kojève's lectures on Hegel – a passage, interestingly, that Agamben, too, paraphrases when discussing the post-human:

> and it is not a biological catastrophe either: Man remains alive as animal in harmony with Nature or given Being. What disappears is Man properly so called – that is, Action negating the given and Error, or, in general, the Subject opposed to the Object. (2003, 5-6)

Ironically, the obese hotel guest, who dehumanises Eve's labour by charging her to perform all tasks related to his personal hygiene, watches a television program that details an optimistic response to post-human reality. Perhaps we have returned to an animal state, stupidly staring at television in a luxury hotel. In a subsequent scene with the same guest, Eve cleans on the right side of the room, the man seated on his bed at left (35′11″). He abrasively requests more toilet paper.[9] Wearing a headset, he dictates into his computer strange scientific talk about how the fittest survive, the number of females needed in a species, and the strongest males in a group.[10] Although it is unclear as to the origin of the passage, it explores the same concepts of a Charles Darwin or a Richard Dawkins. How do groups survive? Who dictates who cleans up after whom in a community? Is it just – even biologically determined – that some watch television while

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[7] "¿Necesita algo más?".

[8] "Quiero más papel de baño".

[9] "Para entender lo que es supone ser sobreviviente, tenemos que regresar a cada historia de éxito y seguir en la manada nacen igual número de hembras que de machos. Impera la ley de la más fuerte. Pero para los grandes machos la clave está en la superioridad numérica".

[10] "Me puede apachurrar el botón por favor? Es que es Shabbaz".

others wash up after them? To what extent is it innately human to engage in cooperative behaviour? Avilés interrogates our condition as humans and, moreover, our status within the larger environment. To what extent are homo sapiens able to think and plan collectively in a non-alienating, benevolent ways? To what extent is multispecies thinking possible? Who will survive the crisis of the Anthropocene?

The intersection of humanity, the non-human, labour, and hygiene is explored in other scenes in *The Chambermaid* and other characters in Eve's orbit. Cleanliness and work provide a social context by which to gauge one's worth, one's humanity – or supposed lack thereof. Thus, when Eve misses a heavy blood stain on a guest's bedsheets, she begs her colleague, Minitoy for help (44′09″). Minitoy, seemingly in a show of goodwill, removes the tough stain; only at the end of the film will Minitoy gain the upper hand, beating out Eve for promotion within the hotel. In another scene, Tita, who works in the hotel laundry room, tells Eve that the housekeeper has "beat-up" hands, only to then try and sell Eve a curative lotion (19′04″). Perhaps the most striking example of how hotel guests effectively animalize hotel employees – the unfair labour practices, the deeply biopolitical character of society, the unequal access to cleanliness and creature comforts – is seen when a Jewish guest requests that Eve press the elevator button (1:06′17″). As he explains, responding to her questioning glances: "It's Shabbat".[11] With this, we see an imperfect adherence to what Agamben proposed to overcome the anthropological machine: a "'Shabbat' of both man and animal" that would interrogate the place of humanity vis-à-vis the animal world.[12] How can we rethink the world in a way that does not make some humans little more than beasts of burden of others?

Another hotel guest, an Argentine woman named Romy, summons Eve to enter her suite having recently nursed her new-born; Romy wipes drops of milk from her breast, unashamed of her nudity – perhaps due to Eve's lowly status as a housekeeper (22:00′12″). The Argentine, stressed during her business trip and alone with an infant, asks Eve for babysitting help while she (Romy) takes a much-needed shower. A few minutes later, we learn that Eve is not afforded such luxuries of hygiene.[13] At home, the housekeeper does not have access to a shower but instead washes herself with buckets of water (27′40″).

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11 "To render inoperative the machine that governs our conception of man will therefore mean… to risk ourselves in this emptiness: the suspension of suspension, Shabbat of both animal and man" (Agamben Kishik, Pedatella 2011, 92).

12 "Allá tengo que bañar a jicaradas".

13 "No sé qué tiene esta ciudad que la garganta la tengo fatal… la piel, una lija … el pelo asqueroso… no sé te juro que debe ser algo del aire, del agua".

The guest will later ask that Eve watch the child multiple days. Effectively, Romy does not take into consideration that babysitting is not Eve's job. Romy essentially buys access to Eve's body with no real sense that Eve should be able to offer and retract her productive facilities. The different social realms these respective characters inhabit is emphasised when discussing how to get around in Mexico City. Romy seems sceptical of using the Mexico City subway system that Eve uses daily, even as she is intrigued by the fact that the housekeeper does not shave her legs (49′04″).

Before Romy leaves the hotel, not having provided Eve with any notice or wishing her goodbye, we see Eve in the hotel's bedroom where she changes the infant's diaper. We hear Romy gargling, off camera in the bathroom (55′43″). The worlds of the two women could not be more different: they are divided by class, professions, and access to healthy, eco-friendly living. Romy appears from the bathroom complaining about Mexico City's air and water quality:

I don't know what is up with this city. My throat is in horrible shape. My skin feels like sandpaper… my hair is gross. I swear, it's got to be something in the air or something in the water.

Eve, the lowly housekeeper whose job it is to remain silent, who does not enjoy the same creature comforts that her guests do, but who has also seen things that they have not, says nothing.[14] Thus Avilés represents the biopolitical unfairness of our society: the arbitrariness with which resources, comforts, and hygiene is distributed. In *Tótem*, one of the party's guests, Uncle Napo explains that he spent four hours travelling Mexico City to procure the organic foodstuffs for Tona (50′20″). It is a sign of love, but is also symptomatic of inequalities.

With *Tótem*, Avilés remains concerned with access to hygiene but, given that narration takes place in a single, middle-class family, she also interrogates the moral codes associated with thinking hygienically. Various scenes in *Tótem* undermine our rationality while erecting our anthropological machine. Why should we feel ashamed of our nakedness? Is there worth in modesty? How does dissembling our animality via deodorants, perfumes, and hygiene constitute an illogical continuance of the anthropological machine? Why do we hide humanity's status as animal – all of our grossness, foulness, and uncleanliness? Case and point is when Nuri's daughter, Esther, grabs a menstruation cup while mom readies herself for Tona's party (16′10″). Grabbing a menstruation cup, Esther asks her mother if it can be used to drink wine. Nuri replies: "Not exactly. No, honey. You can't drink

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14 Scholarship on the arbitrariness of our moral codes vis-à-vis animals is ample. For example, see Joy 2011; Adams 2015; Scully 2002, among others.

wine out of it" (16′15″). This arbitrary character of the distinctions we make between natural and unnatural, between human and animal – ultimately, worthy and unworthy – has garnered a significant amount of scholarship, especially in terms of animal studies and multispecies studies.[15] The film points up how we shield children from our status as animals and thus continue the anthropological machine.

Avilés's second feature film also begins with two revealing scenes. The first has already been alluded to above: we see Sol and her mother, Lucía, in a public restroom, singing and laughing together as Sol struggles to urinate. Lucía asks if Sol has finished urinating. When the child answers in the negative, Lucía explains she cannot wait. With Sol still on the toilet, Lucía pees into the sink: "I couldn't hold it anymore" (2′21″). A few seconds later, we hear banging on the bathroom door and the booming voice of an adult woman: "This is a public bathroom! Get out!" (3′13″). With this, taboos are broken, and the distinctions we make in order to maintain the façade of an anthropological machine, are questioned. The scene immediately following situates viewers in the house of the family's patriarch, the elderly Roberto. There, the bearded senior citizen is seen in deep concentration as he prunes a beautiful tabletop-sized bonsai tree (5′50″). In the silence of his garden, the wizened character appears wrapped in thought as he meticulously works on the plant. This is his attempt to control nature – pruning away the unwanted parts, making distinctions as to what parts of ecology are worth saving and what are not. Suddenly, a dark bird flaps into the camera frame, close to Roberto's head and causing him to duck. As the bird cackles in the distance, the old man frowns at the flying animal. Later on, the bird will again approach the gardener while he prunes; this time, Roberto will be better prepared, and he scares the animal off with a broom (47′16″). Our arbitrary or even illogical classifications of nature (What plants and animals are pests?) are also emphasised when Uncle Napo gives Esther a goldfish as a gift. The child contemplates what name best fits the animal: Shark? Dog? Eventually, she decides on "Nugget" as in "Nugget with ketchup" (42′35″). Wise beyond her years, Esther explains that fish are aware of earthquakes before humans, since the animals "feel the vibrations… although they have small brains they're very clever" (42′40″). Children, even in their innocence, understand that animals are, at times, more intelligent than humans; furthermore, they are more susceptible to catastrophic events.

The Chambermaid and especially *Tótem* thus allegorize our constant and often futile attempts to create 'the human' and control the natural world via different systems of thought – whether those be religion, psychology, education, science, or politics. Thus, in the former

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15 "Si el Spiderman es un superhéroe".

film, we see Eve's endless battle against dirt via cleaning products, hand creams, and stain removers. We see the Jewish guest unable to work due to his religious belief; and we see students unable to better their lives via adult education classes. As Eve's colleague, Minitoy, jokingly asks when her teacher wonders during class time if there are any questions: "Is Spiderman a Superhero?" (1:05′23″).[16] Simply said, what does it mean to be human, animal, or even something beyond – how can we control our experience in order to get there? In *Tótem*, attempts are made in hopes of controlling one of nature's uncontrollable elements – cancer, the disease afflicting Tona. Thus, Uncle Napo holds a séance-type session before Tona's celebration in hopes of abating the guest of honour's constant pain (50′30″). Tona's siblings debate whether Tona should receive further chemotherapy or rather, if he should be provided morphine to dull the pain. Sol's great aunt Alejandra turns to spiritualism to save Tona, even inviting a clairvoyant into the house in order to rid it of bad vibes. As the psychic marches through the house, supposedly vanquishing spirits with a burning piece of bread on a stick, Grandfather Roberto, the practising psychologist yells out "You'll burn down my office. I'm not in the mood for your satanic bullshit" (27′39″). But neither Napo's séance, nor Alejandro's spiritualism, nor even Roberto's science – psychology, his particular discipline evinced to control nature – works. Tellingly, we overhear a patient, almost overcome with emotion, explaining to the elderly psychologist how she had enjoyed the best sex of her life when she cheated on her boyfriend. Intriguingly, the patient situates her experience in terms of inheritance; perhaps generational trauma or Lamarckian evolution, she wonders what she will pass on to her child: "I don't want to pass this on to my baby. I don't want him to unconsciously absorb all this shit that I'm doing" (19′41″). As noted above, Roberto, with his white beard and bald head, could be a doppelgänger for the master psychologist himself, Sigmund Freud (Bunbury 2023). Roberto speaks through an electrolarynx, perhaps an allusion to the fact that Freud, the consummate smoker, had his jaw removed. Ultimately, Roberto's patient, between sobs, expresses her sense of futility against her animal impulses: "I can't control it!" (19′45″). Detaining the push of nature is impossible, even for a school of thought as formidable as Freud's. Worth meaning, too, is the fact that Freudian psychology has long captured the attention of Mexico's intellectual elites, with figures such as José Vasconcelos, Samuel Ramos, and Frida Kahlo turning to Freudian analysis to understand the Mexican national character during the twentieth century.

Avilés will also jokingly nod to other intellectual behemoths of Mexican culture in later scenes in *Tótem*; here, politics and cultural

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16 In De la Fuente 2023, Avilés explains that the title is open to interpretation.

Figure 2   Tona's former art professor. Lila Avilés, *Tótem*. 2023.
Credit @Limerencia Films. Courtesy of Alpha Violet Films

myths are queried as systems of thought capable of transforming the human experience. During Tona's party, one of his old art teachers gives a speech in honour of his former student. Beyond lauding Tona as his best student, the teacher rambles on about colonial history, Aztec myths, and critical pedagogy; he is ultimately cut off. Of special note are two elements of his speech. First, he explains how his student's name, Tona, is short for Tonatiuh – the Aztec god of the sun (1:08′05″). With Tona's death, a 'sun' is dying; with him disappears an entire ecosystem that is the family household. Second is the fact that the teacher is a dead ringer for José Revueltas, the bespeckled and goateed writer and political activist who was a prominent member of the Mexican Left during the twentieth century **[fig. 2]**. The teacher's homage to Tona – replete with Aztec mythology, vile conquistadors, and a touch of decolonial thought – employs many conceits of the cultural nationalism of Mexico's twentieth century. In terms of appearance and message, Tona's old teacher epitomises the ideals of José Revueltas. As it has been recently argued, it may be in human nature to control nature (Tighe 2023). However, *Tótem* suggests that all these attempts ultimately ring hollow. Tona will die.

4 Conclusions: Environmental Apocalypse and Death in Mexico

Unable to control nature yet illogically feeding the flames of the anthropological machine, the Anthropocene constitutes a death knell for humanity. Both of Lila Avilés's feature films allegorize our environmental mourning as the earth dies. First, we should detail some concluding points about *Tótem*, the more obvious rumination on ecological grief.

Tótem's Tona dies at the film's end; with the film's last shot, the camera eerily stares at the father figure's empty bed. The centre of the universe for this family – this ecosystem – has perished. Pertinent, too, is the name of Tona's troubled daughter, Sol, whose name in Spanish means 'sun'. As mentioned above, throughout the film she manifests a marked predilection for insects of all sorts, a point that the director has noted in interviews (Frumkin 2024). Sol evinces an infantile phase in which children are working out different types of totems – models of community that may include multiple species (Morris 1967, 171). She may symbolise a different 'sun'. Perhaps Sol is mourning for her father, the dying 'sun', even as she grieves for a non-human family – her beloved insects. In this way, the film's title is not ambiguous: Avilés's production explores how we forge our communities, both human and non-human.[17]

Sol's name also plays on the notion of 'solastalgia', defined as

> the pain experienced when there is recognition that the place where one resides and that one loves is under immediate assault (physical desolation). (Albrecht 2005, 45; Buhner 2022, 29)

She inhabits just such environmental mourning. Appropriately, just before Tona makes a strained entrance to his celebration, we see him and Sol share a tender moment alone together in which he gives her a painting that he, an artist, created: "It's still wet. It's fresh paint. It has all of your favourite animals" (56′50″). In this sense, Sol – although in constant mourning for what is, in fact, an apocalyptic fait accompli – embodies the bittersweet hope that a dying, multispecies world may at least be archived, remembered, and celebrated. As Joshua Barnett explains, phenology is the name for these "entwined practices of observation and documentation, witnessing and archiving… the goings-on of plants and animals, of habitats and ecosystems, of weather and climate" (2022, 71-2). Sol, like Avilés herself, may also be a documentarian. Finally, we should remember that ecological

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[17] For Latino grief, see the article from Falzarano et al. 2022. For familismo, see Hernández 2024.

grief is experienced differently by individuals, cultures, and communities (Cunsolo, Ellis 2018). Finally, that Tona's 'going-away' party is simultaneously a revelry and a family affair may be particular to the Mexican context – a culture where grieving often involves a celebration of life and in which *familismo* is a touchstone concept.[18]

Reading the *The Chambermaid* as an example of environmental mourning may still appear a specious argument. Although characters mention Mexico City's polluted air and water, and although we can only imagine the kind of harsh chemicals our housekeeper protagonist, Eve, uses to clean the luxury hotel, the film is seemingly absent of death. It is apparent that the hotel's ecosystem is, in a sense, moribund – a close locale characterised by strained social relations and futile attempts to tamp down our animality. Yet, we wonder: are death and mourning at the centre of Avilés's first feature?

Although unnoticed by critics, the final cut of *The Chambermaid* includes a noteworthy difference from the trailer. Avilés's finished product opens with a scene characterised by dark humour that, if we were to see the trailer,[19] was originally nothing short of deathly. In the first shots of *The Chambermaid*, Eve moves around a hotel room, gathering up the rumpled sheets off the bed to launder them. The room is in disarray. As she moves around the bed, she stops, perturbed by what she sees. She bends down to look at something on the floor. Silence. Finally, the head of an elderly pops up; he appears to be upwards of 80 years old. "Good day?" Eve asks (3′50″).[20] Although Eve will offer

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18 "¿Buenos días?".

19 *La Camarista*'s trailer is available at: https://archive.org/details/la-camarista-trailer-oficial-hd/La+Camarista++-Trailer+Oficial+HD.mp4.

20 "Un muerto en la habitación 54".

her help multiple times, the elderly man, seen naked save for a pair of pyjama pants, refuses all conversation. Is he stupefied from slumber? Is he recovering from a fall or a heart attack? Or, is he simply another rude guest? Eve offers to keep cleaning but, given the man's absolute silence, politely tells him that she will return later. If we dare think in terms of Avilés's metaphorical cosmos, the opening scene intimates that senility, accident – indeed, even death – are the defining characteristics of the hotel.

Intriguingly, the film's trailer shows that even deadlier plot twists were left on the proverbial cutting-run floor. The screen flashes to Eve first encountering the old man **[fig. 3]**. Off-screen, her voice is heard describing "a dead man in room 54" (00:08″).[21] This death is never mentioned in *The Chambermaid*'s final cut. Instead, Lazarus-like, the decrepit man rises up from the floor and precedes to ignore Eve. This half-dead man – perhaps originally scripted as a corpse – is the emotional inception of Avilés's film. He foretells the fact that our ecosystems – whether hotels, families, or whole planets – are dying. Avilés's films allegorically examine the ways that we grieve our moribund earth.

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Mourning the Mounted: An Analysis of the Taxidermy Exhibition *Dead Animals with a Story*

Robin Jiskoot
University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Abstract   This article analyzes the taxidermy exhibition *Dead Animals with a Story* located in the Natural History Museum of Rotterdam in order to discover the subversive potentiality of taxidermy. Through granting the taxidermy animals subjectivity, by recognizing human and non-human kinship, and by creating accountability towards animal suffering, *Dead Animals with a Story* sets the stage for the animals to be deemed grievable. This points to the potential of the exhibition to reshape pre-established social and cultural boundaries between the human and the animal, which becomes ever so important in a world marked by extinction and loss.

Keywords   Taxidermy. New taxidermy. Human-animal relationship. Mourning. Animal Studies.

Summary   1 Introduction. – 2 Taxidermy and the Human-Animal Relationship. – 3 Entangled Mourning. – 4 Electrocuted Fur, McFlurry Cups, and Duck Dinners. – 5 Conclusion.

1 Introduction

Walking into the Natural History Museum of Rotterdam, one can hardly look away from the large glass display placed at the entrance hall of the museum. Within the display case lay nine remarkable taxidermy critters curated next to each other, with light illuminating their bodies. At first glance, it is a peculiar and shocking sight. A large goose and stork, a crushed pigeon, and an electrocuted weasel all lying silently on their backs, naturally building curiosity. When one steps closer to the exhibition a sense of individual subjectivity emerges. The large goose and stork are represented as victims of littering. The crushed pigeon is introduced as a city pigeon, killed by the descending Boerengat bridge in Rotterdam, and the electrocuted weasel is displayed as the second weasel killed by the particle accelerator Large Hadron Collider (LHC) in Geneva. By displaying these eerie animal deaths, the taxidermy exhibition *Dead Animals with a Story* (Natural History Museum Rotterdam, 2013) shows the potential dramatic consequences that can happen when humans and animals collide in their everyday activities.

Taxidermy derives its meaning from the Greek word *taxis*, which translates to 'arrangement' or 'order', and the word *derma* meaning 'skin' (Straughan 2015, 363). In practice, taxidermy is the utilization of different methods of preserving animal skins by stuffing or mounting them over a sculpture (Péquignot 2006, 248). It is long been theorized that by utilizing these different techniques taxidermists aim to create a three-dimensional object that creates a faithful reproduction of animals into a state of permanence (Straughan 2015, 363-4). These reproductions are often considered an ideal type and try to create an illusion of movement to represent a choreography of the dead to stimulate life. Ultimately, this allows for taxidermy to possess a certain fabricated liveliness (Desmond 2016, 34-5). Taxidermy as practice and object has been a heavily contested subject in academic inquiry. Haraway's (1984) analysis of natural history museum taxidermy remarks the ways in which taxidermy can portray and sustain patriarchal and colonial ways of knowing and endorse power structures. Yet, taxidermy can likewise rethink natural narratives, prompt inquiry about human and animal relationships, create affective responses, and have the ability to destabilize ontological binary oppositions (Aloi 2018, 64).

While most taxidermy animals are structured as ideal types in natural history museums, the animals in *Dead Animals with a Story* are depicted as 'truly' dead. Ultimately, this represents a new sensibility in taxidermy, which Gregory and Purdy have termed "new taxidermy" (2015, 74). New taxidermy differentiates itself from traditional realist taxidermy by moving away from realist portrayals of dead animals as lifelike to the creation of taxidermy that relies

upon a "self-conscious depiction of its own deadness" (75). In other words, it tries to make visible the constructed nature of taxidermy by focusing on the representation of its deadness. Besides actively commenting on taxidermic practices, new taxidermy can highlight themes, such as loss, grief, longing, temporality, and the human-animal relationship. Considering that *Dead Animals with a Story* can be classified as a new taxidermy exhibition, it becomes an interesting endeavor to discover if *Dead Animals with a Story* can productively address the human-animal relationship, without reaffirming humanist notions of superiority. In other words, can the nine animals in *Dead Animals with a Story* be silent educators in the refiguring of the human-animal relationships? This is an important inquiry, because the objectification of animals through taxidermy within natural history museums has taken place over millennia, continuously reproducing harmful and anthropocentric discourses. New forms of taxidermy can contribute to a change in these narratives and create possibilities for future alterations in relation to our human-animal existence (Aloi 2018, 64). Stated differently, new forms of taxidermy can function as influential semantic points of access that can challenge anthropocentric conceptions of the human-animal relationship (Aloi 2018, 18). This further contributes to the importance of academic inquiry into new taxidermy exhibitions. Bearing this in mind, the following research question is posed: does the new taxidermy exhibition *Dead Animals with a Story* invite a reframing of pre-established social/cultural boundaries between the human and the non-human animal? To answer this research question, this paper will first briefly examine and indicate the complicated relationship of taxidermy and the human-animal relationship to outline what is at stake when examining taxidermy. Thereafter, a close examination of mourning, as a mechanism to rethink human-animal relationships will be highlighted to offer a framework for the analysis of the exhibition. Using this lens, the exhibition will be analyzed, and careful attention will be paid to its mise-en-scène and narration. At last, a conclusion is given.

2 Taxidermy and the Human-Animal Relationship

The human-animal relationship in taxidermy is a complicated and contested matter. It has long been theorized by several critics that taxidermy, no matter its refashioning, stands as a sign of human superiority and mastery (O'Key 2021, 644). On the one hand, this is engendered by taxidermy's ontological status as a human-based creation (Varela 2019, 299-300). By altering, preserving, and mounting animal skins to create lifelike idealized specimen, it is the taxidermist that controls the portrayal of these creatures. Ultimately, this renders the dead animal as passive, with no control over its own

representation. Furthermore, when these critters are eventually curated in museum dioramas, bell jars, or other exhibition spaces, the taxidermic scenes depicted are on numerous occasions rooted in dominant and anthropocentric tropes of the human-animal relationship, such as a relationship embedded in dominance over the non-human (Desmond 2016, 31-3). Furthermore, other common anthropocentric representations of taxidermy illustrate power relations, such as predator and prey, dominant and dominated, and the self and the other (Mondal 2017, 2). Ultimately, this widens the already existing gap between the human and the non-human. Both points allude to the human desire to order, control, and exhibit anthropocentric versions of animals and other life forms. This form of yearning to explain the natural world is fundamental to taxidermy (Poliquin 2012, 6).

As a human-made creation, anthropocentrism will without a doubt be an inherent part residing in the ontological status of taxidermy (Varela 2019, 301). However, more recently scholars are denoting that taxidermic animals have the potential to disrupt and challenge the anthropocentrism that resides within them. An author who has made a valuable contribution to this argument is Giovanni Aloi. According to Aloi:

> The matter is not so much whether these objects vacillate between the ontological status of natural or man-made, but that they essentially are commodities that can enable the retrieval of discursive formations, cultural conditions, practices, and power/knowledge relationships between humans and animals. (2018, 53)

In other words, as indicated by Aloi, taxidermic creatures have the potential to reclaim and restructure the naturalized discourses imposed on them. This shows that taxidermy is not a fixed phenomenon but can actively alter meaning. This is happening more often in modern taxidermy practices, such as botched taxidermy and new taxidermy, where discourses surrounding human mastery are actively challenged (Colvin 2016, 65). Instead of creating naturalized human-animal relationships, modern taxidermy can map multispecies intermingling by showing humans with animals and restructure hegemonic binaries between the human and non-human (65).

3 Entangled Mourning

One way of reframing dominant paradigms of the human-animal relationship resides in the ability of modern taxidermy to render taxidermic animals as subjects of mourning (Colvin 2016, 65). Through various means, taxidermy has the ability to yield taxidermy animals grievable. Before addressing these techniques, it is important to

denote the specific mourning addressed when thinking about mourning in relation to the non-human. Mourning is intrinsically seen as a human-centered phenomenon. Even though most humans spend their lives intermingled with various animals, humans hardly mourn for their deaths. In order to gain insight into this actuality, philosopher Thom van Dooren in his book *Flight Ways: Life and Loss at the Edge of Extinction* poses the question why, in a world marked by extinction and environmental disaster, humans hardly mourn non-humans (2014, 141). To answer this question, van Dooren states that mourning has a preoccupation with human exceptionality, in which humans feel superior to the non-human. This hierarchical way of thinking makes it difficult to mourn for other life forms (141). Therefore, van Dooren emphasizes that people must learn to mourn with non-human life forms, in order to create meaningful shared worlds (143-4). Donna Haraway in her book *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (2016) similarly emphasizes the importance of people learning to mourn with other life forms to establish valuable kinships. This form of mourning can be realized through the decentering of the human (Ryan 2017, 125). Decentering the human, according to Ryan is:

> not simply a turn from anthropocentrism to ecocentrism (from culture to nature), but rather a return to a sense of relationality between species as the essence of mourning. (127)

This shows that at the heart of mourning is the realization that the human and the non-human form entanglements that are inherently embodied, material, sensorial, and affective (126). As Stanescu beautifully states in the context of mourning and the non-human, mourning "is a way to make connections, of establishing kinship, and of recognizing the vulnerability and finitude of the other" (2012, 569). Mourning in this framework is an entangled and social process. It is attesting to a life, and realizing that we as humans are mixed, mingled, and meshed with the multiple other creatures that surround us. As previously stated, it has been theorized that modern taxidermy can elicit these particularities of mourning. By visibly showing the specificity of the death inflicted upon the animal, the taxidermy animal can be rendered as an individual subject to be mourned for (Colvin 2016, 65). Traditionally taxidermy as an epistemological tool emerged due to the desire of humans to classify animals into idealized species, not to create idiosyncrasies (Aloi 2018, 160). By recognizing the animal as an individual-embedded actor, it not only engages affective states of mourning, but it ultimately challenges the human-animal relationship. Furthermore, taxidermy has the potential to invoke mourning by emphasizing the value of the animal and the worldly entanglements between the human and non-human

(Colvin 2016, 70). In the following paragraphs, this essay will examine how the taxidermy exhibit *Dead Animals with a Story* engages mourning in order to rethink the human-animal relationship.

4 Electrocuted Fur, McFlurry Cups, and Duck Dinners

While visiting the exhibition *Dead Animals with a Story* it became prevalent that these bodies did something. They captivated and intrigued. It is therefore not surprising that the museum brochure describes the exhibition as an exposition you will never stop talking about. As mentioned, the exhibition consists of nine taxidermy animals carefully curated next to each other [fig. 1]. At least eight of these animals are represented as double dead, which means that the taxidermic creatures are dead and simultaneously appear to be dead. The representation of the animal's deadness is accentuated by their poses. For example, the taxidermy animal, called "Facemask gull" is represented lying on its back with light illuminating its body. This pose is reminiscent of the position of a deceased person in an open-casket funeral [fig. 2]. Ultimately, this way of displaying the animal, subverts the traditional formal qualities of taxidermy, where the animal appears life-like. As already mentioned in the introduction, this way of curating taxidermy creatures is called new taxidermy. These new taxidermy works, whether intentionally or not, reflexively challenge the history of taxidermy techniques, along with all their inserted meanings (Gregory, Purdy 2015, 78).

New taxidermy considers the biological materiality of the animal's skin to be an expressive potentiality that can express meaning (71). However, the skin on a taxidermy animal can only function as a powerful point of access when the authentic skin of the previous living animal is used. This is not necessarily unique to new taxidermy. As Jane Desmond has argued elsewhere, authenticity in all taxidermy relies upon using the genuine skin, feathers, and fur of the previously living critter. Desmond writes:

> Throughout this taxidermic process of dismemberment and reassembly, the presence of the animal's skin, and sometimes appendages such as claws, hooves, and tails, is absolutely essential. This outer covering is what meets our eye and it must never be fake. Soft tissues – eyes, nostrils, tongues – can be glass, wax, or plastic but only the actual skin of the animal will do. In the skin, in the "dermis" of taxidermy, lies its authenticating ingredient. (quoted in Gregory, Purdy 2015, 80)

Figure 1   Full exhibition on display, 2024. Rotterdam, Natural History Museum Rotterdam.
Author's photo, courtesy of Natural History Museum Rotterdam

Figure 2   Photograph of the "Facemask gull", 2024, NMR998900172803.
Rotterdam, Natural History Museum Rotterdam.
Author's photo, courtesy of Natural History Museum Rotterdam

In an instruction video posted on YouTube, taxidermist Ferry van Jaarsveld from the Natural History Museum of Rotterdam explains that the ethically sourced dead animals in *Dead Animals with a Story* are dismembered, stuffed, and restructured, yet their original skin and fur is always retained.[1] This does not only create an authentic taxidermy exhibition, but in *Dead Animals with a Story* this emphasizes an affective dimension prevalent in the exhibition. As explained, the taxidermy animals exhibited highlight the often unaddressed suffering of animals killed by the technologies of modern life and capitalist production. This unaddressed suffering is made visible for the spectator through the authentic preservation and showcasing of the animal's skin, that contains the trauma and pain inflicted on these animals, which eventually caused their deaths. This is most prevalent in the portrayal of the "Cern weasel 2", "Bridge pigeon", and the "Trauma gull". In the "Cern weasel 2", the electrocuted fur and the weasel's burned paws function as embodied traces to remind the spectator of the weasel's tragic death caused by the Large Hadron Collider in Geneva [fig. 3]. Similarly, the "Bridge pigeon", still retains the gaping hole in its fur that was caused by the descending Boerengat Bridge in Rotterdam [fig. 4]. In the "Trauma gull", when one looks closely physical scrapes from the collision with the trauma helicopter that caused the gull's death are still present on the body of the bird [fig. 5]. These embodied traces create both an affective response within the viewer and highlight the particularity of the animals that once lived. Ultimately, this leads to the possibility of rendering them as subjects that can be mourned for, instead of remaining passive, naturalized non-individuals.

Figure 3 Photograph of the "Cern weasel 2", 2024, NMR999000003507. Rotterdam, Natural History Museum Rotterdam. Author's photo, courtesy of Natural History Museum Rotterdam

1   OPEN Rotterdam (2020). "Dode dieren als hobby? Ferry doet het! Kunst en cultuur". *YouTube*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pW4C8PCLQ6w.

Figure 4 Photograph of the "Bridge pigeon", 2024. Rotterdam, Natural History Museum Rotterdam. Author's photo, courtesy of Natural History Museum Rotterdam

Figure 5 Photograph of the "Trauma gull", 2024, NMR998900003254. Rotterdam, Natural History Museum Rotterdam. Author's photo, courtesy of Natural History Museum Rotterdam

Besides making the visible traces of the animal's deaths explicit through their authentic skin, the exhibition uses cultural objects in the glass display to render the animals as subjects of mourning. An

important aspect of taxidermy is that the interpretation of taxidermic animals is dependent on the objects that are placed alongside each animal. In *Dead Animals with a Story* the taxidermy animals are framed alongside several cultural objects. The "Rubber band stork", for example, is placed alongside ingested rubber bands, which the stork mistook for worms, leading to the bird's death [fig. 6]. Another example includes the display of a McFlurry cup placed alongside the "McFlurry hedgehog" who became an unfortunate victim of careless littering, dying from starvation due to being trapped within a McFlurry lid [fig. 7]. Ultimately, these objects transpose the animals from a natural context to a profoundly cultural context. By creating these natural-material-cultural relationships, *Dead Animals with a Story* allows the viewer yet again to recognize the highly individualized particularities of the animals' deaths setting the stage for them to be mourned for. Furthermore, it grants the viewer a moment to think through the intimate entanglements between human-made objects and nonhuman beings in everyday interactions. It is these assemblages between the objects and the animals that engage the viewer in a series of considerations involving human and animal relationships.

Figure 6   Photograph of the "Rubber band stork", 2024, NMR998900006147. Rotterdam, Natural History Museum Rotterdam. Author's photo, courtesy of Natural History Museum Rotterdam

Figure 7 Photograph of the "McFlurry Hedgehog", 2024, NMR999000002576. Rotterdam, Natural History Museum Rotterdam. Author's photo, courtesy of Natural History Museum Rotterdam

Furthermore, the exhibition recognizes the value of the non-human animal by its potential to engender feelings of regret and accountability within the exhibition and the spectator. The language used within the exhibition, while mostly staying neutral in order to provide epistemological knowledge about the animals, echoes feelings of regret. Words, such as victim, tragic, and unfortunate within the exhibition captions of the taxidermy animals all point to feelings, such as regret and compassion, alluding to the recognition of the value of animal life. Similarly, the large backdrop behind the exhibitions crystallizes these same feelings. The taxidermy animals are accompanied by a mural painted with extinct mammoths, that gaze at the viewer. It is as if these mammoths speak to the viewer; recognize their value, and take accountability, before they end up like us, extinct. This form of highlighting accountability is once again accentuated by the glass display. The beauty of the glass display is the ability to transpose the reflection of the spectator into the exhibition. Here, it is the viewer that looks directly at them-, her-, or himself. While this can be read as the human imposing themselves yet again into the natural world, in the context of the affective domain of the exhibition the reflection elicits feelings of shame, guilt, and accountability. It is through the eliciting of these feelings and by highlighting the value of animal life, that the exhibition sets the stage for the animals to become creatures to be mourned for. In the aforementioned paragraphs, it became evident that *Dead Animals with a Story* can elicit mourning, through recognizing the animal as an embodied individual, highlighting the non-human animals value in the world, and by

emphasizing human and non-human intermingling and accountability. By eliciting feelings of mourning, the viewer is able to attest to these lives and recognize how the human and non-human are intrinsically entangled, therefore changing pre-established hegemonic binaries where human superiority reigns.

However, while some elements of the exhibition indeed actively dismantle the anthropocentric relationship between the human and the animal through eliciting mourning, other parts of the exhibition reaffirm its strong grip. This is most evident through the language use of the exhibition. While as previously stated most of the language use in the exhibition captions of the taxidermy animals is neutral and explanatory or even echoes feelings of guilt and accountability, some sentences exude anthropocentrism. An example of this is the caption of the "Facemask gull", which contains the following sentence:

> in itself, a road-killed herring gull is nothing special, but this bird got one of her legs entangled with the elastic band of a disposable facemask.

This points to a sense of human superiority and animal objectification. It is the human that decides whether or not the road-killed gull can be deemed special, while simultaneously rendering this specific taxidermy gull as 'lucky' to be included. This overall language use also alludes to the dominant cultural desensitized attitude to the sight of road-killed animals (Monahan 2016, 154). Another example in which human superiority is reaffirmed through language is prevalent in the caption of the "Homosexual necrophiliac duck". According to the director of The Natural History of Rotterdam Kees Moeliker (2001), this duck was the first victim of homosexual necrophilia in the mallard. The duck died by colliding into the glass window of the Natural History Museum of Rotterdam, where after dying the duck was raped by another duck. Each year on June 5th the duck is commemorated during Dead Duck Day. A day on which people engage in productive conversation to prevent glass-bird collisions. What happens after these conversations echoes tragic irony. The full caption reads as follows:

> Each year on June 5th, at 5'55" PM, a short open-air ceremony called Dead Duck Day takes place under the glass façade of the museum, at the exact spot where the duck lost its life. The homosexual necrophiliac duck is commemorated and methods for preventing collisions between birds and glass are discussed. Afterwards, a six course duck dinner is offered at Tai Wu, Mauritsweg 24. All are welcome! (Natural History Museum Rotterdam 2013)

This is quite the contradictory passage. While the creation of an open-air ceremony to prevent collisions between glass and birds

alludes to the productive action established for animal suffering, the six-course duck dinner represents the ducks as mere commodities. This language pushes the viewer that reads the caption out of an embedded interaction with the animals on display towards the dominant anthropocentric worldview that animals live in service of the human. Both of these examples point to a linguistic anthropocentrism that has become extremely invasive specifically in the English language, where dominance over the non-human is asserted through language (Fill 2015, 182).

5   Conclusion

The complicated human-animal relationship implied in taxidermy has illustrated taxidermy's double-sided nature. On the one hand, taxidermy's ontological status as well as the ways in which these animals are displayed, reside in anthropocentric paradigms of the human-animal relationship. However, taxidermy and more specifically modern taxidermy, such as new taxidermy, has the ability to restructure and challenge these dominant frameworks. Ultimately, this elicits certain questions. Can all new taxidermy exhibitions invite a reframing of the human-animal relationship? If so, how? What is ultimately at stake? By zooming into and analyzing the new taxidermy exhibition in The Natural History Museum of Rotterdam *Dead Animals with a Story* this essay has tried to answer some of these questions. On close examination, it becomes prevalent that the exhibition *Dead Animals with a Story* holds space for mourning. By granting the taxidermy animals subjectivity and individuality, by recognizing human and non-humans shared entanglements, by acknowledging the value of animals, and creating a space for the spectator to be held accountable for animal suffering, the exhibition sets the stage for these animals to be deemed grievable. Ultimately, this points to the potentiality of the exhibition to reshape pre-established social and cultural boundaries between the human and the animal, where human superiority and extraordinary rule. However, through the language use of the exhibition it became prevalent that the human is not fully dethroned from its position of superiority, which was illustrated by the examples of the invasive nature of linguistic anthropocentrism in the exhibition.

Pitfalls of the analysis point to what Poliquin already denoted when talking about taxidermy that: "The subject is simply too broad, too nuanced, and too detailed to discuss in full" (2012, 9). To better understand the exhibition, further research can examine the long history of taxidermy itself and the Natural History Museum as an active stakeholder in shaping meaning. Furthermore, the lens of mourning allowed to examine the exhibition through one specific affective

angle to rethink the human and animal relationship. However, each experience of mourning, even for the non-human is unique and highly shaped by social, cultural, historical, and political factors, which need to be considered in further research.

Still, *Dead Animals with a Story* suggests that these animals were in fact members of our society who were left in the display to call upon the human to mourn the mounted. Perhaps then, we can recognize that humans and animals share an entangled world and create valuable kinships of care.

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Slow Violence, Sacrifice, and Survival: Environmental Catastrophe as (Eco)Feminist Freedom in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Holly Nelson
University of Michigan, USA

Abstract   In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Zora Neale Hurston makes visible 'slow violence' and 'sacrifice zones' to establish a feminist future for her protagonist, Janie. The novel shows a fictional rendering of the 1928 Okeechobee Hurricane, a storm that Janie survives. In this article, the Author contends that Janie's survival of the storm – her surmounting of 'slow violence' and bypassing of sacrifice in the 'sacrifice zone' – emboldens her to overcome patriarchal violence at the novel's conclusion. Hurston expresses a gendered writer-activism critiquing not only environmental racism, but the intersectional battles of Black women experiencing environmental and patriarchal violence.

Keywords   Ecofeminism. Slow violence. Sacrifice zones. Intersectionality. African American Studies. Harlem Renaissance. Ecocriticism.

Summary   1 Introduction. – 2 Theory and Methods. – 3 Analysis and Discussion: 'The Muck'. – 4 Analysis and Discussion: The Storm and Janie's Survival. – 5 Conclusion.

1 Introduction

What does survival look like in the face of environmental catastrophe? This paper examines Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* through the contemporary theoretical frameworks of 'slow violence' and 'sacrifice zones', as outlined by Rob Nixon and Ryan Juskus. Many scholars, such as literary critic Mary Jane Lupton, agree that Hurston's novel is, foremost, a story of survival, in which Hurston's protagonist, Janie Crawford, overcomes toxic masculinity in her three romantic relationships and asserts freedom for herself (Lupton 1982, 47). But what if we add the environment to the equation? The novel is also a fictional rendering of the 1928 Okeechobee Hurricane, an actual historical travesty that disproportionately affected the Black community living in Belle Glade, Florida, better known in the novel as 'the muck', a muddy space in which laborers harvested vegetables for profit (Hurston 2006, 131). Importantly, Janie survives the storm, allowing an ecofeminist message to arise. Janie supersedes the hurricane, much like she overcomes her three toxic relationships in the novel. Through Janie's survival, her ability to surmount the storms in her life, both physically and metaphorically, Hurston puts the power in the hands of the female. Reading the text, and the story of survival, through the lenses of slow violence and sacrifice invites fresh insights about Janie's survival. Janie is already a victim of patriarchal violence – a theme the novel traces enough – but the addition of environmental violence that explicitly targets the Black Floridian community creates the effect of a one-two-punch. While Janie must overcome patriarchy to truly be free, she must too supersede slow violence and bypass sacrifice. In this manner, Hurston adds a third layer to the intersectional battles Black women encounter – one distinctly tied to the environment. Through Janie's survival, Hurston ultimately establishes a feminist future for Janie, one only made possible by transcending violence, on both patriarchal and environmental fronts.

2 Theory and Methods

This essay engages with contemporary environmental theory and feminist scholarship and, chiefly, how these otherwise disparate fields might converge. Kimberlé Crenshaw's pioneering concept of 'intersectionality' is of utmost importance to this essay. As Crenshaw defines it, intersectionality refers to the "double bind of race and gender", in which overlapping identities (in Crenshaw's case, race and gender) intensify the discrimination one encounters (Crenshaw 2004). In a similar spirit, this essay also follows literary critic John Claborn's proposition for an 'intersectional ecocriticism', an

intersection of ecology and environments. In his book *Civil Rights and the Environment in African-American Literature, 1845-1941*, Claborn argues that

> identities are forged out of their historical, structural, and (for the ecocritic) environmental embeddedness. It is when one becomes conscious of these interlocking oppressions that identity becomes a politics. (Claborn 2017, 11)

This essay concerns Janie's 'environmental embeddedness' as a Back laborer in the muck, in addition to her positionality as a woman. In Hurston's novel, Janie encounters both racial and gendered forms of oppression. She is a victim of environmental discrimination – especially slow violence, as the Author will explore further – as a member of the Black community living in the Everglades. Janie additionally suffers the fate of being a woman in the novel's time and place, facing ill treatment from her three male lovers throughout the novel.

Widely contested in the critical scholarship is just how much agency Janie truly has. Is *Their Eyes Were Watching God* a feminist text, or not? Compared to some of Hurston's other female characters, such as Daisy, the "town vamp" of Hurston's 1930 play *De Turkey and de Law*, or the women who face abuse in Hurston's 1926 "The Eatonville Anthology", the Author maintains that Janie has a solid amount of self-determination (Hurston 2008, 134). Lupton argues in her aptly titled "Zora Neale Hurston and the Survival of the Female" that the novel is "a novel of life, power and survival", a camp the Author stands by, for the most part (Lupton 1982, 47). Mary Helen Washington, on the contrary, argues that *Their Eyes Were Watching God* "represents women's exclusion from power" (Washington 2000, 27). One example of this "exclusion" is Janie's initial exploration of her "growing maturity", her growth and development as a woman mediated at the hands of men (29). As Washington argues, with reference to the pear tree representing sexuality from the novel's opening chapters:

> Janie's image of herself as a blossom waiting to be pollinated by a bee transforms her figuratively and literally into the space in which men's action may occur. She waits for an answer and the answer appears in the form of two men, both of whom direct Janie's life and the action of the plot. (30)

Even though Janie attempts to claim sexual agency for herself, and evolve into womanhood by her own conviction, her course is ultimately determined by "every man's wish", as it were (Hurston 2006, 1). While just one instance of the perverse agency Janie encounters, Janie's "status as an object" (which, the men speaking about Janie on the Eatonville storefront porch amplify) remains persistent throughout

the novel (Washington 2000, 30). Washington's framing of 'Janie-as-object' also follows the line of thinking proposed by Jennifer Jordan, who argues that, contrary to what many critics think, the novel is not a "black feminist" text; ultimately, Janie's "struggle for identity and self-direction remains stymied" (Jordan 1988, 108). For Jordan, the novel rather "exposes the domestic bliss of middle-class America as an empty dream", which, the Author might add, situates Hurston's novel in a wider context of tragedy and American modernism, chiming with the rhetoric of Francis Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* or even William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (108). In any event, for Washington and Jordan, Janie is not as free as she might appear on the surface. Perhaps there is room for nuance, however. While Jordan and Washington's assertions are entirely valid, and Janie's agency is slippery at best, the Author believes that the environmental framing, and slow violence, especially, provides a window through which to examine the power Janie truly holds in the novel. Inserting the Author himself into the debate, the Author considers in this essay how Janie overcomes the narrative obstacles rooted in patriarchy (as outlined by Washington and Jordan) and eventually achieves that 'power and survival', returning to Lupton, but only by first overcoming slow violence.

It will be useful to spell out exactly what the Author means by 'slow violence' at the start of this essay. Foremost, the laborers in Hurston's novel emerge as victims of environmental racism, what sociologist Robert Bullard considers

> any policy, practice or directive that differentially affects or disadvantages (where intended or unintended) individuals, groups or communities based on race. (Bullard 1993, 23)

Environmental racism springs from slow violence, a term that literary critic Rob Nixon pioneers in his influential *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. For Nixon, slow violence is a drawn-out, seemingly invisible process in which "different kinds of disaster produce unequal heft" (Nixon 2011, 3). These 'disasters', such as the hurricane in Hurston's novel, are "slow moving and long in the making", the product of governmental policies that inflict harm on "disposable" – often historically marginalized – populations (4). To "make visible" the slow violence that Janie must overcome, as Nixon would wish, Hurston presents a fictional account of the 1928 storm (5). In this case, Hurston blurs "the boundaries of ethnography and fiction", as both a novelist and anthropologist herself (Fassin 2014, 1). Retroactively advancing Nixon's call, Hurston makes visible slow violence in a gendered dimension.

It is important to mention that literary critic Daniel Spoth, in his article "Slow Violence and the (Post)Southern Disaster Narrative", already identifies that Janie, Tea Cake, and the other inhabitants of

the muck are victims of slow violence. This essay expands Spoth's analysis by considering Hurston's intersectionality as a feminist-writer-activist, showing how slow violence emboldens Janie to claim her (feminist) freedom at long last. Spoth uses Nixon's framework to challenge the "myth of the embedded Southerner" that has persisted in Southern fiction critical scholarship (Spoth 2015, 145). The "embedded Southerner" refers to the idea that Southern subjects, despite opportunities to venture away from home, "nonetheless choose the simple comforts of the local over the wide world" (145). Hurston's novel "deconstructs" the "premises" of the "embedded Southerner" (146-7). As Spoth argues, in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

> The land itself becomes as disposable as its residents following the hurricane; deprived of their means of making a living in the Everglades, the surviving workers – including Janie and Tea Cake – simply move elsewhere. In contrast to literary narratives of stability and stasis that often link the people of the South irrevocably to their landscapes, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* represents this same link as tenuous and able to be swiftly severed. (151)

For Spoth, slow violence invites new avenues for thinking about Southern fiction – the mobility of bodies becomes inextricably tied to their disposability. When intersecting with slow violence, the "multicultural, migratory South" extant in the critical scholarship displays that "the more unmoored and liberated the historical subject becomes, the more opportunity for that subject to become disposable" (152). Despite the dispensability of Black bodies both in both Hurston's novel and the actual historical event of the hurricane, adding intersectionality to the mix shows us that a kind of female survival from the 'dispensability' inherent in the slow violence – at least for Janie – is a possibility.

The hurricane's disproportionate effects on the Black community, in both life and death, also invite us to read the muck also as a 'sacrifice zone', a term proposed by scholar Ryan Juskus (Juskus 2023, 1).[1] As Juskus contends, "sacrifice zones" are "semi-industrial areas… where a dangerous and sometimes lethal brand of racial and economic discrimination persists" (12). In them, "environmental harms are disproportionately concentrated" (20).

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[1] Juskus forthrightly states that a 'sacrifice zone' is a corrective of Nixon's 'slow violence' (specifically, a more optimistic iteration of 'slow violence' that values a "pursuit of life" over "hatred of one's enemies" (Juskus 2023, 21). The Author thinks both terms work together in Hurston's novel. The muck is a localized place that becomes a site of sacrifice for the Black people who live, labor, and die there. The muck's inhabitants, however, are still victims of slow violence, as the poor state planning of the "racialized space" indicates (Parrish 2016, 245).

Hurston's novel differs in part from the framework Juskus provides but retains its core tenets. Juskus conceptualizes sacrifice in terms of industries destroying sacred spaces or wielding toxic effects on land. The muck, which the storm eventually overtakes, is the workers' final resting place, the site of sacrifice. Juskus maintains that

> environmental injustice is better theorized as 'slow sacrifice', a political ecology of life and death, the goal of which is to concentrate death in some places so that other places might experience full, sustainable life. (3)

"Concentrat[ing] death" in the space where the Black people work, the muck is clearly a sacrifice zone. Although Janie faces 'slow sacrifice' in the presence of the storm, she can bypass this sacrifice and stake out her freedom, because she ultimately survives. Hurston's exposition of slow violence and the sacrifice zone, then, stresses the magnitude of what Janie must – and, indeed, does – overcome to truly become free. Hurston consequently leaves restorative potential for Janie's survival – a distinctly female survival.

3   Analysis and Discussion: 'The Muck'

The first obstacle Janie must overcome to achieve her freedom is the slow violence and sacrifice present in the muck, where she spends her days near the end of the novel. Hurston presents the muck, at its inception, as a space of possibility and hope for the Black community inhabiting it. But what, exactly, is the muck? Janie and her lover, Tea Cake, travel to the muck – a muddy, agricultural space in the Everglades – in search of economic opportunity (Hurston 2006, 191). As Spoth argues, this area "represent[s] autonomy and financial security for themselves and the other migrants" (Spoth 2015, 148). Here, then, the physical and built environments converge. The line between nature and culture becomes ever more elusive in this space; the natural world (the muck) helps culture (the people, their capital gain) thrive. Tea Cake describes the muck as a space where

> dey raise all dat cane and string-beans and tomatuhs. Folks don't do nothin' down dere but make money and fun and foolishness. (Hurston 2006, 128)

All the muck's workers are Black, and they perform agricultural labor – picking beans, specifically – by hand. And the land is perfect for cultivation; Janie considers the ground

so rich that everything went wild. Volunteer cane just taking the place. Dirt roads so rich and black that a half mile of it would have fertilized a Kansas wheat field. (Hurston 2006, 129)

The earth, both 'rich' and 'black' (not unlike the people who labor there) is bountiful for the workers, who came "from east, west, north, and south" (Hurston 2006, 131). These "hoards" of workers traveled to Florida, full of "hopeful humanity", to start their lives anew. Hurston's third person narrator describes these people as "chugging onto the muck", personifying the very machines they will soon become as they pick beans and make easy money. Hurston also identifies the workers with the land, on which they depend their livelihoods; the rich, black earth – and, consequently, its economic potential – is "clinging" to the workers, subsuming their identities (131). Hurston, too, romanticizes the muck by calling it "wild", which, for Claborn, calls to mind the nineteenth-century novel, the bogs trod by Heathcliff and Cathy in *Wuthering Heights* (Claborn 2017, 105). The muck, as a swamp community, is also an example of what literary critic Steve Mentz calls "brown", an ecocritical allegory (Mentz 2014, 193). In an "ecotheory beyond green", Mentz proposes that 'brown', even though it is a color that we might find unpleasant, is crucial to ecocriticism. For Mentz, 'brown' represents "the color of intimate and uncomfortable contact between human bodies and the nonhuman world", which is exactly what Hurston illustrates with the workers (human bodies) identifying themselves with their labors on the muck (the nonhuman world) (193). "Swamps" (brown) too are "sources of food, fuel, and other biotic matter" for all kinds of living organisms, despite their unattractive outward appearance (199). While sticky and unpleasant on the surface, the 'brown' muck is a source of life and restoration for the people who live and labor there.

An example of this 'life' and 'restoration' is Hurston's presentation of the muck as a space of celebration, even a multicultural utopia. Accompanying the Black community on the muck are Indigenous Floridians, Caribbean immigrant workers, and poor white people. Importantly, as Claborn contends, Hurston infuses the muck with symbolic meaning; it is an elusive space where the social order melts away, at least in part. Claborn argues that

the swamp also becomes a site that combines multiethnic solidarity with – albeit modest – forms of ecological agency. (Claborn 2017, 105)

This 'solidarity' – and agency, through which the laborers become witness to their own pleasure – is best exhibited at the end of the long work day, in which the workers spend their evenings "dancing", "laughing", and "singing", without a care in the world (Hurston 2006, 131).

The muck is a place in which the laborers can build their lives, take delight in their day-to-day experiences, and secure prosperous futures for themselves.

Despite its potential for economic prosperity, the muck is, ultimately, a site of environmental catastrophe, the result of a pervasive slow violence (Nixon 2011, 5). The novel concludes with a devastating act of God, a hurricane that kills most of the (predominantly Black) workers living in the muck, a distinctly "racialized space" (Parrish 2016, 245). Black workers in Belle Glade – the real-life muck – were hit the hardest by the storm due to improper state planning of the lakefront region. As journalist Eliot Kleinberg narrates in his book *Black Cloud: The Great Florida Hurricane of 1928*, state planners built a cheap (and improperly and unsafely constructed) dam around Lake Okeechobee and encouraged settlement there. Most of these settlers, accounting for "at least half of the more than 8,000 people living in the towns around the big lake", were Black people, many of whom were migrant farmers, like Hurston's characters (Kleinberg 2003, 15).[2] In any case, while the storm itself is a quick, momentary event (which is *not* slow violence, by Nixon's terms), slow violence (such as government policies, encouragement of predominantly Black settlement in the muck by state planners) created the conditions for the hurricane (the 'disaster', as Nixon would put it) to wreak particular, localized havoc on the Black community in the muck, a kind of violence that Janie must eventually supersede.

4 Analysis and Discussion: The Storm and Janie's Survival

Janie's survival of the storm preempts her ability to overcome patriarchy at the end of the novel. First, Hurston describes the storm in masculine terms to symbolize Janie's survival of both patriarchal and environmental aggression, perhaps an intersectional amendment to Nixon's slow violence concept. Nixon writes that

> the narrative imaginings of writer-activists may thus offer us a different kind of witnessing: of sights unseen. (Nixon 2011, 15)

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[2]   It is important to note that the Seminole community, who also occupied the muck, were the first to leave when they discovered a storm was brewing; as one man says, "going to high ground. Saw-grass bloom. Hurricane coming" (Hurston 2006, 154). Here, Hurston exposes a knowledge gap between the Indigenous epistemologies of the land's original inhabitants and the workers who emigrated to work in the muck. In fact, the Indigenous knowledge supersedes slow violence, at least in part, because it overcomes the 'improper state planning' in the region – the Seminole people could, at the very least, physically remove themselves from the disaster.

Reading slow violence in Hurston's novel emboldens us to witness 'sights unseen'; the intersectional battles against Black women that include a discrimination tied to the environment. When the storm finally hits, "it woke up old Okeechobee and the monster began to roll in his bed" (Hurston 2006, 158). The storm eventually intensifies, "and the lake got madder and madder with only its dikes between them and him", returning to the poor construction Kleinberg outlines (Hurston 2006, 159). As the narrator states,

> The monstropolous beast had left his bed… He seized hold of his dikes and ran forward until he met the quarters; uprooted them like grass and rushed on after his supposed to-be conquerors, rolling the dikes, rolling the houses, rolling the people in the houses along with other timbers. The sea was walking the earth with a heavy heel. (Hurston 2006, 206)

Hurston personifies the lake as a male embodiment, a supernatural, masculine 'monster' and 'beast' that relentlessly 'rolls' and overtakes everything in sight. Claborn argues that

> This personification of the storm inadvertently underscores its tendency to amplify or exploit inequities already established by Jim Crow, segregation, and the legacy of slavery. (Claborn 2017, 15)

The Author is interested in how the storm's personification as male "amplif[ies] or exploit[s]" inequalities against women, raising the feminist stakes.

For one, nature in literature is usually personified as female, yet Hurston's writing here is subversive of that norm. Art historian and critic Suzaan Boettger outlines in her article "In the Missionary Position" that women, "across time and cultures", have been symbolically associated with nature – and all its irrationality and unpredictability – and men with culture (Boettger 1994, 251-3). To this end, nature in art, literature, and culture is often represented as Mother Nature, who is both life-giving – connecting to the woman's ability to procreate – but all the same, has the power to destroy. By describing the storm as *masculine*, however, Hurston subverts the nature/culture paradigm and raises the stakes for what Janie can overcome. Hurston therefore presents an ecofeminist message: Janie overcomes the storm, much like she overcomes the toxic relationships in the novel. The storm, who grows "madder and madder" as he rolls through the landscape of the muck, is not unlike Janie's three romantic interests, who mistreat Janie in the text (Hurston 2006, 159). To this point, the storm is an iteration of what literary critic Margaret Cohen considers "white water", the kind of water that symbolizes "the deadly power of the violent and dangerous forces harbored by waterside spaces fully unleashed" (Cohen 2006, 656-7).

For Cohen, white water is "not only a dangerous space but a dangerous time, a representation of time as crisis" (658). It carries "the impending threat of death", a reality Janie had to face in her romantic relationships (658). Overcoming the masculine-coded storm sets the stage for Janie to stake out her own survival against the patriarchal violence she suffers throughout the novel.

Crucially, the storm's masculine connotation also takes on a divine dimension; Hurston underscores how the storm happens at the hand of *God*, another male embodiment. Janie, however, does not entirely resign herself to God's destructive capabilities; she converses with – and even questions – God after the storm and therefore begins to assert survival in the patriarchal landscape. As Janie ruminates on the storm after it passes, she looks "hard at the sky" and interrogates God:

> Somewhere up there beyond blue ether's bosom sat He. Was He noticing what was going on around here? He must be because He knew everything. Did He *mean* to do this thing to Tea Cake and her? It wasn't anything she could fight. She could only ache and wait…Her arms went up in a desperate supplication for a minute. It wasn't exactly pleading, it was asking questions. (Hurston 2006, 178; emphasis in the original)

Janie displays a sort of ambivalence toward God; her mind grows increasingly free and less willing to submit to masculine authorities. She questions God, but she does not necessarily succumb to him. She puts up her arms in 'a desperate supplication', but only 'for a minute'. Janie does not stoop to 'pleading' with God, but rather, asks 'questions'. Janie sees herself as someone who can converse with God, someone perhaps on the same level as him. Janie's equal footing with God reflects, at least in part, Hurston's own connection to "African American freethought", the rejection of theodicy and the belief that "there was likely no just God looking out for [the] interests" of Black people, who experienced so much suffering (Cameron 2016, 237). Hurston herself was a doubter of Christian religion, and this doubt penetrates her text, consciously or not (241). While Janie does not fight God, and 'could only ache and wait', which parallels her resignation in her relationships with Logan Killicks, Joe Stoddard, and Tea Cake, she does not completely give up questioning. While the storm, which God enables to happen, is another form of male power against Janie, albeit a divine one, Janie nevertheless creeps toward a metaphorical survival in her refusal to surrender fully to God.

Despite this glimpse at survival, however, even in death do the ramifications of slow violence persist. If slow violence "might well include forms of structural violence", according to Nixon, structural racism persists in the aftermath of the storm (Nixon 2011, 11). In Hurston's fictional retelling of the event, Tea Cake must "clear the

wreckage in public places and bury the dead", but Black bodies are sacrificed to make space for memorializing the few white people who perished (Hurston 2006, 170). The white people are to receive coffins while, for the Black people, Tea Cake must "sprinkle plenty quick-lime over 'em and cover 'em up" (171). As the inspector instructs Tea Cake,

> don't lemme ketch none uh y'all dumpin' white folks, and don't be wastin' no boxes on colored. (171)

This horrifying passage chimes with the historical context of the work. Kleinberg contends that while white Floridians received proper burials, Black victims were tossed in a trench at the "informal black cemetery" (Kleinberg 2003, 228). Ultimately, Black muck workers are expendable. They do not receive proper burials due to structural racism that privileges white bodies. Claborn considers this moment an instance of the "cycles of environmental inequities" that permeate Hurston's narrative (Claborn 2017, 13). Here, too, is where Mentz's 'brown' ecology takes on a grim, deadly dimension. As Mentz writes, "brown ecology describes a melancholy insight, that the living can never escape mixture with the nonliving" (Mentz 2014, 206). The muck after the storm becomes a "great expanse of water like lakes – water full of things living and dead" (Hurston 2006, 165). In life and in death, the Black laborers are connected to the muck; the dead bodies and the living bodies intersect in the swampy space. In this burial scene, or lack thereof, Hurston makes visible slow violence yet again – as a kind of structural violence, here – a violence nearly impossible for Black characters to overcome. Yet perhaps we can consider Janie's survival of the storm as another kind of 'life' imbued within the *mélange* of 'living and dead'. It is by the storm's very destruction that opens the door for Janie to embark on a future of liberation.

While the storm is destructive, it empowers Janie to stake out a feminist future for herself. At the novel's conclusion, Janie shoots, and kills, Tea Cake, who attempts to bite her while in a rabid episode, after being bitten himself by a wild dog during the storm (184). Janie's shooting of Tea Cake is crucial to her survival of patriarchal dominance; Tea Cake abuses Janie both physically and emotionally throughout the text, and she must kill him to become free. When Janie ends up on trial for murder, the jury sets her "free", from literal imprisonment and her abusive relationship with Tea Cake (188). Importantly, Janie does not take credit for killing Tea Cake; rather, she claims that the storm – and the slow violence/sacrifice embedded within it – did. As Janie plans Tea Cake's burial, she "wanted him out of the way of storms" since "the 'Glades and its waters had killed him" (Hurston 2006, 189). For Janie, if not for stormy "waters", Tea Cake never would have encountered the rabid dog that bit him. Absolving herself of killing Tea Cake and framing him instead as a casualty of a

flawed system of slow violence, Janie presses on toward her freedom.

The next step toward achieving her freedom is Janie's ability to resist – or, at the very least, counteract – the slow violence against the Black Floridian community by giving Tea Cake a proper burial and venerating his otherwise victimized body. Different from the Black bodies strewn about the muck after the storm, the lucky ones sprinkled with quick-lime, Tea Cake

> slept royally on his white silken couch among the roses [Janie] had bought. (Hurston 2006, 189)

His friends surround him at his burial; they "filled up and overflowed" a parade of sedans toward his grave (189). Further, "the band played, and Tea Cake rode like a Pharaoh to his tomb", painting Tea Cake as a regal figure and venerating his sacrifice (189).

In the face of collective violence, Hurston offers us a moment of collective renewal and the possibility of resistance to slow (and structural) violence. While Black bodies were formerly cast aside, the Black body now becomes the center of attention, a site of veneration and remembrance. Washington writes that Tea Cake "exists in death in a far more mythical and exalted way than in life", which, vitally, is at the hand of Janie (Washington 2000, 36). She preserves his memory in such a way that counters the slow violence that attempted to hold him inferior. Now that Tea Cake is officially sent to the afterlife, and the nail is in the coffin (both literally and figuratively), Janie now holds the freedom to stake out possibilities for herself and become a witness to her own, personal self-determination.

In order to truly be free, however, Janie must ultimately flee the sacrifice zone; only then can she no longer be a victim of slow violence. That does not mean Janie does not experience a kind of 'solastalgia' in her departure from the muck, and her consequent departure from Tea Cake. Finding her freedom, then, is not an entirely pleasant time for Janie. Philosopher and environmentalist Glenn Albrecht defines 'solastalgia' as

> The pain or distress caused by the loss or lack of solace and the sense of desolation connected to the present state of one's home and territory. It is the lived experience of negative environmental change. It is the homesickness you have when you are still at home. (Albrecht 2019, 200)

Janie feels a 'homesickness' for her relationship with Tea Cake, which she mourns alongside the environmental distress. In her lived experience of negative environmental change, Janie experiences 'pain' and 'distress', not only at her 'sense of desolation' connected to the muck, which was her 'home and territory' for the time being. She also mourns

the loss of Tea Cake. Hurston captures this sentiment in her final description of the muck, in which she intertwines patriarchal and environmental violence. Janie plans her departure from the muck because

> the muck meant Tea Cake and Tea Cake wasn't there. So it was just a great expanse of black mud. (Hurston 2006, 191)

Tea Cake is emblematic of patriarchal violence and the muck, now a space of desolation, is an object of environmental violence. Janie must leave the muck, then, to fully assert her freedom from these two closely connected bodies. The muck, once an ideal space of possibility and simultaneously the site of slow violence and sacrifice, is now nothing but 'black mud', devoid of its symbolic power. Returning to *Prismatic Ecology*, Levi R. Bryant argues that "black" (in terms of ecology) "has connotations of despair and abandonment, fitting for...the ecological circumstances we find ourselves in today" (Bryant 2014, 291). 'Black' also, fittingly, "draws attention to issues of race, minoritization, and second- and third-world countries, underlining how these groups are often disproportionately affected by climate change" (Bryant 2014, 291). The 'black' swamp, existing now on its own terms, is a melancholy reminder of the sacrifice Janie's community endured. The space is now haunted by the memory of Tea Cake, but also by the slow violence that, despite the many lives it took, remains invisible. In Bryant's terms, the 'black' "presents an image of the universe that is indifferent to our existence", an extension of the policies that crafted the conditions for slow violence in the first place, or even Tea Cake's feelings toward Janie, to push the symbolism even further (291). It becomes imperative, then, that Janie flee the space altogether, physically distancing herself from the space of environmental catastrophe (the muck). Only then can Janie at last claim freedom for herself.

Janie leaves the muck at the end of the novel and returns to Eatonville, finding her freedom at long last. The novel's final words are especially indicative of the freedom Janie now has. Even in the fact of death, Janie has now achieved a liberation – perhaps even a rebirth – that stands separate from patriarchal violence. Literary critic Iain Twiddy writes in his 2012 book, *Pastoral Elegy in Contemporary British and Irish Poetry*, that in elegy, "death is natural...in line with the season pattern and rebirth" (Twiddy 2012, 4). Taking a cue from Twiddy, we might read the conclusion of Hurston's novel as an elegy, in and of itself, an elegy to the old way of life, in which patriarchy reigns dominant. If we consider death as 'rebirth', the storm and the death that ensues causes Janie to be reborn, rebirthed, into a feminist future. In the novel's iconic closing passage, Janie

> pulled in her horizon like a great fish-net...so much of life in its meshes! She called in her soul to come and see. (Hurston 2006, 193)

Of course, the novel begins with the line "ships at a distance have every man's wish on board...they sail forever on the horizon" (1).

The opening passage prefigures that men will reign dominant in the novel, an idea that Janie subverts in her own ability to claim freedom at the text's conclusion. The horizon that once held the wishes of men now belongs to Janie. And, perhaps most vitally, Janie's claiming of nature's horizon also displays a mastery over the environment and the power it holds, what Boettger might consider an "assertive act" that challenges the nature/culture gender binary (Boettger 1994, 248). While almost a victim of environmental catastrophe, Janie overcomes this violence by assuming a kind of agency over the natural world. No longer will men *or* the environment determine her course of action; Janie is now the guide to her own life. Having survived many storms, both physical and metaphorical, throughout her journey, Janie is now free to claim her own horizon and "pull in" a new future. Hurston therefore envisions a feminist future for Janie, one that hinges on the Black woman's survival of both patriarchy and racially targeted environmental distress (Hurston 2006, 193).

5 Conclusion

Hurston shows us that Black female survival is made possible, even in the wake of environmental catastrophe. The words 'freedom' and 'free' appear twenty-two times in the novel, underscoring the importance of freedom to Janie's journey. Janie finally achieves that freedom and survival – what Lupton calls "the survival of the female" so crucial to the novel – post-storm (Lupton 1982, 52). Although Janie is a victim of patriarchal violence in her romantic relationships, and environmental violence as a laborer in the muck, Janie's survival of the storm emboldens her to survive patriarchy, too, and ultimately stake out freedom for herself. While Janie encounters "exclusion from power" throughout the novel, Hurston importantly reclaims agency for Janie, at the text's conclusion, which her survival of the storm preempts (Washington 2000, 27). Hurston is indeed a 'writer-activist' for the Black Floridian community upon which she writes, by exposing the slow violence these people encountered and framing them as victims of slow sacrifice. In this manner, Hurston emerges as a feminist-writer-activist, who makes visible slow violence to bring attention to the intersectional battles of Black women like Janie, who are victims of patriarchal violence and environmental racism. In the end, while not all-encompassing, slow violence and sacrifice, as critical frameworks, offer new possibilities for understanding Janie's survival. Janie fundamentally can surmount storms both physical and metaphorical in her life, *en route* toward a liberatory future.

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Seeing beyond the Anthropocene with Joyce and Beckett

Michael Kane
Technological University Dublin, Ireland

Abstract   This article suggests that the literary works of James Joyce and Samuel Beckett may offer a means of 'seeing beyond the Anthropocene'. A close look at Joyce's "The Dead" and the "Proteus" and "Penelope" episodes of *Ulysses* as well as at Beckett's play *Endgame* and other works will show how these writers' distinct ways of looking at the world, and the life and death of mortal human beings, provide radical critiques of (and perhaps alternatives to) anthropocentric idealism. Their insights are still highly relevant today as the ecological crisis demands a fundamental reorientation of the (post) human relationship with the earth.

Keywords   James Joyce. Samuel Beckett. Anthropocene. Ecology. Posthuman.

Summary   1 Introduction. – 2 Learning 'Wavespeech'. – 3 The Beginning of the Endgame. – 4 Conclusion.

1   Introduction

One often thinks of James Joyce as a writer who focused on the urban environment of Dublin around 1900 and of Samuel Beckett as a playwright of 'the absurd' whose works are characteristically set in no particular place or recognisable environment at all. The distinct perspectives of both writers, however, arguably anticipate two of the future scenarios envisaged in the contemporary imagination as humanity hovers between visions of apocalyptic environmental disaster and visions of a new, green, environmentally friendly way of life. Recent broadly ecocritical discussions of the writings of both Joyce[1] and Beckett[2] have drawn attention to the relevance of aspects of their works to contemporary ecological concerns. This essay will assemble readings of texts such as "The Dead", episodes of *Ulysses*, and *Endgame*, drawing on these discussions and earlier commentaries (e.g. Adorno 2000; Ellmann 1974) to reveal how these twentieth century Irish writers did indeed prophetically 'see beyond the Anthropocene'.

If the Anthropocene has come to be widely understood as the modern era in which the very geological make-up of the planet has been fundamentally altered by human activity (Lewis, Maslin 2015), what 'seeing beyond' it signifies is perhaps a different matter. As so much of the planet's population is increasingly conscious of the disastrous effects of the Anthropocene in terms of climate change and the global environmental crisis, any glimpse of what might lie beyond (or what path might lead beyond) the Anthropocene would be welcome. While neither Joyce nor Beckett may have heard of terms such as the Anthropocene or climate change, their relevance to these matters lies in their critiques of fundamental philosophical/cultural attitudes that have deeply influenced human beings' relations with their natural environment and the planet with now widely recognised disastrous results. Joyce's critique of the prevalence of varieties of philosophical idealism that promote the soul and the spirit at the expense of the body and the earthly, and Beckett's critique of the arrogance of anthropocentric claims to know and master the world are both still relevant in a time of ecological crisis. This will be clear to those (e.g. Klein 2015) who recognise that 'Seeing beyond the Anthropocene' and finding a way out of the current crisis is more than a matter of technological innovation and installing a few solar panels. What is required, according to Latour (2018) for example, is a fundamental cultural and philosophical change of direction involving a coming 'down to earth' from environmentally and socially destructive idealist

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1   Borg 2017; Brazeau, Gladwin 2014; Fairhall 2014; Leonard 2014; Walsh 2014.

2   Boulter 2018; Olsson 2022; Rabaté 2016.

flights of fancy; overcoming modern anthropocentrism will be vital for any undoing of the damages of the Anthropocene and a recovery of ecological balance on the planet (cf. White 1967; Pope Francis 2015).

In so far as Joyce and Beckett sought to overcome enormously influential, deep-seated attitudes to the world prevalent within western modernity, their critiques may be related to the recent use of the term 'posthuman', where that is understood to refer to a critique of the legacy of humanism as fundamentally anthropocentric, as well as Eurocentric, androcentric, and certainly not very eco-friendly.[3] The term 'posthuman' will be relevant in that sense in the following also, as it has been applied in recent discussions of the treatment of the environment in the works of Joyce and Beckett (Borg 2017; Olsson 2022; Rabaté 2016).

Such abstract terms may at first seem alien to the great literary works themselves and these writers' treatment of everyday life and the life of the body. As Fairhall writes,

> Joyce's fiction does not engage much with Dublin nature [...], yet it does investigate [...] the locus of the human experience of nature – the body. (Fairhall 2014, 568)

Both Joyce and Beckett are renowned for their down-to-earth treatment of this aspect of nature – the body. Beckett was famously particularly minimalistic in his approach.

In 'down-to-earth' terms, one may say that Joyce and Beckett saw beyond (or outside) the Anthropocene in turning their attention to the down-to-earth life, decay and death of human bodies, perhaps what an anthropocentrically driven culture has paradoxically programmatically repressed in the ruthless modern pursuit of abstract wealth and power. Rather than such pursuits, what is ultimately foregrounded in their writings is a modest, non-aggressive version of everyday mortal life grounded on the earth with few material things but with a rich supply of playful language, imagination, and humour. Their focus on aspects of life other than an obsession with the immediate instrumentalization of all human and natural resources for profit and power in itself suggests their playful literary works may hold out – as both 'autonomous works of art' in Adorno's sense (Adorno 1982) and Bakhtinian 'carnivalesque' subversion (Bakhtin 2009) – an alternative to the destructive mainstream culture of the capitalist Anthropocene. As such, their works may indeed help in the contemporary collective effort to 'see beyond the Anthropocene'.

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3 Cf. Ferrando 2013; Hayles 2010; Simon 2019; Braidotti 2019a; 2019b.

2   Learning 'Wavespeech'

The closing scene of James Joyce's story "The Dead" with the snow "general all over Ireland" (Joyce 2006, 194) could be seen as a final, melancholic, depressing reinforcement of the theme of death in that story (and in *Dubliners*). It can, however, also be read as the final reconciliation of Gabriel Conroy (initially a rather conceited, would-be modern, cosmopolitan individual, with little time for the rural West of Ireland or the real mortals around him) with his own mortality, other mortals, *and* the culturally loaded natural environment bearing the scars of famine and imperialist domination west of the city of Dublin (Kane 2022).

Early in the story Gabriel casually dismisses the suggestion that he go to the West of Ireland for his holidays and show more interest in his own country and the Irish language, saying he intends to go to France, or Belgium, or Germany, ultimately irritably declaring that "Irish is not my language" and he is "sick of [his] own country, sick of it!" (Joyce 2006, 164-5). As Ellmann writes:

> the west of Ireland is connected in Gabriel's mind with a dark and rather painful primitivism, an aspect of his country which he has steadily abjured by going off to the continent. (Ellmann 1982, 248).

By the end of the story, however, he has apparently been shocked out of his sense of his own superiority to his "own country" and the most rural west of it by hearing something of his wife's past love life there. Gabriel finally becomes aware that the snow falling softly outside the window of his city-centre hotel room is also falling on a remote cemetery in the countryside far to the west – and seems to feel that it is at last establishing an emotional connection between him and that rural, natural environment of the West for which he previously had so little time:

> Yes, the newspapers were right: snow was general all over Ireland. It was falling on every part of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly upon the Bog of Allen and, farther westward, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves. (Joyce 2006, 194)

In a paper exploring "The Dead" in relation to the cultural as well as ecological significance of the Irish bogs, Fairhall writes:

> the interplay between his [Gabriel's] consciousness and forms of wetness extends his recognition of his kinship with other human beings into an intuitive sense of relatedness to the bog, the snow, the River Shannon's waves, and the treeless hills. (Fairhall 2014, 568)

This, he continues, "illustrates an aspect of what Stacy Alaimo calls trans-corporeality", a concept that "addresses 'the interconnections, interchanges, and transits between human bodies and nonhuman natures'".

The end of "The Dead" arguably signals a shift away from a loftily critical attitude towards provincial, rural Ireland on the part of the self-consciously modern, cosmopolitan writer (Joyce himself) towards a kind of "faith" (Joyce quoted in Ellmann 1982, 107) or philosophy of life – reconnecting mortal human bodily nature *and* the natural environment – that is further developed in *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*.

That shift is again treated in the first part of *Ulysses*, as the young, highly intellectual Stephen Dedalus strives to find an alternative to the two "masters" of the "Imperial British state" and the "Holy and Apostolic Roman Catholic Church" as well as to all the other "voices" demanding his allegiance (Joyce 1960, 24; 2007, 73). What Stephen apparently arrives at as an alternative is what he mulls over in the "Proteus" episode; it then conveniently comes to life in no. 7 Eccles Street in the very bodily persons of Leopold and Molly Bloom. The lofty intellectual who "does not yet bear a body" (in the Linati Schema reproduced in Ellmann, 1974) is apparently approaching a more 'down-to-earth', Aristotelian philosophy of life that integrates the soul with the life (and death) of the body *and* with the material world of the natural environment. James Fairhall neatly summarizes Stephen's intellectual progress thus:

> If the goal of Stephen's growth in *A Portrait* is to transform himself into the son of the mythical artificer Daedalus, escaping biology through art, then the goal of his primal struggle in *Ulysses* is to reconcile with necessity in the form of mother-as-nature. (Fairhall 2012, 69)

Fairhall also suggests that

> by the time Joyce was composing *Ulysses* – certainly by the time he was working on "Proteus" – he had become something of a philosopher of nature. (Fairhall 2012, 91)

It is precisely in a natural environment that the "Proteus" episode of *Ulysses* is set: Stephen surveys the "ineluctable modality of the visible" of "seaspawn and seawrack, the nearing tide, that rusty boot" on the shore of the "snotgreen" Irish Sea and wonders whether he is "walking into eternity along Sandymount strand". He closes his eyes "to hear his boots crush crackling wrack and shells. [...] Crush, crack, crick, crick" (Joyce 1960, 45). *Ulysses* may be celebrated for its focus on a modern urban environment, but, from the opening scene at the "scrotumtightening" (3) Forty Foot to Molly Bloom's "O and the

sea the sea", this elemental 'Anthropocene-dwarfing' force of nature is never far away, as is appropriate for an epic based on Homer's *Odyssey*. Stephen comes to some kind of vision as he walks alone by the sea on Sandymount Strand, and there is a parallel here with the scene at the end of chapter four of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, when he "discovered his artistic vocation while walking on Dollymount Strand" (Joyce 2011, 957; cf. Leonard 2014). One might conclude that some of Stephen's best thoughts come to him where the city meets the sea. The complete shift of focus in the episode immediately after "Proteus" from Stephen to Leopold Bloom making breakfast at home is the logical follow up to the young intellectual's 'snotgreen-sea' inspired musings here.

Richard Ellmann's (1974) heading for his discussion of the "Proteus" episode is "Why Stephen Dedalus Picks his Nose" (as Stephen does at the end of the chapter). One of the reasons why Stephen does so is that what he picks out is a very graphic example of physical decay, the counterpart of birth and creation which had figured in the earlier part of his train of thought. Both counterparts are aspects of a natural world understood as in a state of constant protean flux. Stephen is coming to realize that his own body is part of this natural cycle. Indeed, Fairhall (2012, 91) suggests that *Ulysses* as a whole

> investigates and represents the transcorporeal interweaving (a continuous, feminine process rather than a fixed, masculine property) of nature and human nature.

Another related reason for the nose picking is that Stephen and Joyce have been thinking of Aristotle, a philosopher who, according to Joyce, was "the greatest thinker of all time" (quoted in Ellmann 1974, 12). Aristotle, the "*maestro di color che sanno*", is in Stephen's mind from the first lines of "Proteus" with the reference to the "ineluctable modality of the visible" (45). Ellmann explains Aristotle's relevance in Dublin around 1900, where, in the Romantic mysticism of devotees of the Celtic Twilight, Joyce observed "an idealism as rampant as Plato's" (13). "Against idealism", Ellmann writes, Aristotle "declared that the soul was inextricably bound up with matter" (16). Picking one's nose while meditating on the meaning of life and death is perhaps a graphic illustration of that connection. It also shows that Stephen in fact now does 'bear a body' and that he is part of the material natural world of decay and death, birth and growth, not soaring above it.

That human beings are so related to the earth is of course a classic ecological point. Stephen is coming 'down to earth' – the English title of Bruno Latour's 2017 book *Où atterrir?* – and coming to an understanding of "nature-as-process" as well as of his own modest position within this process (Latour 2018, 74). As Stephen's thought processes

in "Proteus" revolve so much around *processes* of growth and decay, he may be landing somewhere close to Latour's suggestion that:

> It is perhaps time [...] to stop speaking about humans and refer instead to *terrestrials* (the Earthbound), thus insisting on *humus* and, yes, the *compost* included in the etymology of the word 'human'. (2018, 86; emphasis in the original)

Stephen's rejection of religious and political masters as well as of philosophical and cultural forms of idealism and mysticism may be bringing him to an Aristotle-inspired philosophical position that is not too far from Latour's urgent contemporary philosophical argument: both recognise the necessity of coming 'down to earth'.

It would perhaps then be not too far-fetched to characterise "Proteus" (and *Ulysses*) as an early example of 'ecology', the term Haeckel coined in the late nineteenth century, defining it as "the investigation of the total relations of the animal both to its inorganic and to its organic environment" (quoted in Herber, s.d., 1). The "critical edge of ecology", Herber argues, is that it

> clearly shows that the totality of the natural world – nature taken in all its aspects, cycles, and interrelationships – cancels out all human pretensions to mastery over the planet. (2)

That latter phrase would resonate with Joyce's Stephen, the disgruntled "servant of two masters" – "the imperial British state [...] and the holy Roman catholic and apostolic church" (Joyce 1960, 24).

Just as Stephen's thoughts flow into each other in this episode devoted to his 'stream of consciousness', the watery 'lagoonscape' he sees and hears is an environment where everything seems to flow into everything else. His train of thought is from the first inspired by the natural environment of shifting sand and flowing water, and he appears to merge with the flowing, swirling world around him through a combination of a mental use of onomatopoeia and a physical act of urination:

> In long lassoes from the Cock lake the water flowed full, covering greengoldenly lagoons of sand, rising, flowing. [...] Listen: a fourworded wavespeech: seesoo, hrss, rsseeiss, ooos. Vehement breath of waters amid seasnakes, rearing horses, rocks. In cups of rocks it slops: flop, slop, slap: bounded in barrels. And, spent, its speech ceases. It flows purling, widely flowing, floating foampool, flower unfurling. (Joyce 1960, 62)

Everything flows in "Proteus", and of course the sense of flux and flow is a fundamental feature of Joyce's *Weltanschauung* as of his literary practice, where words and meanings so often flow into each other.

Looking out across the sea, Stephen recalls hearing about the search for the body of a recently drowned man and imagines the body decomposing in the water:

> Bag of corpsegas sopping in foul brine. A quiver of minnows, fat of a spongy titbit, flash through the slits of his buttoned trouserfly. God becomes man becomes fish becomes barnacle goose becomes featherbed mountain. Dead breaths I living breathe, tread dead dust, devour a urinous offal from all dead. Hauled stark over the gunwale he breathes upward the stench of his green grave, his leprous nosehole snoring to the sun.

> A seachange this, brown eyes saltblue. Seadeath, mildest of all deaths known to man. Old Father Ocean. (Joyce 1960, 63)

This is not just a morbid meditation on death, drowning, and the decay of the body, but part of Stephen's evolving philosophy recognizing the interconnectedness of all things, including life and death. That interconnectedness is most evident in the line "God becomes man becomes fish becomes barnacle goose becomes featherbed mountain". If the Christian idea of the incarnation of God the Father in a human body connects the divine and the human, Stephen's sentence playfully elaborates on this, apparently inspired by the slightly comic image of the minnows nibbling at the drowned man's genitalia. The mutation of the barnacle goose (that has presumably digested the fish) into the featherbed mountain is indeed comic, punning with the associations of the name of the mountain behind Dublin Bay (as well as of the name of Joyce's partner, Nora Barnacle). The line suggests a playful kind of pantheism, in which "God" may be imagined as present in fish, birds and mountains, as much as in "man". It can be read as a "curious celebration of natural sustainability" where "circularity and interdependence supersede isolation and alienation", as Leonard writes (Leonard 2014, 265). Stephen's insight offers a playful alternative to the persistent anthropocentric emphasis on the 'special relationship' between 'man' and 'God', perhaps indeed a root cause of the current ecological crisis (cf. White 1967; Pope Francis 2015).

The playful, associative leap from "goose" to "feathers" to "featherbed" to the name of the mountain in Stephen's consciousness is just one example of Joyce's increasingly playful, associative, and punning approach to language, consciousness, and the "whirled without end" (Joyce 1975, 582) as of his life strategy of "silence, exile, and punning", as one critic punningly rephrased Stephen's formula (Menand 2012). That playfulness is also part of Bloom's character and outlook, and it is taken to an extreme in the pun-filled pages of *Finnegans Wake*. Joyce's punning playfulness may also be said to be a fundamental part of a philosophical approach to a world (or "whirled") where

everything, every meaning, and every body is related to everything else. That world of interdependence where sounds, meanings, and identities slip into each other is essentially an ecological vision. In an essay on the "Ecology of the Pun" in *Finnegans Wake*, Walsh points out that puns are "units of meaning in flux, open to and influenced by their textual environment" (Walsh 2014). Things, meanings, and sounds are interwoven to an extraordinary degree in wordplay that produces meaning as an "ecology of structures", as Walsh puts it. Joyce's avant-garde language places the emphasis on interrelationships, rather as ecology highlights the interrelationships between species of animals and plants on the planet.

Stephen's musings on decomposition and re-composition in "Proteus" are echoed later when Bloom at the funeral rather playfully and irreverently considers how close the Botanic Gardens are to Glasnevin Cemetery:

> The Botanic Gardens are just over there. It's the blood sinking in the earth gives new life. [...] Well preserved fat corpse gentleman, epicure, invaluable for fruit garden. (Joyce 1960, 137)

Earlier in the morning Bloom already alluded to related ideas in his brief conversation with his wife in "Calypso". Molly points at the word "metempsychosis" she came across while reading, and she asks Bloom what it means. He answers:

> Some people believe, he said, that we go on living in another body after death, that we lived before. They call it reincarnation. That we all lived before on the earth thousands of years ago or some other planet. [...] Metempsychosis, he said, is what the ancient Greeks called it. They used to believe you could be changed into an animal or a tree, for instance. What they called nymphs, for example. (78-9)

However incidentally the idea is mentioned here as Molly lazes in bed, it again recalls Stephen's philosophical musings on life, death, the body, the soul, Protean flux and the interconnectedness of man, fish, goose, featherbed mountain, and God. Metempsychosis, as Bloom explains it, establishes a connection between individual human lives and deaths and the lives and deaths of animals and trees.

Bloom's down-to-earth character (and philosophy) is evident to readers from the beginning of the "Calypso" episode, with the memorable itemization of the inner organs he "ate with relish" (65), to the end, as he follows the 'call of nature' at the end of the garden (83). His interest in food and the material, practical side of life (preparing breakfast and going to the butcher's) make him appear comfortable in his own body in a way that Stephen, the young intellectual, is not. Of course, he is not just solid matter or flesh: the interior

monologue shows that he has a rich, exotic, idiosyncratic imagination and intellect. Bloom's first appearance in the book, immediately after Stephen's thoughtful monologue in "Proteus", seems to present readers with an exemplary Aristotelian 'soul' that is "inextricably bound up with matter". That "matter" is not just Bloom's own body, but the material, physical, and natural environment.

It is entirely fitting then that Bloom's first spoken words in *Ulysses* ("O, there you are") are a response to the "Mkgnao!" of a furry, non-human animal (65). His elaborate, sustained conversation with the "pussens" as he makes breakfast in the kitchen shows him easily interacting with the domestic animal as a fellow creature he recognizes as having intelligence of its own. Bloom's simple chat with the cat and consideration of what this fellow nonhuman creature might be thinking could be said to already indicate a modest readiness to step outside of a purely anthropocentric perspective.

Like the minnows Stephen imagines nibbling on the drowned man's nether parts in "Proteus", Bloom's cat, Ruben Borg writes,

> participate[s] in the cycle of organic transformation, proceeding from birth to burial, from individual creature to decomposing body, eating and producing waste, [thus] offer[ing] a Copernican challenge to the philosophical grammars that traditionally grant human consciousness a place of privilege among all organic forms. (Borg 2017; cf. Kime Scott 2014)

In simply talking to the cat, Bloom may be said to have set aside those all too anthropocentric "philosophical grammars", recognized his fellowship with other species, and come 'down to earth'. Bloom's association between the "pussens" and his wife, Borg suggests, also establishes a deep link between Molly Bloom and that earth.

In Joyce's extraordinary finale to *Ulysses*, the breathless "Penelope" episode, Molly appears in all her individual down-to-earth, full-minded as much as full-bodied, creaturely humanity; she also appears (despite all the particularity of her concerns) as somehow more than herself, as a kind of universal, symbolic figure, an 'everywoman' representing perhaps 'the (eternal) feminine', or perhaps really 'the human', or indeed 'the (eternal) feminine' *as* 'the (post)human'. In addition to her down-to-earth awareness of her body and the cycles of her bodily life as part of an embodied world, her never-ending sentences seem to reach beyond all physical boundaries, including any notional boundaries that may be used to define the self, a gender, or the human species as clearly distinct from (and supposedly superior to) the rest of the natural world, or even the universe. Molly reaches her passionate, imaginative, linguistic (and sexual?) climax, with thoughts of merging with the natural world in the rapturous closing lines of *Ulysses*:

and O that awful deepdown torrent O and the sea the sea crimson sometimes like fire and the glorious sunsets and the figtrees in the Alameda gardens yes [...] and I thought well as well him as another and then I asked him with my eyes to ask again yes and then he asked me would I yes to say yes my mountain flower and first I put my arms around him yes and drew him down to me so he could feel my breasts all perfume yes and his heart was going like mad and yes I said yes I will Yes. (Joyce 1960, 932-3)

Joyce wrote of his approach to the identification of Molly with Penelope in the final episode:

I have rejected the usual interpretation of her as a human apparition [...]. In conception and technique I tried to depict the earth which is prehuman and presumably posthuman. (quoted in Borg 2017, 1)

If the title of Joyce's epic sets up a series of identifications suggesting the realistic characters have epic, symbolic significance, Molly's identification with Homer's Penelope already indicates that she signifies something more than herself, or anything she says, does or thinks. Her identification with "the earth which is prehuman and presumably posthuman" clearly expands her significance beyond her individual or even symbolic womanhood *and* humanity to something larger than human life itself – something "prehuman and presumably posthuman", and thus truly 'beyond the Anthropocene'.

If Molly's words and thoughts may strike many a reader initially as a bit of a blur that is frustratingly unfocused as well as unpunctuated, her stream of consciousness may also be considered post-anthropocentric, intimately aware of the connectedness of everything, not seeking to impose any rational, instrumental order on the environment, or to establish hierarchies or priorities. The words, thoughts, desires, and memories seem to circulate here as vital elements of the vast ecosystem of "the earth which is prehuman and presumably posthuman". The latter phrase, Joyce's use of the symbol of infinity (in the Linati schema) to indicate the 'time' of this final episode, and the length of Molly's unending 'sentences' all contribute to a sense of time and space that extends 'beyond the Anthropocene'.

The renowned lack of punctuation in the final episode of *Ulysses* certainly contributes to a sense of a "whirled" of infinite interconnections, not divided up, contained, centred, subordinated, and mastered, but as sprawling, unruly, and anarchic as it is ungrammatical. In Molly's head, the word "yes" (of which, according to Jacques Derrida, there are 79 instances in the episode and at least 222 in *Ulysses*) (Derrida 1992, 306) appears to take the place of punctuation, as she pauses briefly between ideas that are affirmatively joined

by 'yesses', as much as by 'ands' (not counted by Derrida, the Author supposes). Molly's mind, one might say, follows what Deleuze and Guattari called a rhizomatic "logic of the AND":

> In contrast to centered (even polycentric) systems with hierarchical modes of communication and preestablished paths, the rhizome is an acentered, nonhierarchical, nonsignifying system without a General and without an organizing memory or central automaton, defined solely by a circulation of states. What is at question in the rhizome is a relation to sexuality – but also to the animal, the vegetal, the world, politics, the book, things natural and artificial. (Deleuze, Guattari 2004, 23)

In the universal ecosystem of Molly's streaming consciousness everything is connected with everything else. The fact that her first and last words here in "Penelope" are "yes" creates the impression that both are uttered *in medias res* and that the reader is suddenly eavesdropping on a monologue (or 'Mollylogue'?) that has already begun and will never end but may well circle around to the first "Yes" again. While Molly's thoughts revolve so much around her body, the abruptness of the shift of focus to Molly and to the narrative technique of unmediated and unpunctuated interior monologue at the beginning of "Penelope" makes her words seem paradoxically disembodied, as if they are freely floating above the rest of the book and the material world. The stream of words seems connected physically as well as mentally to both Molly's own body *and* to an infinite universal ecosystem (of words, desires, memories, bodies, living things, nature, flowers of the mountains, and "the sea the sea" [Joyce 1960, 932]). Her infinitely resounding (recirculating) "Yes" is surely Joyce's own resounding "Yes" to "the earth which is prehuman and presumably posthuman".

And then there is *Finnegans Wake*. One thing the reader may grasp in the course of the swirling flow of words here is that Anna Livia Plurabelle does not merely *have* a stream of consciousness, she *is* a stream and part of the natural landscape itself. If the 'real heroes' of *Finnegans Wake* are "time and the river and the mountain" – as Joyce explained to Jolas (quoted in Barrows 2014, 333) – language in the book appears itself to be part of the natural process of the "riverrun" (Joyce 1975, 3) in the first line, as words, languages, and meanings flow into each other to an extraordinary degree. That Joyce's words have the earthiness of nature itself was clearly noted by Samuel Beckett when he referred to the "endless verbal germination, maturation, putrefaction" of *Finnegans Wake* (Beckett 1972, 15). Joyce's "abundant organic imagery" is indeed, as Barrows suggests, closely related to its language (Barrows 2014, 341).

Without getting any further into the complications of this extraordinary work, one may perhaps conclude that the perspective opened

up by James Joyce in "The Dead", *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* indeed involves seeing beyond the limits of anthropocentrism and the 'Anthropocene' to get a sense of the infinite vitality of the 'posthuman' earth. That is the extraordinary scale of the vision that opens up as Stephen Dedalus and James Joyce seek to "awake" from the "nightmare" of history (Joyce 1960, 42).

3 The Beginning of the Endgame

Samuel Beckett's play *Endgame* (1957) opens with the words "Finished, it's finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished", spoken by the character Clov (Beckett 1981a, 456). The time, he tells wheelchair-bound Hamm, is "Zero", "the same as usual" (457), and the scene all around, observed by Clov through a telescope, is "zero… zero… and zero" (471). There is nothing "on the horizon", for, as Clov points out, "What in God's name could there be on the horizon?" The waves on the ocean are like "lead" and everything "from pole to pole" is "gray" (472). No explanation is given as to what has happened to cause such apocalyptic devastation.

This type of empty landscape in a 'zero' time is of course characteristic of Beckett's works. It has often been seen as related to an 'existentialist' view of life as devoid of given meaning. It is also sometimes understood in the context of the aftermath of Beckett's own experiences during the Second World War and his awareness of the horrors of the Holocaust (Knowlson 1996; Davies 2022; Kane 2023).

Both interpretations are surely relevant, but in 1961 the philosopher Theodor Adorno also highlighted the reference to nature in the play, offering a particularly succinct summary of the end result of what is now called the 'Anthropocene'. Soon after the play's opening, when Hamm suggests that they have been forgotten by nature, Clov replies "There's no more nature" (Beckett 1981a, 461). Adorno comments:

> The condition presented in the play is nothing other than that in which "there's no more nature". Indistinguishable is the phase of completed reification of the world, which leaves no remainder of what was not made by humans; it is permanent catastrophe, along with a catastrophic event caused by humans themselves, in which nature has been extinguished and nothing grows any longer. (Adorno 2000, 324)

The fact that "there's no more nature" and the "condition" depicted in *Endgame* as a whole is explained by Adorno as resulting from the "completed reification of the world" leaving "no remainder of what was not made by humans". The latter is a neat summary of the

impression left by the 'Anthropocene' today as one looks around a rapidly urbanizing planet, hearing of increasing numbers of species threatened with extinction as well as of the devastation causing and caused by climate change.

The post-apocalyptic landscapes of "zero" in Beckett's *Endgame* (and in so many of his other works) can be related to a philosophical sense of 'nothingness' in the aftermath of the 'death of God', to the anomie of the modern world, as well as to a sense of *everything* lying in ruins in the aftermath of the Second world War and the Holocaust. They also however speak to the kind of awareness of the devastation of nature that is currently spreading around the world, along with the awareness that this is the result of centuries of the 'Anthropocene'.

If it may initially seem anachronistic to associate Beckett with a contemporary sense of global environmental crisis and a reassessment of centuries of human and planetary history captured in the term 'Anthropocene', it is worth remembering that he was always deeply sceptical about post-Enlightenment notions of 'progress'. As Jean-Michel Rabaté writes, Beckett's "bête noire was the grandiose and inflated self-delusion of anthropomorphism" (Rabaté 2016, 20). In *Mercier et Camier*, Beckett even coined his own neologism "anthropopseudomorphe", a term suggesting, according to Rabaté, that:

> a lie (pseudos) is wedged in the middle of the main symptom of humanism: the projection of the human everywhere.

Such grandiose projections are parodied everywhere in Beckett's work. In *Endgame*, Adorno already also saw "the phantom of an anthropocentrically dominated world". In that play, Hamm's insistence on being pushed in his wheelchair "right around the world" and brought back to "the center again" by Clov graphically illustrates

> the hubris of idealism, the enthroning of man as creator in the center of creation [...] entrenched [...] in that "bare interior" like a tyrant in his last days. (Adorno 2000, 346-8)

Anthropopseudomorphism, one might say, like the Anthropocene itself, goes back a long way. The coining of both terms suggests the endgame of both has truly been reached.

Adorno refers to the more immediate historical context of *Endgame* when, just before quoting Clov's "zero... zero... and zero", he writes:

> In *Endgame*, a historical moment is revealed [...]. After the Second War, everything is destroyed, even resurrected culture, without knowing it; humanity vegetates along, crawling, after events

which even the survivors cannot really survive, on a pile of ruins
[...]. (2000, 323)

The phrasing here is strikingly similar to the end of Beckett's essay
"The Capital of the Ruins", describing the bombed ruins of Saint Lô
in the immediate aftermath of the second world war: the experience
of working in the Irish Red Cross hospital there left "one" with a

> vision and sense of a time-honoured conception of humanity in ru-
> ins, and perhaps even an inkling of the terms in which our condi-
> tion is to be thought again. (Beckett 1995c, 278)

Both Beckett's and Adorno's comments suggest that war could not be
taken merely as an isolated or isolatable historical event, but the cul-
mination of a "condition", the recognition of which could have enor-
mous consequences for a certain "conception of humanity".

It is then not just nature that has apparently come to an end in
Endgame, but humanity too, or a certain "time-honoured conception"
of it. Adorno relates this not just to the war but to a wider "catastro-
phe" involving, on the one hand, "those deformations inflicted on hu-
mans by the form of their society" (Adorno 2000, 334) and, on the oth-
er, to "the hubris of idealism, the enthroning of man as creator in the
center of creation" (346). When the decrepit Hamm has Clov wheel
him in his wheelchair around the walls of the room "right around
the world" and then "back to the center again", insisting on being
"bang in the center", he resembles a "tyrant in his last days", Adorno
writes. The "history of the subject's end" is apparently inextricably
linked here with this parody of the mad claims of anthropocentrism.

What might be left after "the [anthropocentric] subject's end", af-
ter a "time-honoured conception of humanity" lay in ruins? What
could be seen 'beyond the Anthropocene'? Perhaps Beckett's vision
leaves us, to use Adorno's words again, with subjects

> consist[ing] in nothing other than the wretched realities of their
> world, shrivelled down to raw necessities", "only pathetic details
> which ridicule conceptuality, a stratum of utensils as in an emer-
> gency refuge: ice boxes, lameness, blindness, and unappetizing
> bodily functions. (Adorno 2000, 329-30)

As a vision of the future (or even of the 1950s) that may seem fairly
bleak. Yet Beckett's work arguably offers – to use his own words af-
ter WWII – not just a "vision and sense of a time-honoured conception
of humanity in ruins", but also something of "an inkling of the terms
in which our condition is to be thought again". Those terms may be
post-anthropocentric as well as post-apocalyptic. Nowadays one might
describe them as 'posthuman' in the post-anthropocentric sense of

'post-*humanist*', and part of a great cultural U-turn (away from destructive anthropocentrism) that may be a fundamental aspect of the response to the ecological crisis of the planet.[4]

While it would not be appropriate to "categorize" Beckett "as a thinker, writer, and practitioner of the posthuman", as Rabaté writes (Rabaté 2016, 41) – and indeed it would be wrong to "categorize" Beckett at all – there *is* a sense in which Beckett's work offers "inklings" which anticipate some of the concerns of those who use the term 'posthuman' in attempting to think through the implications of the climate crisis for "a time-honoured conception of humanity". In his essay "The Posthuman, or the Humility of the Earth", Rabaté (2016) points out how Beckett's ongoing "critique of anthropomorphism" was reflected in his particular appreciation of Cézanne's paintings of the Mont Sainte Victoire: "Cézanne", Beckett wrote,

> seems to have been the first to see landscape & state it as material of a strictly peculiar order, incommensurable with all human expressions whatsoever. (quoted in Rabaté 2016, 40; cf. Knowlson 1996, 196-7)

Beckett clearly shared the painter's awareness of the incommensurability of the landscape with "all human expressions", despite the all too human fondness for seeing man as the measure of all things. According to Rabaté, Beckett also shared a kind of "new humility" with "the later Joyce" that involved a

> reconciled sense that one will remain close to the Earth, an Earth that contains all the ashes of the dead along with the fertilizing humus for future plants. (Rabaté 2016, 45)

Indeed, it was probably from Joyce that Beckett first heard the word 'posthuman' (Rabaté 2016, 37).

In addition to reviewing some recent posthuman readings of Beckett's work, Jesper Olsson reminds us that even if "an ecologically oriented reading of Beckett" might seem surprising, he was "a reader of Ernst Haeckel, the inventor of the concept of ecology" (Olsson 2022). In an article referring to "Plant Life" and "Posthuman Endgames", Olsson persuasively argues that

> what is at stake [in Beckett's work] is [not only] a series of endgames that explore the limits of the human, but also our entanglement with other beings on the planet [bringing] the human into contact with plants, soil and dirt. (Olsson 2022)

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[4] Cf. Ferrando 2013; Hayles 2010; Simon 2019; Braidotti 2019b.

One could relate this to the fact that Beckett's characters, such as the protagonist in "First Love" (Beckett 1995b), constantly express an inability to 'know' anything beyond the immediate physical (and usually earthy, natural, though generally not so fertile) environment. They are equally often literally grounded on the earth, on the soil (if not indeed, as in *Happy Days*, up to their necks in it) or given to apparently lovingly lingering over the pleasures to be afforded by feeling or sucking a few stones (as in *Molloy*) or contemplating the odd root vegetable, such as the parsnip in "First Love" (Beckett 1981b; 1979). The old woman narrating Beckett's short prose piece "Enough" (1966) tells of the time she spent with a

> strange man 'ejaculating' words on the ground, incessantly bent like a bow toward the earth, even caressing the soil with his face, eating the flowers on his way. (Olsson 2022)

In a phrase that could have come from many a Beckett character, she comments:

> What do I know of man's destiny? I could tell you more about radishes. (Beckett 1995a, 192)

Olsson detects a "descent toward the terrestrial" and an "attraction to the earthly" in Beckett's prose pieces in which the characters almost seem to wish to "become earth", a move that can be interpreted as not just comically (or philosophically) 'absurd', and evidently rejecting all the trappings of society, civilization, culture, but as ecologically 'getting closer to nature' in tune with a contemporary post-anthropocentric, post-humanist interest in "becoming earth" (Olsson 2022, 4, citing Braidotti 2013).

The basic earthiness of the environments of Beckett's characters could be seen then as not just a "vision and sense of a time-honoured conception of humanity in ruins", but also something of "an inkling of the terms in which our condition is to be thought again". Those terms involve perhaps a coming "down to earth" (Latour 2018) somewhat comparable to Joyce's move and compatible (if never commensurate) with contemporary ecological as well as post-anthropocentric, post-humanist "inklings".

4 Conclusion

The extraordinary breadth and continuing relevance of Joyce's vision, taking in "the earth which is prehuman and presumably posthuman", is no doubt in part due to his recognition that oppressive local circumstances – Stephen's "nightmare" of history – were part of a

much wider historical and philosophical context of narratives legitimating dominant powers and imperial exploitation of lands and peoples allied with narratives denying the earth and the body legitimacy. His attempt to break out of the confines of the colonial situation and the prudery of Irish Catholic, British Victorian and Imperialist attitudes to the body and sexuality involved reassessing and revaluing the physical and natural world and the relations of mortal human bodies and minds to that world of flux. His understanding of the life and death of the individual body and mind as part of a wider cycle of life and death and of the 'ecological' interdependence of bodies, minds, languages, and the physical and natural world is evident in his work. This is clear from the evocative scene of the snow "falling softly" all over Ireland at the close of "The Dead" to the meditations of Stephen Dedalus on Sandymount Strand, from Bloom's conversation with the cat and explanation of metempsychosis to Molly's naturally flowing words, and from the language merging with the river and the mountain and the sea in *Finnegans Wake*.

In the aftermath of yet another 'nightmare of history', after the devastation of war, fascism and the Holocaust, Samuel Beckett had all the more reason to attempt to see beyond the limits of the Anthropocene. The tone of his works is darker than that of Joyce's, conveying a more complete "vision and sense of a time-honoured conception of humanity in ruins". From "The Capital of the Ruins" to *Endgame*, where there is "no more nature", and to so many of his other plays and prose pieces of the 1950s and 1960s, there is a sense of "humanity in ruins", of civilization at the end of its tether, and a post-apocalyptic air that speaks to the current spreading awareness of the devastating results of the Anthropocene. The arrogance of anthropocentric pretensions to 'know' and master the world – so closely associated with the centuries of the Anthropocene and the legacy of 'humanism' – is constantly undercut in Beckett's work, as characters, such as the narrator of "First Love" or of "Enough", express their incomprehension regarding everything beyond the immediate physical, earthy environment, and, if one were fortunate, a few parsnips or radishes. Beckett's return to the fundamentals of the vulnerable, mortal body, the earth, and the "vegetal" (Olsson 2022) is arguably in many ways compatible with current concerns to come "down to earth" (Latour 2018) and reorient the human (or 'posthuman') relationship with the earth.

In conclusion, the works of both James Joyce and Samuel Beckett can be seen to have explored fundamental questions relating to such a reorientation of that relationship between human beings and the earth – understood, in Joyce's words, as "prehuman as well as posthuman". Both writers can be said to offer, in Beckett's words, an "inkling of the terms in which our condition is to be thought again". Such inklings are highly relevant today, as humanity as a whole seeks to wake up from the nightmare of its own history and see 'beyond the Anthropocene'.

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Narrative Agency and Storied Becomings in Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves*

Andrea Ruthven
Universitat de les Illes Balears, Espanya

Abstract   Set in a future in which North America has succumbed to ecological disaster and the settler-colonial inhabitants have lost the ability to dream, Cherie Dimaline's novel, *The Marrow Thieves*, depicts how an ethics of reciprocal care for both humans and more-than-humans offers a means of resistance toward necropolitical colonial narratives of indigeneity. Throughout the novel, *Story*, dreams, and language are agential, and enact a communal *being with* such that the characters are able to see themselves not just in the past but also in the present and the future.

Keywords   Indigenous epistemologies. Agential narrative. Land agency. Eco-critical dystopia. The Marrow Thieves.

Summary   1 Introduction. – 2 Language, Dreams, and Story. – 3 Conclusions.

We needed to remember Story.
It was his job to set the memory in perpetuity.
(Dimaline 2017, 25)

1   Introduction

Cherie Dimaline's young adult Indigenous eco-critical dystopian novel *The Marrow Thieves* depicts how an ethics of reciprocal care for both humans and more-than-humans offers a means of resistance toward necropolitical colonial[1] narratives of indigeneity (Martensen 2021). Indeed, the novel – which tells the story of twenty-first century residential schools re-purposed by the failed Canadian nation-state to extract marrow from Indigenous peoples – narrates the agential power of language while simultaneously enacting the recognition of communal *being with* the land through its own story-telling devices. This article asks how the process of storying with the land can serve to materialise the past, present, and future in a slipstream (Dillon 2012) that recognises agentic materialities for language through narrative becomings. This moves beyond the question of language as the human produced force that shapes our reality, and towards the agency and materiality of stories themselves to assert the possibility that narrative and language are themselves alive. As Patrizia Zanella notes, Dimaline's novel

> offers a radically different vision rooted in the liberatory practices of Indigenous worldmaking through an expansive understanding embedded in Indigenous languages and soundscapes. (Zanella 2020, 178)

In the novel, language becomes an embodied practice that serves as a means of resisting landscapes and narratives shaped by colonial practices, forging instead worlds that live in and through Indigenous resistance and resurgence. The novel highlights the ways in which settler colonial practices are themselves part of speculative or science fiction (SF), as

[1] From contact, settler-colonial violence inscribed within Canadian social and political policies toward Indigenous and First Nations peoples have dispossessed inhabitants of the land, that, "coupled with other colonial practices such as the residential school system, intermarriage, and cultural genocide, have resulted in a permanent disruption of Indigenous ways of life" (Martensen 2021, 51). These policies, which continue today in various forms, result in a disruption of ecologies of life that are intimately linked to connection with the land.

settlers changed the landscape with intensive farming, grazing, and settlement patterns that reconfigured traditional indigenous homelands into alien landscapes. (Baldwin et al. 2018, 207)

SF, of course

is storytelling and fact telling; it is the patterning of possible worlds and possible times, material-semiotic worlds, gone, here, and yet to come. (Haraway 2016, 31)

Dimaline foregrounds Indigenous lifeways in her eco-dystopian novel that are shaped by the ongoing environmental crises. These narratives, Conrad Scott contends, do more to

bring us closer to the crises involved, rather than to underline an idea that catastrophe will happen sometime in the future (Scott 2022, 14)

while simultaneously underscoring the ways in which Indigenous being resists settler colonial narratives of "the vanishing or dying Native" (TallBear 2015, 232-3). Throughout the novel, language and Story are key to the characters' ability to connect with the land and with each other, forging resistant strategies that privilege more-than-human communities of life within ecological disaster.

Within the novel, as we will see, the characters form and are formed by Story, the entity that both creates them all as beings but is also created by them. To accept the narrative agency of more-than-humans is to accept that the human is not exceptional in its ability to story the world. The lack of exceptionality of humans as storied and storying beings has been theorised by Indigenous peoples for far longer than the so-called new materialisms have been circulating in Western academic discourse. Without homogenizing Indigenous cultures and experiences, Simone Bignall and Daryle Rigney remind us that

'more-than-human' ways of knowing, being and acting have characterised Indigenous ontology, epistemology, axiology and ethology since time immemorial, and today they constitute a significant site of shared identification across the Indigenous world. (Bignall, Rigney 2018, 159)

These 'ways of knowing' that go beyond Western knowledge structures recognise

a cosmology of interconnectedness, which views nonhuman life forms as having inherent rights to exist and be respected as opposed to just serving the shorter-term self-centered needs of people. (Waukau-Villagomez, Malott 2010, 447)

In contrast, "the empiricism of Western science does not represent the interests or epistemological perspectives of non-Western cultures" with colonialism and Western scientific research functioning "as forms of worlding, of shaping relations between peoples and environments (and knowledge about them)" (Jekanowski 2017, 1). The elision of "Indigenous cultural and intellectual authority" within discourse on so-called new materialisms

> allows Western philosophy to claim the 'new Humanities' as its current 'discovery' after modern humanism, but this apparently 'new' intellectual frontier in fact traces an ancient philosophical terrain already occupied by Indigenous epistemologies and associated modes of human experience. (Bignall, Rigney 2018, 160)

As the novel attests, the extractivist tendencies of colonial systems are not limited to tangible resources, like petroleum, land, and water (among many others), but extend to systems of knowledge, of ontologies of being-with, of stories and cosmologies as well. Western epistemologies and ontologies that theorise the agency of the more-than-human without taking into account Indigenous knowledges re-enact colonial moves to innocence (Tuck, Yang 2012). While the contribution of the so-called new materialisms to environmental studies cannot be understated, these must, in turn, ethically engage with Indigenous knowledge if we are to shape ways of being-with the world that do not reproduce capitalistic, neoliberal futures. These "kindred theories" (Molloy et al. 2023) can and do work in conjunction to offer mutual response-ability (Haraway 2016) beyond the theoretical and discursive. Humans and nonhumans, or more-than-humans, must be understood as implicated in co-constitutive relations of becoming, and *life*, much like storying, cannot be attributed solely to the sentient. The novel, as will be discussed, enacts the very politics it advocates by privileging Indigenous epistemologies, cosmologies, and world-building through its storytelling, which recognises the narrative agency therein, and contests ways of knowing and being that refuse the life of the more-than-human.

2   Language, Dreams, and Story

The Marrow Thieves narrates how settler colonial practices of capitalist extraction decimate the environment of North America to the extent that the connection to the land has been severed and people have lost the ability to dream. Only the Indigenous inhabitants retain this ability, and so they are still, again but in a different way, rendered objects for extraction by the colonial government, hunted and locked-up in residential schools to fuel the demands of the failing

power structures, because their bone marrow is thought to enable them to dream. By capturing Indigenous peoples and literally draining them of their marrow, settler colonists and their state apparatus seek to maintain the extractivist death-ways that have long seen Native inhabitants and the land as commodities or resources to be exploited by the Canadian nation-state. The protagonist of the novel, French, manages to escape the Recruiters, those charged with bringing Indigenous peoples to the schools, and is taken in by a group of other First Nations people who together form a family attempting to forge their own life ecologies with the more-than-human world around them. This family is comprised of Miig, the titular leader, and Minerva, the group's elder, as well as a handful of young people who learn together how to reorient themselves within this post-apocalyptic environment. Kyle Powys Whyte argues, in his thinking through the apocalyptic narratives often used to discuss climate crises, that

> the hardships many non-Indigenous people dread most of the climate crisis are ones that Indigenous peoples have endured already due to different forms of colonialism: ecosystem collapse, species loss, economic crash, drastic relocation, and cultural disintegration. (Whyte 2018, 226)

Dimaline's novel exemplifies the ways in which the climate apocalypse in its current iteration in the novel is not separate from those crises marked by the arrival of the colonial powers, as the writer privileges the role of Story as an agent of knowledge and change that is crucial for the survivance and resurgence of the Indigenous characters. In "Story: Part One", Miig tells the group that, initially, "We welcomed visitors, who renamed the land Canada" but that over time,

> we got sick with new germs. And then when we were on our knees with fever and pukes, they decided they liked us there, on our knees. And that's when they opened the first schools. (Dimaline 2017, 23)

Miig is careful to tell his listeners that despite the "years where we were lost" and the resulting "pain drowned in forgetting", when their people "remembered that we were warriors" (24) they were able to rebuild, relearn, and regroup (24). The Story Miig tells is one of healing, one that reminds his listeners not only of past resurgence, but also of their own potential to not just survive but rather to thrive. For Scott

> much Indigenous SF aims for communal healing from centuries of settler colonial violence to not only Indigenous peoples, but also to the land, waters, plants, and animals – and not just a healing *of* community, but a healing *by* community. (Scott 2022, 24)

Within the novel, much of this healing occurs through "the communal function of storytelling and listening", wherein

> The kinship-making effect of storytelling lies in this intentional act of careful consideration of how stories affect both tellers and listeners. (Zanella 2020, 181)

Within this narrative community, it is important to recognise that humans are not the only beings with a language or with Story, nor are they the only listeners. Indeed, narrative agency is an animating force of all more-than-humans and humans who form part of society from an Indigenous viewpoint, which includes "habitats and ecosystems" as these "have ethical structures, inter-species treaties and agreements" of their own (Watts 2013, 23). These forms of mutual reciprocity – of caring for and being cared for – are inherent to the ways in which all beings, including the more-than-human such as the habitats and ecosystems Watts mentions, depend upon communal being with that understands society as including subjectivities that do not include the human.

As Karen Barad has noted in work that considers the ways in which subjectivities are brought into being,

> Outside of particular agential intra-actions, 'words' and 'things' are indeterminate. Matter is therefore not to be understood as a property of things but, like discursive practices, must be understood in more dynamic and productive terms – in terms of intra-activity. (Barad 2011, 150)

The storied beings that are recognised as such by the members of Miig's ad hoc family intra-act with the world around them, as do the humans. Their material being-in-common is amplified through Story as one way of ethically understanding the mutual dependence and being-with that exist. Throughout Dimaline's novel, Story, and the language used to tell it, is recognised as an agential being as well as a material one, that is as much a teller and a listener as the rest of the family. It is the discursive and intra-active practice of Story that sustains the being of the ecological life force. Indeed, it is through the recognition that

> matter in all its forms, from subatomic particles to stellar formations, is storied matter composed of narrative agencies actively producing configurations of meaningful expressions (Oppermann 2023, 14)

that French and his kin are able to both return to themselves and expand out toward the world.

One of the other young people in the group, Rose, shares with French language that she learns during her time with Minerva, the woman elder who has lived experience of the 'old' ways and language. Rose teaches him the word *nishin*, and he "turned the word over in [his] throat like a stone; a prayer [he] couldn't add breath to, a world [he] wasn't willing to release" (Dimaline 2017, 39). The word, which Rose explains means 'good', is given a vibrancy and is animated as she and French both speak it releasing it into the air and the world around them. It also, however, retains its connection to the land, as it becomes a stone in French's mouth, a solid being that he can feel. It further becomes part of French as he is unwilling to release it, choosing to hold it in his body so that it may merge with of him. It is not only a word, but also a world. Just as the language comes from the land, so too does it retain its potential for relationality, as Rose learns from Minerva, French learns from Rose, seemingly, the word is also integrated into each of them and furthers their mutual connections as the receive it from each other.

As Zanella notes, "every word Frenchie receives is a gift and has a physical presence in the world, both in its written, syllabic form etched on a tree and in its spoken form" (2020, 189). French explains how he

> reached out to feel the language on [his] skin for the first time since Minerva had breathed her words over [his] forehead when she thought [he] was sleeping during her nightly check-ins. (Dimaline 2017, 155)

Thus, language and Story are bound in a physical relationship that further grounds the group to the land. Returning to Zanella,

> The words Minerva breathes and the syllabics on the tree that they encounter on their northbound journey constitute a physical act of care, a blessing, a protective charm, and a signpost to Indigenous-centered worlds. (Zanella 2020, 189).

This 'act of care' tells those who can read the syllabics that they are not alone. Etched on trees, they inscribe language onto the landscape, forging links between all beings. The trees themselves absorb the language and convey it to other survivors in such a way that the syllabics, the person who etched them, and the tree are implicated in a mutual being-with.

The importance of Story is imperative to the survivance (Vizenor 2008) of the Indigenous peoples in the novel, because it is, as French says, "imperative that we know" and so Miig tells Story every week as "it was the only way to make the kinds of changes that were necessary to really survive" (Dimaline 2017, 25). The power of Story is

such that it can shape for both good and bad, and the children learn to see themselves in Story, as when Rose joins the group and after three weeks "she [becomes] part of Story" (33). She brings with her a connection to the past – "having been raised by old people, she spoke like them" (33) – and also the future, as she joins the narrative that spills forward in time through its telling. The novel is an example of Indigenous slipstream narrative, what Grace Dillon defines as "viewing time as pasts, presents, and futures that flow together like currents in a navigable stream" (Dillon 2012, 3). The slipstream, that is, the overlapping of time in the novel is enacted through Story as a living entity. The Story Miig tells is not just about the past but, rather, it is an organic being in which each member of the group participates, forming part of the narrative's own becoming in the present, engaging in the communal sharing that binds them all within Story's being. The rule is that "everyone tells their own coming-to story. [...] Everyone's creation story is their own" (Dimaline 2017, 79). The coming-to story, the story that each member has about how they came to the group, is understood as a 'creation story', that is, how they not only joined the group but how they became one with the group and with the Story Miig tells of Indigenous history. Thus,

> The group's ethics of story sovereignty stand in stark contrast to the coercive process of extracting Indigenous people's bone marrow without consent nor concern for the lethal consequences of the extraction process. (Zanella 2020, 179)

In this way, Story is alive, not just an account of the past, but it grows and becomes more with the addition of each person's private narrative, as this becomes part of the group narrative. Further, it is recognised as its own entity, that will enter the communal in its own time, without a logistics of forced giving or taking as a toll for joining the family.

Story in the novel can be conceived as what Warren Cariou terms "terristory", that "is a relation, or rather a plural and ongoing set of relations" through which "Indigenous people learn their responsibilities" and their identity (Cariou 2020, 2). Terristory is the animate, desiring, and thoughtful nature of land as it communicates, and for Cariou, by understanding terristory we accept that "instead of humans telling stories to mimetically represent the land, it is the land itself that communicates to humans through stories!" (1-2). This recognition of land as communicative, as animate and alert, reverts narratives of domination and oppression over the land – that is, Western, settler-colonial, capitalist narratives in which the land is an object to be exploited (a narrative that is also imposed on BIPOC – Black, Indigenous or People of Colour – who inhabit the land) – arguing instead for a land that has its own agency. Thus, "it's crucial to think

seriously about the ways in which the stories do, in an essential way, come from the land" (Cariou 2018, 341). The link between Story and the land is rendered material in the novel, as the failing environment is mirrored in the children's longing for a resurgence that would heal both themselves and the world around them. French says that

> with most of the rivers cut into pieces and lakes left as grey sludge puckers on the landscape [his] own history seemed like a myth" and so the kids "longed for the old-timey. (Dimaline 2017, 21)

Thus, when Miig communicates Story, it is something the group yearns for as a way of recognising their own agential identity. By understanding Story's ability to bring into being, by merging their own narrative within it, they can assert their own right to be, joining with the more-than-human landscape to which they belong.

When it is time for Story, Miig exhales "smoke as he spoke" and French and the others watch "the word *Story* puff over the fire and spread into a cumulative haze that smelled of ground roots and acrid burn" (Dimaline 2017, 22). They "listen with every cell" (19) as they wait for Story to penetrate their very being. The word becomes part of the world, joining the air around the group, being breathed in by them and merging with them. Story is part of the world; it is both brought into being by the land itself and is used to give shape and coherence to it. To indicate his positioning, Miig "opened a hand, palm down to indicate the ground, this ground, as he began Story" (22). Miig's gesture enacts the recognition of land aliveness, as he both grounds himself and prepares to connect with the story the land is going to tell. Story also, however, implicates the group in the land's own narrative. For Scott

> the storyteller puts the onus of his teachings on those listening, on those who are asked to carry forward community-making into the real-world in opposition to current hyper capitalistic overdrive through the co-opting of science towards profit and petro modern ways of living that disconnect us from the environment and contribute to the ravaging of land and waters. (Scott 2022, 25)

Miig's Story has the double effect of drawing the group into a shared history – a history in which the land speaks through Miig and they can all speak to the land – and also a common future.

For Cariou

> terristory can be understood as the ground of culture; the living, nurturing, relational medium in which Indigenous communities flourish, and also the entity or being(s) from whom Indigenous people learn their responsibilities. Terristory is a relation, or rather a plural and ongoing set of relations. (Cariou 2020, 2)

This plural, ongoing set of relations, is one of mutual respect and response-ability, and one that requires the recognition of agency beyond the human, beyond the animate. Or, perhaps more clearly, to recognize the vibrancy and animation of all beings: land, rock, stones, lightening, etc. Upon meeting a larger community of Indigenous refugees who have managed to build a space for themselves that does not require frequent running, French is surprised to learn that they still hope to return home. They tell French that they are waiting and that "All we need is the safety to return to our homelands. Then we can start the process of healing" (Dimaline 2017, 193). Wondering why they would postpone healing, French asks "Can't you just heal out here?" (193). The men in the group are patient in the answer that they are the land, and when one heals so does the other, telling him that

> we can start healing the land. We have the knowledge, kept through the first round of these blasted schools, from before that, when these visitors first made their way over here like angry children throwing tantrums. When we heal our land, we are healed also. (193)

Mutual healing arises through processes of mutual care, mutual response-ability, and mutual narratives. These narratives, like Miig's story, frame the land, as Christina Turner notes, as being granted full agency, and "This agentic earth rebels against her exploitation" (Turner 2021, 43). The land's rebellion and the rebellion of the people who inhabit it are bound together through their shared Story and language.

Dream, Story, and language in Dimaline's novel are all part of the same symbiotic process that links being and land aliveness. In the novel, the Canadian settler-colonial state crumbles as the land is killed off, enacting the necropolitical policies that fuel extractivism and capitalist modes. The inability to understand the land as more than an inert substance is mirrored in the inability to understand Story. As the environmental impacts of colonial and neocolonial practices become more apparent, some "people turned to Indigenous people […] looking for ways we [the Indigenous] could help guide them" but even this desire for help is deaf to Story as they looked "for ways they could take what we had and administer it themselves" asking "How could they best appropriate the uncanny ability we kept to dream? How could they make ceremony better, more efficient, more economical?" And it is the inability to recognize Story, and its corollaries dreaming and language, that is lost on the settler, as "They stopped dreaming. And a man without dreams is just a meaty machine with a broken gauge" (Dimaline 2017, 88). The extractivist drive is solidified in the capitalist view of the Indigenous peoples as a resource to, quite literally, be tapped, as they turn to suck the marrow

from them as the only ones still capable of dreaming. And yet, the inability to see the connection between the dreams, the land, and the inhabitants is precisely the blindness that renders them dreamless.

When Miig attacks a delivery truck in the hopes of rescuing his husband Isaac, he finds instead the vials of marrow. While he cannot save the corporeal forms of the Indigenous peoples who have been violated, he does what he can to return the dreams to the land: he "drove to the lake, one of the last ones [he] knew still held fish". He returned the marrow to the water and "sang each one of them home when [he] poured them out. It rained, a real good one, too. So [he] knew] they made it back safe" (Dimaline 2017, 145). The marrow, including the dreams of those stolen by the nation state, are here returned to the world in an act of what Patrizia Zanella identifies as ethical kinship. She states that

> Miig models kinship that not only extends to humans in a wider sense than the nation state's emphasis on the nuclear family, but to the other-than-human or more-than-human kin, the land, and the waters. Kinship is created through acts of caretaking that restore proper relations between these different yet interconnected entities. (Zanella 2020, 186)

These interconnected identities are the song and language Miig uses, the dreams the marrow contains, and the land and water and all systems supported by, and that support, them. Bearing in mind that "language, culture, religion, and landscape" are entwined and "are integrated cultural resources that defy colonial notions of knowledge, agency, and power" (Baldwin et al. 2018, 205), rather than extractivist tendencies that remove kin from the land in unethical or non-nourishing ways, Miig restores the stolen marrow in the hope that the language, dreams, and Story will serve to replenish some of what has been lost.

The intertwined role of language, dreams, and Story is made even more apparent when Minerva, who has been captured by the state, is recognised by French and the group as the 'key' to dismantling the system. When the Recruiters attempt to extract her marrow:

> Minerva hummed and drummed out an old song on her flannel thighs throughout it all. But when the wires were fastened to her own neural connectors, and the probes reached into her heartbeat and instinct, that's when she opened her mouth. That's when she called on her blood memory, her teachings, her ancestors. That's when she brought the whole thing down.
>
> She sang. She sang with volume and pitch and a heartbreaking wail that echoed through her relatives' bones, rattling them in the ground under the school itself. Wave after wave, changing

her heartbeat to drum, morphing her singular voice to many, pulling every dream from her own marrow and into her song. And there were words: words in the language that the conductor couldn't process, words the Cardinals couldn't bear, words the wires couldn't transfer.

As it turns out, every dream Minerva had ever dreamed was in the language. It was her gift, her secret, her plan. She'd collected the dreams like bright beads on a string of nights that wound around her each day, every day until this one. (Dimaline 2017, 172-3)

Minerva's dreams here are the generative force of survivance and resurgence. Her song is embodied, her heartbeat a drum, and her voice the voice of many – past, present, and future. The language connects to the land here as it rattles her relatives' bones, the bones of those who were murdered in the previous residential school system. Her memory is not singular but communal, her blood the visceral legacy of her ancestors' teachings, teachings that became her own, and that would carry on after her through the children. The strength of the language is not just the words themselves, but rather their connection to all beings, living and non, or rather, a connection that recognises all beings as living and agential, as it causes the mechanical failure, the "pop and sizzle" of malfunctioning probes and computers, that cause the system failure (Dimaline 2017, 173).

Minerva's rebellion enacts what Vanessa Watts identifies as *Place-Thought*. That is,

the non-distinctive space where place and thought were never separated because they never could or can be separated. Place-Thought is based upon the premise that the land is alive and thinking and that humans and non-humans derive agency through the extensions of these thoughts. (Watts 2013, 1)

Here, language, dreams, and Story are agential actors in the rebellion against a state sanctioned violence that would (and does) continue to ignore their lifeways. As Minerva sings, she activates the past, present, and future through a connection to the very land that articulates their being.

The presence and importance of language and Story here, as part of the continued vibrancy of Native being in the novel, is in line with what Baldwin, Noodin, and Perley identify in their work on ecologies of language. Namely, that

American Indian language advocates have been pushing back to shift the focus away from extinction and toward vitalities emerging from communities of continuity. (Baldwin et al. 2018, 204)

While in no way downplaying the devastation of language loss, the authors argue that the "concepts of extinction and endangerment" are colonial legacies, and that they are used to "perpetuate colonial domination and oppression of indigenous concepts and practices" (204). Thus, the authors look for ways to challenge the question of language extinction away from colonial concepts and toward vitalities. Among these challenges the authors cite Bernard Perley's work on the Maliseet language, in which he

> argues that the emphasis on the linguistic code is misplaced and that more attention must be paid to the community and the emerging social relationships that are mediated by the Maliseet language. (Baldwin et al. 2018, 205)

In Dimaline's novel, the vitality of the language as seen in emergent social relations is enacted through being in common and building futures through their shared past. After losing Minerva, and the "key" (Dimaline 2017, 213) to defeating the settler colonial state because of her knowledge of language and culture, the remaining "Council spent a lot of time piecing together the few words and images each of us carried: hello and goodbye in Cree, a story about a girl named Sedna whose fingers made all the animals of the North" (214). This process of re-membering through language, Story, and image is here figured as a communal act of survival. Each and every member of the Council and the community has the responsibility to the bonds of more-than-human kinship to keep the past, present, and future alive. This is an act of "emergent vitality" (Baldwin et al. 2018), which stresses the intra-actual (Barad 2011) process of being-with that

> places emphasis on the interaction between speakers who produce the texts rather than focusing on the texts at the expense of the social relations. (Baldwin et al. 2018, 217)

For the characters in Dimaline's novel, the living ecology can only emerge through the interactions between humans and more-than-humans in linguistic, cultural, and thus ecological, becomings.

3   Conclusions

At the end of the novel, as the community attempts to rebuild and move toward an ever-elusive home, they come across a group of four other travellers. In their attempts to determine whether the group are friend or foe, they converse with one of them in Cree. Clarence, the most fluent in Cree, reports to the others that one of the men is "speaking an old Cree I don't even fully know. He's way more

fluent than me or anyone else I've met. And walked his lineage back" (Dimaline 2017, 227). When French points out that the man is not old enough to replace Minerva as their key to both the past and future, Rose asks: "Why does he have to be old? [...] The key doesn't have to be old, the language already is" (227). Once French has determined that the man dreams in Cree, that is, that the language lives through him and that it connects him bodily to the past, he is welcomed into the community as a potential new 'key' to connect them all to the future. The group recognises the importance of this connection through language as a means not only of preserving Terristory, but also of reviving practices of futurity that depend on the interactions language enables. Preserving language ecologies goes beyond the linguistic form to preserve "the social relations that are mediated by those languages" (Baldwin et al. 2018, 207). The "social relations" identified go beyond those enacted between humans, extending to the more-than-human as well, to solidify Indigenous ecologies of being. In the novel, the importance is highlighted as the group engages in the work of crafting "more keys, to give shape to the kind of Indians who could not be robbed" (Dimaline 2017, 214), despite the fact that this "was hard, desperate work" and that they "felt hollow in places and at certain hours [they] didn't have names for in [their] language" (214). As the text notes, the inability to name certain hours or places leaves them feeling 'hollow' or empty, with an absence that is identifiable, but cannot be filled without generating more knowledge networks.

French asserts that "We needed to remember Story. It was [Miig's] job to set the memory in perpetuity" (Dimaline 2017, 25). With the understanding that Story, language, and dreams are all intertwined actions of land agency, Dimaline's novel posits a means of countering narratives of extraction and exploitation and the physical repetition of residential school traumas. The novel enacts what Warren Cariou identifies as an "Indigenized ethic of interpretation" as stories "come from the land" and are not merely generated by humans residing on the land (Cariou 2018, 341). This unequivocal relationship to the land, or Place-Thought (Watts 2013), is enacted in Dimaline's novel, and the alternative to thinking and being *with* the land is the apocalyptic destruction and cannibalistic tendencies settler-colonists impose on Indigenous peoples. *The Marrow Thieves* thus works through the modes of Native slipstream and Indigenous futurism (Dillon 2012) to enact resistance to colonial modes of being and becoming through the recital of Story and its unequivocal corollaries of dreams and language as a means of, as Grace Dillon notes, *biskaabi-iyang*, an Anishinaabemowin word connoting the process of "returning to ourselves" (Dillon 2012, 10). The living ecologies that emerge from this 'return' are narratives of resistance to settler-colonial necropolitics that deny Indigenous futuring.

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Life, Death and Sustainability through Indigenous Literature
An Ecocritical Study of Selected Works from Northeast India

Sayan Mazumder
Jadavpur University, India

Abstract   Understanding sustainability in the Anthropocene through ecocritical discourses help us to deal with today's environmental angst. Indigenous literature critically interprets the effects of cultural domination on Indigenous communities. This paper looks at the works of two Indigenous authors from Northeast India to substantiate how literature through its creativity functions as force/medium of renewal and self-criticism of 'cultural ecologies', preserve oral narratives, utilize traditional ecological knowledge, use of conceptual categories like 'ecopsychology' and 'topophilia' in Indigenous literature to reformulate our ideas of life, death and sustainability.

Keywords   Indigeneity. Ecocriticism. Sustainability. Cultural ecology. Northeast India. Traditional knowledge.

Summary   1 Introduction. – 2 Methodological Approach. – 3 Primary Texts and Summary. – 4 Literature as Cultural Ecology. – 5 Preserving Indigenous Narratives. – 6 Traditional Ecological Knowledge. – 7 Ecopsychology, Nature-Language and Topophilia. – 8 The Role of Religion and Faith. – 9 Conclusion.

1   Introduction

> Even the men would have to be very careful, and remember to re-
> spect nature the way she expected to be respected. (Kire 2016, 40)

The Indigenous co-existence with the natural world for time immemo-
rial can be interpreted as an example of sustainable ecology. Their
voices through literature give meaning to the environmental angst
we are suffering today. Interpreting Indigenous literature can broad-
en our perspectives on how to internalise ideas of life and death and
decrease our ever-growing alienation from nature. Literature helps
the readers in imagining the consequences of this alienation better
than scientific data that might also help in reducing the ignorance
that humans have formed as an outcome via the Anthropocene. As
residents of the Global South the challenge is even more formida-
ble: it is not unlike walking on a tightrope between development
and sustainability. Our vulnerability is even more apparent having
lived through the COVID-19 pandemic. We have to shift our focus to
the looming climate crisis and find ways to re-envision our future
through sustainable ways. Sustainability needs to be understood
both culturally and environmentally. Maan Barua in his book *Lively
Cities: Reconfiguring Urban Ecology* (2023) talks about how

> cities are lived achievements forged by a multitude of enti-
> ties, drawing attention to a suite of beings – human and nonhu-
> man – that make up the material politics of city making.[1]

In the rural spaces Indigenous authors are using the space of liter-
ary creativity that can be understood as a means of preserving so-
cial and cultural identities as well as the production of new literary
ecologies that "examines the interplay between literature and the
environment".[2] Literary ecologies look at how the complicated rela-
tionship between humans and their environments are understood,
explored and expressed through different literary forms. Literature
plays an important role in critically observing how post-colonial com-
munities elaborate standpoints against cultural domination. In case
of Indigenous literature, the complexities of external interventions
have had a significant impact on cultural formulation. In a region like
the Northeast India, it is crucial to preserve vulnerable species and
our pristine landscape, home to many Indigenous communities. Only
in the last part of the twentieth century have we seen the beginning

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[1] https://researchguides.dartmouth.edu/human_geography/thecity.

[2] https://www.transcript-publishing.com/series/literary-studies/
literary-ecologies/?f=12320.

of a global effort to acknowledge the need to secure their endangered cultural and environmental realities. If we dive into the history of the sustainable development agenda, we see that it goes back over 30 years. After the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, the need for a global partnership for sustainable development took centre stage because. It was in 2000, at the Millennium Summit in New York that the eight Millennium Development Goals were adopted that led to *The 17 Sustainable Development Goals* (SDG) in 2015 (United Nations 2015). The SDGs have had a significant impact in policy making with regards to the environment around the world. Natural calamities occurring around the world only highlights the significance and effects of the climate crisis.

After the independence of India in 1947, the central government prioritized development over environmental preservation for economic stability and security. Soon even the most remote regions of India were connected by roads. Our natural landscape underwent huge changes. Arunachal Pradesh is a state located in the Northeastern part of India, home to many Indigenous communities felt the tremors of the government policies soon after. Arunachal Pradesh has a reverse of forests containing valuable timber, firewood, land for new industries crucial for economic development. People from different parts of the country came to Arunachal Pradesh to look for jobs. The state government started to produce lumber from that forest for the growing industries. New schools were built that provided Western education to the children. The first priority was development. Natural resources were being massively utilized and exploited. The natural ecosystem started to suffer from this rapid industrialization. If we turn our attention to the Indian history of development, we find Indira Gandhi, the prime minister of India in 1972, while addressing the United Nations environmental conference held in Stockholm, argue in favour of development over environment. She went to great lengths to say that if pollution was the price of progress, the people would, in fact, prefer progress. In a country like India, it was essential to develop technologies, promote the Green Revolution, give industrialists more ability to use natural resources post-Independence. The country came together for the cause of development.

Ramachandra Guha in his essay "Environmentalism of the Poor" (2014, 138-49) assesses the challenge that the Global South has to deal with. Guha says that at the beginning, large areas of forests and land were given up by the Indigenous communities. Arunachal Pradesh's economy depended on the export of wood from the forests. Often, people who had to leave their homes due to the rising water levels created by new dams or by the toxification caused by the new industries were tolerated because this sacrifice was for the greater good of the country. In a review of Ambika Aiyadurai's book *Tigers are Our Brothers* (2021), Anirban Datta-Roy elaborates on the

relationship that the Mishmi community of Arunachal Pradesh shares with their natural surroundings as,

> The relationship which the Mishmi share with nature, a relationship which includes both wild and domestic animals as well as guardian spirits with whom a reciprocal relationship is maintained through taboos, rituals, and offerings. While indigenous cosmologies of nature have allowed them to engage in activities like subsistence hunting for centuries, these activities are often seen to be in contravention of wildlife laws, a point of conflict which exists among the Mishmi of Dibang Valley and many other forest-dwelling groups across the world. (Datta-Roy 2022, 280)

The Chipko movement[3] that occurred during the 1970s, had a significant impact on environmental awareness in India. The women hugged trees to save them from the axe. This movement gained the attention of international media and made Indians more aware of environmental degradation and its consequences. Ecologically aware intellectuals demanded a more "decentralised, socially aware, environmentally friendly and more gentle form of development" (Guha 2014, 165). Guha was convinced that the way Western countries preached 'environmentalism' only worked for the countries having more land than required by people, and economic prowess to implement strict reservation of vulnerable regions. But in the case of South-Asian countries it was very important to change the outlook on environmentalism because sustainability of nature came second to the need for resources to sustain human life. The idea of sustainable development is even more complex because of the change in priorities as seen by the Government. The Western ideas of environmentalism must be re-evaluated while talking about under-developed countries such as India.

2 Methodological Approach

In this paper, I will look at selected novels by two Indigenous authors from Northeast India who have contributed greatly towards understanding the ecologies of life and death and the tenets of change, continuity and sustainability through their novels. Specifically, Mamang Dai of Arunachal Pradesh and Easterine Kire of Nagaland, two prominent, Indigenous poet-cum-authors, and their literary works will be discussed in this paper. The methodology of this research paper is based on a comparative framework. Comparative studies help in

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3 https://www.sugiproject.com/blog/the-chipko-movement.

understanding how Indigenous literature works in creating 'kinship' with natural surroundings, and functions as a reservoir for storing Indigenous knowledge, myths, stories and languages. The comparative framework also helps in building a kind of 'global solidarity' that is crucial in today's world. Comparative literature as a discipline helps in analysing the literary transmissions across literary systems and languages. Indigenous scholarship across the world has emphasized the importance of earth-centric life of the native communities that has helped them to peacefully coexist for time immemorial. It also echoes the primary objectives of Ecocriticism. All told, this research forwards a new way of understanding the environmentally conscious literature from a comparative praxis. The paper will try to eco-critically understand the selected novels and their contribution to understanding the change in 'cultural ecologies' of Indigenous communities through literary explorations. Indigenous Scholarship also demands ethical research and alternate perspectives to produce unbiased knowledge. Beyond the urban cities, the 'change towards modernity' comes at a higher cost. As the environment is deeply connected with the Indigenous life, it must be a collective effort to build up sustainable environments that benefit every community, the human and non-human and nature. Sustainable development means to grow in a way that does not affect the future generations and their ability to grow on their own, that also can mean a process to maintain the continuation of life. Now, during the Anthropocene era, it is very difficult to even provide necessary resources, food and clean water to everyone. Collaborative efforts at every level are absolutely significant to find sustainable solutions for all. This paper aims to look at a few critical aspects like understanding literature as cultural ecology, preserving oral traditions as a means of saving cultural heritage from extinction, utilizing traditional ecological knowledge for sustaining life, analysing Indigenous literature through conceptual categories such as 'ecopsychology' and 'topophilia', use of 'myth and religion' in reformulating the ideas of life and death.

3 Primary Texts and Summary

Mamangs Dai's novel *The Legends of Pensam* (2006) invokes the idea of "collective memory"[4] of the community to understand how we use memory and mental images to reconstruct our past. The stories in this novel weave the history of Indigenous communities from the snippets of memory. The transition from past to present and back to the past through myths, stories and legends could be seen in this

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4   https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/hawlbachsspace.pdf

novel. Bonding with the land remains a constant theme of the novel. The 'fantastic' stories told by the characters not only re-emphasize the strong connection of people to their community but also signify their deep-rooted love for their surroundings. The second novel discussed here is Dai's *The Black Hill* (2014). Here we see the first historical journey of a French priest through India's Northeast that resulted in spreading Christianity throughout the region. The novel is also significant in show-casing the relationship between different Indigenous communities, their failure to unite against colonial aggression, the changing social, cultural and natural atmosphere in the Northeast. Dai's novel is based on thorough research on actual events and recorded stories that paint the picture of Northeast India and their contact with the Western cultures. Easterine Kire's novel *When the River Sleeps* (2014) talks about a hunter who tries to find a precious "Heart-stone" from a "sleeping" river. This hunter's journey also highlights a man's relationship with nature, community, animals and even spirits. Kire reflects on the conflicts of man and his inner self while positing that valuable traditional knowledge of these Indigenous communities is getting lost. The final novel that I will discuss in this paper is Easterine Kire's *Son of the Thundercloud* (2016). This novel is a blend of Christian mythology and Indigenous faith. The promise of a boy that brings joy, rain and new life to a community almost on the brink of extinction. The metaphors used in this novel also reconnects the reader with the importance of stories and story-tellers. The boy who fell from the sky, or the tiger spirit roaming around the forest that the characters imagine as a brother, creates a space for peaceful co-habitation. It redefines that humans are a part of nature and nature is a part of humans. These stories mark the start of how the Indigenous authors of the Northeast are re-imagining the community through their creative work, expressing their concerns about losing their traditional knowledge and cultural heritage. The precarity and inter-relations of life and death, religion and faith, nature and culture, the changing state of their ecology can be interpreted through close analysis of these texts. A comparative study of these novels might uncover ways in which the authors are trying to address many of these social and ecological concerns.

4 Literature as Cultural Ecology

The discourse of cultural ecology introduced by Zapf in 2016 helps us navigate Indigenous narratives as well. Maria Löschnigg says in her essay "Native Knowledge Systems and the Cultural Ecology of Literature",

literature operates as a cultural ecology but that they actually constitute a knowledge system within an epistemological ecology. Moreover, as will be demonstrated in the following sections, they indicate and perform a cross-fertilization between different thought systems through forms of creative appropriation. (Löschnigg 2019, 278)

Her work constantly emphasizes the critical points of the knowledge systems of Indigenous literature through its intrinsic features and upholds how understanding the natural environment affords practitioners significant agency. Literature works as a medium that helps in self-renewal and self-reflection of culture creating a framework of cultural ecology. It is through the knowledge mediated via the Indigenous narratives that she enhances her ecocritical approach. Thus, multiple discourses are thus significantly impacted by this research. This research aims to study the texts through comparative methodologies to understand how the authors are utilizing their texts by building platforms for ecological and cultural analysis. The question then lies upon what they did with the narratives and how they did it, and what meaning it might carry are the main subjects of discussion with regards to their ecological space. The comparative aspects of reading these texts and cultures together, is to examine how they talk to each other and how these texts can bring forward the Indigenous voices which had not been heard before.

India's Northeast is a diverse place with different communities, landscapes, cultures languages, traditions and faiths: it is an amalgamation of multiplicities. The sense of shared history and experience, the intrinsic qualities within the literary ecologies helps in forging a new way of looking at the world around us. The aim of this research is to examine how the Northeastern literature is reformulating itself to achieve these goals. Moreover, I show that these texts evince a transition in terms of authorship to activism. The ecological approach in the Anthropocene helps in understanding the human-nature dynamics, reconfiguring the community space, restoring the invaluable knowledge passed down to us, protecting the Indigenous heritage and envisaging a sustainable future. The ecocritical perspective in many ways aids in reconnecting us to the world beyond. It is the start of a dialogue focusing on some key issues of the contemporary time, also an effort to recognize how the knowledge we gain from our existence is being transformed within the ever changing cultural and literary systems. The ecological approach paves the way to reattach the bond that every living and non-living element of this universe shares. Only through introspection, thus reshaping our ideas and restructuring our vision, inclusivity of one and all, that we might succeed in restoring the balance. The ultimate goal is to expand the field of study by addressing the environmental concerns, emphasizing active

participation, ensuring more significance on Indigenous contexts, opening up new avenues of knowledge across the board and providing adequate space for further conversation might start the process of healing. Indigenous literature here helps in ethically interpreting their knowledge systems. This research is a step towards critically understating Northeast India's Indigenous narratives and their significance in shaping Indigenous cultures. As Hubert Zapf discusses in *Literature as Cultural Ecology* (2016),

> For this evolutionary function of literature, the formal and artistic qualities of texts are not merely illustrations of already existing environmental knowledge but are themselves actively participating in the production of ever new ecologies of knowledge and communication. Literary form is therefore an indispensable part of the ways in which a cultural ecology of literature looks at texts. (Zapf 2016, 91-2)

Zapf's idea of literature as a medium of preserving the "evolutionary memory" plays a significant part in bridging the gap between the human and non-human ecologies. He also elaborates how the literary texts explore the complex interactions between culture and nature by opening up the potential space for innovation and self-renewal through 'creative explorations'. That is the space where Indigenous literature becomes even more significant. Continuous changes affecting the Indigenous cultures are reflected through the literary ecologies expressed by the interventions of the authors. Ecological thought is thus embedded within the texts, and foregrounds the functional dynamics of the texts that encapsulate cultural connotations of the Indigenous ways of continuity. This research tries to focus on these areas of transitions with regards to the selected novels. The readings of the novels were conducted through an eco-critical lens examining the role of cultural ecology in building up a sustainable model. The novels provide detailed descriptions of the landscapes to contextualize the setting of the stories. The multiple narratives show how each community is respectful towards the customs of other communities, respectful of the elders and the spirits. Even forests or rivers have spirits. The Indigenous people believe humans can turn into tiger-spirits, can leave the body and stay on a tree. It is this 'transition' that makes 'ecotone' a pivotal concept in understanding the 'agency' of nature. Ecotone means to be a transitional area, which is present between two ecosystems (*Encyclopaedia Britannica* 2021). As the Northeast region is so diverse and ecologically rich, the interaction of the communities and ecosystems help us to comprehend the changes. Ecotone helps in analysing the texts and reading them through an earth-centric lens. The mutual relationship between the people and nature makes Indigenous cultures more important in the

contemporary times. In Indigenous culture, nature is looked at as the protector and the provider. One must follow a certain etiquette in amongst nature and nature would show a path even in the most difficult time. It is important to notice the attitude of the Indigenous people towards nature, that distinguishes them from the modern materialistic approach. The Indigenous authors voice their concerns and also uphold their traditional ways of life through literary production strengthening their foothold in the ongoing conversation. It is also a kind of 'activism' reflecting through their artistic work enabling the Indigenous communities to share their own experience.

5 Preserving Indigenous Narratives

Re-imagining the Indigenous communities through literature can be thoroughly analysed via a comparative study of the texts in terms of their use of the oral tradition, re-articulation of the myths and legends placed within the storyline that paints the picture of the region as a whole. As literature is said to be the mirror of the society, the authors have to 're-envision' the Indigenous communities through their works. Brian Gollnick (2008) in his book *Reinventing the Lacandón: Subaltern Representations in the Rain Forest of Chiapas* discussed how Indigenous communities of the Lacandon jungle have been misrepresented through cultural exoticization. Gollnick finds "oral traces" of indigenous people in dominant cultural outputs by utilising theoretical breakthroughs provided by subaltern studies. He looks at how the jungle region and its people have been portrayed in literary works from the Spanish conquest onwards, as well as how the native people have portrayed themselves in these works, which include poetry, video, photography, and post- and anti-colonial narratives. In Northeast India, Indigenous authors have tried to invoke the 'collective memory' and consciousness of the community with the help of their novels. As Halbwachs explains that "In each epoch memory reconstructs an image of the past that is in accord with the predominant thoughts of the society" (Halbwachs 1992, 40). The authors are trying to 'restore' Indigenous cultures in these rapidly changing times, in a world of advanced technologies and progression. It is crucial to archive the myths, legends, customs, and traditions of Indigenous communities as most of it still remains in the oral form. As Longkumer notes in his essay "Little Nationalities: Writing in English in the North-East" that

> Kire's narrative choice of the indigenous oral tradition come as a refusal to adopt the narrative mode of mainstream Indian novel as she emphasizes on illustrating ethnic elements through her use of language, expression and themes. (Longkumer 2021, 78)

So, the authors are re-formulating their novels in a way to pro-
vide space for this knowledge to become an intrinsic part of text.
Northeast India has a rich repository of oral literature. Ramanujan
is the preface of his book titled *Folktales from India* suggested,

> Both public culture and domestic culture cannot be fully under-
> stood without knowledge of the folk idiom. Every kind of Indi-
> an cultural practices, every kind of Indian cultural performance,
> whether it is the classical epic and theatre or modern film and po-
> litical rhetoric, is indebted to oral traditions and folk forms (Ra-
> manujan 1991, xiii-xiv)

He emphasized that in the mostly non-literate countries it is the oral
traditions that form the ethos and worldviews in the childhood and
that is reinforced in the later stages of life.

> Oral traditions give us alternative conceptions of deities that bal-
> ance and complete, and therefore illuminate the textual concep-
> tions. (Ramanujan 1994, 93)

Written literature has its origin in oral literature. Northeast Indian
literature still survives by way of folktales, stories and oral narra-
tives. It was in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century that
people from the different Missionaries of Europe started to arrive
in Northeast India to preach their religion and find routes to Tibet
from the Indian side. They also started to document the topography,
the people and cultures of the Indigenous communities. The newly
established Missionaries and the arrival of the printing press had
a very significant impact in the Northeast in terms of both religion
and education. But in terms of literature, it was after independence
that we see prominent writers coming out with multitudes of writ-
ten work from the region. Easterine Kire discussed how the lack of
script had been the most difficult hurdle to overcome for writing in
Indigenous languages. Indigenous authors have preferred English as
the medium of writing given that they originally received English ed-
ucation in school and were comfortable in the language. Both Kire
and Mamang Dai have used oral narratives and stories in their work.
All of the history, tradition, myths and legends, wars and violence,
crisis and exposure had created a unique space for the authors to ex-
plore the oral literature and weave it into their work. Mamang Dai's
novel *The Legends of Pensam* (2006) is a collection of myths, legends,
stories, customs, beliefs, and rituals rearticulated to the readers by
various characters at various times. The author herself is trying to
find the place from where she used to belong. Her encounters with
people of different villages bring up different events that narrate the
history of a village, a place, a person, a certain period or historical

incident. All of these are closely bound to the orality of the region. How the culture of a certain place is shaped through its stories and myths can be analysed throughout the novel. In her essay titled "Oral Narratives and Myth", she addressed the question of the necessity of the old stories and the legends as,

> Perhaps in this, myth and memory have their role too. How do we identify ourselves as members of a community belonging to a particular place, with a particular history? Some of the signs for this lie with our stories. We are here today as members of a community with a particular set of beliefs, by an act of faith, because we believed in the 'word' as composed in our myths and legends. It is here that we may find that peculiar, indefinable something by which we recognise each other, and make others see us as a group, a society, a people of a particular community. (Dai 2009, 05)

The importance of the orality also conserves a significant portion of the history of the Indigenous communities. The stories of conflicts between the different communities, the legendary stories of the different spirits, the shaman and his ritualistic influence on the people helps in constructing the community. The history, myths and legends join each other forming the collective memory of the people. When the travellers in *The Legends of Pensam* reached a certain village, they found that arrangements were made for a storytelling session. A big fire was lit for "a long night of stories when myth and memory would be reborn in the song of the ponung dancers" (Dai 2006, 93). It is this idea of being reborn through stories that makes oral narratives even more important. The elders, the singers, the dancers, the shamans play pivotal roles in keeping the stories alive, keeping them connected to their roots. In the other novel *The Black Hill*, Mamang Dai emphasizes the importance of stories.

> Every dawn I think all the stories of the world are connected. At night another voice tells me – no, there are more stories yet that are silent and separate. There are many lost stories in the world and versions that were misplaced yesterday or a thousand years ago. Perhaps this is one or the other of them. (Dai 2014, ix)

The Black Hill is a great example in which the author not only tells a story but further explores a crucial historical event. The Christian mission within the Northeast had changed the religious and social aspects of the people. It is a significant juncture that has shaped the Northeast we know today. Dai's first novel can be seen as a series of intercalated stories. Many of the characters are storytellers themselves who help the people inside the story to move forward with a better understanding of the world. Easterine Kire's works

talk about 're-visitation' into the Indigenous world. Not only does her work narrate different Naga stories and myths to the readers but with that establishes a new world order. After colonization, a distance evolved between the traditional life and the modern life, creating a conflict within the communities. Sometimes the new religion made people distant from the natural world and their own roots. As Kire through metaphors discloses that evil spirits even killed the repository of the 'story-tellers'. Easterine Kire emphasizes how the storytelling culture within her family and community helped her become the writer she is today. All the novels discussed here have been heavily influenced by oral narratives and folk tales. Belonging to the Naga community herself, the Naga cosmology is also a very important part of Kire's work. She puts a boy as a reference to Jesus in the context of her novel *Son of the Thundercloud*, where ultimately the boy becomes the saviour and later on is killed because of conspiracy and jealousy. Her narrative technique very wisely works as an inter-connecting link between the Indigenous faith and Christianity. By combining the two, she re-formulates the Naga life by creating a world of peaceful co-existence. Orality and myth are at the center of her work.

> "And there were storytellers who went all over the land telling stories to the people, and spreading joy and hope". "Where are they now?" "Dead. Killed, all killed by the dark ones, those who did not want them to transform people's minds with their stories". "Why?" "Because the people sought to be free whenever they heard the stories. Free of fear, free of shame and constant desire. Without the stories, people believed they were destined to suffer, and they allowed the dark ones to enslave their minds and fill them with fear and sorrow and despair until they died". (Kire 2016, 48)

Kire as the master storyteller uses her novels to turn our attention towards the loss of Indigenous knowledge that is being replaced by the Western education. She emphasizes that the storytellers provide the community with tales of compassion and kindness, give them hope. They have valuable knowledge that is passed down from the elders that keeps getting actively circulated for thousands of years. Kire says that this is the right time when the stories should be revisited in order to keep them alive. The lack of stories and storytellers meant that the

> people slowly forgot what they had been told, or believed they were just myths, and they allowed their minds to accept the darkness. So, the drought came as a result of people rejecting the joyful stories and accepting the dark stories. (Kire 2016, 48-9)

In the other novel *When the River Sleeps*, we find Vilie as the guardian of the forest and nature. His journey, and all the supernatural things that happen to him can be traced back to Indigenous belief systems. Vilie remembers all the old sayings, stories, and rituals that in turn helps him navigate through the treacherous paths of the forests. It is this traditional learning that saves his life multiple times. Vilie's story is also a testament to the hunter's way of life deep in the hills and forests of the Northeast, where the Indigenous communities have thrived for a long time.

Mamang Dai and Easterine Kire both use oral traditions, integrating stories and myths into the fabric of their respective novels. Oral narratives work as a vital resource for Indigenous knowledge and literature being produced in the region. Orality is a massive part of Indigenous life and that is why it is very important to 're-tell' these stories and keep the tradition of passing that knowledge to the next generation intact.

6 Traditional Ecological Knowledge

According to P.S. Ramakrishnan, the TEK (Traditional Ecological Knowledge) is very significant due to the rapid change towards technology and the impending environmental crisis. He emphasizes the need to implement traditional knowledge for policy-making and creating a sustainable environment. He says,

> This traditional wisdom is based on the intrinsic realisation that man and Nature form part of an indivisible whole, therefore should live in partnership with each other. This eco-centric view of traditional societies is widely reflected in their attitudes towards plants, animals, rivers, and the earth. This whole body of knowledge centred around the economic value of plant and animal species is a part of ethnobiology, and has potential value for the society at large. (Ramakrishnan 2001, 27)

He enunciates that traditional knowledge has economic, social and ethical benefits, particularly in terms of sustainable development. Authors from the Northeast have taken literature as a way of imparting this knowledge. The old sayings/stories that the authors inculcate in their novels would make sense to the people of Northeast as these are taken from the local Indigenous cultures. The myths and the stories serve educational purposes also. The vivid descriptions of farming, the seasonal vegetables, the songs, the trading routes, the animals and their importance are narrated as stories but they in fact remind the new generation of the traditional ways and value systems. Dai's novel *The Black Hill* elaborately describes dangerous routes to

travel the land (Father Krick's journey to Tibet, Kajinsha's journey across the hills and forests), Kire's novel *The Son of Thundercloud* talks about the self-sustainable ecosystems created by the three sisters, description of vegetables and plants Indigenous communities use for cooking, in the novel *When the River Sleeps* (2014) we find Vilie talking about the rituals and customs of the hunter communities. Traditional knowledge also includes the rites, rituals, customs and festivals that the communities organize to celebrate their culture. In Dai's *The Black Hill*, we see that one of the protagonists Kajinsha knew the forest so well that he could travel even in the dark. It is the same with Kire's central character Vilie (*When the River Sleeps*) as well. These two characters from different novels are examples of traditional hunters who could survive in the jungle for days on end. On their long journeys, we see them having expert knowledge on how to set traps for food, what plants to eat, and what trees could provide them with medicinal attributes to put on their wounds. While Kajinsha, a village chief made a house so deep in the valley protected by the landscape that it takes many days to just reach there. Only avid knowledge of one's own environment, and utilization of local resources makes life sustainable for these people without the use of any modern technology. Kire's protagonist Vilie made the forest his home, only coming to the rural market for some sugar, oil and tobacco. Both the protagonists from different communities, different novels, different authors share the sense of belonging with nature. They utilize traditional knowledge learned from their elders and maximize what is provided by nature. For example, during a scene in which Vilie cuts himself, a woman from the local weaver community helps him by giving some kneaded pulp of bitter wormwood to ease his pain. This is how the Indigenous people without any access to medical facilities use the environment for survival. On his way back Vilie home found Idele, who was the best bark-weaver of the community, had died. With her death, the knowledge of nettle-weaving art she possessed was is also on the brink of extinction. Soon the nettle-weaving art might also get lost forever if steps to revive it are not taken soon. Another important incident of Vilie's journey was the meeting with the Nepali worker Krishna. When Vilie asked Krishna to send his kid to school in the future, Krishna replied that he does not have the means to send the child to school but he would teach the kid his trade to make an honest living. Vilie was asked to be the little boy's teacher. People like Vilie who had the experience, knowledge and the know-how can teach the new generation many things that so-called Western education cannot. Vilie's story helps us understand the importance of Indigenous knowledge systems.

In *Son of the Thundercloud*, we see the young boy Rhalietuo being taught by Pele on how to make a house from the materials found in the forest. Seidze, the boy's aunt teaches the boy about the ways of

collecting food for the family. In the wilderness, there are no markets where one can go and buy food. One has to work very hard to cultivate their lands and save seed grains for the next season. It is intense labour that goes into catching fish, growing rice, taking care of the animals, finding edible fruits and plants. Siedze becomes the teacher of the young boy forming an inseparable bond. Instead of meat, they used mushrooms to supplement their diets. The young boy learns to separate the poisonous mushrooms from the edible ones, and in turn, her aunts make delicious broths for him (Kire 2016). Indigenous communities who source their food from nature has to take good care of their environment. The earth replenishes the trees, the animals and the human world. The rivers provide them with water for cultivation, drinking and fishing. But the modern development and industrialization have many adverse effects on the rivers.

In all the four novels we see the significance of the river in Indigenous life. This connection with nature and natural environment is quintessential for the Indigenous communities. Kire's novel *When the River Sleeps* (2014) describes the river as a spirit. Here the river is also the metaphor for our consciousness. The Heart-stone that Vilie tries to find in novel, also gives strength to his inner self and transforms him. In the other novel *Son of the Thundercloud*, we find the river coming back to life after the rain. The young children who never knew about the river because of the long drought could hear it for the first time. The head priest exclaimed "The river runs. We are saved!" (Kire 2016, 40). The fantastical events occurring in the texts arise from the belief of Indigenous communities. It is like what Alejo Carpentier (1957) called "the marvellous real".[5] The traditional knowledge of the Indigenous communities, the relationship that they have with the natural world, the respect they have for the river, the sky, the land and the earth as a whole, have helped them sustain life here for thousands of years. This ecocritical understanding of the texts brings forward a unique attitude that the Indigenous people have towards nature. The synthesis of myth, folklore and traditional knowledge culminates into literature that re-contextualizes the environmental issues at this moment. The traditional ecological knowledge must be restored, archived and utilized with the modern ideas in order to change our materialistic approach towards nature and restore the parity between humans and the environment. Only in that way we can start the process towards sustainable development.

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5 https://instruct.uwo.ca/english/785a/Prologue.html.

7   Ecopsychology, Nature-Language and Topophilia

To understand the attitude of Indigenous communities towards nature, the concepts of ecopsychology and topophilia will be helpful in this research. The term ecopsychology was coined by Theodor Rozak (1992) and is defined as

> Ecopsychology studies the relationship between human beings and the natural environment through both ecological and psychological principles. Ecopsychology seeks to develop and understand ways of expanding the emotional connection between individuals and the natural environment, thereby assisting individuals with developing sustainable lifestyles and remedying alienation from nature. (Blaschke 2013, 37)

While doing an ecocritical reading of any text, one needs to understand the complex relationship between human action and its impact on the natural environment in the text. The response of a novel to its local environment is very important. The interaction of the protagonists to animals, forests and rivers, showcases the multifaceted dynamics of ecopsychology. In the essay titled "A Nature Language", Peter H. Kahn, Jr., Jolina H. Ruckert, and Patricia H. Hasbach introduced a new concept that redefines the human-nature interaction. They articulate in the introduction that,

> A way of speaking about patterns of interactions between humans and nature and about their wide range of instantiations. Locking eyes with a wild animal is an experience that can stay with one for a lifetime. The authors refer to such experiences as enacting the interaction pattern of "recognizing and being recognized by a nonhuman other". (Kahn, Hasbach 2012, 13)

This way of communicating through the nature language could be encountered in the novel *When the River Sleeps* (2014) when a 'were-tiger' makes its appearance. Vilie encounters the same were-tiger on multiple occasions, the spirits in the trees of the unclean forest, and the battle with the river are examples of this nature language where the environment is given active agency. In the *Son of the Thundercloud*, we see rain coming to the village with the birth of Rhalietuo. While he travels to visit his aunts, another storm hinders their progress. But his mother Mesuano reassures Pele that the boy Rhalietuo (as a metaphor for Jesus) can see his father in the rain. Many events in this novel have religious connotations as well. The Indigenous belief and faith have a deep connection with the environment. In the moments of distress, we witness the protagonists of these novels addressing the sky as their father, the earth as their

mother, building up a sense of kinship with nature. Vilie believes that the forest is his wife. Creating family relations with the natural world, and asking them to protect them is the evidence of how 'ecopsychology' is very much interconnected with their life. The bond between human and nature is not just in their myths and legends but as if they share an ancestry. Similar to a mother feeding and protecting her offspring, the Indigenous communities believe that they are nature's children and that nature will protect them. If one is in tune with the forest, even the most impenetrable jungle makes a way to pass it. Indigenous communities have domestic animals, farm animals, they encounter wild animals like deer and tigers in the forest. Local animals play a significant role in their rituals and customs. The natural landscape, the trees, the hills, and the rivers have material and spiritual value in them. That is why they feel the necessity of communication through the nature language. One of the most interesting parts of the Northeast culture is their myths and folklore. In her essay titled "Myth and the Mizo World View" (2007), Dr. Cherrie L. Chhangte discusses how the origin stories of the Mizo culture created a 'sacred time' where all natural things such as humans, the plant and animal world, and all the living beings could communicate and co-exist peacefully.[6] The origin stories go on to say how conflicts arose among them and daunting measures had to be taken to resolve the issue.

> However, the domesticated animals refused to bow under the dictates of their human masters any longer, claiming that they should have a more exalted position because of their contributions to the victory. They raised a great protest when some of them were to be slaughtered for the feast. The situation became critical until Sabereka, Thlanrawkpa's father-in-law decreed that, henceforth, neither animals, plants nor humans should be able to speak the same language. Thus, with communication cut off between them, other creatures could no longer make protests, and order was restored with humans continuing to be masters over other living beings. (Tribal Research Institute 1992)

This myth clearly expresses how nature language has been a very significant part of different cultures in diverse ways. What is also important to notice is that the domination of humans over nature was also addressed in the Mizo origin story. Taking away the power of communication in-between the living creatures was also a way to 'silence' the natural world. The human world has taken advantage of the forced silence to keep the 'hierarchy' going which in turn

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6   https://cherriechhangte.wordpress.com/2007/11/28/myth-and-the-mizo-world-view/.

has resulted in the decay of the environment. One could understand through these textual and mythical examples of how the nature languageworks and its importance from the Indigenous perspective. The ecological crisis tends to form a psychological reaction termed 'topophilia' – emotions related to a specific place. Yet, it is not just a love for a place but has a deep sense of 'cultural identity' linked with it. When used in the space of ecopsychology, Scott Donald Sampson's work on the 'Topophilia Hypothesis' can provide us with a clear understanding. Scott not only talks about how topophilia is directly linked with the re-envisioning of our relation with nature but also connects it to the sustainability crisis. He gives examples from many Indigenous and oral cultures around the world but specifically theorizes the 'hunter-gatherer' bond within their psychological framework. This is very much interrelated with the texts discussed here. Vilie for example in *When the River Sleeps* (2014) set in an unconfirmable time, is a hunter who explores his relationship with nature. The wilderness becomes a 'sanctuary' to him. Kire's novels provide the readers with magical tales and legends conjoined with people like Vilie and Pele who are believers in their own culture and identity. There is also the love of their land that propagates the protagonist to the 'proper understanding' of 'their' world. As Sampson elaborates,

> Present-day Indigenous peoples and many followers of major religious traditions still possess a cosmology, yet most of us in Western industrial societies exist largely without one. The absence of a sense of deep history likely contributes to the dearth of greater meaning and purpose that many of us experience, with one result being the dysfunctional human-nature relationship at the heart of the eco-crisis. (2012, 42)

Kire's novels are very much in accordance to Scott's essay. Vilie's story re-imagines the 'hunter life' of the Indigenous communities while Pele's journey turns him into the witness of the 'revival of nature'. In many different ways each of the discussed novels tries to address the imbalance that has taken place within the human-nature relationship. Mamang Dai's novels explore the changing times through historical events and visible observations. The many stories of *The Legends of Pensam* (2006) put forward how development is changing the landscape that has been there. Dai herself as the narrator addresses that Northeast's remote terrain helped in the region's 'isolation' that in turn protected this rich landscape and forest till now. *The Legends of Pensam* similarly works as a protector and reservoir of the rich Indigenous stories of the people. These stories can make one re-visit the land they were born and brought up, to the hills, forests, and rivers that make this magical. As Dai notes "when you look at the land you forget all your aches and pain" (Dai 2006, Author's

note). Maybe Scott's hypothesis talked about the same people who are intrinsically connected to the land which gives a very strong nature-oriented psychological side to them. Scott concludes with the idea that sustainability can only be achieved through the accumulation of locally sustainable cultures. Geographical locations and sustainability are directly linked with the relationship between the human and the environment of that place. The unique characteristics of each place provide unique challenges that must be dealt with in the ground level only. The Northeast must be given the opportunity to find their own solutions without external intervention. The ecological aspects of the novels thus try to address these problems and find answers through the re-imagined reception of these texts.

8   The Role of Religion and Faith

In terms of the religious aspect, one needs to understand the synthesis of Indigenous faith with Christianity in the Northeast cultures. The presence of Christianity in the Northeast spans more than 150 years and continues to play a huge role in the Northeast states. Colonialism brought the military and also the Church into the Seven Sister states. Due to the dominance of this religion, the social and cultural ethos of the people have also changed over time. Initially, the people who converted had to abandon all their past beliefs and completely focus on Western theology. But in the 1950s and 1960s, the revival of the Church became a significant movement. The Nagaland Christian Revival Church was formed in 1962. Tereso C. Casiño and Yiepetso Wezah in their essay titled "Towards a Relevant Theology of Nature: North-East India Tribal Perspective" (2011) talk about the conflicts between biblical teachings and the traditional beliefs of Indigenous people: they provide many examples of how the Creator-Human-Nature relationship changed in the two worldviews. But a new kind of restoration is taking place in Northeast India. Tereso C. Casiño while discussing the "Theology of Nature" or "Mythology of Nature" says that

> A biblical theology of creation assures the communities of North-East India of their God-given identity and future. The people's claim to the land is theologically legitimate. Their present identity and determination to live as a people finds historical mooring, not simply because of their mythical stories, but because of the historical reality of existence from the time their forefathers lived in the land. The use of Indigenous myths to construct a theology of nature in North-East India could pave the way for a contextualized, relevant, and innovative preservation and protection of the environment and ecology. (Wezah, Casiño 2011, 115)

Kire's novel *Son of the Thundercloud* re-associates the people with the traditional Indigenous belief system and also re-contextualises Christianity through their Indigenous experience. Rather than drawing a distinction between Christianity and Indigenous beliefs, she explains that there are a lot of similarities between the tenets of the two faiths. The prophecy of the novel is very much connected to Isaiah's prophecy about the saviour. Kire herself talks about how prophecies are important in her novels. Isaiah prophesized the birth of a child who shall become the everlasting Father and the Prince of Peace (Is 9:6-7). The impending birth of the prophesized son is being constantly reminded to the readers throughout the book. What is even more interesting is that the aunts of the boy warned that people will try to hurt him, afflict him with sorrows, say terrible behind his back even though he will save them from all the misfortunes. This is in the same line of Isaiah's "Atonement of Christ" where he said that the Saviour would be despised and rejected, and would be wounded because of our transgression while carrying our sorrow (Is 53:1-12). Here Kire draws a parallel between the stories of her own community with similar stories of Christianity. It is this interconnection of the Indigenous faith with Christian religion that Kire tries to highlight. Kire's work has also addressed the questions of 'faith' through Indigenous knowledge systems, traditions and beliefs, along with the orality and story-telling culture that is prevalent in Nagaland. In the same novel Kire creates a fable-like story that consists of an amalgamation of legends, and myths, droughts and deaths, of revival and heroic feats and of changing times. All the names of the characters are equally significant. Pelevotso was the name given by the grandmother but the parents shortened it to Pele, which means 'faithful to the end'. Pele in the novel also fulfills his destiny. He is a witness and a believer. This is the 'faith' that Kire tries to emphasize again and again. The names of the sisters are also significant. Kethonuo means truth and Siedze means a future full of hope. They wait four hundred years for the promised son to arrive. The name that is given to this son is Rhalietuo. It means the redeemer. She says that

> *Son of the Thundercloud* is a story about love and forgiveness and it points to the world beyond this, which is part of the Christian tradition and also has a place in Naga tradition. (Pou 2023, n.d.)

Easterine Kire's deep connection to Christianity plays a very significant part in the novel. The 'Son' of the thundercloud defeats the tiger and offers redemption to the people suffering due to the drought. The Naga faith and the Christian religion intertwine throughout this novel. Kire prefers to use "nativisation of Christianity" instead of synthesis to understand their religious aspects. In this way, the author 're-contextualizes' faith in Indigenous communities. The story of the Heart-stone in

When the River Sleeps was collected by Kire from her hunter friends. The journey of Vilie is the journey of a man who incorporates the traditional knowledge, the respect for nature and spirits, the cultural ethos of a man of the land. Vilie's adventure makes the reader aware of the terrains, the customs, the taboos, the justice system of society, the nettle leaf plantation, the flowers and the animals, the dangers that lie deep in the forest life. Kire in an interview with Veio Pou discussed about the readers of her work. She explains that to her mind she is writing to and for the Nagas. The language she uses might be English but the way she conveys the feelings will make sense to the people about whom she is writing for. The connection that she primarily tries to form is with her people who have suffered a lot. Through Vilie's journey that ends up making his soul more kind and spiritually aware, Kire tries to redirect the minds of the people of her land.

Kire's novels are not just a collection of folklore but they consist of cultural lessons. The 'modern' world has a great impact on each and every community. But restoring the stories, histories, the socio-cultural specificities and faith can help the Naga communities pave their way through these difficult times. Both of the Kire's novels have the idea of 're-birth' present in them. The change of heart in *When the River Sleeps* to the birth of the promised son of the thundercloud, the idea of re-occurrence plays a huge role. It could be understood as a call for the 'renaissance' of consciousness. The novel starts with the retelling of the story of a miraculous birth. But Pele's grandmother also refers that this has happened before and will happen again. So, it is a case of history repeating itself. The novel sets the story at a tragic time when Pele loses his family due to the famine. The whole community is diminished due to the lack of food. Pele decides to leave his village, he and travels towards the 'Village of the Weavers'. On the way, he finds how famine had ravaged the landscape. The earth has cracked due to the drought. He can only see miles of barrenness and no sign of life. It felt as if the colour of the soil had changed to a 'death-grey' colour. The lush green landscape of the mountains now seemed like a desert. When Pele meets two women on his journey, he gets to know that the famine has made everyone abandon this village which has lasted Seven Hundred years. The sisters are four centuries old and they have lived on 'hope' that the birth of the son of the thundercloud will end this famine and their misery.

> "Hope, sir, we have been living on hope. Every morning when we wake up, we eat hope, and so we live to see another day", the younger woman said. Her sister asked, "Tell me, traveller, do you have any knowledge of the Son of the Thundercloud? Do they speak of him where you come from?" The question, and their eerie laughter, caught Pele completely off guard and he lied, "No, I have never heard of him". (Kire 2016, 16)

The extraordinary revelation by the three sisters shock Pele. But he has no other option but to believe them. Even amongst this horrific desolation, this hope that was given by their ancestor had kept them alive. They believed in the prophecy that predicted that the birth of the promised boy would bring rain and end this drought. The soil will give birth to saplings. New life would surround them and there would be food for everyone. Pele wonders about the prophecy when the dry land is ravaged by sudden rain. He and the sisters survived the storm in their small hut. Everyone is amazed by the strength of rain. This marks the beginning of a new time in the story. The 'hope' has come to fruition. It is the time for the son of the thundercloud to be born. The sisters start to look younger before Pele's eyes. Soon they met the woman who will be the mother of the 'chosen boy'. Her name is Mesanuo. She got pregnant from a single raindrop. The hero of the novel is going to be born soon after. It is important to understand the significance of the hero in any mythical story. The people of the world are suffering and they need a saviour to rescue them. Keeping in mind the novel's deep connection with the Christian faith, the redeemer must have a heroic arrival. We see that the prophecy was that he would be born to a woman who had lost her husband and seven sons to the 'tiger'. He would grow up to kill the tiger and avenge the death of his father and his brothers. Not only that, he will bring life to the land that was suffering from drought, death and other dangers. So here his birth is also deeply rooted in the cycle of water, rain and life. The use of the stories of were-tigers is significant in the Indigenous communities. The Angami communities believe that the men who change into were-tigers show unusual signs from an early age. They keep this were-tiger ritual as a closely guarded secret. The elders impart these stories as a part of traditional knowledge to the young generation, but is important to notice that they do not share it with any bad intention but rather educate them about their culture.

> We do not recommend these practices but we are telling you about them because knowledge is always powerful. That is what the age-group houses are for, to impart knowledge of the natural and the supernatural to you so that you go out into the world with knowledge of both, and not disrespectful of either world as some people are. (Kire 2014, 28)

It is also important that the elders teach the future generation to be respectful of 'both' worlds. The worlds are spiritual and the material worlds, the world of the living and the world of the dead. But one also learns to respect other cultures and their beliefs. Disregarding people from different cultures has become a norm. Rather than thinking of 'other' civilizations as barbaric or ignorant, we must respect their beliefs and cultures. This lesson of 'mutual respect' is very crucial in

understanding the Indigenous traditions. In *When the River Sleeps* (2014) we see Vilie's transformation throughout his journey. His heart transcends from the material world to the spiritual world. Kani, an elder man and a community head teaches him a valuable lesson that it is the purity of heart that enables one to catch the river while it sleeps. He warns Vilie about the impending dangers to get the Heart-stone. He had to be a changed man to be successful in his quest. As he states,

> If you are grasping at wealth, you are going to lose something that wealth cannot buy for you. You will lose knowledge of the spiritual. And you will lose the power it offers you. That is true power: that is the only power to aspire to because it gives you power over the world of senses and the world of the spirit. (Kire 2014, 96)

At the end of the novel, we find how Vilie's spirit gained superiority with the help of the Heart-stone and he survived on his way back home. Even one of the were-tigers that attacked him at the very start of his journey later comes as his saviour. This growth of mind and spirit enables Vilie to become a rightful owner of the Heart-stone. It is the 'spiritual' renaissance that takes place inside the protagonist. The novel also re-connects the reader to the nature of the Angami territory. The protagonist's journey is a lesson towards acknowledging the traditional faith and relation between the two worlds. It also creates the space for a revival of Spirit which is necessary in contemporary times. In the *Son of the Thundercloud* (2016), the day after Mesanuo gets pregnant from the raindrop, she gives birth to the son of the Thundercloud, whom she names Rhalietuo. With his birth, the rain also arrives as prophesized. All the lands that were barren are now filled with new life. A new dawn has eventually arrived and bathed the valley in golden light. Pele leaves his hut to see what is happening outside. He is amazed at the miraculous sights he witnesses along with the people of the village of the Weavers. Young saplings that have appeared overnight. They are tall, straight, and in good health. Their roots have already begun penetrating the ground, absorbing moisture, and securing a location where they had erupted. Everyone rejoices at the infant boy. They are happy that their suffering has now come to an end. When asked about all the new developments by the village headman, Mesanuo answered that

> It's called birthing, headman. The earth has birthed trees, rocks, stones, and grain, just as a mother births her offspring. The trees and rocks are the sons of the earth. Take care of them and they will take care of you and your children. (Kire 2016, 35)

Nature gives new life that helps us live on this planet. The earth is the mother and we must take care of her. The taking place of new

life also signifies continuity in the cycle of life and death. Indigenous faith and Christianity come together through the intricacies of these texts. It reflects how the coming together of both can be observed through the stories that lead the characters to the end of their journeys. Authors like Dai and Kire reflect the constant conflicts of life and death and yet try to re-imagine the world through a framework that has made Indigenous life sustainable even today.

9   Conclusion

The research thus points to the agency of nature within the Indigenous community. The points of interactions and the transitions between the 'human, non-human and nature are closely analysed with the help of conceptual tools. The research has tried to focus on how ecological sustainability becomes a key factor in 're-imagining' the community. The Indigenous communities have a very deep connection with the land. Their psychological response with regards to their 'space' and environment' in the novels have been thoroughly examined. Another objective was to critically interpret how transformations are mapped in literature through synchronic/diachronic readings with specific references from Northeast India. The synthesis of multiple faiths, the restoration of Indigenous knowledge and the oral traditions through literature have also been discussed. This research has tried to highlight on how Northeast literature is 're-configuring' the community through ecological concerns today.

The ecologies of life, death and sustainability have been contextualized in the texts through multiple perspectives. The authors discussed above have conveyed their thoughts by providing hints to the readers. The narratives of the communities co-existing in harmony with nature surely indicate to the sustainable environments in which the Indigenous people have been living for so many years. Creation myths, the spirituality of nature, ecological knowledge and consciousness present in the Indigenous communities might suggest alternative methods of forming sustainable ecologies. The mention of dying arts and crafts and the growing lack of storytellers, narrated within the novels urge us to introspect and take action. If the pattern continues, more and more Indigenous languages, traditional knowledge, Indigenous art and oral literatures might be lost. The ecological changes are already affecting the ways of living and earning livelihood. Soon the scarcity of necessary resources might bring a complete collapse to the Indigenous heritage. The Northeast literature is spreading awareness in its own way. The authors are 're-configuring' their novels to accommodate and archive Indigenous knowledge and also voicing their concerns through literature. It is very important to move away from the colonial ideas of environmentalism and

proceed towards a sustainable future keeping in mind the needs of the Indigenous in an inclusive manner. Re-visiting Indigenous literatures and cultures might provide alternative pathways and enable us to form a new vision in the days ahead.

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Beyond Life and Death: Humanistic Care of Eco-Arts in China

Xintian Liu
Shandong University of Arts, China

Abstract   The ecosophy and the cosmology of the unity and coexistence between human and nature, as well as the aesthetic view of natural beauty in ancient Chinese philosophy, all reflect the deep love for nature and all creatures. One of these representative themes related to ecological view is the reflection on life and death, which represents as the eternal issue of art expression. This ecological aesthetic consciousness that was embodied in countless works including poems, music, dance and paintings has been inherited by contemporary artists in China. Some artists represent the desire for life and the fear of death in the artworks, arousing empathized experience and feelings of the audience during the appreciation. Others focus on the transcendence of life and death, discussing the representation of rebirth. The artworks of Shen Shaomin, Xu Bing, Song Dong and Jin Lipeng are introduced as representatives in this paper. In the practice of artistic creation, any reflection and expression on life and death ultimately serves the aesthetic education of eco-literacy. In order to make greater contribution to an ecological aesthetic education, eco-artists are supposed to take the love for both life and earth as the inner spirit. To form a new paradigm of eco-friendly living is the main goal of ecological aesthetic education.

Keywords   Life. Death. Rebirth. Humanistic care. Eco-art. Chinese Contemporary Art.

Summary   1 Introduction. – 2 Empathy: The Desire for Life and the Fear of Death. – 3 The Metaphor of Phoenix: Recreation and Rebirth in Artworld. – 4 Coexistence: The Journey of Energy in Recycle and Transformation. – 4.1 Towards an Ecological Aesthetic Education on Life and Homeland. – 5 Conclusion.

1 Introduction

Throughout the ages, life and death are the eternal motifs of art. Numerous works of art have revealed profound thought of the ancestors on the issue of life and death. The expressions of this theme in ancient Chinese literatures and artworks were influenced by traditional philosophy, which has a distinct color of Chinese civilization, especially with the views of cosmos and ecological connection among creatures. There is a statement in *Book of Changes* saying that, "as begetter of all begetting, it is called change" (Wilhelm, Baynes 1977, 590), which means the alteration during creating life is the origin of life, namely to create life and continue it endlessly is to keep changing and sustain without ceasing. In its Chinese version *Sheng sheng zhi wei yi* 生生之谓易 ("as begetter of all begetting, it is called change"), the first character 生 means the creation of life, which needs the communication, transformation and reproduction of all creatures living between heaven (天) and earth (地) during an endless process of *Yi* 易 (changes). Therefore, *sheng sheng* 生生 means 'creating life'. The statement *Tian di zhi da de yue sheng* 天地之大德曰生 means "It is the great virtue of heaven and earth to bestow life" (629). For ancient Chinese philosophers, the concept and vision on the relation between life and death could be interpreted as transformation and circulation, the most common natural phenomenon in ecosystem.

In the book *Ecoaesthetics and Ecosophy in China*, Cheng Xiangzhan takes "Creating life" as the key expression of Ecosophy C. He claims that, "it can be transformed into a free translation philosophically to connote the meaning of continuous reproduction breed in an endless succession" (Cheng 2023, 13), and the ecoaesthetics that have influenced eco-art in China could be regarded as "the aesthetics of eternal engendering of the whole bio-community on earth" (13). This ecological view is about the relationship between mankind and other creatures, which also shows the ancient Chinese philosophers' humanistic care for *Wanwu* 万物 (all things in the universe). It generates love for Wanwu, particularly the deep connection with all things in nature, as the basis of ecoaesthetic experience.

It is no exaggeration to say that man and Wanwu are kin in one family in the universe. According to the famous philosopher Chuang Tzu, "Heaven, Earth and I were produced together, and all things and I are one" (Legge 2016, 27). His best friend Hui Shih also claimed that we should "love all things equally. Heaven and Earth are one body" (Feng 2007, 182). Emperor Jianwen, an emperor in ancient China, said to the accompany around him when he entered the Hualin Garden:

> You do not have to be far away to pursue the beauty of nature and empathize with all the creatures. In the forest and spring here, I

can feel mammals, birds and fish come to me and get close to me.
(Liu 2022, 63)

In the history of Chinese traditional aesthetic culture, there were numerous examples of taking human and creatures as relatives that sincerely expressed their love for nature and all lives. Such kind of humanistic care can be seen in Chinese ancient music, sculpture, dance, meticulous paintings that depict flowers, birds and insects enjoying their habitat and coexistence, as well as garden designing aiming at creating a suitable environment for residents and other creatures.

Besides, the ecological view advocated by ancient Chinese philosophers is also reflected in the adaptation and respect to the laws of nature. Chuang Tzu said,

Death and life are ordained, just as we have the constant succession of night and day; – in both cases from Heaven. Men have no power to do anything in reference to them; – such is the constitution of things. (Legge 2016, 49)

Life and death are natural laws. In order to ensure the normal order of the natural world, people should not arbitrarily violate the laws of nature, but merely accept it and comply with it.

As regard to 'humanistic care' in this paper, it refers to a kind of special ecological care for all creatures, which comes from humankind, especially on the mental and spiritual aspects. The love and kinship between humans and other creatures are the basis of the concept 'humanistic care'. Humanistic care here is a term of humanities, instead of the medical care that is more commonly used in daily life. However, as discussed in the fifth part, eco-art with humanistic care would be applied as the method of education, which is helpful to heal mental trauma or cultivate eco-literacy in an aesthetic way (Inwood 2007; 2008; 2013). Thus, the meaning of humanistic care mentioned here could be much broader.

The statements above contain an ecological view of circulation, sustainability and ecosystem thinking, which has been inherited by ecological arts in China and has become the inner spirit, manifesting as the artistic expression of the connection between nature and human. Based on the following case studies, the life and death issues in ecological arts in China can be discussed on three dimensions. The first one is about the empathy between human and all creatures, including the desire for life and the fear of death. The second one is the metaphor of nirvana, specifically the narration of 'rebirth' in the world of art. And the last one is the observation on symbiosis views in ecological arts, such as the flow of energy during the journey of recycle, sustainability and transformation.

2 Empathy: The Desire for Life and the Fear of Death

As to Chinese contemporary eco-art, it is full of humanistic care and love for all things, which is particularly reflected in the consciousness of empathy between human and nature, or in Chinese *Wu Wo Wei Yi* 物我为一 (all things and I are one) instead of the dichotomy in subject-object mode. Just as Wilhelm elaborated in the translation of *Book of Changes*, "strictly speaking there is no real dualism here, because there is a clearly defined hierarchic relationship between the two principles" (Wilhelm, Baynes 1977, 110), and one must be activated and led by the other. So is the dynamic connection between life and death.

The dialectic view on life and death is the inner spirit in artworks of Chinese contemporary artist Shen Shaomin. His installation *Bonsai*,[1] which was composed around 2007, criticized the process and techniques of abusing plants during making the mini-landscapes. He took banyan trees as a sample and presented this process to the public. Being pulled, fixed and bound by metal appliances, the branches and leaves of plants tolerate the distortion and deformation that is difficult to achieve under the natural state of growth. The audience can see the cold, silver and shining metal color and the external force on the trunk of the plants, which scream silently out the unspeakable pain. From the horrifying visual effect to the silent sense of depression, the uncomfortable feeling of the audience is unable to be expressed, which is consequently enlarged and enhanced. The body of the banyan tree, in Shen Shaomin's narration, was actually referred to the body of human. As the curator Wu Hung recorded in the preface of the exhibition, Shen was enlightened by an introduction of Bonsai to realize the resonance between the "abuse of limbs" and "abuse of plants".[2] Audiences could empathize with the plants and feel pain both in body and mind. At the other side of the exhibition, the artist placed some metal tools that would be needed to distort the branches and fix its form according to the aesthetic taste of human, like surgical instruments, flashing cold light. Feng Youlan wrote in his book, when what is natural and spontaneous is changed into something artificial, which is called by Chuang Tzu "overcoming what is of nature by what is of man", the result can only be misery and unhappiness (Feng 2007, 172). Human have feelings, so do plants. Human yearn for life, so do all creatures.

Shen's eco-art works also let people see animals' desire for life and their fear of death. In his installation *Chinese Carp*[3] exhibited in 2018,

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1 See more information about the artwork on https://www.designboom.com/art/shen-shaomin-bonsai-series/.

2 See more information on https://m-news.artron.net/20140925/n657622_7.html.

3 See more information on https://www.artsy.net/artist/shen-shaomin

He made 2,000 extremely realistic carp out of silicone, installed electronic pacing devices inside each fish, and lay them on the white salt beach. Few people would notice the dying moment since the carp die soon after being caught ashore. Yet people pay attention to the suffocating state of dying when they stand in front of Shen's installation, watching the silicone carp's gill flapping and breathing in a difficult way. With the help of pacemakers, the artist infinitely magnified this special point between life and death, in order to make it approach eternity. We can easily imagine according to the exhibition pictures and videos that tens of thousands of carps flapping their gills together, making the depressed feeling of struggle immediately permeate the whole exhibition venue, full of desperation and fear of death.

The work contains a multi-dimensional level of connotations, one of which focuses on the role of carp in the ecosystem. With a dual identity in the ecological chain, Chinese carp is good at eating microbes and phytoplankton, once being used as the guard of environmental protection and introduced to other countries to purify water. However, because of its strong adaptability and reproductive ability, they cause local ecological imbalance. The American residents start to round up Chinese carp. The artist tries to draw attention and enlighten audiences on the natural law of the ecosystem from a unique perspective, warning and reminding the public to respect life and take other creature's life seriously. This intention is exactly in line with the ancient Chinese Taoism and Confucianism that human and nature ought to coexist harmoniously. Therefore, *Chinese Carp* carries Shen Shaomin's thinking about life and death, especially the innovative expression of ecological imbalance, which should be regarded as one part of his ecological humanistic care.

Ecological art provides an aesthetic field for viewers to empathize with the entire ecosystem, and finally realize that lives of animals and plants are worth caring just as life of themselves. Human race and other life forms have close kinship. Just as Donna Haraway pointed out,

> all earthlings are kin in the deepest sense, and it is past time to practice better care of kinds-as-assemblages... all critters share a common 'flesh', laterally, semiotically, and genealogically. (2015, 162)

The lives of people and all things are equally precious. What's more important is, to experience the life and death of all creatures would be helpful for audience to understand and respect life. At the moment seeing animals and plants on the verge of death, audiences' hearts would be full of sorrow and pity. Through the ecological and humanistic care of Chinese contemporary art, we can see the ecological wisdom inherited from ancestors thousands of years ago.

3 The Metaphor of Phoenix: Recreation and Rebirth in Artworld

During appreciating Chinese contemporary eco-artworks, appreciators find a tribute to the vitality of all lives and the pity for the dead. In *Hong Lou Meng* 红楼梦 (a novel named *A Dream of Red Mansions*), one of the four greatest classics in ancient China, there is a story about Daiyu burying flowers in the garden. The famous writer Cao Xueqin wrote this story in Qing Dynasty. A young girl named Daiyu sympathized with the flowers when she saw the petals falling into the river. She gathered the petals in a bag, crying sadly. And then, she dug a hole as a tomb, and buried them in the ground. This intended behavior reveals the ecological humanistic care. Cao Xueqin wrote a beautiful poem in the narration, to illustrate the scenario and emotion of Daiyu burying flowers, started with "Flowers fall and fly in the sky, but who pities the faded red?" (Cao 2022, 389). Daiyu cared for the flowers, relating her own miserable destiny to the short life of them, and imagining herself as one little flower. She pitied the flowers as she pitied herself.

But the renowned poet of Qing Dynasty named Gong Zizhen showed another attitude on the life and death issue of flowers. He wrote in the fifth poem of *Ji Hai Za Shi* 己亥杂诗·其五 (*Poems Written in Jihai Year*), "Falling red is not a heartless thing, but into spring mud to protect flowers" (Gong 2019, 5). Although being withered and faded, the falling petals can still become the fertilizer that nourishes the soil. The energy of life returns to the roots and will bloom on the branches again in the next year. Obviously, the original meaning of this poem is not about ecosophy, but the value of sacrifice and patriotism. However, the readers can figure out one connotation that death is not the end of life in the energy circle of nature, but the beginning of a new life.

Enlightened by the ancestors, artists attempt to find a way to interpret their statements beyond life and death, namely to recreate and let the wastes continue living as another existing form in the artworld. In Chinese contemporary art, there are many examples of recreation with garbage waste on ecological themes.[4] Taking Xu Bing and his large installation *Phoenix*[5] as instance, the artist used a number of abandoned building materials such as light-emitting diode, steel strip, excavator mechanical arm, safety helmet, fence and cloth of the construction site, and finally welded into the image of

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[4] Such as *Invisible Man* by Liu Bolin; *Illusion* by Du Hongyu; *Masai Mara* by Liang Mingyu; *Disappeared House* by Hu Quanchun; *Waste Not* by Song Dong; *Homeland* by Ge Pingwei; etc.

[5] See more information about the artwork on https://www.xubing.com/en/work/details/174?year=2010&type=year#174.

phoenix, which can even shine at night. It finally 'soared' in front of Today Art Museum in March 2010. During the daytime, what the audience can see is a phoenix installation full of wastes. When the night falls, this work is shining and shocking. The abandoned components regain a new life in this artwork, and the responsibility of ecological protection is revealed as well.

Using discarded materials to create new works is one of Xu Bing's common artistic languages. For another example, in the installation *Background Story*,[6] Xu Bing continued this creative concept. With the help of the projection on the curtain, he used the garbage such as broken wood chips, plastic strips and cotton wool to present several famous landscape paintings on the other side. The artist tries to tell audiences that there is no waste in nature. The garbage for now could transform into something useful, just like the statement of Gong Zizhen's poem. This installation shows us another view that transcends life and death, as well as being useful and useless. When the audiences enter the exhibition hall, the first thing they see is the beautiful painting. Only after going around the back, will they find the 'background story' about the recycle and reuse of waste materials.

Besides, there are some other works that reflect and discuss on the subject of rebirth. Except the metaphorically transformation between life and death, Xu Bing showed us the way how energy flows from one living creature to another in his early work *American Silkworm Series 3: The Opening*.[7] Every summer from 1994 to 1999, he raised silkworms in the United States and completed some works together with these little creatures. Those works were named *American Silkworm Series*. The artist inserted the mulberry branches that the silkworm loves to eat in the vase. After eating the mulberry leaves, the silkworms spit silk to make cocoons, which look like several white or yellow buds from a distance. The green mulberry leaves gradually turned into dead branches in the exhibition space, while the silkworm babies turned into cocoons and then moths. This magical process presents the energy transportation in ecosystem in an intuitive and vivid style. The ecological relation between mulberry leaves and silkworms reminds us of the deep connection between people and all things that nourish and co-exist with each other.

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[6] See more information about the artwork on `https://www.xubing.com/en/work/details/711?year=2024&type=year#711`.

[7] See more information about the artwork on `https://www.xubing.com/en/work/details/202?year=1998&type=year#202`.

4 Coexistence: The Journey of Energy in Recycle and Transformation

Before the perspectives on nature proposed by Confucianism and Taoism, there has already been points of view on the relation between human beings and nature in ancient myths and legends, especially in the genesis mythology. The goddess *Nv Wa* 女娲 created human by the riverside. She made several muddy figures according to her own image, and then waved a branch in her hand with the earth and water, which became persons alive when dropped on the ground. In the Eastern Han Dynasty, *Xu Zheng* 徐整 wrote *Wu Yun Li Nian Ji* 五运历年纪 (*The Chronicle of Five Elements Calendar*), which narrated the legend of *Pangu* 盘古 who created the world:

> Long long ago, in the very beginning of the universe, heaven and earth were chaotic like an egg. Pangu was born inside of it. After eighteen thousand years, heaven and earth opened up. The light air rose up while the heavy one fell onto the ground. Pangu was living between them, growing taller and bigger with heaven and earth. After Pangu died, every part of his body became different elements and substances in nature. His breath became the wind and clouds. His sound turned into the thunder. The left eye became sun and the right eye became moon. His body and limbs grew as four poles and five mountains. His blood flew like a river while tendons and muscles turned into ground and soil. The stars were transformed from his hair and vegetation was actually his skin. His tooth and bone became gold, stone, pearl and jade. (Xie 1935, 26-7)

Therefore, human beings are originally parts of the whole ecosystem and kin to all creatures. After the end of life, energy inside one's flesh will gather again in some other forms and return to the earth, namely to continue living in other creature's body. It is the reason why Chuang Tzu took human and nature as one. The figure of Pangu is just like Gaia in the western culture. Similar statements can also be found in Betsy Damon's book. She said:

> An aerial view of a river system closely resembles the veins and arteries of the human body... Like our blood, rivers nourish and feed living systems. They cleanse and discharge unwanted substances. Like our veins and arteries, they don't work if they are overloaded with pollution, dammed too much, or transferred elsewhere. (Damon 2022, 12-13)

 In a word, to share fate with nature is to breath and metabolize with the whole eco-system.

In Chinese contemporary ecological art, there are many works[8] that take the harmonious coexistence of man and nature as the theme of artistic expression, especially those works embedded the ecological wisdom of ordinary daily life in the creative compositions. To take Song Dong's installation *Coexisting with a Tree*[9] as an example, this work presents a detailed scene of the life in Beijing quadrangle courtyard. In a small room, a tree ran through the bed. This kind of construction not only preserves the life of a tree, but also expands the living space of the residents. It records the cunning and cleverness in daily life in a humorous way, which also tells people that it is not necessary to seize the life of natural things and arbitrarily interrupt other creatures due to human desires. We should find a way to achieve a harmonious coexistence between people and all things, which means to find an optimal balance point, so that the lifeline of residents and the tree can continue together. This is also an ironic warning to people who cut down trees or excavate mountains and blast rocks in order to build houses and apartments.

Jin Lipeng and his eco-art action could be taken as another case. As a teacher of Sichuan Fine Art Institute, he made several compost bins with college students and placed them around the campus, which had already converted tons of raw food waste from the school cafeteria. He keeps applying the sustainable concept in the energy conversion recycle and combines the permaculture principle with artwork composition, such as helping woods in the campus regenerate and restore the ecological environment. During the eco-art action project started from 2012, he raised academic lectures on ecological knowledge and aesthetic healing, group meditations and regional walking activities, eco-art workshops, and community sharing activities such as breakfast meetings and parent-child days. These community-wide eco-art aesthetic events provide opportunities for more frequent dialogues among participants, thereby re-establishing connections among community members. Jin Lipeng's *Healing Garden*[10] is such a local program of eco-art action, revitalizing an abandoned garden. Through the design, construction and daily maintenance of edible landscape, production of seed balls and pocket gardens, beekeeping program, compost bin, earthworm tower and papermaking workshop, volunteers and community residents participate in hand work and labor activities. Via these socially engaged eco-art activities, Jin

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[8] Such as *Who is the Intruder* and *Liuyin Garbage Research* by Jin Lipeng; *The HK FARMers' Almanac* in Hong Kong; *The Naming of A River* by Cheng Xinhao; etc.

[9] See more information about the artwork on `https://m-news.artron.net/20151030/n789105_2.html`.

[10] See more information about the artwork on `https://ecoartasia.net/JLP/JLP_chi.html`.

reconstructs the sense of 'community' from an ecological perspective among students, college faculty and practitioners in the nearby communities around Huxi Campus of Sichuan Fine Art Institute.

Art can transcend the boundary and limitation between life and death, indicating a path of rebirth. The energy of life would be transferred among diverse forms instead of disappearing. Here we can take a story of Chuang Tzu as a quotation. When Chuang Tzu mentioned the death of his wife to Hui Shih, he explained her transformation of life energy as follows.

> During the intermingling of the waste and dark chaos, there ensued a change, and there was breath; another change, and there was the bodily form; another change, and there came birth and life. There is now a change again, and she is dead. The relation between these things is like the procession of the four seasons from spring to autumn, from winter to summer. (Legge 2016, 137)

To Chuang Tzu, the transformation between life and death are just like day and night. It's the naturalist things in the universe. Human comes from nature when being alive, as a part of nature, and return to nature when being dead, still as a part of nature. After that, the body without any heartbeat and breath becomes other forms of life as if the death never came. Deep inside this traditional ecosophy, there is the wisdom of transformation, as the term *Hua* 化 (transformation), which can be extracted from *Book of Changes* and classics of Taoism. And now, Chinese contemporary artists use this traditional ecological wisdom to create ecological artworks.

4.1 Towards an Ecological Aesthetic Education on Life and Homeland

In the practice of artistic creation, any reflection and expression on life and death ultimately serves the aesthetic education. In order to make greater contribution to an ecological aesthetic education, eco-artists are supposed to take the love for life and the love for Wanwu as the core spirit.

With the help of eco-aesthetic education, we can see the sense of responsibility in the eco-arts created by the generation younger than artists mentioned above. This tendency is obvious in the exchange and creative support program *Towards the Mountain Seminars* organized by China Academy of Art and supported by CHANEL in 2023, which is an integral part of the *Seeds Project: Education Program for*

a Sustainable Future.[11] 16 groups of young artists who participated in the project submitted creative art proposals on the theme of ecological issues. Among them, several groups of artists focused on issues of life and death in ecosystems.

Chen Ruicheng is a young artist from Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts. He collected oyster reef materials and ocean sound samples in his eco-artwork *Floating Realm*.[12] Oyster reefs could be regarded as a microecosystem. Oyster reefs are aggregates of live oysters, the shells of dead oysters, and other organisms. Although some oysters die, the shells still provide a habitat for the rest of the life energy in this microecosystem. By creating oyster reefs with different shapes, and then embedding sound samples into them, Chen made oyster reefs a sound conduction device, conveying information about life and death.

Another example is *Whale Fall*[13] by Li Yuxuan from Tsinghua University, which focuses on the phenomenon of whale fall in marine biosphere. Through the perspective of whales, the artist helps the audience immerse into the process of ecological pollution in the ocean. Via strong visual impact, the experience of whales stimulates people's empathetic feeling so that the public could focus on the pollution and restoration of marine ecological environment.

Renewed Soil by Dong Yuhao and Zhao Fan from Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts is another case that deserves attention. The artists collected records of planting, daily maintenance and pruning of three candlenut trees, one alive, one dead and one sick. They hope that the public would think about the relation between people and plants in the urban environment, and cultivate ecological humanistic concern for all creatures. The artists said:

> We wish to add reflections on life, death and regeneration into the art creation, in order to awaken people's respect and care for plants. (*The Art Newspaper* 2023, 25)[14]

In addition, there are plenty of other art proposals on life and death in ecosystem.[15] All these proposals indicate the attention, investi-

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11 See more information about the project on `https://www.caa.edu.cn/gm-rx/2023/8/202308/63350.html`.

12 See more information about the artwork in *The Art Newspaper* 2023, 25.

13 See more information about the artwork in *The Art Newspaper* 2023, 31.

14 See more information about the artwork in *The Art Newspaper* 2023, 27.

15 Artists and works include Xu Xinhua's *Museum of Life*; Zhuge Ruijing's *Implant*; Weng Zheying's *New Relationship between the City and Nature*; Sheng Chengcheng's *Zarafa: Fable about the Continuation of Species*; *Paddy Ideal* by Chen Yulin and her team; Jian Guorong's *The Memory of Eucalyptus*; Chen Qiheng's *How Orchids Think*; Zhang Tianyi's *Interspecies Symbiosis Plan*; Gu Weiran's *Everything Grows Rewilding, You and*

gation and reflection of young artists on ecological issues, which are representative achievements in the new practice of ecological art and eco-aesthetic education. It is worth noting that these cases show the ecological thinking of young artists, who pay attention to the evolution and constitution of life in nature, and gradually return to the original meaning of the word 'nature' proposed by ancient philosophers, not merely in Chinese ancient ecosophy, but in all nations. Just as Latour pointed out, the concept of nature originally includes the whole dynamic process in nature. The word 'nature' in Latin or Greek could be translated into "origin, engendering, process, the course of things", which indicates "a whole range of transformations: genesis, birth, growth, life, death, decay, metamorphoses" (Latour 2018, 68). However, the meaning of 'nature' has been narrowed, which is mainly recognized as the object of epistemological activities.

In the broader space of community and primary schools, the concepts of ecological environmental protection and sustainable development have been brought to public by eco-aesthetic education and eco-art actions as socially engaged arts. A new paradigm of living that is ecofriendly to all creatures and full of humanistic care has been gradually established. *Keepers of the Waters (Chengdu)* art action was initiated and held by American artist Betsy Damon in 1995, who also designed and built the *Living Water Garden* in 1998 in China (Damon 2022, 73-5). It is still a landmark of Chengdu, including multiple forms of public art, installation and performing art. At present, *Living Water Garden* is still a good place for citizens in Chengdu to enjoy the natural environment for leisure activities. It is an important place for the daily ecological aesthetic life of citizens. *Living Water Garden* in Chengdu and several other ecological parks designed and built by Damon in the United States are ecological works of art with both environmental values and aesthetic values. To form a new paradigm of living is the main goal of ecological aesthetic education, which might not be merely inside schools, but also in everyday life. People who sincerely take nature as homeland are potential to become ecological citizens.

Zhang Zhimin, the famous Chinese artist, once wrote a poem on his painting *Home*, which can be translated as below:

Human beings have homelands, and animals have their habitats too. There is only one earth. If there is a competition to occupy the environment of earth, it's obvious that humans would be the

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I Share Its Sadness; Han Zhitong's *Disperser*; *Community Activity Tower and Walk System for Raghunathpur* by Wu Haoyue and his team; *Going Ashore* by Zhang Jiazhen and Cui Jiaxuan; as well as Xie Rui's *State of Exception*. See more information about the artwork in *The Art Newspaper* 2023.

loser in the end. Imagine that we can create a new earth, to give all the animals freedom and a new home, just like in ancient times, so that they can fight, play and live a happy life. Maybe this is just a dream, but at least it is the wish of people who love all the creatures. (Tan, Zhang 2014, 97)

All things are equal members of the whole ecosystem family. Man is related to nature, rather than occupying the center of nature, or being the dominator of animals. Therefore, based on the traditional philosophical cosmology and modern knowledge of ecology, the concepts of recycle, sustainability and systematic thinking emphasized by ecological artists in China are embodied in the works as a kind of dynamics and dialectics that transcend the dichotomy between life and death.

5 Conclusion

Influenced by ancient philosophy, Chinese contemporary artists have expressed ecological concern and humanistic care in their artworks on the theme of life and death. They advocate the harmonious co-existence between man and nature, and emphasize the equal relationship between all living things. Life and death are not binary opposites, since after the living organisms die, the energy flows and transfers to other creatures in the ecosystem, maintaining the basic functioning of nature. Therefore, respecting life while not grieving over death too much, and following the law of nature are the main principles. The artists use the dialectical transformation relation between life and death to create works of art, which is the main characteristic of ecological art in China, reflecting the ecosophy inherited from ancestors. In the process of cultivating ecological literacy in elementary schools and in public, aesthetic education related to ecological art can be used to shape the ecological consciousness and a new ecological civilization.

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Università
Ca'Foscari
Venezia