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Introduction

Conceptualizing “Literary and Visual Extremities” in the fall of 2022, we were aiming for a broad range of engagements with the notion of extremity that our call for papers originally framed chiefly in literary and philosophical terms. In particular, we were inviting literary scholars to submit essays responding to Catherine Malabou’s urgent call for a “reorientation of literature” along the lines of her sense of plasticity as the newly emergent neurobiological scheme of thought contextualized in neurobiological research.¹ For Malabou, such a necessary reorientation would entail a paradigm shift away from the one she found in Maurice Blanchot and Michel Foucault’s poststructuralist thinking about literature toward her own radical proposition to reinvestigate it in materialist terms as an unthinkable post-traumatic space that writing must confront in new ways. Malabou’s phrase “the dusk of writing” eloquently marked that shift, signaling the twilight of the textual domain and that contemporary writing began to emerge as a practice *in extremis*. The sense of extremity underlying Malabou’s philosophical proposition must be approached as something more than just a pretext for a critique of present-day literary production oblivious to its own material implications. For the philosopher, writing from a post-traumatic space is a necessary point of departure for redrawing well-trodden literary pathways and grasping the psychopolitical pressures of present-day experience, defined by such traumatizing, extreme aspects of contemporary reality as colonialism, racism, terrorism, fascism, wars, capitalism, climate catastrophe, or the current AI crisis.

¹ See Malabou (81).

One remarkable example of such a renegotiation of extremity that served as a cue in our work on this issue has been the special feature “Extreme Texts,” published in 2020 in *Jacket2* magazine, curated by the Tamil American conceptual poet, scholar and editor Divya Victor. In her preface to “Extreme Texts,” Victor emphasized the shifting meaning of the word “extreme,” visible in the rhetoric accompanying its use in the public domain, including the word’s proximity to “extremism,” in Trump’s America at that time: “I observed that ‘extreme’ has come to mean a way of delimiting the lives of certain people and not others under oligarchic states.” Curating the “Extreme Texts” feature shortly after returning to the US from Singapore, where she had been living for several years as an academic on a work visa and where she gave birth to her daughter, Victor found herself back in America “at a moment when it seemed that a majority of Americans had acquiesced to live, normally, under extreme conditions, with denuded civil rights, attenuated freedoms of press, increasing inequality of wages, and diminishing access to medical care, and under misogynist, transphobic, and supremacist policies. . . . [and] marked by fury over Trump’s ‘Muslim ban.’” Only a few years later, her acclaimed book *Curb* (Nightboat Books, 2021) brought a powerful poetic reckoning with the extremity of post-9/11 reality and its impact on the lives of America’s South Asian citizens that in Victor’s work continues to be enacted as writing in extremis, continuously poised at the edge, or curb, both figuratively and through investigation of the intersection of psychogeography and geopolitics.

Struck by Victor’s incisive argument, the insights offered in the essays included in her “Extreme Texts” feature, and having had our own experiences with an “unsettling transfiguration of once-familiar terrain [which tends] to produce disorientation, even estrangement, by radically altering geometries of attention” (Retallack 1), we were prompted to offer a follow-up to the discussion about extremity. The aim was to rethink extremity during an online international conference devoted to this highly resonant concept. The event was hosted by the Department of North American Literature and Culture at the University of Lodz in June 2021 during the early phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, and has subsequently resulted in “Literary and Visual Extremities,” the collection of articles presented to readers now—in November 2023. It is worth adding that our editorial process was taking place when the pandemic was still unfolding and the issue started to materialize when Poland was facing the reality of the sharp escalation of Russia’s invasion in Ukraine. Over this entire turbulent period, we have had many opportunities to reflect on the abruptly shifting shapes of extremity as a defining quality of contemporary times that continues unabated, yet demands urgent

attention and constant reconsideration. When the reader receives this issue, will the war in Ukraine still be going on? Will media attention still be preoccupied with the extremity of the rising impact and expansion of AI technologies? Will the latter even be considered an extremity at the end of 2023? Today, the unbridgeable yet overlapping realities of the ongoing war and unbridled development of new technologies constitute an ominous arc of extreme circumstances, whose future course and transformation cannot be predicted or controlled any more. Perhaps every reflection devoted to the concept of extremity cannot have a very long life span, yet for this very reason the term invites a more sustained engagement that keeps us alert to what unfolds for us as being the most striking, unsettling, destructive, oppressive or enervating.

The essays that follow offer a varied platform for thinking about the notion of extremity in contemporary writing and other artistic practices, reclaiming the term's complexity and expanding its critical potential beyond the word's reductively negative connotations. Our contributors zero in on textual and art practices that have foregrounded the changing meaning of extremity, pointing to the need for raising the stakes of the debate about extreme phenomena by inviting more radical approaches. As Mieke Bal insisted during her keynote lecture at the 2017 Annual American Comparative Literature Association Conference in Utrecht, the words "radical" and "radicalization" must be saved from the discursive grip of mass media and politics in order to make these two terms usable again for art and literature. Along similar lines, in her keynote lecture presented during the 2022 conference, titled "Poetry's Refusal to Be Obituary: Witnessing Mass Death Events in 21st-century American Poetry," discussing Douglas Kearney's book *Sho* (Wave Books, 2021), Victor argued that extremity has been largely overtaken and misappropriated by the overarching force of the media spectacle. These scholars' work urges us to pay closer attention to the concept's current uses and misuses as well as its ideological entanglements. Today, the notion of extremity should be critically parsed and reclaimed to serve the purpose of diagnosing the continuing escalation of present-day social and political problems.

Among the essays included in "Literary and Visual Extremities," five sections cohered, which revealed a preoccupation with environments and phenomena variously impacted or transfigured by conditions or states of extremity. Respectively, the authors who contributed to these sections have addressed texts or images engaging with extreme aspects of such elements of the current material and conceptual landscape as borders, ecologies, limits, forms, and memory. To begin, extreme borders are mapped out in Dorota Golańska and Małgorzata Myk's texts, where artistic and literary practices emerge as effective means of interrogating the political as well as personal

repercussions of the post-9/11 war on terror in the US. Golańska's essay titled "Negotiating Interior Frontiers: Lara Haddad's *A Question of History* (2015–16)" is a thorough analysis of contemporary US-based Syrian artist Lara Haddad's series of photographs *A Question of History* (2015–16), which serves as a critical practice effectively destabilizing and renegotiating the figuration of "interior borders"—a term derived from the work of Ann Stoler via Étienne Balibar's thought—and which becomes useful for (re)defining the extremity of experience of Muslims whose lives have been criminalized despite their refugee status. Approaching Haddad's intimate, minimalist aesthetics through the lens of Malabou's sense of destructive plasticity, Golańska reads the artist's work as a complex critique of US-based Muslims' disorienting experience of "the always-shifting self-identifications, (non)belongings, implications, and victimizations" (21). Małgorzata Myk's essay "Duration of the Archive: Soundscapes of Extreme Witnessing in Divya Victor's *Curb*" focuses on Victor's 2021 poetry collection *Curb*, where everyday shared spaces and landmarks such as sidewalks and curbs are figured as extreme borders that delimit the lives of the South-Asian diaspora in the post-9/11 US. Myk examines the ways in which the poet's reconstruction of the archive of anti-South Asian violence is further amplified and extended through her attention to soundscapes that draw out unheard durations from the archival material, augmenting it by amplifying the lyric mode that Victor's radical conceptual poetics of witness reconfigures to account for the extremity of her South Asian kith's oppression.

The subsequent "Extreme Ecologies" section focuses on conceptual developments in poetic language and its current rearticulations offered in response to the extremity and imminence of the climate catastrophe. Paulina Ambroży's essay "The Posthuman Body as an EcoGothic Wasteland in Allison Cobb's *After We All Died* and Adam Dickinson's *Anatomic*" is a wide-angle, comprehensive examination of the contemporary North American posthuman lyric form and its environmentally-oriented metaphors, which Ambroży additionally situates against the backdrop of the eco-Gothic mode, adopting a dual perspective that helps her flesh out the limits of the human and identify a beyond for non-human agency. In her insightful reading, the scholar demonstrates how Cobb and Dickinson's poetic discourses of toxicity in their contemporary wasteland poems successfully renegotiate the melancholia underlying T. S. Eliot's influential modernist paradigm of wasteland poetics. In Gi 'Taek Ryoo's "Radical Ecopoetics: The Apocalyptic Vision of Jorie Graham's *Sea Change*," the author convincingly analyzes the implications of rereading Graham's 2008 ecologically-inflected poetry collection *Sea Change* with a focus on the "affective dimension of experimental forms of language" which, as he argues, offers an enactment of "experiential encounter with the environmental crisis" rather than it

being another representation or deconstruction (94). According to Ryoo, Graham's poetry mobilizes and radically transforms our sensorium to produce new modes of engagement with the material world. In Ryoo's reading of Graham's poetry, her poetics generate sites of interliving with non-human others through staging the encounters that enable a reckoning with our complicity in the extremity of environmental destruction. The essay "Clark Coolidge's *The Land of All Time: An Affectively Restless Eco-poem*," co-authored by Elina Siltanen and João Paulo Guimarães, is a timely reminder not to let despair prevail as the only response to the ecological crisis. The authors' robust reading of Clark Coolidge's improvisatory, disjunctive poetry of indeterminacy shows how this poet's writing of "vibrancy, speed, and flow" engages in harnessing and complicating the affective landscape of the poem through a dynamic method of "extreme wordiness" in order to move beyond environmental despondency (109). Adopting the lenses of affect theory and ecocriticism, Siltanen and Guimarães argue that Coolidge's work operates at the intersection of nature and culture, making a "complex restless affect" fundamental for establishing radical forms of awareness and attention in poetic writing (120).

Attention to the presence and persistence of limits as well as the imperative to destabilize and unsettle them informs the "Limits" section of this issue, featuring the contributions of Hal Coase and Jacek Partyka. Coase's essay "Delimit / De-limit: Barbara Guest at Kandinsky's Window" offers a *tour de force* reading of Guest's poem "The View from Kandinsky's Window" from her 1989 collection *Fair Realism* alongside Kandinsky's own theories of form and abstraction. Coase sees Guest's crucial contribution to "a renewal of the historic avant-garde" aesthetics as a practice enacted through the poem's reappraisal of the value of Kandinsky's artistic practice, criticized for its failure to conform to rigid boundaries of stylistic purity (139). Coase identifies in Guest's poetics an insistence on interrogating and undoing the fixity of limits underlying the formalist debates of her time as well as the weak modernist gesture of reorienting the avant-garde theory as a "set of decentered, provisional, and heterogenous practices" potentially constructive of new feminist theorizations of the avant-garde (127). Jacek Partyka's essay "'What I lack is myself': The Fluid Text and the Dialogic Subjectivity in Susan Howe's *Debths*" sees the limit as directly related to the figures of transgression and extremity and explores its contradictory potential in the avant-garde poetics of Susan Howe, simultaneously gesturing to the writing of Victor, Joyce, Borges, Dworkin, Bakhtin, and others to trace its unnerving presence. Scrutinizing the limit's groundwork in Howe's poetry as the dynamics repeatedly echoed in a tripartite structure of "obligation," "trespass," and "demise," Partyka sets it in motion to reflect on the ways

in which Howe's writing tries to unsettle the poet's subjectivity as always appropriative, complicit, and extreme. Partyka's sense of the limit emerges here as irreducibly porous, relational and dialogic.

Opening the "Extreme Forms" section, the essay of Tomasz Sawczuk "Plasticity and the Poetics of Inside-Out Inversion in Emmett Williams and Roman Stańczak" is a close engagement with Catherine Malabou's philosophy of plasticity and the possibility of its direct application in renegotiating the material boundaries between the contemporary horizons of textuality, visuality, and politics. Sawczuk's analyses of Emmett Williams's concrete poetry and Polish artist Roman Stańczak's sculptures conceptualized as inverted everyday objects probe deeply into Malabou's argument on the twilight of writing and her long-standing preoccupation with fundamental plasticity of form. As Sawczuk shows, Williams and Stańczak both lend themselves to plastic reading and redraw the lines of their disciplinary fields. They situate their artistic practices outside the textual regime of representation and beyond the hold of aesthetics and operate in the material, metamorphic domain of plastic forms without sacrificing the political dimension of their work. Extremities of the digital form are investigated throughout Cameron Barrows's essay "HTML Texts and the Dawn of Asemic Digital Literature: Exploring Dennis Cooper's Ideas," where Cooper's HTML novels and short stories, figured with GIFs rather than glyphs, become "found fragments or artefacts of digital life" that call for a new digital hermeneutics (180). Emphasizing HTML literature's relation to twentieth century avant-garde and asemic traditions and gesturing toward Malabou's remarks on the relationship between topography and writing in the rapidly changing spaces of the digital realm, Barrows argues that Cooper's HTML texts and his related theories expand our notion of what constitutes the digital age today as well as modify its radical temporality.

Our fifth and final section, devoted to "Memory in Extremis," features Paola Trimarco's essay "The Extremities of Literature: Traumatic Memory in Two Novels by Kazuo Ishiguro" and Anna Bendrat's essay "How Do You Know Who You Are?: *Marjorie Prime* on Envisioning Humanity Through the Faculty of AI-Powered Memory as Reconstructive Tissue." Focusing on the theme of traumatic memory in Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986) and *When We Were Orphans* (2000), Trimarco proposes to view these two narratives through the neurobiological lens of Malabou's sense of *neuroliterature*. The author suggests that the neurobiological perspective on wounds caused by trauma proves more generative than the more common psychological approaches to Ishiguro's writing. In particular, Trimarco uses Malabou's perspective to address the motif of traumatic memories of war and loss found in both novels, arguing that neurobiology enables

a plastic reading of these texts and offers deeper insights into the material dimension of traumatic experiences. Anna Bendrat's timely contribution addresses Jordan Harrison's play *Marjorie Prime*, which predates present-day extreme concerns regarding the expansion and further advancement of AI technologies. In Bendrat's analysis, Harrison emerges as a playwright who shows the potential ethical consequences of the impact of AI in the case of technology-assisted memory reactivation in dementia patients by weighing their benefits and problems. The author's reflections bring into focus the play's portrayal of the complex nature of memory in terms of "the plastic, and thus reconstructive, character of this foundational human faculty" and primarily in relation to new technologies and their impact on our individual lives as well as relationships (210).

Taken together, the essays comprising "Literary and Visual Extremities" offer a dynamic lens on Catherine Malabou's "reorientation of literature" and visual art, micro- and macroscopic inspections of the myriad forms of extremity—via borders, ecologies, limits, forms, and memory—that pervade the everyday, redefining its meaning and expanding its critical potential beyond purely negative connotations. In his powerful 1965 book *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, where Thomas Merton was thinking through the most extreme questions of his time—the threat of nuclear annihilation, the immorality of the Vietnam War, the fight for civil rights, and the expansion of imagined American ideals—he wrote: "What is the conventionally accepted American myth? Is this myth still alive, or has it expired and become an evasion? Is the present crisis—in race relations, delinquency, etc., a judgment of our public daydream?" (34). Six decades later, Merton's questions are not only relevant but have proliferated, extending far beyond America's borders and having encompassed new ecologies and taxonomies between the human and non-human. The kind of ethical urgency Merton endorsed has been taken up by Divya Victor and numerous others, and continues into the essays in this volume. As we navigate our increasingly unpredictable future, marked by conflicts and war, staggering technological advancements and environmental crises, the essays collected here serve as a testament to the ongoing need for critical engagement with extremity, highlighting the vital role it plays in understanding and responding to the challenges of our time.

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