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How to Dwell in Garbage Patches? Waste Communities in the Aftermath of Ancestral Catastrophe in Chen Qiufan's *The Waste Tide* (2013) and Wu Ming-yi's *The Man with the Compound Eyes* (2011)

Abstract

The article approaches the problem of dwelling in areas affected by environmental crises through the lens of two speculative fabulations. Chen Qiufan's *The Waste Tide* (2013) and Wu Ming-yi's *The Man with the Compound Eyes* (2011) both depict the intrusion of human-induced catastrophes into the life of coastline communities in Southeast Asia, requiring them to work out forms of dwelling and remembering that make space for the assemblages of beings that emerge out of the devastated landscapes inherited after the modern era. Each of the novels tackles a different aspect of this problem. *The Waste Tide* shows the catastrophic effects of mass production and recycling of electronic garbage which, shipped to junkyards in the Global South, not only exacerbates the environmental pollution, but also exerts a negative impact on the local indigenous and migrant communities, threatening their economic status and social cohesion. Inspired by Martin Heidegger's meditations on poetic dwelling, *The Man with the Compound Eyes* features the so-called Great Pacific Garbage Patch, a gigantic collection of plastic waste gathering on the surface of the ocean and hitting coastal regions, wreaking havoc on local life. By investigating the two novels, I look for models of remembering and dwelling together that go beyond the anthropocentric notion of memory rooted in an individual self and offer new models of dwelling in times of catastrophe.

Keywords: waste, garbage patch, ancestral catastrophe, collective memory, poetic dwelling.

NO LONGER HOME

As Dipesh Chakrabarty points out in his recently published *One Planet, Many Worlds* (2023), in times of ongoing catastrophes the sentiment expressed in the phrase: "The earth is our home; it is made so that we can dwell on it" (3) has to be rethought. Confronted with the manifestations of the destruction of Earth systems caused by civilizational exploitation, humans are gradually forced to live, what he calls, "creaturely lives" (6). In other words, incapable of actively shaping their environment, they merely strive to survive by all means available. As numerous other authors point out, the idea that the disturbance of ecosystems on a planetary scale cannot be controlled or averted by technological advancements and scientific reasoning brings about a change in the Western imaginary, sanctioned by the natural sciences, which since the establishment of geology in the 18th century conceived of the planet as a stable and unchanging background for the development of human civilization according to the laws of historical progress (Clark and Yusoff 4). Now, the increasingly visible cascading effects of environmental disturbances put into question the Enlightenment idea of geologic processes unfolding gradually in deep time (Ghosh 19–20). The violent intrusion of climatic phenomena and elemental forces ravaging more and more regions of the world are said to only reflect the brutality of what has provoked them—"that of a development that is blind to its consequences" (Stengers 53). These figurations of more-than-human agencies, coming back with a vengeance to dethrone Man as the governor of all creation on the planet, not only replay the age-old Western conflict of humans versus nature. The age of catastrophes also calls for a reassessment of the historical roots of the current planetary predicament and for new ways of dwelling on the earth, based on less confrontational and more co-operational models of coexistence among earthly beings. If, as Amitav Ghosh argues, with reference to Laurence Buell's claim, that the current climate crisis is also a crisis of the imagination (9), then such a conceptual shift may be critical for working out a liveable future for communities inhabiting the landscapes left in the wake of unbridled exploitation of natural resources.

The search for ways of coming to terms with the ongoing and oncoming catastrophes and learning to live on an inhospitable Earth has often taken the form of a reconstruction of the past causes of the current crisis to look for solutions to today's ecologic and economic crises. Those attempts are based on the assumption that the key to a liveable future lies in the past; the past that needs to be recollected and represented so that we do not repeat our past mistakes. In other words, the wrongdoings and failures of the epoch of human domination over Earth, often forgotten or actively obliterated by the perpetrators, need to be remembered for

the sake of working out liveable more-than-human socialities. In the following paper, I will elaborate on this notion, approaching the topic through the lens of two speculative fabulations—Chen Qiufan's *The Waste Tide* (2013) and Wu Ming-yi's *The Man with the Compound Eyes* (2011)—which depict the intrusion of catastrophes caused by excessive consumption and exploitation of natural resources into the life of coastline communities in Southeast Asia, requiring them to work out forms of dwelling and remembering that make space for the communities of beings that emerge out of the devastated landscapes inherited after the modern era. I read both these novels as speculative attempts at thinking about dwelling on a damaged Earth which requires an in-depth reconsideration of the relationship between humans and the more-than-human powers that cannot be controlled by technological means.

I have chosen these two novels not only because they are both set in the same territories and thus take up a similar scope of problems pertaining to the human-caused environmental damage in the Global South. Both can be read, in addition, as responses to a specific manifestation of this damage—the problem of excessive production of waste that threatens the well-being of communities in these (and other) regions of the world. However, each of the novels tackles a different aspect of this problem. *The Waste Tide* shows the catastrophic effects of the mass production and recycling of electronic garbage which, shipped to junkyards in the Global South, not only exacerbates environmental pollution, but also exerts a negative impact on the local migrant communities, threatening their economic welfare and social cohesion. *The Man with the Compound Eyes* employs a different trope. It features the so-called Great Pacific Garbage Patch, a gigantic collection of plastic waste gathering on the surface of the ocean, which—in this speculative scenario—hits the coastal regions of Taiwan, wreaking havoc on local life. Through a close study of the two novels, I look for models of remembering together that go beyond the anthropocentric notion of memory rooted in an individual self. In both these novels I trace the way in which a liveable future is worked out by more-than-human communities which confront their problematic past(s) as the sedimented "accursed share" (Yusoff 92) of colonial extractivism, to be able to dwell in the ruins of the modern capitalist world.

E-WASTE, OR THE ANCESTRAL CATASTROPHE

The Waste Tide (2013) takes place in a not-so-distant future, most probably in the 2020s (Healey 3), on Silicon Isle, located off China's southeastern coast. Although, as explained in the opening chapter, the

place was inhabited since the 9th century, only recently has it become a location for a huge electronic junkyard. Controlled by three local clans, the island is a major recycling factory, employing predominantly migrant workers to reassemble and melt electronic parts from all over the world to extract precious metals. No wonder that the site is of major interest to an American corporate venture, TerraGreen Recycling, which developed a technology for reusing rare elements in consumer e-waste and wants to invest in developing the infrastructure on Silicon Isle with the prospect of employing the local population. As Chen himself commented in an interview for the online magazine *Domus*, although Western culture typically frames waste as raw material for further extraction, he wanted to make visible its social agency, its ability to generate ways of being together and dwelling outside of the neocolonial exploitative order (Scarano). To take up this theme, he depicted the main location in which the action takes place, Silicon Isle, as a token of this order.

The island is sharply divided into two areas. One, a paragon of prosperity, features grand mansions, mixing Chinese and European architectural styles, expensive cars and luxurious shops. But in the opening chapters of the novel, Scott Brandle, representative of TerraGreen Recycling, visits the e-waste junkyard, located just a few kilometers from this pristine, upscale neighborhood. In narrow alleys between dilapidated workshops, he witnesses not only the extent of the ecological degradation of the local environment, but also its detrimental effect on the health of the population of migrant workers, called by the natives "the waste people." The name refers both to their occupation and their social status, because without proper social protection and healthcare they are sacrificed in the name of progress. Despite the mask that he is wearing, he can smell the "overwhelming stench" (Chen 32) of the air that carries "particles and dust" (32). He also sees women washing clothes in water black from pollutants and children playing with junked prostheses, shipped from the West and now lying in heaps, still contaminated and containing "blood and bodily fluids, which pose a lot of potential risk for public health" (34). The life-threatening exposure to these substances only adds to the violence suffered by the migrant workers, disparaged by the native population. Chen clearly draws a parallel between the treatment of waste (discarded electronic parts, moving along international trade routes) and the experience of migrant workers (uprooted, and living away from their native villages to which they will never be able to come back). The novel indeed depicts various forms of "slow violence" which, as Rob Nixon argues, "occurs gradually and out of sight" (3) as a result of human-made environmental catastrophes and typically affects economically underprivileged social groups. As Nixon demonstrates, various forms of this kind of violence are actively sustained

by the exploitative capitalist regime, often disguised as agencies resembling the fictional TerraGreen Recycling.

The parallel between electronic waste and the status of communities that inhabit electronic junkyards can be extended even further, as has been done by Peter C. Little, in his *Burning Matters* (2021), based on research he conducted in Agbogbloshie, one of the world's largest e-waste dumping grounds on the outskirts of the Ghanaian city of Akra. Just like other authors studying the deleterious environmental impact of waste, he attributes the growing amounts of e-junk to the principle of planned obsolescence, adopted by major manufacturers of electronics since the 1980s (103). It is a practice of intentionally producing equipment with a short consumer life, so that new models can be continuously designed and distributed to replace their predecessors, which thus quickly become obsolete and end up on exponentially growing junk heaps. Interestingly in the context of Chen's novel, Little does not stop at lamenting the damage to natural environment and public health caused by planned obsolescence, but demonstrates how this leading principle of "fast capitalism" in the long run affects the way in which scrapyards are inhabited by the workers. They live among waste that is re-commodified and turned into a source of profit, owned by private companies, and therefore they are prevented from turning this area into their place of permanent residence. They experience constant displacement resulting from forced evictions and demolitions of their makeshift sheds carried out by municipal authorities without any regard for fundamental human rights. Attributing the plight of e-waste workers to the normalized rules of capitalist production, Little coins the term "violent obsolescence" to name the "direct, displacement experience and suffering of laborers engaged in global copper supply chain, fueled by the electronics industry that actively values material obsolescence" (83). Thus the active cutting of any affective ties that a community or an individual might have to this place turns the workers into another kind of waste. In his novel Chen not only depicts the condition of precarious habitation on Silicon Isle, but also addresses a problem absent from Little's account. The Chinese author demonstrates that the condition of displacement experienced by migrant workers is actively sustained by the official power which excludes them from forms of collective memory practiced among the natives.

This theme is introduced early on in the novel from the point of view of two characters, Brandle and his translator Chen Kaizong. For personal and professional reasons both turn out to be perceptive observers of the ways in which the official history-making and native commemorative practices serve the purpose of depriving migrant communities of their links to their place of inhabitation. Brandle, for whom "home had already

become a distant and abstract concept" (Chen 258) because of a tragic death of his older daughter, is also a ruthless "economic hit man" (170), forging corporate deals that exploit the poor and the disadvantaged in the Global South. No wonder that during a tour of Museum of Silicon Isle History, he immediately recognizes that it offers a "whitewashed and rewritten history" (22), presented only in order to lure potential investors. The museum showcases how the local population advanced from fishing and farming through the industrial age to the digital era, but deliberately omits the story of migrant workers and the forms of slow violence that they suffer. Kaizong, who represents a different case of rootlessness, notices another aspect of local memory practices. For him the visit to Silicon Isle is a return to the place where he spent the first years of his life, before his parents emigrated to the United States. A professional historian and graduate of Boston University, he is particularly interested in the traditional Ghost Festival, taking place upon his arrival on the island; a celebration organized to "commemorate one's ancestors and keep alive the family's memories" (47). Kaizong recognizes that these rituals, which sustain the natives' faith in indigenous mythologies, effectively counteract the workings of history, "the process through which events are bleached of their emotional color" (51). However, despite this opposition between academically sanctioned history and the native commemorative festival, in the novel they are both shown as implicated in sustaining the forms of oppression of migrant workers from the scrapyard. The latter are not only absent from the official narrative promoted by the museum, but also, separated from their home communities, they do not practice similar forms of commemoration as the natives. What is more, as a social group living in conditions of permanent dispossession and displacement, they risk being used by the natives in divination rituals including human sacrifice, which further emphasizes their status as "waste people." Read from this perspective, Chen's novel demonstrates that workers, living in the condition of permanent violent obsolescence, are deprived of the right to remember and be remembered so that they do not claim the right to inhabit the island on equal terms with the natives. At the same time, he suggests that in order to counteract forms of violent obsolescence, it is crucial to look for ways of remembering the atrocities of the past to work out liveable communities of the future.

This theme is taken up in the storyline of the third main character—a teenage scrapyard worker called Mimi. Although she shares with Brandle and Kaizong the experience of rootlessness, she is the only one of the trio to directly experience the forms of oppression which are rampant on Silicon Isle. Having come there from a mainland village, seeking opportunities for financial gain, and holding on to waning

recollections of her former life with her parents, she learns the hard way that a "place without memories could not be called home" (175). Without the support of her community, the girl becomes particularly prone to the slow violence which is rampant on Silicon Isle. It is out of this violence that she emerges as a technological singularity, a half-human, half-technological being, "a new kind of life that crossed the boundary between biology and machinery" (331). Although consecutive chapters trace Mimi's transition to this state, it would be difficult to conclusively explain why she turns into this unique entity. The process is probably initiated when she puts on a junked helmet, which accidentally injects a synthetic virus into her nervous system, but perhaps other events catalyze her transformation (61). After all, she inhales large amounts of toxic substances when labouring in a workshop, and also heavily uses electronic hallucinatory drugs to experience a momentary relief from her constant distress. She undoubtedly crosses a significant threshold between human being and cyborg when she is violated by a gang of thugs who use a special, illegally built machine that turns her physical suffering into sexual pleasure for her aggressors (133). Or perhaps it is her participation in a healing ritual conducted by an old witch that turns her into a cyber-goddess that can easily travel between all planes of existence (203). However, Brandle futilely asks himself: "But who is her creator?" (331). The investigation that he conducts reveals that the being that Mimi becomes is actually a result of long historical processes that have been deliberately wiped out of history.

As Brandle discovers, Mimi's fate is an unexpected result of a series of scientific-military experiments conducted from the mid-1950s in American laboratories. It is there that Project Waste Tide was initiated and carried out until 1972 by Seisen Suzuki, a Japanese migrant and biochemistry graduate who worked on a new hallucinogenic weapon, using convicts and soldiers as test subjects. When it turned out the weapon has long-term negative effects, doctor Suzuki looked for a cure, and her research was subsequently commercialized to produce viral batteries that enabled advancements in the field of digital prosthetics, but that also produced the electronic drugs taken by Mimi. Therefore Kaizong, when meditating on the unpredictability of the outcomes of historical processes, points out that "Mimi was the unlucky girl singled out from millions, touched by history" (182). He therefore suggests that the various forms of slow violence which affected her body and turned it into this hybrid are a result of what Elizabeth A. Povinelli calls "ancestral catastrophe."

In her *Between Gaia and Ground* (2021) Povinelli distinguishes this catastrophe from the one that she calls "the coming catastrophe," which emerges "out of the horizon of liberal progress," and is conceived of as

"the future event that will constitute a new beginning, a radical death or radical rebirth" (3). As Povinelli argues, from the point of view of colonized and oppressed cultures, this "ancestral catastrophe" has been happening throughout the colonial period and keeps returning in the form of environmental damage and neocolonial practices of exploitation, an example of which are e-waste scrapyards (xi). In his novel Chen not only draws a connection between the workings of "fast capitalism," the e-waste predicament and the condition of constant displacement and rootlessness, experienced by the protagonists. He also suggests that a possible, liveable future emerging out of organized resistance can be fueled by the recovery of the obliterated ancestral catastrophe that complicates narratives of progress propagated by official power. This other future emerges not as a result of the purification of collective memory, but rather by commemorating the ancestral catastrophes and their concomitant forms of slow violence as a basis for establishing local communities and tying them to their place of inhabitation on the ruins of the old world. Such a community, based on the recognition of the common predicament of natives and migrants, comes about at the end of Chen's novel as a result of Mimi's intervention.

Once revealed, the story of the abuse suffered by Mimi at the hands of the locals ignites riots by long-suffering waste people against the native clans controlling the processing workshops. However, the escalation of the conflict is prevented by a tsunami that hits the island, endangering the lives of all of its inhabitants, but predominantly affecting the affluent coastal districts restricted to natives. At this moment of natural calamity, Mimi spurs her fellow e-waste workers to help all in danger, regardless of their social status and ethnic origin. She decides to perform this act of care and solidarity across social and ethnic divides at the moment when, thanks to her hybrid status, she is capable of looking at the natives in a different way, having infiltrated the local online surveillance system called "Compound Eyes" (Chen 287). It is this technological dispositive, comprised of hundreds of thousands of cameras fitted with image recognition programs, which was used as a preventative measure to control the local population and prevent social unrest. This digital dispositive gives her a panoramic view of the affluent population on the island. They turn out to suffer in their daily lives the same distress and emotional deprivation as the waste people. Mimi witnesses scenes of addiction, self-mutilation and social exclusion among "civilisation's favorite children" (290), experienced in different ways, but just as deeply as in the case of the waste people affected by the long-term effects of ancestral catastrophes. When connected to "Compound Eyes" as a virtual body she travels around the island that she inhabited, and feels as if she "swept over streets, passed through houses, shops, bridges, parks, elevators, trains, and buses" (288). When accessed by Mimi, a digital tool of

surveillance and control enables her to experience anew the locations that she inhabited as a human being, this time seeing across the social divides imposed by the exploitative order of e-waste industry. Thus repurposed technology becomes instrumental in creating a community inhabiting an extractivist wasteland and capable of solidarity by remembering together the ancestral catastrophe, despite the attempts of the official authorities to wipe out the history of their exploitation. As the final chapter suggests, a possible solution to counteracting forms of displacement caused by violent obsolescence is to creatively repurpose the digital technologies responsible for this condition. Mimi's example proves that learning to co-inhabit spaces with machines may prove critical in the future when more communities will face disasters, living among the debris of capitalist extractivism. After all, the last words Mimi utters, before she sacrifices herself to protect her community, are: "I am only a beginning" (325).

DWELLING POETICALLY IN GARBAGE PATCHES

That Mimi's last words portend more similar problems in the future is proven in the epilogue of *The Waste Tide* in which we meet Kaizong a year after the main events in the novel. On board of a ship, he looks for trash islands composed of plastic waste. They seem to draw great amounts of lightning which may awaken another technological singularity from the remnants of the ancestral catastrophe, and Kaizong, on behalf of an environmentalist organization, looks for it, to prevent it from being exploited by corporate agents. The theme of marine garbage patches that bring about changes in the coastal communities' way of life is employed differently in my second example, the novel *The Man with the Compound Eyes* (2011) by the Taiwanese author and artist Wu Ming-yi. It is also set in a near future, when the effects of climate change and environmental pollution affect Taiwanese coastal communities. This novel also depicts a world haunted by ancestral catastrophe, which here takes the shape of a large chunk of the Pacific Garbage Patch. Brought by the rising tide to the Taiwanese coast, plastic waste that most probably will remain there for decades reveals its agency in shaping the life world of humans. However, where Chen stressed the potential of repurposed electronic technology to disrupt capitalist flows, Wu explores the ways in which local communities, endangered by both ecological predicament and capitalist exploitation of the coastal region, try to work out liveable entanglements with non-human entities which are crucial for future survival.

From the beginning, Wu depicts this area as a place where the natural landscape has been degrading ever since a new highway was built to attract

tourists and build modern infrastructure. Although in the past this land was inhabited by aborigines, then "the Japanese, the Han people and the tourists" (Wu 17), now a few houses left by those communities have been turned into tourist attractions. Also, the local vegetation and fauna have been pushed further away from the new housing estates. As Alice, the protagonist of the novel, reflects, the place, which she compares to "a global village theme park" (18), looks as if "the artificial environment had been intended to spite the natural landscape" (18). Thus Wu depicts a different form of colonization than Chen—not inundation with waste, but landscaping for the sake of tourists and to the detriment of local peoples. But it is not only the civilizational development, propelled by the agenda of progress, that drives away local communities relying on hunting and fishing. They are also forced to abandon the villages inhabited by their ancestors due to increasingly severe effects of climate change, particularly the rising of sea level and deadly typhoons, such as Morakot, which caused the great flood in Taiwan in 2009, mentioned by Alice. This location, affected by natural disasters (a sign of which are remnants of an amusement park destroyed by an earthquake), becomes a proper background for the interweaving stories of the main characters, each experiencing the loss of their old ways of living, the connection with the ancestral past(s) and their communities (predominantly the Pangcah and Bunun peoples, Taiwanese aborigines). At the same time the novel traces the way in which the main characters, all experiencing displacement, organize their dwelling in this place, while sustaining a lively connection with their ancestral past(s).

Significantly, the garbage patch that hits the coast at the climactic moment in the action is clearly framed by Wu as a return of that forgotten remnant of consumerist societies. Alice, observing from her seaside home the steady rise of the water level, acknowledges that "[f]or the past year the sea has been like a random memory" (54). In a subsequent paragraph she adds that "[t]he sea had no memory, but you could still say that it remembered things" (55). The metaphorical framing of the garbage patch as that which has been condemned to oblivion by global capitalist culture is employed by Wu not only to criticize consumerism and depict the efforts of official Chinese authorities to use it for propaganda purposes or monetize it by launching a recycling initiative—only prolonging the current predicament. Much more significantly, it shows how the main characters make themselves at home in a landscape which cannot be purified, and therefore requires forging new ways of dwelling in the ruins of the modern world.

Wu openly admits that when creating this vision of a possible future, he was inspired by Martin Heidegger's writing on "poetic dwelling" (Tsai

871), particularly his essay "Building, Dwelling, Thinking" (1951). At the time of the article's publication the German philosopher expressed concerns about the deleterious effects of the human exploitation of the natural resources and was quite critical of the possible outcomes of technological development. He warned against identifying dwelling with wielding power over other beings or turning them into mere resources for building infrastructure. In his essay he posited that dwelling should be premised on the idea of existence that not only constructs habitats but also cultivates, nurses and nurtures "the things that grow" (149)—not necessarily biological organisms but all beings natural, technological or otherwise that humans rely on for their existence. "Mortals dwell in that they save the earth" (148), wrote Heidegger, clearly connecting the notion of inhabiting a given space with careful attention to the well-being of the world. This aspect of his thought, especially the conceptualization of the relationship between humans and their world, is becoming particularly significant in the current era of ecological destruction and large-scale environmental damage. As Onur Karamercan points out, Heidegger's topological thinking has a lot to offer to contemporary eco-phenomenology (2). What gains significance in this context is the distinction introduced by Heidegger between "the idea of place as a precise, neutral, calculable point in space and 'dwelling place' as that to which the human being belongs by having been determined by its existential boundaries" (5). In this respect the contemporary commentators on the German philosopher's work emphasize that his topological thinking involves the necessity of recognizing the boundaries of human existence on Earth to be able to work out a correlation between humans and their environment which would enable the latter to save themselves in the face of the ongoing environmental crisis.

In his extended discussion of Heidegger's main philosophical notions Bruce V. Foltz emphasizes two aspects of the dwelling significant for my reading of Wu's novel. Firstly, as he reminds us, "dwelling is founded upon the poetic" (156), or, in other words, through language "gathering together and letting-lie-before-us" of all things and naming them "with respect to what they are" (157). In this respect Foltz refers to the idea of dwelling which Heidegger introduced with reference to a line from Friedrich Hölderlin's poem: "poetically man dwells" (Heidegger, "Poetically" 211). But, as Heidegger emphasized, his concept of poetic dwelling is premised on the ancient Greek understanding of poetry as making (*poiesis*) (212). Poetic dwelling, therefore, essentially draws on his view of language as not merely a signifying system for communicating meaning, but in a critical way a "house of Being" (Heidegger, "What" 129) which discloses nature to us and turns the world into a place of residence for humans. What follows from this is that "dwelling rests on the poetic,"

as humans experience the place only through the openness of language (Heidegger, "Poetically" 212). Foltz, clearly situating his discussion of Heideggerian philosophy in the era of environmental crises, writes that "the rift between ourselves and the environment . . . cannot be healed by additional scientific research or more efficient technological regulation, but only through a poetic reestablishing of these world regions within whose dimensions we can dwell and be at home" (159).

Secondly, Foltz refers to Heidegger's linking of dwelling with the idea of *Schonen*, which Foltz translates as "conservation" and defines as using something without inflicting harm on it and allowing it "to remain within its essence" (161) as opposed to exploiting it against its potential and capabilities. Also, Foltz emphasizes that conservation that occurs through dwelling concerns "the fourfold regions that are opened up and founded poetically" (162). Thus, as he explains with reference to Heidegger's texts, dwelling occurs through conservation of what Heidegger called the fourfold (*das Geviert*)—sky, earth, mortals and gods—"conserving them in a way that lets them be what they are" (163). Such a poetic dwelling, as Foltz argues, may provide a foundation for an environmental ethics and lead to the saving of the earth and making it our home again. However, in the context of the problems that Wu addresses in his novel, the question that needs to be answered is: how to dwell poetically in times of major environmental catastrophes, in regions of the Earth that become less and less habitable?

Situating the concept of dwelling in a more recent context of ecological problems, and referring to Foltz's analysis, Casey Rentmeester in his *Heidegger and the Environment* (2018) argues that Heidegger looked into East Asian philosophies, particularly Daoism, as sources of the ideas of the human place in the world alternative to the exploitative Western culture. Rentmeester stresses the affinity of the idea of *Gelassenheit*, letting beings "unfold on their natural terms" (89) to the Daoist concept of *wúwéi*, non-coercive actions that accord with the natural efficacy and power of things (90). No wonder that Wu was inspired by the idea of poetic dwelling, the proof of which is a community of Bunun people depicted in his novel. Located in Taitung province in the southeast Taiwan, the dwelling place on a mountain top called Forest Church is a refuge where nature's laws are respected and nature is conserved and protected against corporations. The entrance to the grounds is guarded by two banyans, called walking trees by the locals, because of their prominent aerial roots which look like legs growing into the ground (Wu 156). This natural gate to Forest Church symbolizes the growing network of connections between beings inhabiting this terrain as equals. This place, which may be treated as an instantiation of the Heideggerian idea of *Schonen*, is one of the examples

from the novel that it was informed by the concept of poetic dwelling. However, this inspiration is perhaps most visible in the main storyline—the relationship between Alice and Atile'i, a teenage boy who comes from a distant Pacific island called Wayo Wayo and arrives on the coast of Taiwan together with the garbage patch.

Wu stages this encounter between representatives of two worlds to illustrate different ways of making oneself at home in the world enduring a catastrophe. Atile'i is clearly introduced as a representative of a world that existed in isolation from other cultures and therefore preserved its cosmology and mythology for hundreds of years in an unchanged form. At the same time Atile'i shares with all characters the condition of displacement, because, as his parent's second son, he was obliged by local custom to leave forever his dwelling place which offered only limited resources to its inhabitants. Travelling across the ocean on a grass canoe, he comes across the garbage patch and, never having seen plastic debris, takes it for an island of the dead from his native mythologies, which he nevertheless tries to inhabit. In the chapter recounting his stay on the island it turns out time and again that "the only thing keeping him . . . alive was memory" (Wu 37), as he relies on his recollections of his father's lessons. He survives on the island and turns it into his temporary home, because he tries to "fill [his mind] with remembrance" (37) and record his experiences. He uses found pens "to draw the sights and sounds of the island" (41) on his body, layering them one on top of another "like a palimpsest" (41). Atile'i finds his way about on the garbage patch by going along with its unpredictable movements, feeling his environment with his body, and measuring time with the songs he learned on his home island. Thus, the act of recording his story proves critical to the way he inhabits the plastic island.

No wonder that Alice's meeting with Atile'i inspires her to finally start writing a novel and a short story, both entitled *The Man with the Compound Eyes*. This metafictional device, which makes Alice a porte-parole of Wu, who also wrote a novel and a short story under this title, testifies to the author's interest in poetic dwelling. The events in the novel are narrated from interchanging points of view of the characters, sometimes in the first, other times in the third person. Each of these stories documents the characters' efforts at practicing the non-invasive and collective ways of dwelling and becoming together with non-humans inhabiting the region. But even if Wu draws heavily on the notion of poetic dwelling, he also situates it in the context of current environmental issues to suggest that the concept needs to be extended to include the stories that let the world unfold from the perspectives of its non-human inhabitants.

The figure of a man with compound eyes not only captures the mosaic-like structure of the book, composed of heterogeneous perspectives on different ways of inhabiting the world. As the events unfold, this eponymous creature is encountered by the characters at different, critical points in their lives. For instance, Dahu, a Pangcah aborigine, identifies this spectral presence as Kawas from Thai lore, an ancestral ghostly shapeshifter, living in the depths of the forest (Sterk 204–05). However, when encountering him, each of the characters notices his insect-like eyes, where in each ommatidium a different image flickers: "[A]n erupting undersea volcano . . . a falcon's-eye view of a landscape . . . a leaf about to fall" (Wu 276). This mosaic-like structure and the name of the creature reveals similarities with the surveillance system from *The Waste Tide*; however, the eponymous creature from Wu's novel collects memories and inspires solidarity in a different way and with a different purpose than Mimi. Chen was primarily interested in the power of a technological dispositive to channel experiences of others to seek connections despite class differences. Through the figure of a man with compound eyes Wu articulates a critique of the anthropocentric idea of memory as a solely human capacity.

In his novel he overtly mentions groundbreaking research by the American neurobiologist Eric Kandel, recipient of the Nobel Prize in 2000 for his work on the physiological basis of memory in sea slugs. In the novel some passages read like direct quotes from Kandel's works from the first decade of the 21st century. He argued that the mechanisms responsible for remembering and recollecting in humans are quite similar to those of non-human animals and it is a grave misconception to think that animal memory is markedly different from ours. Wu not only borrows this notion, but through the eponymous figure of his novel extends it to all living and non-living elements of human surroundings. As the man with compound eyes further explains, he is an embodiment of ecological memories of other living creatures and the environments in which they live. And, he continues, any ecosystem may function properly only on condition that the beings which it comprises retain their memories of their own past(s) and the past(s) of their companions. Thus, the novel answers the question of how to dwell in times of environmental catastrophes, by showing that if humans want to again make themselves at home on Earth, they should make space in their stories, mythologies and cosmologies for more-than-human memories, which they tend not to take into account and record; memories crucial for all the elements of an ecosystem to survive. For these are also memories of various ways of dealing with crises and imbalances in the face of catastrophes that may prove useful for human communities in times of predicament, such as the inundation with plastic waste that Wu's novel depicts.

CONCLUSION

It can be argued, therefore, that, by trying to prepare us for the future to come, these two examples of speculative fiction emphasize that, in a world increasingly permeated and shaped by anthropogenic waste, for the sake of working out more pragmatic approaches to the environmental predicament we must "avoid the nostalgia of reconciliation that might return us to the coherent and uncontaminated body" (Yusoff 93). Indeed, in both novels waste acts even when it is removed from view or recycled, entering ecosystems and bodies in the form of toxic substances that may alter the genetic make-up of organisms for generations to come. Chen and Wu also both depict worlds of the near future to answer the question about how to dwell among waste, one of the troubles that we are bound to stay with for centuries to come. By situating this problem in the context of new forms of remembering and dwelling, they seem to suggest that learning to live on an inhospitable Earth involves not only a search for effective countermeasures to environmental problems, climate change and health crises. They also demonstrate that dwelling otherwise requires thinking otherwise about our relationship with the fundamental and elemental powers of more-than-human agencies beyond human control.

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