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Introduction

BACK TO THE STONE AGE?

This volume grew out of a collaboration between a literature scholar and a social scientist who discovered a rich common ground of concern about our planetary future and our terrestrial present. The specific topic was sparked by something that may seem trivial on the surface, but that rests on a bedrock of cultural assumptions that this volume aims at least in part to examine and dismantle—namely, the assumptions that generate the common reaction which greets almost any concrete proposal for changing today’s society along ecological principles: “You want to take us back to the Stone Age!” The underlying fear, it seems, is that ecological concerns will lead to people being asked or forced to “give up” civilization itself, or at least “modernity.” Thus, environmentalists are frequently described and dismissed as antimodern, naïve, and wanting to go “backward” in time, like adults wishing to be children once more. To those who react in this way, it feels as if the very meaning of being “human” is under siege; they seem to believe that a desolate future of returning to cave dwellings and blood-thirsty pagan rites is always lurking behind any talk of sustainability and ecological transition. This volume—starting with this Introduction—intends to delve into these assumptions, fantasies and fears about so-called modernity, to contest and demystify them and to show how in response to the ecological crisis a range of artists, writers, philosophers and social scientists have been rethinking modernity’s temporality, its deeply ingrained dualisms and the human/non-human split that lies at its very heart.

While the initial impetus for the volume came from our perplexity about the assumption that thinking and acting ecologically necessarily implied some sort of historical regression or retreat, it is also true that the entire field of contemporary environmental humanities is shot through

with questions and issues that are essentially temporal in nature. First of all, there is the recognition of how quickly the climate is changing, of how fast the glaciers are melting, of how often record-breaking weather events are occurring, and of the linear temporality of these “records” themselves. These issues are all subsumable under the larger question: how much time do we have left? The temporal issue at stake in this question is that of “the end of times”—the time left before some catastrophe or collapse—or at least of the end of the collectively held assumption that time proceeds progressively “forward” for humankind. More powerfully than ever before, we are confronted with an uneasy awareness that this linear and teleological temporality, with its metaphysics of “progress,” is a key aspect of what is meant by the term “modernity.”

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Moreover, the responses to the problems that have emerged from modernity or, more specifically, from the integrated processes of capitalism, industrialization and globalization, have also been framed in explicitly temporal terms. On the one hand, a movement called “accelerationism,” which advocates an intensification and speeding-up of capitalist growth and technological change, has emerged in both left-wing and right-wing variants (Noys; Rosa; Shaviro). On the other hand, an increasing number of voices have called for a “slowing down” of everything from thought to food (Berg and Seeber; Gayeton; Waters). In addition to the issue of speed, the temporal question at the heart of ecological thought and activism is that of the future: what kind of future can we expect, given that we have so much trouble imagining anything different from how we live now? And yet it has become increasingly clear that the way we live now has no viable future. The planet cannot materially sustain the present pace of trade, growth and resource extraction, and it is only a matter of time before something unprecedented occurs, coming either from the side of the planet—in the form of tipping-point events, unleashing totally unheard-of climate phenomena and causing great harm and suffering for human as well as non-human populations—or from the side of global capitalism and nation-states around the world as they collapse and crumble. At present, the first scenario appears far more likely than the second.

The science is clear: we are living in a moment of unprecedented environmental upheaval. Let us simply look at the facts for a moment (see e.g., Ahmed; Rockström and Gaffney). The climate is not merely “changing”; it is warming to temperatures which have already ended the relatively stable and temperate Holocene epoch of the last eleven thousand years, and which threaten to trigger irreversible changes that will create conditions much less hospitable for sentient life. At the same time, in the name of an opulent minority of consumers and capitalists, essential forests are being cut down, oceans are being acidified and overfished, ecosystems

are being irreversibly destroyed and mountains of non-biodegradable trash are piling up while most of the pollution gets exported to poor regions and countries. Ninety-seven percent of mammal biomass on the Earth is now composed of humans and their agricultural and domestic animals. Wild animals, birds and insects are going extinct at a rate not seen since the asteroid that wiped out the dinosaurs. We are watching as glaciers melt at an unprecedented speed, and as extreme weather events such as fires, floods, hurricanes and droughts occur more and more frequently—and the recent COVID-19 pandemic is probably just the beginning of a new era of epidemics and disease as viruses proliferate throughout the industrial farming industry and bacteria grow resistant to antibiotics.

Another facet of the current situation is that socially and economically, even wealthy Westerners can no longer assume that life will be better or easier for future generations, including today's children, but are instead faced with the threat of a gradual decline, or worse, a rapid collapse. Not only have the promises of technology and free-market capitalism not delivered the leisured and prosperous science-fiction future promised to the post-war generations, but the standard of living of the present will almost certainly continue to erode in future decades. In the United States, this decline has already been happening since the 1970s, but Europe and the rest of the world are more than likely to follow suit as the global economy increasingly feels the limits of a finite planet and as protracted secular stagnation due to creeping resource shortages replaces a short-lived splurge of economic growth made possible by cheap and abundant fossil fuels (Ahmed 25–30; Hall and Klitgaard 459–73). None of this means that humanity is forced to slide back into the Stone Age. It does mean, however, that designing ways of living well with (much) less energy and less material wealth is going to become the new name of the game.

WHAT MODERNITY MEANS

Thus, the current situation requires recognizing that the myth of progress on which modernity was predicated is unraveling. This fact has not entirely sunk in on the level of the political class or the general public, but it has arguably entered our collective imagination through the proliferation of catastrophe stories in popular culture. Some of these stories are explicitly ecological and meant as warnings, some are simply disaster narratives, others are horror stories of zombies or contagion—but images and scenarios of destroyed capitals, empty cities and apocalypse of various degrees and kinds permeate our cinema and literature alike. This is not surprising, since progress and apocalypse are two names for the same linear narrative that

underwrites modernity (Greer, *Apocalypse*), and as one wanes the other surges forward to take its place.

Modernity, however, can be defined in several different ways and refers to a number of different phenomena, giving birth to a shifting family of meanings. According to one definition, “[m]odernity refers to a condition of social existence that is radically different to all past forms of human experience . . . Modernization refers to the transitional process of moving from ‘traditional’ or ‘primitive’ communities to modern societies” (Shilliam). In this quite standard characterization, modernity is literally defined by its difference from “traditional”—meaning: earlier—societies, as well as “primitive” ones, which is a rightfully outdated term that generally designated “native” or “indigenous.” In other words, this definition of modernity, which comes from International Relations Theory but represents a widely held understanding, self-referentially posits the modern as the temporal successor (but also as the cultural opposite) of the premodern or indigenous. Thus, as we will see in this volume, the peoples and worldviews that have come to be labelled “indigenous” were invented as such at the moment when “modernity” was also invented, as a logical binary that mutually constitutes both sides of one single ideological tautology. Without the notion of “modernity,” so-called Indigenous humans are simply humans.¹ If modernity requires the idea of Indigeneity in order to make sense of itself, like most binaries that structure the Western world, this is nevertheless not an innocuous dichotomy—it is instead a ruthless hierarchy, as can be seen by looking at the historical meaning of modernity.

The “modern” historical epoch can be dated in a number of ways but usually begins after the Middle Ages, with the so-called Age of Discovery, from the 1400s to the 1600s. This moment, called the Early Modern Period, is a period of exploration and expansion of intellectual and geographical borders, of the Renaissance and rediscovery of Antiquity in Europe but also, crucially, of colonization, enslavement and genocide in the name of Christendom in the so-called New World. This is regarded by world-system historians (see Wallerstein) as the beginning of the “modern world-system,” characterized by the development of capitalism and industrialization, but it cannot be separated conceptually from the wars of empire and the wholesale transformation of entire populations into mere factory fodder kept on the brink of survival.

¹ In using the term “Indigenous” throughout this volume, we are following the example of Cherokee scholar Daniel Heath Justice in *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*, who uses it to refer to kinship-based tribal-nation peoples across the North American continent. We use it to refer to people who identify as such around the globe (6–9). Following his lead, we capitalize this term to affirm the distinctive political status of peoplehood that the proper noun implies (6).

A more specific sense of the idea of “modernity” conflates it with the eighteenth-century debates about science, philosophy and politics that we generally subsume under the idea of the Enlightenment. This makes the concept of modernity even more malleable because it includes the internal and external critiques of the Western model and of its abuses as they had developed by the eighteenth century—and so the modern Enlightenment includes radicalism, reformism, democracy and human rights. The darker side of such ideas, however, is that—as argued by David Graeber and David Wengrow in *The Dawn of Everything*, drawing on the research of Native American scholar Glenn Aparicio Parry and other sources (see Parry)—their origins in the thought of Indigenous intellectuals who criticized European society was almost completely covered up for three centuries. So even modernity’s progressive streaks are marred, at least when it comes to the acknowledgement of their genesis, by the ills of colonialism and racism.

Despite these different emphases, most critics and scholars of modernity can be seen as referring to a shared set of principles and assumptions, including the Cartesian split between mind and body, which arguably extends the earlier Christian split between spirit and matter, combined with a division of the world into humans and non-humans, the former designating the realm of Culture and the latter becoming cordoned off as Nature (with animals being seen as mere insentient machines). As we observed earlier about the “modern/ pre-modern” binary, this one is not an equitable pairing of opposites either, but a *hierarchy* in which Culture is destined to dominate and control Nature for its own ends. Without the notion of the “human,” non-human animals are simply living beings, fellow Earth-dwellers. Seen from this angle, the modern project is one of mastery and manipulation of a soulless, mindless and passive “natural” world. This also happens to be what Max Weber would call the disenchantment of the world—a process by which humanity comes to occupy a universe that it has stripped of mystery, of the divine and of the kind of agency and co-presence that was long associated with the term “animism.” In modernity, the only relationship humans can have to the Earth and to the land they live on is one of possession, control, extraction and, at best, management or the gendered notion of “husbandry.” This attitude, characterized by commodification and by a conceptual transformation of living systems into dead matter, is widely regarded as the basis of the exploitative, extractive and de-realized relationship that Western and Westernized humans have with the planet right now. And it is one of the underlying reasons that many thinkers in both science and the humanities have come to call the last century and a half the “Anthropocene”—the “age of the human,” which should more aptly be termed the “age of the exploitative and extractive

portion of mostly masculine humanity.” Indeed, this age has also been linked to the genocidal and racist expropriation of Indigenous bodies and lands in the service of global capitalism. As Jamaican scholar of decolonial thought Jason Allen-Paisant observes succinctly in his essay on African indigeneity, “the turning of nature into an object has gone hand in hand with turning certain humans into objects” (43).

MODERNITY’S TEMPORALITY

We will return below to the term “Indigenous” and the complex debates surrounding it, but we want to dwell for a moment on the most important feature of modernity, at least for our purposes: its temporality. As we saw from the earlier definition, the notion of time that underwrites modernity, as that which breaks “radically” from the traditional and the primitive, assumes that time is linear and that the “modern” is more “advanced” than the “traditional.” The latter acquires in this dyad a distinctly negative meaning, which is especially perceptible in the ideologically fraught term “primitive.” Linear time moving “forward” in a line is a key aspect of modernity, and one that has an important pre-modern origin—namely in the Judeo-Christian tradition, actually dating back to Zoroastrianism (Greer, *Apocalypse*). The idea of moving “forward” is essential and linked to the belief, especially strong since the nineteenth century, that human societies are constantly progressing. According to independent scholar John Michael Greer, to professor of conservation biology Tom Wessels, and to other thinkers, the idea of progress is nothing less than the central myth or civil religion of the modern era (Wessels 5; Greer, *After Progress* 20). The assumption that our societies, our economies and our cultures are constantly getting better is so deeply ingrained that it is difficult for many of us to see through its truly ideological or faith-based nature. Built into the very definition of modernity, the belief in progress requires that the past be regarded as “primitive” and “backward” or, in Greer’s words, as “an abyss of misery and squalor” (*After Progress* 28) while history continues its unstoppable movement towards better things (29).

Moreover, as Greer points out, “progress” refers to any one of several interwoven things: moral progress (societies getting “better,” more democratic, etc.), scientific progress (usually equated with technological “improvement” and “innovation”) and economic progress (tantamount to material growth) (*After Progress* 39–43). Although momentarily shaken, at least for some of us Westerners, by world events such as the First World War and the dropping of the atom bomb in 1945, the faith in the religion of Progress has generally continued to underwrite contemporary Western

culture and development. In order for us to begin to appreciate the power of this model in our thinking, Greer reminds us of other cultures in which the dominant model of time was quite different. For example, in the influential Greek poet Hesiod's vision of the world as depicted in his two major poems, *Theogony* and *Works and Days*, the present moment, called the Iron Age, was a pale shadow of an earlier Golden Age, which had been followed by a Silver Age and an Age of Heroes, immediately prior to Hesiod's time. In other words, the arc of history was not at all that of an advancement but that of a "long and bitter descent" (*After Progress* 51).

Another example to drive home the fact that faith in progress is not some natural emanation or deep grammar of the human psyche but a historically and culturally specific mythology, Greer cites the Dreamtime of the Australian aboriginal culture. Similar to the cosmologies of many other tribal societies around the world, the Dreamtime assumes that everything has already happened long ago and is happening "right now in parallel to ordinary time" (*After Progress* 53). There have been recent debates about the accuracy of the understanding of the Dreamtime by anthropologists, as there has come to be more self-awareness about the reflexive ethnocentricity of anthropology itself, but the larger, undeniable point is that many Indigenous creation myths and spiritualities do not share a linear paradigm but rather more cyclical, integrated or "complex" notions of time, the term Tom Wessel borrows from complex systems science (21).

In their book *The Ends of the World*, philosopher Déborah Danowski and anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro explain that Amerindian cosmologies are often the exact reverse of the modern timeline insofar as they place the human moment not at the end of time, not as the most recent epoch, but rather at the beginning of time, as "*empirically anterior* in relation to the world" (63). According to these origin stories, the world begins with a "primordial humanity," either created by a demiurge or simply presupposed, and these primordial humans are not fully human in our sense; they are "endowed with the same mental faculties" as humans but also a "great anatomical plasticity" (63–64). From this initial common humanity all the current biological, geographical, meteorological and celestial bodies were later made through a process of diversification, while historical humankind remained essentially the same (64). The result is that there is a substratum of vestigial humanity in all living and (from the "modern" perspective) non-living beings. A similar cosmology exists for the Kaluli in Papua New Guinea, for whom there once existed a time where the entire surface of the earth was covered only with "people," who later were converted into the various species of animals, rivers and another natural phenomena, leaving a part to become the ancestors of

human beings (64). In short, for many Indigenous peoples, other animals and natural elements of the landscape may be regarded as multiplicities of “people” or “societies,” or as Danowski and Viveiros de Castro argue, as “*political entities*”—a notion that was developed by Bruno Latour in *Facing Gaia*. Thus, to return to the issue of temporality, for many Indigenous peoples time is anything but linear, teleological and progressive (68, 76).

Western temporality, however, is not just an infinitely forward-moving progression. As we mentioned earlier, alongside the idea of progress another teleological structure is frequently shadowing it: a goal and an endpoint, often figured as an apocalypse followed by the rebirth of a paradise, at its heart echoing the Biblical model which describes the post-apocalyptic world as Edenic. Thus, Progress and Apocalypse are two aspects of the same modern model of linear time; they are two deeply mythical *topoi* that permeate Western culture. If, under capitalism, the myth of Progress seems to promise a paradise without an apocalypse, Bruno Latour argues that this is because for moderns, the apocalypse has in some psychological and ideological sense *already occurred* and we are already living in a Garden of Eden, or so we have been led to believe. The apocalypse was the end of the traditional, pre-modern life, of the world of “before,” and this is one reason why anything that seems like a “return” to the past is felt to be a fall from grace or an inconceivable loss (Latour 184–219). Latour’s provocative remarks resonate uncomfortably with another critique of the apocalypse paradigm, this time coming from Indigenous scholars and critics, who point out that their world has already ended, that their apocalypse has indeed *already happened*, has been happening in some cases for six hundred years, and yet that they are still here.

APOCALYPSE, DEEP TIME AND THE ANTHROPOCENE

Nevertheless, despite these qualifications, the apocalypse “meme,” as Greer calls it, still has much traction and tenacity among contemporary Westerners, especially but not only among environmentalists. Among the latter, it is not hard to understand why. This is partly due to the huge and powerful impact that catastrophism initially had as an environmental rhetorical device. Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, published in 1962, was basically an apocalypse story, and as such it led to the contemporary ecological movement and to the various regulations and protections that were put in place in the 1970s. In 1995, Lawrence Buell would call it “the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal” (285). It has since become subject to the law of diminishing

returns, however, and even counterproductive as reactions of helplessness and paralysis become more and more frequent and as eco-anxiety takes hold. Apocalyptic scenarios dominate popular culture—*The Walking Dead*, *Don't Look Up*, *Melancholia*, and other examples—as well as literature and other arts, and yet action to change systems and lives has not happened on the scale that would be necessary. According to psychologist Paul Slovic and others (see e.g., Dupuy; Marshall; Stoknes), catastrophic scenarios simply don't mobilize people to act on climate change knowledge. In fact, apocalyptic scenarios can seem like an attractive *alternative to change*, offering a chance to start over with a clean slate (Landon 8). Conducive to denial and comfortable with its mechanisms, apocalyptic scenarios invite each reader or viewer to imagine that they will not be one of the millions to perish, but one of the handful to survive and to start afresh, as at the end of the film *The Day After Tomorrow*.

If apocalyptic narratives are ubiquitous now, they emerged with particular force at the beginning of the nineteenth century and took hold of the popular imagination at exactly the same moment when Deep Time was gaining ground—which also corresponds more or less exactly to the timespan described by the term “Anthropocene.” The concept of Deep Time, introduced by Scottish geologist James Hutton in the late eighteenth century, was initially rejected and took several decades to gain acceptance. As the story goes, Europeans up to then had been used to thinking of the Earth as roughly six thousand years old and were not inclined to embrace Hutton's model, which cast the planet's age into the millions of years, dwarfing the human era and thereby deflating humanity's self-importance. Yet, discoveries of dinosaur skeletons in the early nineteenth century corroborated his work and by the mid-nineteenth century, the Deep Time concept of seeing human civilization as just a short fragment of an immensely longer geological story was accepted as part of the scientific worldview.

This paradigm change reverberated throughout the cultures of the West. Thomas Cole's *The Course of Empires* (1833–36), a series of five paintings depicting “The Savage State,” “The Arcadian or Pastoral State,” “The Consummation of Empire,” “Destruction” and finally “Desolation,” merged the popular tendency to think in terms of progressive epochs or stages (used notably by Adam Smith, and later by Hegel and Marx) with a new awareness of the fragility of civilizations and the possibility of decline and disappearance, often portrayed as cataclysmic rather than gradual. In British literature, the first post-apocalyptic novel, *The Last Man*, was written by Mary Shelley in 1826. In the United States, Edgar Allan Poe published “Conversation of Eiros and Charmion” in 1839, telling the story of a comet that approaches and then destroys Earth.

While the concept of Deep Time was initially met with hostility because of its profoundly unsettling implications for anthropocentrism, today it continues to speak to our mortality, fragility and ephemerality. It is frequently evoked by nature writers and environmentalists as a reminder of our relatively insignificant place in the course of planetary history (Talenti; Macfarlane), in the spirit of calling us back to a humbler and more respectful attitude, as many of the essays and literary excerpts in this volume suggest. The word “Anthropocene” can be regarded as part of this project, i.e., as a warning that we are impacting geological time categories that are far beyond our scope and ability to control once we have disrupted them. Yet, paradoxically, the term “Anthropocene” can strike one as precisely the opposite of humble. It attributes agency to humanity over geological time, a “telluric power” as it is often described, evoking godlike abilities. Not surprisingly, some recent commentators have suggested embracing the Anthropocene as an opportunity to “manage” the planet for our own ends, calling for geo-engineering and other technological “fixes” to the unfolding ecological crisis (see, most notably, Lynas).

The term “Anthropocene” raises other critical questions as well. Critics have observed that it unfairly attributes blame for global warming to humanity as a species when, in actuality, it is a small number of nations and an even smaller number of industries and corporations that are mainly responsible for the rising temperatures and the collapse of ecosystems. The terms “capitalocene” and even “oligarchocene” have been suggested (Bonneuil and Fressoz; Moore; Campagne), though they have not quite caught on for now. Perhaps the implied sense of a collective destiny that the word “Anthropocene” evokes resonates better than the more accurate and politically incisive variations. As Dipesh Chakrabarty suggests at the end of his highly influential essay “The Climate of History,” the term effectively invokes a “universal that arises from a shared sense of catastrophe” (222).

Whatever the reason for its traction, the term has spread through academic and popular discourse like wildfire. It has also crystallized concerns about the future of the planet into new psychological phenomena such as “Anthropocene anxiety” and “ecological anxiety disorder” (Grose; Ray; Kennedy-Woodard and Kennedy-Williams). From psychotherapists to cultural analysts in various disciplines, it has been noted that there is a wide range of emotions activated by the Anthropocene and its implications for the future (Albrecht; Sepkoski). These emotions include but are not limited to depression, grief, denial, fear and anger. Many of them are quite paralyzing, especially the fatalism that can come from a sense of inevitable catastrophe and planetary destruction; some of them can flirt with apathy or cynicism; and finally, environmental activists and scholars often wrestle with the specter of despair. Other emotions are

more subtle, such as the “Anthropocene nostalgia” discussed by one of the contributors to this volume, which is a form of looking backward that is paradoxical, demythologizing and oddly critical, aware that the past that is ambivalently longed for was neither simple nor particularly good. Many of the articles in this volume can be seen as dealing with the psychology and affect of the Anthropocene, because many are about how literature, film, graphic novels, poetry or visual art seek to engage with people’s emotional, intellectual and aesthetic responses to the ecological crisis and its possible future outcomes.

INTERCONNECTIVITY, INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE AND THE ECOLOGICAL FUTURE

17

This brings us to the heart of the matter, as our volume’s title—“The Ecological Future”—insists. What to do and how to do it? This is not mainly a question of “solutions” (which eco-modernists and Big Tech are all too eager to supply for a hefty fee), but rather one of course corrections, reorientations, and possible paths towards a true equilibrium—a stabilization of ecosystems and societies, a more just and joyful world based on realistic assessments of planetary limits and health, on an ethics of care for the Earth rather than possession of land and resources, and on a more intelligent and compassionate approach to maintaining life on Earth. If we think through the implications of the issues raised in this Introduction thus far, one of the conclusions is that art and literature will have a crucial role to play in the necessary and urgent task before us: changing mindsets and perspectives. We need to be able to think and act based on a more complete picture of the world and the dangers it is facing: not just more data and more facts, but also a way of understanding the data without the blinkers and blind spots of dualistic thinking and anthropocentrism, without the myth of progress, without the twin seductions of apocalypse and paradise, and without the categorical separation of the human and the non-human, of Culture versus Nature, that has driven our relentless destruction of ecosystems in the name of growth, prosperity and development.

If there is one theme that runs through all the essays in this volume, it is the importance of recognizing the interdependence of humanity, animals, the biosphere and the various Earth processes that support life on this planet. If there is any one term that could serve as the byword for an “ecological future,” it would be *interconnectivity*. Just as interconnectivity assumes subtle and complex interrelations between systems and things that on the surface may seem distinct and autonomous, there are various

paths to this more complete vision of the world and its beings. For some, the path can be bio-geoscience itself (Capra and Luisi), or some of the more specific recent research that has, for instance, revealed the symbiotic relationship between trees (Simard; Wohlleben) or the vast underground mycelium networks which permit the former to communicate among each other (Stamets; Sheldrake). For others, the path leads through spiritual traditions and practices such as Buddhism for instance, from which (as discussed by one contribution to this volume) a popular metaphor has emerged: Indra's net of jewels, a vast network that stretches infinitely in every direction, with a perfect jewel in every "eye" of the network that reflects all the other jewels. This is taken as a powerful trope for the idea of interbeing and mutual inter-causality across the entire biosphere. For still others, a recognition of the interconnectivity emerges from a revived spiritual engagement with the material world, through current as diverse as posthuman ontology and ecology (Braidotti and Bignall), neopaganism (Hopman and Bond; Hutton), plant-based spiritual practices (Narby and Chanchari Pizuri; Pollan), or a renewed interest in animism (Astor-Aguilera and Harvey; Durrant and Dickinson; Harvey).

This brings us back to the issue we started with above, when we began to define modernity. Modernity, as we saw, has produced Indigeneity as its "Other" but nevertheless needs it in order for the word "modern" to even have any meaning at all. Under the aegis of this highly problematic abstraction, many different tribes, cultures and individuals having varying degrees of connection to traditional lifeways (from full immersion to none at all) have been regrouped into a single category. According to the United Nations, there are around 476 million "Indigenous" people in 90 countries around the globe, making up about 6.2 percent of the global population.²

Indigenous peoples have been the first and most impacted by the Anthropocene, and they have been so for centuries (Allen-Paisant 33). Not only has settler colonialism unfolded at the cost of Indigenous lands, sovereignty and lives, but Indigenous people continue to be the most vulnerable to extractive practices today. Although representing only 6 percent of the world's population, Indigenous communities are involved in "40% of all environmental conflicts globally" (Martínez-Alier and Meynen). In the twentieth century, this included uranium mining (Voyles) and, later, deposits of radioactive waste, as well as logging, water pollution and appropriation of Native waterways, pipelines laid across sacred Native lands, drilling and, most recently, fracking (Fixico; Klubock; Todrys). As a result of rising oceans and climate change, islands where Native people dwell have been sinking and disappearing—which is a harbinger of rising

² See <https://www.un.org/en/observances/indigenous-day>

coastal waters that will drive many other coastland populations inland in the future, except that these islanders literally have nowhere else to go.

Indigenous activists have thus been instrumental in calling for a stop to environmentally harmful practices and have spearheaded protests, lawsuits and actions to protect their lands. In 1990, the Indigenous Environmental Network was founded by “grassroots Indigenous peoples and individuals to address environmental and economic justice issues.”³ Moreover, researchers and policy makers around the world are turning to what has come to be called Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK; see e.g., Menzies) for managing and restoring damaged ecosystems. The Skolt Sámi people of Finland, for example, participated in a study in which their traditional knowledge of salmon fishing was used in a co-management project with the Finnish government to restore spawning sites and reverse the decline of salmon populations.⁴ Similarly, ancient Aboriginal practices of land clearing through fire in Australia have shown to stimulate greater biodiversity in regrowth and more sustainable ecosystems, and as one contributor argues in this volume, it is not “too late” to revive these traditional burning techniques to better care for the land. These are only two of many examples of traditional land management and sustainable stewardship of the plants and animals in ecosystems under Indigenous care.

Also in 1990, a non-profit organization called Bioneers was founded by Kenny Ausubel and Nina Simons to disseminate nature-based solutions for “restoring imperiled ecosystems and healing our human communities” (Nelson xvii). Drawing on “human ingenuity wedded to the wisdom of the wild,” Bioneers emphasizes the interconnectivity of natural and human communities and looks to TEK to face the unprecedented “global ecological collapse” (xxii). Native American sociologist Jack Forbes puts it like this: “The life of Native American peoples revolves around the concept of the sacredness, beauty, power and relatedness of all forms of existence” (qtd. in Pinchbeck 21). Interconnectivity is thus a crucial aspect of Indigenous cosmology and thought, and one that is increasingly making its way into mainstream science (Cajete; Peat). As Tewa Pueblo educator Greg Cajete observes (Nelson 253–56), education for the future needs to draw on scientific as well as traditional knowledge, “re-indigenizing perspectives in mainstream thinking” while respecting the unique knowledge of specific tribes. A truly enlightened science would thus be able to draw on insights of both what Cajete calls “the rational mind” and “the metaphorical mind” (Nelson 5–6).

³ See <https://www.ienearth.org/about/>

⁴ The study was published in *Nature* in 2017. See <https://e360.yale.edu/features/native-knowledge-what-ecologists-are-learning-from-indigenous-people>

Cajete’s synthesis can also recall the “mestizaje,” or bridging of different identities and cosmologies, that Gloria Anzaldúa calls for (and performs) in her influential 1987 manifesto, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, where ecofeminism, queer theory and Chicana indigeneity meet and forge a new border consciousness. If interconnectivity and a respect for the interdependence of human and non-human creatures characterizes the cosmologies and worldviews of many Indigenous peoples, these aspects have also been important for feminism and especially for the queer and decolonial feminism of figures like Anzaldúa. Her work emphasizes embodiment and spirituality in ways that deliberately and defiantly refuse the dualisms and alienations of modernity, inviting readers to see how the political and the spiritual are connected in an engaged decolonial practice. They are connected not only to each other, but also to a specific land and place, making spirituality a question of what Christina Holmes calls “body/landscape/spirit relations, offering a comprehensive effort to shift subjectivity from the secularized and individuating practices that are produced by dominant discourses” (19).

ENLIGHTENMENT AND “RE-INDIGENIZATION”

An ecological future requires dismantling and rethinking modernity as we know it. We need to break the spell of the magical thinking that the concept of modernity has cast on the West and on much of the “developing” world as well (see e.g., Kothari et al.). The magical thinking we are referring to is the neoliberal trinity of blind faith in inevitable progress, unbounded economic growth and self-regulating free markets. None of these beliefs are fact-based. When Mahatma Gandhi was asked what he thought of Western civilization, he famously quipped: “It would be a good idea.” Wouldn’t a true “Enlightenment”—based on an honest appraisal of the information we have about the Earth and its systems, as well as an ability to think with a “re-indigenized” intelligence that connects us to ourselves as minds, bodies and spirits in a living world full of other beings to whom we feel directly and intimately related and whom we also recognize as having minds, bodies and spirits (see e.g., Van Horn et al.)—also be a good idea? This enlightenment would also be a “re-indigenization” in another sense: as David Graeber and David Wengrow have reminded us recently, drawing on a wealth of scholarship by Native American researchers, many of the values we associate with the Enlightenment, such as equality and radical democracy, were already the contributions of Indigenous thinkers in the eighteenth century (27–77).

In short, perhaps the Enlightenment baby does not need to be thrown out with the bathwater of Modernity. Many of its ideals and institutions,

such as the Human Rights Council, the UN Declaration on Indigenous People of 2007 or the UN War Crimes Tribunal, are valuable even if flawed. The United Nations has often been criticized for being Eurocentric and overly Western in its self-proclaimed universalism, and there is clearly truth to these critiques. Yet, there are real dangers in abandoning any shared human values and retreating into an absolute cultural relativism that allows any state or nation to impose anything it wishes on its people. We are watching some of these dangers play out in real time as we write this Introduction. Vladimir Putin's army has invaded Ukraine and ideologues in Russia have been defending his actions for years by saying that Russia has its own "special Russian truth that you need to accept," which they claim is not the human-rights-and-democracy truth of the West (Gatehouse). If this sounds vaguely familiar, it is because in the United States the Trump administration was making similar post-truth assertions between 2016 and 2020, claiming its right to "alternative facts" that finally led to a concerted coup attempt to impose its "alternative results" on the presidential election. Thus, we need to be careful to not discard human rights as we rethink the category of the human, and instead to expand the idea of "rights"—acknowledging very clearly its original cultural baggage and Eurocentric limitations but maintaining the aspiration to respect the dignity and integrity of all living creatures and of the precious ecosystems that sustain us all—of all terrestrial beings, as Bruno Latour calls all of us in *Facing Gaia*. We also need not throw out the science baby with the bathwater of scientism—the cult of technological progress and the assumption that science alone can provide all the answers to the environmental crisis—that has in large part led us to today's situation. Post-science is overwhelmingly anti-science, and we need all the hard-nosed science we can get when it comes to climate disruptions, biodiversity losses and emerging pandemics.

If we want to break the spell of modernity and at long last enter into a true present, we will need to give up our most cherished faith: the twin civil religion of Progress and Apocalypse. As we reach peak oil and break many of the planetary boundaries, we will not have the better future we expected—"not the future we ordered" (to borrow the title of Greer, *Not the Future We Ordered*). We will also not garner the illusory cleansing reset of a swift and apocalyptic collapse that would "regenerate" our dying civilization. One of the blind spots of moderns, according to Latour, is that they feel they have nothing to learn from the past. If we actually looked to the past, as painters and writers in the early nineteenth century began to do, we would see that entire civilizations have already come and gone, almost always in messy, bloody and agonizing ways. If we were not so mesmerized by the seductive myth of our unique and irreversible greatness, we could better prepare for the long descent that is most likely

awaiting us. If we could only perceive and prepare for it with some of that special human intelligence and ingenuity of which we are so proud, we might make that transition into the de-industrialized future gentler for ourselves and our children.

Danowski and Viveiros de Castro conclude their book *The Ends of the World* by suggesting that the way forward may very well be to look into the present heritage of long-standing cultures and traditions, in order to genuinely prefigure the ecological future. They propose that the Amerindian collectives they study, like many other Indigenous collectives, with their mastery of “technoprimitivist bricolage and politico-metaphysical metamorphosis,” are not figures of the past (as they have almost invariably been seen by modernity) but rather *figurations of the future* (123). Or, as John Michael Greer suggests in his essay *After Progress* and his novel *Retrotopia* (echoing the arguments of the “appropriate technology” movement), we might do well to revisit ways of organizing life that draw on the perfectly good technologies and practices that we have discarded not so long ago. And, as Ernest Callenbach showed already back in the 1970s in his novel *Ecotopia* (his meticulously researched blueprint for a sustainable society), we currently already have a lot of the tools, technologies and knowledge that we would need to organize human life more ecologically and to survive in the now irreversible Anthropocene. What we need to help us use these tools and ideas with ingenuity, creativity and compassion are new narratives about our place on the planet and about the future.

OVERVIEW OF THE VOLUME

This volume hopes to contribute to this broad and ambitious project by offering up twenty contributions—mostly in the form of academic essays, along with a handful of literary excerpts and scholarly conversations with authors—grouped under five headings that directly reflect the ideas and concerns we have set out in this Introduction: “Temporality and Deep Time,” “Eco-Anxiety and Anthropocene Nostalgia,” “Indigenous Pasts, Presents and Futures,” “Interconnectivity and Animacy” and “Ecotopia and Eco-Futurism.”

The first section is meant not to go back in time so much as to bring a wider and deeper timescale into focus, using a larger conceptual lens, as it were, before later sections explore issues of concern to the present and future. In “Stories of Making and Unmaking’: Deep Time and the Anthropocene in New Nature Writing,” Amy Player examines the way authors such as Robert Macfarlane and Kathleen Jamie engage with

geological timescales to invite readers to reimagine their relationship to the “more-than-human world” in the Anthropocene. Moving from literature to the interplay of word and image, Małgorzata Olsza’s “Comics in the Anthropocene: Graphic Narratives of the Apocalypse, Regeneration and Warning” examines three contemporary graphic novels which attempt, in different ways, to deconstruct the modern master narrative of progress and to imagine alternative temporalities in relation to ecological crisis and reconciliation.

Also a direct challenge to the modern presumption of inevitable progress, the next piece, John Michael Greer’s “Winter’s Tales,” is a fictional narrative—structured around three moments in the near to mid-distant future (the years 2050, 2100 and 2150), on the day we currently know as Christmas—of the slow descent from a recently de-industrialized society to a “salvage” economy where no one even remembers affluence. In the conversation that immediately follows, “‘Looking to the Past to Reinvent the Future’: Writing About the Long Descent, Practicing Green Wizardry,” we invite Greer, an independent scholar, science fiction writer and blogger, to reflect on the role of the imagination in helping or hindering us to adapt to the de-industrial future that is inevitably coming our way as our planet’s finite resources become increasingly scarce.

The next contribution is an essay by Christian Arnsperger, “How Deep Time Can Help Shape the Present: Existential Economics, ‘Joyful Insignificance’ and the Future of the Ecological Transition,” which looks at another of Greer’s short stories, one which imagines Earth many billions of years into the future, and suggests that Deep Time, with its capacity to awaken a sense of both existential horror and yet possibly renewed joy at human insignificance, can help us imagine new modes of thinking, feeling and being “indigenous” to this planet. This philosophical examination of Deep Time is immediately followed by “Robustness and Vulnerability: Caring for the Earth in an Age of Loss,” an extended excerpt from author and conservationist William deBuys taken from two of his books: *A Great Aridness: Climate Change and the Future of the American Southwest* (2011) and his most recent opus, *The Trail to Kanjiroba: Rediscovering Earth in an Age of Loss* (2021). Together, these two passages speak to the irreversible changes underway across landscapes and ecosystems all over the planet and evoke the loss of the world we were born into, and how they may lead us to grief but should also awaken our desire to care, cooperate and create community. The last piece of this section is thus a conversation with William deBuys, “‘The Paradise of How It Has to Be’: Writing About the Future of the Earth in a Time of Decline.” In it we invite deBuys to speak to his long and rich career of writing about landscapes, extinction and climate change, and specifically to elaborate on some insights advanced

in his latest book, which describes a care-delivering journey to a remote area of the Himalayas while also weaving together reflections on geological time, scientific discovery, writing and other philosophical matters relevant to facing the current planetary “age of loss.”

The second section of the volume picks up on the theme of grief raised by William deBuys and examines a range of emotions aroused by ecological devastation and the prospect of irreversible planetary changes. The first essay, “Firing up the Anthropocene: Conflagration, Representation and Temporality in Modern Australia” by Philip Hayward, discusses a series of paintings and poems which show that European settlers in Australia, after upsetting the long-standing fire management practices used by pre-colonial Indigenous peoples, have been experiencing terrifying wildfires and eco-anxiety ever since the nineteenth century. Hayward echoes many of the other contributors to this volume in his conclusion that any shift to an ecological future will involve snapping out of “now-ism” and inhabiting time in a distinctly different manner, acknowledging its multiplicities as well as learning from traditional Indigenous Earth stewardship practices. The next essay in this section, Dominika Oramus’s “Prophesying the End of Human Time: Eco-Anxiety and Regress in J. G. Ballard’s Short Fiction,” looks back to the complex and sometimes strangely fatalistic eco-anxiety of the postwar era in two post-apocalyptic short stories by J. G. Ballard from the 1960s. Indirectly alluding to the Doomsday Clock created in 1947 by the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, Oramus examines how the temporality of these stories is figured in an entirely new manner antithetic to the religion of progress: not by a movement forward, but as a countdown to the end. Alicja Relidzyńska’s examination of a wholly new emotional response that has arisen in the era since the term “Anthropocene” was coined in 2000 is the subject of the next essay, “The Nature of Irrevocability: Anthropocene Nostalgia in Hayley Eichenbaum’s Photography Series *The Mother Road*,” which looks at a series of eerily empty photographs of the famous monument to postwar petroculture, the Southwest segment of Route 66, and examines the intensely ambivalent form of nostalgia these images evoke. While not explicitly addressing the complex history of Indigenous people in relation to extractivism, the essay gestures towards both their presence and their deliberate erasure through its iconic (and now empty) Southwestern landscapes.

The issue of the next section, “Indigenous Pasts, Presents and Futures,” emerges as a central theme of the volume for reasons that we hope to have sketched out convincingly in the earlier part of this Introduction. This section begins with Brygida Gasztold’s critical analysis of the postcolonial history of Anthropocene extractivism in her essay, “Environmental Neocolonialism and the Quest for Social Justice in Imbolo Mbue’s *How*

Beautiful We Were.” While Gasztold’s contribution focuses on a fictional town in Africa which allows the Cameroonian-American novelist Imbolo Mbue to speak to a broad colonial history of exploitation and expropriation—in this case, through oil drilling—on the African continent, Emily Childers and Hannah Menendez bring our attention to two recent novels by Indigenous authors in North America in their essay, “Apocalypse When? Storytelling and Spiralic Time in Cherie Dimaline’s *The Marrow Thieves* and Louise Erdrich’s *Future Home of the Living God.*” Both novels engage with the conventions of speculative fiction while paying homage to Indigenous storytelling practices, resilience and futurity. Indigenous Futurism and the way in which it can renew reflection on an ecological future is also the explicit focus of the third essay in this section, Erika De Vivo’s ethnographically-informed discussion of an art and culture festival organized in 2018 by members of the Sámi people of Northern Scandinavia: “Márkomeannu#2118, the Future is Already Here: Imagining a Sámi Future at the Intersection of Art and Activism.” Throughout this section, the power of the actuality and futurity of Indigenous cultures comes to the fore, thus setting the stage for a genuine recognition, *in the present and for the sake of the future*, of the crucial ecological knowledge these cultures possess when it comes to Nature’s deep integrity.

Accordingly, the next section deals with “Interconnectivity and Animacy” by building on the issues raised in the previous section and broadening them to a range of encounters, contexts and artforms. In “‘The Only Way Out Is In’: Transcending Modernity and Embracing Interconnectedness in Gary Snyder and Kenneth White,” Monika Kocot examines the influence of Buddhism and the master trope of interconnectivity known as Indra’s net in the poetry of two North American poets. In the next essay, “Past Conditional Subjectivities: Enacting Relationships with the Non-Human in the Work of Ana Mendieta,” Matthew Tedford looks at animacy and focuses on a Cuban-American artist whose artistic practice radically challenged the rigid boundaries between the human and the non-human associated with modernity under capitalism and colonialism. Also addressing the relationship between the human and non-human, Katarzyna Ostalska’s essay, “‘Enlightenment Is a Shared Enterprise’: Tree Ecosystems and the Legacy of Modernity in Richard Powers’s *The Overstory*,” surveys the latest science of forest ecosystems alongside Buddhist values of spiritual enlightenment to interrogate the legacy of modernity in the contemporary world. The last essay of this section, Courtney A. Druzak’s “Apocalypse . . . Eventually: Trans-Corporeality and Slow Horror in M. R. Carey’s *The Girl with All the Gifts*,” follows up on the tree-human assemblages discussed by Kocot and adds in fungal-human hybridity as a way to reflect on human “enmeshment” in the natural world. All these essays shed light on the much-needed decentering

of human beings in their relationship to the rest of the planet, which forms the bedrock of any viable ecological future and for the reinvention of truly sustainable human societies.

This reinvention is what the final section, “Ecotopia and Eco-Futurism,” focuses on. It begins with an updating of Ernest Callenbach’s classic novel of sustainable community, *Ecotopia* (1975), into a screenplay for a television series, by Elizabeth Watson. Based on Callenbach’s extensive research and updated for the small screen, Watson’s script allows us to collectively visualize a green city based on principles of respect for planetary boundaries, steady-state and circular economic systems rather than perpetual growth, and a quality of life that fosters well-being for both humans and the biosphere. The episode is followed by a conversation with Elizabeth Watson, “‘Did You See Last Night’s Episode of *Ecotopia*?’: How a TV Series Could Help Move Climate Action Forward,” in which she speaks to the role of the popular imagination in motivating political change by offering concrete ideas of what sustainability could mean. Not only does the world of *Ecotopia* sidestep the pitfalls of apocalypticism and the blind faith in progress alike, it also explores the cultural and psychological implications of living in a sustainable society while offering a positive incentive to change. The final essay of the volume, Katarzyna Więckowska’s “Appositions: The Future in Solarpunk and Post-Apocalyptic Fiction,” continues the exploration of models of livable futures in her critical survey of solarpunk fiction, a new literary genre that is explicitly committed to moving beyond the pessimism of contemporary post-apocalyptic scenarios, as well as the blind faith in inevitable progress that, together, sabotage our ability to think and act effectively in the face of the current climate crisis. It is our hope that this volume’s examination of both critical and creative efforts towards imagining an ecological future will also contribute—however modestly—to this urgent task.

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TEMPORALITY AND DEEP TIME

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“Stories of Making and Unmaking”: Deep Time and the Anthropocene in New Nature Writing

ABSTRACT

New Nature Writing reflects many of the anxieties which are becoming increasingly prevalent in the Anthropocene, an era which necessitates temporal leaps between the present moment, the deep past, and the deep future. Coming to contextualize our impact on the planet in the Anthropocene era in such expansive, geological terms poses profound challenges to the ways we have conventionally framed our wider place on Earth. When viewed through the lens of deep time, our impact on the planet has been comparatively brief, but we are scarcely beginning to comprehend its lasting effects. While the scale of the environmental problems we have created often seems insurmountable, this chapter argues that writing which helps us to think about deep time and acclimatizes us to its vast scale can itself serve as a way for us to grapple with the immensity of the problems we face. Through a consideration of the writing of new nature writers Robert Macfarlane and Kathleen Jamie, it looks at how their engagements with deep time challenge the feelings of helplessness that the scale of the environmental crisis can sometimes burden us with. By arguing that coming to terms with the Anthropocene is to come to terms with a changing narrative we tell ourselves about our role on the planet, it considers how New Nature Writing is playing a crucial role in this narrative shift more specifically, as it explores different ways for us to reimagine our relationship with the more-than-human world in the Anthropocene era.

Keywords: Anthropocene, deep time, New Nature Writing, temporality, Robert Macfarlane, Kathleen Jamie.

As awareness of the Anthropocene has gained ground, questions surrounding how we might come to terms with a concept which is so broad in scope and has such lasting implications have come to the fore. Whilst the term is by no means universally accepted, its capacity to serve both as a shorthand for and an acknowledgement of our role in global climate change has undeniably helped instigate debate in recent years.¹ When viewed through the lens of deep time, our impact on the planet has been comparatively brief, but we are scarcely beginning to comprehend its lasting effects. Coming to contextualize our impact on the planet in the Anthropocene era in such expansive, geological terms poses profound challenges to the ways we have conventionally framed our wider place on Earth. As Rob Nixon has put it: “[I]he Anthropocene hypothesis shakes the very idea of what it means to be human” (2370). To come to terms with the Anthropocene is to come to terms with the changing narrative we tell ourselves about our role on the planet: it is to face up to difficult truths and to imagine ways we might move forward with the weight of these truths. It is at this juncture in which New Nature Writing finds itself as it explores ways of envisaging these immense changes and seeks to (re)imagine our relationship with the more-than-human world in the Anthropocene era.² Through an analysis of recent writing by new nature writers Robert Macfarlane and Kathleen Jamie, this chapter will argue that New Nature Writing brings together deep time and the Anthropocene in surprising and often illuminating ways which provide us with alternative ways of thinking about and framing these new temporalities. It will demonstrate how New Nature Writing is playing a crucial role in the narrative shifts so inherent to our understanding of the Anthropocene, and show how the genre’s engagements with deep time can contribute vital new narratives for our times, which can help us consider humanity’s future inhabitation of the earth in the broader context of the Anthropocene era.

In the opening essay from her 2012 prose collection, *Sightlines*, entitled “Aurora,” Kathleen Jamie recounts a trip taken to Greenland to see the northern lights. She describes finding herself in an unfamiliar landscape and being confronted by the “vast, unnerving scale” (2) of the land, and being

¹ For a more in-depth discussion of Anthropocene terminology, see Benjamin Kunkel’s article “The Capitalocene.”

² Whilst most writers associated with New Nature Writing are resistant to the label, it nevertheless serves as a useful shorthand for writing which engages with the complexities of our relationship with the more-than-human world in the Anthropocene era. Whether it represents a departure from the nature writing which preceded it is a contested issue, however. See Graham Huggan’s “Back to the future: the ‘new nature writing,’ ecological boredom, and the recall of the wild” or Jos Smith’s *The New Nature Writing* for a more extensive exploration of the genre and its associated issues.

surrounded by icebergs which “give nothing, suggest nothing but a white nihilism” (7) and suggest “nothing but colossal, witless indifference” (10). Here Jamie underscores the tension between the human tendency to reach for and create narratives to help us understand things which are so much bigger than we are, against the difficulty of imparting meaning on things which tend to resist representation, often precisely because they seem to operate on scales so different from our own. Furthermore, this also provides a useful narrative analogue for the challenges which come from trying to conceptualize deep time in writing in terms of the broader scales it occupies. However, despite the difficulties that come with trying to describe the scale of such a landscape and the elements contained within it, Jamie notes how there are some narratives of sorts which emerge from it, and which can, intriguingly, be read. When referring to the extraction of ancient ice cores, she notes:

The icecap is two miles deep. In 2003, a team who’d spent seven years drilling through the Greenland ice to fetch up core samples at last hit bedrock. The ice at the bottom of the core is 20,000 years old. They were bringing the deep past out of its silence, waking it up to ask it about change. (17)

Here Jamie evokes both temporal and spatial scales which are somewhat difficult to comprehend: we tend to engage with the idea of distance as a measurement which goes across, rather than down, and especially not to such a depth; the fact that drilling the ice core took seven years to do certainly helps us to understand the immensity of such an undertaking, and that’s before we even try to comprehend the age of the core itself. Jamie notes how these cores contain narratives from the past which are not only visible in the present, but which hold potential messages about the future too, as they contain the narratives which can help us understand broader-scale concepts such as climate change and the key role we have played in it. In this way, the compressed narratives they contain can serve as projections for possible futures we face and so could act as a potential catalyst for change.

When describing her experience of observing the natural phenomenon of the northern lights elsewhere in the essay, Jamie writes:

We are standing with heads tilted back, marvelling.
Luminous green, teal green, the aurora borealis glows almost directly overhead. It intensifies against the starry night like breath on a mirror, and it moves. Across the whole sky from east to west, the green lights shift and alter. Now it’s an emerald veil, now with a surge it remakes itself into a swizzle which reaches toward some faraway place in the east. (12)

Jamie's description here reflects her sense of wonder in response to this phenomenon, but it can also be viewed as a moment which Philip Hoare argues "jerk[s] us out of our complacency." Although Hoare is referring to the perseids meteor shower here, it works equally well when paralleled with Jamie's observations. Hoare argues:

Throughout the year, at key moments, as we move through the orbits of fragmentary heavenly bodies, we can lie outside, on the grass or a beach, and watch the sky erupt. . . . Nature is suddenly disrupted, and the disruption has nothing to do with us, and our notional dominion. It is a spectacle older than us, setting our existence in salutary perspective. . . . Such events still remind us that not everything is within our grasp or control.

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Hoare's description is replete with examples which negate the notion of our own centrality here: his reference to "our notional dominion" is an excellent shorthand for how we might come to place ourselves in the wider scope of deep time, particularly in the age of the Anthropocene. Whilst this can be complicated by the fact that the Anthropocene is also an acknowledgement that we can impact the more-than-human world on a truly mammoth scale, natural phenomena such as these also serve as important reminders that we are not at the centre. Indeed, although we may necessarily be at the centre of our own lives, events such as these, if we are attentive to them, can unsettle this perspective and place us as far smaller elements in a far wider scheme than our own comparatively fleeting lives. Such narratives can serve as a reminder "that not everything is within our grasp or control" (Hoare), and so help acclimatize us to the idea of deep time by taking us out of ourselves.

Elsewhere in "Aurora," Jamie notes how the Vikings "used to navigate by raven" (4), which leads her to wonder: "Maybe ravens had brought [the Vikings] here, too, in their Greenlandic voyages, a thousand years ago. A thousand years. The blink of an eye" (5). This blurring of temporal scales is particularly effective, with Jamie acclimatizing us to temporal slippages where time expands and contracts, both to the timespan of millennia, and a single blink of an eye. Similar temporal leaps appear elsewhere in Jamie's work: in her *Findings* essay "Darkness and Light," she describes visiting the Neolithic chambered cairn of Maes Howe in Orkney at the winter solstice and compresses the sense of multiple eras passing into one paragraph, from the Neolithic to the present day. When describing the history of the cairn, she notes:

The Vikings went away, leaving many messages, but Maes Howe was again half-forgotten, a fairy place, a strange mound on a heath. Generations lived and died. We invented electric light, the internal combustion

engine, we exploited oilfields, developed telephones and TVs, to dispel the winter dark—and now at solstice we come, as no one has done for nigh on 5000 years, to witness a little beam of sunlight creeping through the darkness onto a stone wall. (16)

If we can relate to the idea of being human thousands of years ago, then thinking of how comparatively close to us previous civilizations are in the broader temporal scheme could further help acclimatize us to the more distant pasts required when thinking about deep time. This paragraph serves as a further narrative analogue for comprehending multiple layers of time, with Jamie's temporal compression of these ages and events into a single paragraph providing a useful way of thinking of deep time itself, and the temporal compression required when imagining such broad scales of time. Though Jamie's paragraph here compresses millennia rather than the mega-annums which we more readily associate with deep time, it still evokes concepts of time far broader than our lived experience of it, which in turn helps us to more readily imagine displacing ourselves into the past, and so to imaginatively project ourselves into possible futures too. In this way, it allows us to adjust to a more expansive sense of the past and future.

Glaciated landscapes provide a further means to reflect on the farther reaches of time as their morphology has been shaped by glacial activity which took place often tens of thousands of years ago, so they also more readily lend themselves to an imaginative displacement into another time. In his 2015 text *Landmarks*, Robert Macfarlane notes: "In the Scottish Highlands I find it easy for thousands or millions of years to fall away in a glance. Out on the prow of one of the rock buttresses that lean over the great valley of Lairig Ghru, I can envisage some version of the glen as it was in the Pleistocene" (274). Whilst glaciated landscapes may seem less subject to the sort of rapid visual transformations of urban environments which change on a far more human timeframe, as Macfarlane shows here, an imaginative viewing of the vestiges of the deep past which still shape certain contemporary landscapes can allow us to tangibly comprehend the connection between the deep past and present. The vast stretch of years fall away, and this understanding of the entanglement of deep past and present could and should lead us to consider how present patterns of human behaviour, through their disruption of processes which move through geological time, will continue to have consequences into the deep future, for human generations and generations of shifting landscapes to come.

Jamie also seeks to bridge the gap between the deep past and present when observing a similar glacial landscape, to demonstrate their closeness and by extension their connectedness. In the opening essay in *Surfacing*, "The Reindeer Cave," she conducts a similar displacement to Macfarlane

by overlapping her own present experience in the valley with an imagined exploration there in a previous ice age. She writes: “To reach the caves, you climbed a grassy slope a hundred-and-fifty feet above the river. You try to imagine stepping from the cave-mouth onto ice and moraine” (2). On a narrative level, Jamie’s use of a more inclusive second person pronoun here encourages a shift from more singularly anthropocentric ways of engaging with the more-than-human world. Her attempts to distance herself from such anthropocentric perspectives notably emerged in her earlier review of Macfarlane’s 2007 text *The Wild Places*, where she criticized him for perpetuating the trope of “the lone enraptured male” (“Lone”). Whilst Macfarlane’s recent work admittedly represents a shift from this position, Jamie has more consistently, and indeed more self-consciously, sought to test the limits of her own anthropocentrism. She has argued: “I look at a page I’ve written, see that I’ve used the word ‘I’ 17 times and go back and reduce it by two thirds” (Personal correspondence 2), elsewhere adding that: “I want to have [my readers] stand shoulder to shoulder with me, so I can say ‘Look at this, can you see what I see? Let me show you.’ I want to reveal the world in its wonder, and have readers as co-discoverers. I don’t want to show off” (Introduction). Following Zechner, in its attempts to destabilize anthropocentric perspectives, much New Nature Writing seeks to place human beings “on a par with the world they encounter” (167). Just as Jamie seeks to place her readers on her “par” too, she also avoids foregrounding her perspective over the more-than-human world she is encountering in her writing. Jamie’s reluctance to place herself at the centre helps encourage considerations of perspectives beyond our own, where an individual’s experience is framed as just one part of a much wider narrative taking place over a much broader temporal spectrum. Whilst clearly still grounded in human experience, such an approach can help to place us in a connective web of which we constitute just a small part, and can further accustom us to such expansive ideas as deep time as it places us within a narrative framework of something considerably larger than our selves.

In a further complication to questions of anthropocentrism in relation to deep time and the Anthropocene, later in “The Reindeer Cave” Jamie adds: “[T]hat last ice-grip, the one which ended ten thousand years ago and created the land we know. Ten thousand years—in the great scheme of things, we’re living through a warm bank holiday weekend” (*Surfacing* 2–3). Whilst the use of the first person plural here represents a further shift from more singularly anthropocentric positions, I would argue that even more crucial here is Jamie’s attempt to humanize these epochal stretches of time by making us think of them in an even greater chronological context, but one which is then translated back into a more relatable human one too. As

one of the chief difficulties with coming to comprehend expansive concepts such as deep time and climate change is the sense of distance and abstraction they can evoke, making such abstract concepts feel more connected to us by humanizing them in this way can challenge the feelings of helplessness that the scale of the environmental crisis can sometimes burden us with.³ Whilst humanizing these concepts remains a position which is inescapably anthropocentric in origin, it is one which seeks to primarily connect us to these more expansive and abstract ideas, rather than to distinguish or separate us from them. There are undoubtedly limitations to using this more human scale as a means for understanding deep time, especially when engaging with concepts which extend so far beyond the human, but such an approach should not be so readily dismissed if it can help us come to terms with ideas which are so abstract in scope, particularly if it can both help us to envisage alternative paths forward which recognize our agential role in the Anthropocene and to accept the limits of our control over it. Even so, Zechner identifies a tension in relation to these anthropocentric positions by pointing out how Jamie's writing "illustrates the difficulty of putting a non-anthropocentric approach . . . into a consistent ethical framework" (177). In fact, I would argue that the absence of a consistent ethical framework is present in much New Nature Writing and is reflective of the broader difficulties we face when trying to come to terms with the Anthropocene more generally as we struggle to express the scale of what is going on. Indeed, as Stef Craps puts it: "[W]e are somewhat at a loss as to how to adequately navigate the emotional terrain of environmental breakdown" (3). Nevertheless, even if New Nature Writing may lack a consistent ethical framework, finding ways to accept and move forward with the weight of the knowledge of our Anthropocene reality makes these explorations more vital and necessary than ever.

However, although it can be humbling to acknowledge that the glaciated landscapes described by Jamie and Macfarlane here can change on scales which go beyond human timeframes, we must also accept that in the Anthropocene era, many of these landscapes are changing at an acutely alarming speed precisely because of human activity. As Andri Snær Magnason has argued, "Earth's mightiest forces have forsaken geological time and now change on a human scale. Changes that previously took a hundred thousand years now happen in one hundred" (9). Whilst such new temporalities take time to adjust to, such a shift in temporal velocity demands immediate action if we are to respond to these changes in a way

³ These expansive concepts also constitute examples of Timothy Morton's concept of "hyperobjects," which he defines as "things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans" (1).

that goes beyond simply bearing witness to them. Jamie, for instance, has argued that “[n]owadays in ‘nature’ or ‘the environment’ we are far from consoled. It’s in nature we find the most frightening changes. The more alert nature-writers . . . are energised by that truth” (“*Four Fields*”). New nature writers do not simply bear witness to or report these “frightening changes”: in my view, being “energised by the truth” is rooted in the motivation to challenge the seeming inevitability of our unsustainable path in the Anthropocene.

For writers navigating the more-than-human world in the Anthropocene era, the prevalence of plastic surfaces in their writing in ways which are deeply troubling to both encounter and acknowledge and exemplifies precisely the sorts of “frightening changes” Jamie refers to. When walking along the coastline in northern Norway, Macfarlane notes:

It is low tide, and the sand of the bay is strewn with jetsam, almost all of it plastic. . . . Fishing buoys, toothbrushes, bleach bottles, tangled fishing nets, thousands of unidentifiable shards.

I feel sick as I walk the wrack-line and its litter, appalled by the contrast with the plateau, implicated by my part in the scene. This was once all oil too. Oil—the “monstrous transformer”—is in all of these things, vital to the manufacture of the plastics that we first synthesized only a century ago. (*Underland* 319–20)

Macfarlane’s visceral response and sense of disgust at the sight is important, but so too is the fact that he doesn’t exempt himself from the wider blame, as he also reminds us of the complex web of dependency on oil, within which almost all humanity is complicit, to varying degrees. For Heather Houser, evoking disgust could prove effective in inciting a reaction in the reader, arguing that it can be viewed as “a conduit to engaging with human and nonhuman others as it counteracts forms of detachment that block environmental and social investment” (120). Such a rhetorical technique can challenge feelings of disconnect from the more-than-human world, and particularly those which are evoked by the scale of the damage we have done, by drawing our attention to our complicity in this damage, regardless of how difficult it may be to confront. By acknowledging this sense of complicity, Macfarlane moves beyond simply bearing witness and provides us with a way to face up to these frightening changes, which can serve as a further way of being “energised by the truth.” Indeed, Macfarlane has argued that “menace and anxiety have always stimulated cultural production, and loss has always stimulated desire” (“*Go Wild*”). The very idea that humans are motivated to create from loss goes some way in explaining why New Nature Writing

has had such a resurgence in recent years, and thus enables the genre to act against the broader sense of loss so integral to the Anthropocene era. He later adds:

Nature is no longer only a remote peak shining in the sun, or a raptor hunting over birch woods—it is also tidelines thickened with drift plastic, or methane clathrates decomposing over millions of square miles of warming permafrost. This new nature entangles us in ways we are only beginning to comprehend. . . . The more we struggle to distance ourselves from the Anthropocene, the more stuck we become. (*Underland* 321)

By reminding us that the consequences of our exploitation of the more-than-human world now occur everywhere on the planet, and on scales we are barely capable of grasping, new nature writers help us face up to these uncomfortable realities and come to terms with the scale of them as well.⁴ In this, they respond to James Bradley’s call for writers to “find ways to communicate ideas that are not just uncomfortable and frightening but actively difficult to comprehend” too.

Fossil fuels are substances which take millennia to form and the widespread and long-term environmental impacts that have emerged from our comparatively recent exploitation of them exemplify the complex Anthropocene entanglement Macfarlane refers to. They are also integral to the production of plastic, a material which is now so ubiquitous it is coming to form part of the Earth’s geological strata which will remain into the deep future. Though often conceived of for single, ephemeral use, plastic’s pervasiveness in the Anthropocene now requires us to think of deep time, because the time it takes to break down vastly outweighs this fleeting usage period, as Farrier argues:

A typical disposable plastic container is in use for around 60 days before it’s thrown away. Yet this brief period falls on a line that runs from the deep past to the deep future: the 3.4 million years since the raw materials (oil) began to form, and the 10,000 or more years it could take for the plastic to degrade. (“Sands”)

This perplexing temporal bind reflects how plastic forms part of our changing Anthropocene narrative and makes us question the sort of relationship we have and indeed want to build with the more-than-human

⁴ For instance, recent studies have detected microplastics in the depths of the oceans, on “remote” mountain peaks, and inside of us too. See Barrett et al., Allen et al. and Cox et al., respectively.

world, particularly when such seemingly insignificant, throwaway items have such a lasting impact. As Farrier asks: “Is it our intentional signs and symbols that leave the most lasting marks, or our unintentional traces?” (“Sands”). He argues that “it’s in the encounter with everyday objects, surfaces and textures that we get the best sense of [the Anthropocene’s] scope and scale,” adding that “[p]lastics, which began being mass-produced in the middle of the 20th century, give us back the world as the West has been taught to see it—pliable, immediately available, and smoothed to our advantage” (“Deep Time”). To challenge narratives that the more-than-human world exists for our benefit is to challenge the myopic sense of short termism and the assumption of human control so integral to this world view, because the lasting impact of such seemingly insignificant items fundamentally challenges the notion of the “traces and marks” our Anthropocene imprint will leave behind.

There is nevertheless a strange duality in the Anthropocene, as it both confirms the mammoth imprint we have had and also confirms how we are, as a species, comparatively fleeting in the much wider temporal arc of deep time. Macfarlane notes how

There is a dangerous comfort to be drawn from deep time. . . . What does our behaviour matter, when *Homo sapiens* will have disappeared from the Earth in a blink of a geological eye? Viewed from the perspective of a desert or an ocean, human morality looks absurd—crushed to irrelevance. . . . We should resist such inertial thinking; indeed, we should urge its opposite—deep time as a radical perspective, provoking us to action not apathy. (*Underland* 15)

There is a tangible sense of urgency to Macfarlane’s words here, and an alertness to the dangers of “inertial thinking” and the ways in which it might encourage apathetic responses to environmental crises, even when we acknowledge that such expansive concepts as deep time and the Anthropocene are difficult for us to fully comprehend. This urgency is compounded by the fact that for numerous climate change deniers, our comparatively fleeting passage on earth is used as a justification for not intervening, as they put recent changes in climate pattern down to natural variations beyond the scope of human control. In a counter to such positions, Macfarlane argues that “to think in deep time can be a means not of escaping our troubled present, but rather of re-imagining it; countermanding its quick greeds and furies with older, slower stories of making and unmaking” (*Underland* 15).

In his own writing, Macfarlane’s reflections on past human histories help with this “re-imagining” of our present. When visiting a cave adorned with ancient paintings in Norway in his 2019 text *Underland*, Macfarlane

layers his own present-day explorations of the cave with his own imaginings of those who visited it at various moments in the past. He writes:

A summer's night 3,000 years ago. At this latitude, in this season, darkness scarcely exists above ground. Low tide, calm sea. A small group of figures follows the shore, stepping from rock to rock. . . . Up where the tunnel wall overhangs them, the figures halt, make their preparations. Rock is to be the painter of rock. In a cup of stone they crush haematite and mix it with spit, earth and rainwater to make a red paste. The painting begins. (273–74)

Macfarlane's description here acts as a form of patient, measured storytelling which unfolds in a way not entirely dissimilar to the narratives depicted in the cave art pictures themselves. In this way, it makes his present-day narrative form part of an "older, slower story of making" too. Macfarlane's temporal layering here is similar to Jamie's descriptions in *Maes Howe*, though whilst Jamie's descriptions compress multiple eras into a single paragraph, Macfarlane's overlap an envisaged single past event into the present. Both perspectives demonstrate how comparatively little the places themselves have changed despite the time that has passed, and both writers again humanize these broader stretches of time by describing events which we can still envisage taking place today. The act of painting on cave walls for Macfarlane and the witnessing of sunlight entering *Maes Howe* at the solstice for Jamie are events or moments which unfold at roughly the same pace now as they did then. In this, both Jamie and Macfarlane further challenge the aforementioned "quick greeds and furies," and subsequently encourage a "re-imagining" of "our troubled present" (Macfarlane, *Underland* 15) by helping us to reconsider our position in the broader scheme of things.

Furthermore, Macfarlane's use of the present tense in these cave narratives not only creates a sense of the past becoming present, but also accentuates the immediacy of his present-day explorations in them. By layering different perspectives and histories onto his own in this way, the narrative of *Underland* leaps between different times: to look at the text's structure is to see a form of layering not entirely unlike geological layers, so that the text takes on its own layers of strata. The cumulative effect of the narrative therefore presents the reader with a narrative analogue of sorts for an (albeit much compressed) experience of deep time. Bradley has argued that "[n]ot only must we confront the inhuman scale of transformation that is taking place around us, its temporal, physical and moral enormity, we must find new ways of making sense of its complexity and interconnectedness," and Macfarlane's approach here could be read as a way in which the narrative structure of the text responds to this sense of "complexity and interconnectedness," too.

When describing the progress of two cave-explorers elsewhere in *Underland*, Macfarlane observes that “[t]ime reverses space—the deeper in they get, the younger the cave-space. The journey into darkness is a journey to the present. The sea has taken thousands of years to win each yard of stone” (275). Macfarlane’s descriptions of these caves, which are the result of slow, hard-won processes of weathering and erosion, enact what Jamie calls a form of “temporal recalibration” (*Findings* 11) which reflects the approach that thinking about deep time necessitates. Jamie’s own description of the experience of working on an archaeological dig similarly unsettles the chronological, linear experience of time which we are accustomed to. Of the dig, she writes: “To add to the odd sensation of inhabiting several different times, there was also this process of dismantling; of running the narrative of construction backwards” (*Sightlines* 61). Though not explicit engagements with deep time, both Macfarlane and Jamie’s descriptions provide alternative temporal perspectives and re-imaginings of the boundaries we conventionally associate with time, which could again help accustom us to the challenges of envisaging such an expansive concept as deep time, too. Furthermore, these “temporal recalibrations” also reflect what Bradley has argued is “a disruption of unitary narrative” characteristic to writing in the genre. He adds that they unsettle “our assumptions about narrative time in an attempt to articulate an awareness of the inhuman scale of what is taking place around us” which can be considered as part of a further attempt to come to terms with our Anthropocene influence. Helping us to comprehend the distance of time involved in these human histories both reminds us of our comparatively fleeting existence, and makes these pasts seem somehow closer, which could again help acclimatize us to the more distant pasts required when thinking about deep time.

As the chapters of *Underland* progress and we read proverbially deeper into the narrative, the locations that Macfarlane travels to go deeper underground, and we as readers subsequently become more embedded in the narrative framework of deep time. The earlier chapters of the text begin with Macfarlane’s present-day explorations in the Mendip Hills in Somerset, and by the penultimate chapter, he has reached one of the deepest locations in the underlands of the planet that it is humanly possible to access and has some of his most profound reflections on humanity’s legacies into the deep future. In this way, the text itself reflects Macfarlane’s initial assertion that “deep time is the chronology of the underland” (15). Visiting a nuclear waste containment facility in Finland which lies 1500 feet below the earth’s surface and which he calls “an experiment in post-human architecture” (399), he notes how it was intended “to outlast not only the people who designed it, but also the

species that designed it. It is intended to maintain its integrity without future maintenance for 100,000 years, able to endure a future ice age” (398). In this way, as the text draws to a close, it looks towards the deep future by considering the legacy of what we will leave behind us. As deep time is frequently considered in terms of the past, this reminder of the deep future is also important, since it encourages us to shift our accustomed way of thinking about deep time too.

Engaging with the fleeting nature of human existence in the wider scheme of things, even when placed within an anthropocentric narrative framework, provides us with one of the most relatable ways to envisage deep pasts which existed long before us, and to envisage possible futures which will take place long after we have gone. As Jorie Graham argues, however, envisaging these possible futures poses its own mammoth challenges:

[H]ow [can we] make the “deep future”—seven to ten generations hence—feel actually connected to us, right down to this very minute of our lives. . . . How can you expect a person to find, let alone feel and act upon, the fine thread that truly connects their very next choice to a life 1,000 years hence which might not in any way resemble what we know of as human life? (38)

As writers work with the imagination, they are well placed to help us feel this sense of connection to the deep future, even when it may seem necessarily abstract. The diverging and converging temporal scales that Jamie and Macfarlane employ help us to envisage a deep future which is connected to us in the present in at least two ways: first, by acclimatizing us to leaping between temporal scales, and second, through the imaginative displacement of the self that their switching between temporal scales necessitates. Such an approach can help shift us out of the present and, by extension, challenge the predominant short-term perspectives and the more anthropocentric ways of seeing our place in the world. New nature writers’ engagement with leaping temporal scales, along with their ability to envisage possible futures is of particular use in a contemporary context, as it could provide a means to counter the short-term mindset inherent in the current late capitalist economic model, which is particularly damaging to the environment, in both the short and long term. Being able to face up to our immense impact in environmental terms through an understanding of our place in the wider scale of deep time could therefore be viewed as a challenge to this predominant and damaging strain of capitalism, by encouraging us to think of, and within, this longer view.

Macfarlane argues that “Philip Larkin famously proposed that what will survive of us is love. Wrong. What will survive of us is plastic, swine bones and lead-207, the stable isotope at the end of the uranium-235 decay chain” (*Underland* 77). Macfarlane’s contrasting imagery of our long-term Anthropocene legacy here is particularly abrupt as it startles and shocks the reader through its contradiction. He adds that “the half-life of uranium 235 is 4.46 billion years: such chronology decentres the human, crushing the first person to an irrelevance” (*Underland* 409). Knowledge of this requires a radical questioning of what it means to be human, and both deep time and the idea of the Anthropocene can fundamentally unsettle our sense of self and our sense of centrality in this way. This is arguably one of the best ways we can think of deep time as the “radical perspective” Macfarlane suggests (*Underland* 15), because in going so far beyond the human, it can also help us rethink our place on the planet on a far wider scale.

Both Macfarlane and Jamie provide us with alternative ways of thinking about temporality which help us reach a better understanding of deep time. The new temporalities they engage with encourage us to face up to the problematic legacy we have already left behind, but also to consider the legacies we might leave in the future too, which is of particular importance as we come to terms with the changing narrative we are telling ourselves in the Anthropocene. As Macfarlane puts it: “[A]t its best, a deep time awareness might help us see ourselves as part of a web of gift, inheritance and legacy stretching over millions of years past and millions to come, bringing us to consider what we are leaving behind for the epochs and beings that will follow us” (*Underland* 15). This also helps us respond to Bradley’s call that we “find new ways of making sense of [the] complexity and interconnectedness” of the Anthropocene, because in considering deep time as a way to connect to a wider sense of ourselves, it also enables us to connect to the idea of species and epochs far beyond us. Acknowledging the role we are having as agents of geological change in the Anthropocene era is a deeply unsettling but necessary task, and New Nature Writing’s engagement with this may yet help us to effectively envisage the scope of the possible and alternative futures that may take place, and so help us come to terms with this monumental change.

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Comics in the Anthropocene: Graphic Narratives of Apocalypse, Regeneration and Warning

ABSTRACT

Narratives of the Anthropocene function in the realm of not only scientific but also popular discourses. Indeed, the most popular narratives of the Anthropocene, namely the story of the apocalypse and the story of progress, with their respective temporalities, are particularly well-represented in comics. The present article looks at the Anthropocene through the lenses of word and image, tracing the response of the medium of comics to the ongoing catastrophe, including Joe Sacco's *Paying the Land* (2020), Scott Snyder and Yanick Paquette's modern take on *Swamp Thing* (2019) and Richard McGuire's *Here* (2014). *Paying the Land* is a story of the Dene people and their response to the Anthropocene. Drawing on the opposition between nature and progress, it examines whether empathy can stop capitalistic exploitation of Indigenous communities and the land which they cherish. *Swamp Thing*, seemingly a narrative of environmental apocalypse, also functions as a story of ecological reconciliation and regeneration. Finally, *Here* builds on and deconstructs the narrative of progress, demonstrating how a specific location has and will be transformed from 3,000,500,000 BCE to 22,175 CE, offering the reader/viewer a non-chronological look at environmental changes. Apart from the visions of the now and the future that these graphic narratives present, temporality coded in their "grammar" (layout, panels and gutters) is also discussed.

Keywords: comics, graphic novels, Anthropocene, temporality, apocalypse.

INTRODUCTION

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As demonstrated by its powerful links to various apocalyptic scenarios (Swyngedouw 214; Nixon 64), the discussion of the Anthropocene in the humanities is essentially a discussion of time and temporality, be it in the sense of the inevitable ending, of possible regeneration which deconstructs and subverts stories of the end, transforming them into stories of “the after,” or of “the *longue durée* of the planetary (geological and astrophysical) perspective” (Jones, Rigby and Williams 392). It is these three temporal perspectives, pointing to the (im)possibility and (un)imaginability of the future, that I will focus on in the present article. The temporalities of the Anthropocene, and human responses to it, will be analyzed in three contemporary American comics, Joe Sacco’s *Paying the Land* (2020), Scott Snyder and Yanick Paquette’s modern take on *Swamp Thing: Protector of the Green* (2019) and Richard McGuire’s *Here* (2014). As comics, these texts recognize their connection with popular narratives (the “superhero saving the world” scenario or variations thereof), be it in an affirmative (*Swamp Thing*) or critical/distanced fashion (*Paying the Land* and *Here*). As I shall try to demonstrate, all three contemporary graphic narratives,¹ and/as temporal structures, exemplify different human responses to the ongoing crisis, ranging from belief in ecological reconciliation to anti-capitalist critique and a negation of the narrative of progress, thus demonstrating how the popular narrative of “the end” known from the history of comics is critically transformed in (response to) the Anthropocene, defined here not in its limited geological sense but as a time of unprecedented human influence on the Earth with its negative political, ethical, economic and cultural consequences (Zalasiewicz et al.; Clark 1–28). Apart from engaging with the temporality encoded in the “what” of the story, I also comment on the physicality of comics as a medium which represents, breaks, and dissects time in its sequential structure of panels and gutters.

The structure of the article follows and builds on the above premises. First, I briefly discuss the notions of temporality in the study of the Anthropocene. Then, I contextualize all three texts as products of the Western (North American) mindset and comment on the concept of space-as-time in comics. The discussion of the three comics follows.

¹ The term graphic narrative is defined by Hillary Chute and Marianne DeKoven as “narrative work in the medium of comics” (767).

THE ANTHROPOCENE, TEMPORALITY AND COMICS

Suspended between the human notions of the “the end,” “the after” and “the long duration,” Anthropocene graphic narratives should not be read in universal terms but always in connection with the perspective inscribed in them. Despite their ecological intentions, *Swamp Thing*, *Paying the Land* and *Here* are all products of the affluent West, which over the years has marginalized the role and value of nature for the sake of modernity and progress, and this perspective has, in turn, been reflected in the prevailing narrative and temporal structures. As Libby Robin observes:

Time is not equally deep everywhere. Time itself depends on place. Much of the dominant discourse of the era of postwar reconstruction . . . was extrapolated from ideas of the national, particularly European and North American models. . . . A default “global” follows the big economies. It typically focuses on territories and land systems at the expense of atmospheres, oceans and polar ice-caps, which are the truly global spaces. (62)

Respectively, as Dipesh Chakrabarty observes, “the epoch [should] be more properly called ‘the Capitalocene’ or ‘econocene’ so that a vague and undifferentiated humanity—‘anthropos’—is not held responsible for bringing about this time and that the blame is laid squarely at the door of a system: capitalism or the global economic system” (6). Acknowledging their Western and capitalist affiliations, many American comics, both mainstream and alternative, which engage with the question of the Anthropocene focus on different forms of anti-capitalist critique. They actively perceive Western Capitalism as threatening, and thus, quite literally, visible. The conceptualization of the Anthropocene as an epoch that is very much conditioned by the economic, the historical and the social and, most importantly perhaps, by the spatiotemporal (i.e. the West), helps explain why the narratives of “the end” and “the after” prevail. They rely on culturally inscribed teleological narratives found in the Bible and privilege stories of the apocalypse, seen as both “the end” and the lessons that it brings (De Cristofaro 3), at the expense of the more complex perspective of the *longue durée*. In aligning “the monumentalism of national modernity” with “the monumentalism of the apocalypse” (Nixon 157), they either relegate the “deep time perspective” to the periphery or make it function in terms of the temporal “other.” This is not to say that the disastrous impact of humans on the environment should be downplayed but rather points to the fact that looking at the Anthropocene through the human(istic) notions of

narrative and temporality reveals structures that are framed by older narrative concepts, such as, for example, the “artistic chronotope” (Bakhtin 84–85). It is through these “tamed” forms of conceptualizing time that contemporary American comics venture into, explore, and engage with deep time, attempting to represent the “complex, paradoxical temporality” (Farrier 6) of the human epoch.

Crucially, the ability of comics to tell and structure stories depends on the intersections between space and time. Scott McCloud has famously defined comics as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in a deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (9). In comics, time is coded in space (McCloud 100–07), as the reader/viewer actively moves from one panel to another, and the shape and the size of the panel, as well as the width of the gutter (the empty space between the panels) all play a role in how the reader/viewer perceives time in the story. Moving from panel to panel, from one temporal moment to the next, the reader/viewer is (self-)consciously made aware of how the physicality of the medium codes time. In classic comics theory, the process of “closure,” which McCloud defines as the “phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole” (63), allows the reader/viewer to bridge the gaps between the panels, thus co-creating the story. More often than not, however, the artist chooses to challenge the reader/viewer’s need for “closure.” Nick Sousanis talks about how the “spatial interplay of the sequential and the simultaneous imbues comics with a dual nature—both tree-like, hierarchical and rhizomatic” (62). Respectively, Hillary Chute observes that

comics can retrack narrative, confuse the eye, offer multiple directions of reading. . . . While a visual rhythm is sometimes established (through panelization, through colour), as regular in these texts, it is just often as not. . . . There are two broad senses of rhythm at work here: the rhythm of the reader’s acquisition of the text, and the material, visual rhythm of the created page, in which a trace of the imaginary, projected regularity of the grid is always present. (36–37)

Time, both “readerly” and “narrative,” and space lie at the heart of comics’ storytelling. All three analyzed comics, in their own respective ways, point to and critically engage with this phenomenon, exploring the links between temporality and the narrative (form). To paraphrase David Farrier’s claim in *Anthropocene Poetics*, I suggest that “the environmental crisis is also a crisis of” (6) form, with contemporary comics artists seeking new ways of representing time on the page, often by experimenting with the classic grid structure.

“YOU FIND YOURSELF IN THE CIRCLE”

In his most recent work, *Paying the Land*, Joe Sacco, an acclaimed comics journalist, tells the story of the Dene, an Indigenous people who have lived in the Mackenzie River Valley in the Northwest Territories of Canada for centuries, and their response to the agents of the Anthropocene: the Canadian government, with its drive towards “modernity,” and corporations mining for oil, gas and diamonds. Drawing on the opposition between ecology and “progress,” *Paying the Land* examines whether empathy can stop capitalistic exploitation of Indigenous communities and the land which they cherish.

The story opens with a chapter entitled “You Find Yourself in the Circle” (3–22), in which Paul Andrew, one of the Dene people, explains to Sacco (who both acknowledges and accepts his role as a Westerner and therefore acknowledges and accepts his own limitations) how his tribe has “always” lived. The people were close to the land and the animals and rarely had “contact with the outside world” (4). The question of time is addressed early in the conversation. Sacco asks about “keeping track of time” (11), which is in itself a very Western concept, and Andrew responds that “the environment dictates” (11) and governs time. The concept of Western linear time, of progress, is thus conceptualized in relation to cycles and “circles.” “You find yourself in the circle,” Andrew explains, “you work yourself in[to] the circle of that community” (17), which is as much human as more-than-human. A special bond with place, a “unique and complex ensemble—rooted in the past and growing into a future” (Iuan 388), as opposed to space, is emphasized. And while the tensions between the need to tackle unemployment and poverty among the Dene and “the responsibilities of environmental stewardship” (Sacco, *Paying the Land* 42) are also acknowledged,² it is nevertheless apparent that the Dene have responsibility towards nature. “Progress” and “modernity” are brought by the West, Catholic missionaries, the residential school system, foresting companies, and mining consortiums, and the tribe struggles to come to terms with the fact that they cannot protect what they consider to be their land (“their” in terms of a connection to the place; Sacco dedicates his book to “the people of the land”), because they do not own it (in the Western legal sense of the word). “Progress to us means becoming a wiser person,” Richard Nerysoo, one of the Dene interviewed by Sacco asserts, “it means living with the land and nature as close as possible”

² The Dene, as a people, want a future, also an economic one. Darrell Beaulieu, “president and CEO of Denendeh Investments, which promotes the economic growth of the Dene first nations” (42) interviewed by Sacco, observes that people “‘are not going to stop’ taking what they need. . . . ‘It’s just a matter of how we do that’” (43).

(69). “Ownership is not how we look at the land” (200), another person asserts. Sacco thus sets up the same kind of temporal conflict that Nixon has described as a conflict between “the short-termers who arrive (with their official landscape maps) to extract, despoil, and depart and the long-termers who must live inside the ecological aftermath” (17). The dividing line between the Western and the Indigenous understanding of existence and time is thus clearly marked and, in the complex network of demarcation lines that this narrative presents and operates within, will only deepen. And while the story seems to operate with(in) binary oppositions, it does so self-consciously and therefore, paradoxically, critically. Sacco realizes how limiting binary oppositions are and yet, as a Westerner, cannot help but refer to them.

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This point of divergence is marked at the end of the opening chapter. Sacco interrupts and intervenes in Andrew’s tale, saying: “Okay. This is very fascinating, but I guess we should get to the point where a plane [which took young Andrew to a residential school] shows up” (Sacco, *Paying the Land* 22). He is bored. He wants action and cannot conceive of (narrative) time in terms of duration. Or perhaps he is testing the contemporary reader/viewer who might be on “an insatiable—and often insensate—quest for quicker sensation” (Nixon 8). Henceforth, the narrative will operate as if on two temporal levels.³ One is linear and Sacco, as a Western journalist is critical of it and yet finds it difficult to ignore it. While he criticizes the narrative of capitalist progress, he still thinks about (hi)story in terms of the impending end. Linear time must come to an end. The environmental apocalypse is upon us. This is probably why, despite the claim made by Andrew in the opening chapter, Sacco structures the history of the Dene in a linear fashion, albeit with some hints of modernist disruption, fragmentation, and achronological order (e.g., the plane he asks about in the opening chapter only appears on page 120), as these are the formal tools that he has at his disposal as a Western writer. He visualizes the struggle of the people over the last 600 years as a “line” of key events, including the Doctrine of Discovery, first contact with the colonizers, claiming of the land, the introduction of the residential school system, urbanization and the exploitation of natural resources, highlighting the fact that, as Nixon observes, “[n]arratives of national development are partial narratives” in which Indigenous communities function as objects but not subjects (150).

³ It should be noted that Sacco has experimented with the representation of time in his previous works. In *The Great War: July 1, 1916: The First Day of the Battle of the Somme* (2013), he explored the format of the panorama in/as comics. It both combines and juxtaposes sequentiality and continuity.

The other, circular, temporal plane is developed concurrently by Andrew. He speaks in the opening and the final chapters, entitled respectively “You Find Yourself in the Circle” and “The Circle is Closed,” opposing the linear perspective of the Western narrative with its drive towards the end. In “bending” time, the story does not negate the possibility of the apocalypse but rather points to what Rob Nixon calls “slow violence,” namely

a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all. Violence is customarily conceived as an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and as erupting into instant sensational visibility. . . . [W]e also need to engage the representational, narrative, and strategic challenges posed by the relative invisibility of slow violence. (2)

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The poor and the vulnerable, such as the Dene, fall victim to “slow violence” and, importantly, recognize that fact. Their perspective extends beyond “instant sensational visibility,” which is probably what made Sacco interrupt Andrew in the opening chapter, and also embraces the timespan over which “slow violence” extends, as some of the changes may only be observed on such a plane. The Dene People acknowledge and oppose both “reckless corporate short-termism” (Nixon 22) and long-term “unnoticeable” environmental degradation, e.g., the fact that the local mine has “produced 237,000 tons” of the highly toxic arsenic trioxide dust which is literally hidden deep inside the mine (Sacco, *Paying the Land* 247–48). The “circular” plane also implies a constant, unending, sense of responsibility for the land, which is something that may not be found in the linear perspective, as the latter tends to (dis)place that burden onto future generations.

In the closing chapter, Andrew once again addresses Sacco, and through him, the reader/viewer. He asserts that “Indigenous people should not await validation from the non-aboriginal world” and baffles the comics journalist with the claim that the Dene “have something to go back to” (254). “Go back?,” Sacco (255) asks in disbelief, as this statement challenges his forward-looking narrative of the impending end. For the Dene People, “going back” means both literally going back to the old ways of living, with one young member of the tribe, Eugene Boulanger, describing how spending time in his ancestral hunting grounds made him see himself “in the continuum of [his] ancestry” (258), and asserting that the “circle” is complete by “being responsible enough to provide this experience for those ones who aren’t here yet” (258).

Paying the Land operates on both temporal planes, the linear and the circular, pointing to what Farrier calls “the Anthropocenic moment” (128)—a moment in which one realizes the “rift” between the actual and the imagined outcome—in this case, the “rift” between the “end” and the possibility and the dream of the “after.” The function of “the Anthropocenic moment,” Farrier further observes, is to force one into the position of responsibility: “[I]n focusing attention back on us, it asks the question, what will you do?” (128). Sacco seems to direct this question at both the reader/viewer and himself. It is as if he is working against himself as the narrator and the character; indeed, the comics journalist regularly positions himself in his graphic narratives in a self-reflective and contradictory place (Dong 39–53). He seems to recognize the fact that “[c]omics grammar exhibits the legibility of double narration—and stages disjunctions between presence and absence and between word and image—in order to pressure linearity, causality, and sequence” (Chute 206). Torn between his roles as Sacco-the-narrator and Sacco-the-character, Sacco-the-Westerner and Sacco-the-critic of Western modernity and progress, he builds a story that combines contradictory linear and circular planes. The pages are not organized in a grid-like sequential manner: Sacco employs sequences of panels, of different sizes and shapes, drawings without frames and full-page images interchangeably, saturating his work with visual details. The reader/viewer cannot decide on or fall into a steady rhythm of reading (as is the case with consistent grid-based layouts made of panels of the same size) and has to navigate their way through the graphic narrative, looking for closure and at the same time accepting the gaps, inconsistencies and conflicting temporalities. In and of itself, the medium of comics self-consciously draws the reader/viewer’s attention to time, i.e. the time that is required to read a single page and the time coded in the spatial arrangement of panels and gutters. Indeed, “Sacco’s investment in slowing readers down and asking them to grapple with producing meaning is a deliberate technique,” Chute writes, “positioned both against the global news media’s propensity to offer quickly consumed visual spectacles and against the restless acceleration of information” (202). Forced to position themselves in-between the linear and the circular plane, the reader/viewer is also constantly reminded of complex approaches to temporality in the Anthropocene in and through the process of reading.

APOCALYPSE NOW?

Scott Snyder and Paquette’s contemporary rendition of *Swamp Thing: Protector of the Green*, arguably the most commercial text of the three analyzed graphic narratives, may be read in terms of extending and

commenting on the questions raised in *Paying the Land*. While the perspective of the Indigenous people gives way to a medley of science-fiction and superhero fiction, *Swamp Thing*—the history of which dates back to the 1970s—is not only a narrative of the environmental apocalypse but also a story of ecological reconciliation and regeneration extending beyond the human/nature divide.

In contrast to the more reflective perspective presented in Sacco's work, *Swamp Thing* is a popular narrative guided by superhero conventions which by definition relies on the "instant sensational visibility" criticized by Nixon (2). The narrative of the environmental apocalypse is thus perceived as integral to the genre, imbuing it with action and suspense. As Erik Swyngedouw points out, in the context of the ongoing environment crisis, such narratives are considered even more entertaining, because "sustaining and nurturing apocalyptic imaginaries is an integral and vital part of the new cultural politics of capitalism. . . . At the symbolic level, apocalyptic imaginaries are extraordinarily powerful in disavowing or displacing social conflict and antagonisms" (219). In other words, environmental apocalyptic narratives are so appealing because they replace actual politics (responsibility held by national governments, international organizations and individuals in the affluent West) with a call to action that functions at the basic archetypal level of a battle between good and evil, superheroes and villains. Furthermore, as Swyngedouw explains, this "environmentally apocalyptic future" tends to be "forever postponed," looming over the world as constant threat which "neither promises redemption nor does it possess a name; it is pure negativity" (219). In *Swamp Thing's* universe, the apocalypse is indeed "forever postponed," insofar as social and political mechanism described by Swyngedouw is combined with the formal limitations of comics as a serial (not to be confused with sequential) product: new narratives must be constantly produced and consumed.

Specifically, in *Swamp Thing*, the reader/viewer enters into a world where three forces—the green (the force of plant life), the red (the force of animal life), and the rot (the force of death)—are managed and kept in check by their respective avatars. In Snyder and Paquette's story, the balance among the three forces is disrupted, as Dr. Alec Holland, the person chosen to take on the role of "the protector of the green," the titular *Swamp Thing*, abandons his mission. The apocalypse narrative, envisioned as the ultimate fight between the forces of good and evil, begins when the powerful avatar of the rot, a flesh-eating monster, is awakened and unleashed from the depths of the Earth. The force that is threatening the environment is, in keeping with Swyngedouw's remarks, depoliticized, not to say apolitical, and functions only as "pure negativity" (219). It is not a man-made threat, and neither is it conceived

in terms of the consequences of man's actions. Instead, as Swamp Thing explains, the rot "makes his home in the world's most barren places, places where the green is weak" (Snyder and Paquette n.pag.) and functions as a conceptual antithesis of the green. Swyngedouw explains that such populist, or in the context of this graphic narrative, popular visions emphasize the threat and downplay the responsibility for it, insofar as "[w]e are all potential victims. 'THE' Environment and 'THE' People, Humanity as a whole in a material and philosophical manner, are invoked and called into being. . . . However, the 'people' here are not constituted as heterogeneous political subjects, but as universal victims, suffering from processes beyond their control" (221).

Human, though still depoliticized, agency is only invoked in the figure of the saviour, when Dr. Alec Holland eventually accepts his mission, morphing into a human-plant hybrid. In a process of environmental transformation, the human ("the flesh," "the red") bonds with the green; eventually "the body beneath dies" but the consciousness is "given over to the green in full, never to uproot or walk again" (Snyder and Paquette n.pag.). It is as much a physical (material) as mental experience, with Alec feeling "the carbon dioxide from [his] lungs being taken in, like a second breathing in [his] own body" (n.pag.). Reluctant at first, "[t]he Swamp Thing comes to realize that he incorporates both the human and the green within a sacred whole; he embodies the trans-corporeal intra-action of all life" (Klassen 173). While the rot is only death, Swamp Thing seems to embody the cycle of matter: the human flesh will eventually die and nurture the green, giving rise to new life. "It's like living in a haunted body," the creature observes, "I'm still me, still Alec, but I feel what it feels too" (Snyder and Paquette n.pag.). Apart from posthumanist interpretations, according to which the creature "dissolves the very categories of 'normal,' 'natural,' and 'human'" (Klassen 173), Swamp Thing embodies a world that does not end in apocalypse, but in ecological reconciliation and regeneration, as the human and the natural become one. Human temporal perspective shifts as a result. Instead of thinking in terms of one or two generations, Dr. Alec Holland opens himself up to the possibility of "deep time." "Even my thoughts are divided," Swamp Thing explains, "I have my life, my memories, and I have the memories and history of the green" (Snyder and Paquette n.pag.). While such a realization is not in itself a solution to the environmental crisis, it is a vital alternative, insofar as the negative "end" is replaced with a hopeful sense of "the after." And, especially considering the sensationalist aspects of the apocalyptic temporality to which I return below, the latter presents itself as a more responsible response.

The sensationalist drive towards the apocalypse that lies at the heart of what is essentially an action-driven graphic narrative means that the story

must end with a battle between good and evil, between environmental degradation and reconciliation. In a dramatic twist, Alec-turned-Swamp Thing appears to lose to the rot, while the green mourns. The story teeters on the brink of an apocalyptic ending, the triumph of death and destruction, only to be continued when the Swamp Thing is reborn after five years. Both his human flesh and his green exterior are regenerated by trees endowed with a form of consciousness, who help him realize that environmental regeneration takes time. In contrast to Nixon's discourse of "slow violence" developed in Sacco's *Paying the Land*, the sensationalist, fast-paced, narrative of *Swamp Thing* engages with what Chakrabarty refers to as the (political) paradox of inhabiting "two presents":

Anthropocene time puts pressure on another question: What does it mean to dwell, to be political, to pursue justice when we live out the everyday with the awareness that what seems "slow" in human and world-historical terms may indeed be "instantaneous" on the scale of Earth history, that living in the Anthropocene means inhabiting these two presents at the same time? (30)

Swamp Thing, as a narrative, seems to "inhabit two presents at the same time." On the one hand, the reader/viewer is presented with an exciting, colourful, suspense-driven story of the impending environmental apocalypse. A classic grid-like structure of frames and gutters gives way to more organic and irregular panel division and numerous splashes (full-page images) and bleeds (images which extend over two or more pages), which grab the reader/viewer's attention (Petersen 150–55) and at the same time propel the story. Bleeds, in particular, "are, by their nature, violent. The image's domination of the page is striking and demands the reader's complete attention" (Earle 49). *Swamp Thing* thus capitalizes on the fast pace with which the environmental apocalypse approaches, exploiting this theme for the sake of "action," but it also points to the "instantaneous" aspect of the ongoing changes, even if they might appear to be "slow" for humans. Coded in the very character of the human/nature hybrid is a perspective of "deep time," not only as regards the lifespan of greenery but also as regards environmental regeneration.

FROM NOTHING TO NOTHING

The contradictory temporal perspectives explored in Sacco's *Paying the Land* and Snyder and Paquette's *Swamp Thing* are further investigated and challenged by Robert McGuire in *Here*. *Here* builds on and deconstructs

the narrative of progress, or the concept of narrative as such, demonstrating how a specific location has and will be transformed from 3,000,500,000 BCE to 22,175 CE, offering the reader/viewer a non-chronological “deep-time” perspective on environmental changes. *Here* demonstrates how limited human temporality is, much in keeping with Jan Zalasiewicz’s⁴ distinction between human-centred and planet-centred thinking (29–30), on which Chakrabarty also comments, explaining that we are, naturally, predisposed to think in terms of “human time” rather than “geological time” (9–11). Still, Chakrabarty continues, considering how unimaginable the latter is in the context of the horizon within which most humans operate, “geological time” is also tinged with human bias, because “[b]oth geological time and historical time are expressive of human categories, but they are tinged with different kinds of affect. It is, of course, only within the sense of time that informs world history that we can speak of hope or despair” (12).

Respectively, the concept of “an” (as in one in many in geological history), as opposed to “the” (as in the one and final), apocalypse, an end, or “loss,” are rendered both central and peripheral in *Here*. On the one hand, even in the act of challenging it, *Here* does present the reader/viewer with a narrative, a comics sequence, with a beginning and an end,⁵ out of which “time,” associated with either “hope or despair,” may arise. On the other hand, in its temporal scope, it actively engages with a “deep-time” perspective (in an ironic gesture, McGuire draws a scene in which a person living in 1986 is wearing a T-shirt which reads “Future transitional fossil”), demonstrating that the trajectory of geological time involves a movement from “nothing” to “nothing”:

Yet if we pan out from such spatiotemporally specific instances of extinction to assume the “deep-time” perspective often invoked in discussions of the so-called Anthropocene, it could appear that loss is the name of the game. To go back to very deepest notions of time, if current cosmological models are accepted as roughly accurate, what we know of, what we see as, this particular universe appears to start from nothing and could quite possibly end as nothing. (Jones, Rigby and Williams 391)

⁴ Jan Zalasiewicz is Professor of Palaeobiology and chair of the Anthropocene Working Group. He has published widely on the concept of the Anthropocene in geology and commented on how “the Anthropocene,” as a concept, functions in the humanities.

⁵ It should be emphasized that it is true for the book format of *Here*, which is the dominant format in the English-speaking countries. In Poland, *Here* was published in the form of 154 unbound cards which the reader/viewer may arrange freely, be it in a chronological or non-chronological order, which further challenges the notions of narrativity and causality.

Here essentially depicts a movement from “nothing” to “nothing,” albeit in a manner that tames it for the reader/viewer. Comprising approximately 150 double-page images (the pages are not numbered) which interconnect and overlap, it begins and ends with the same image of a room in 2014. Space and time are thus domesticated and sympathetic to the human scale, and *Anthropos* appears to frame the story, insofar as “to acknowledge the word *home* is to turn to spatial, temporal, and material scales that are distinguished from deep-time or primordial sources” (Jones, Rigby and Williams 392). This domestic human perspective, however, is quickly challenged as the reader/viewer enters deeper into the story.

With every turn of the page, new temporal shifts take place. At first, they are relatively small, insofar as they embrace the human lifespan: the reader/viewer moves from 2014 to 1957, then 1942, 2007, and then back to 1957. Nothing much changes except the decor in the room. Then, over three consecutive pages, the temporal shifts extend, as one travels from 1757 to 1623, back to the 1950s, and then to 8,000 BC, and to 1,009 BC. Concurrently, apart from the dominant temporal frame, minor “time portals” open in the form of smaller frames dispersed over the double-page. Such a structure, one which involves major temporal shifts and minor cross-temporal insights, is in itself a commentary on the differences in the perception of time.⁶ “Time portals” also further complicate a non-chronological narrative by opening passages to other moments in time, demonstrating how brief human presence appears to be against the background of “deep time.”

That is not to say, however, that it is inconsequential. The dominant image of a living room, which is originally read in terms of the safe and the domestic, transforms to signify “human presence,” which is, as “human time” progresses, more and more threatening and damaging. Over the course of three double-page images, the reader/viewer witnesses the changes which have taken place in the natural landscape over 300 years. Vast virgin forests fill the pages which show the world in 1573 and 1637; yet, this vision is interrupted by, respectively, two smaller “time portals” placed next to one another on the facing pages. The panel on the right-hand side shows the beginnings of deforestation in 1763 (and the displacement of the Indigenous people) and the panel on the left-hand side shows the living room in 1989, with the forest completely gone (fig. 1).

⁶ Paradoxically, double pages in general suggest a slower pace of reading than the classic grid structure. Instead of moving from one scene to the next quickly, one lingers on the page.

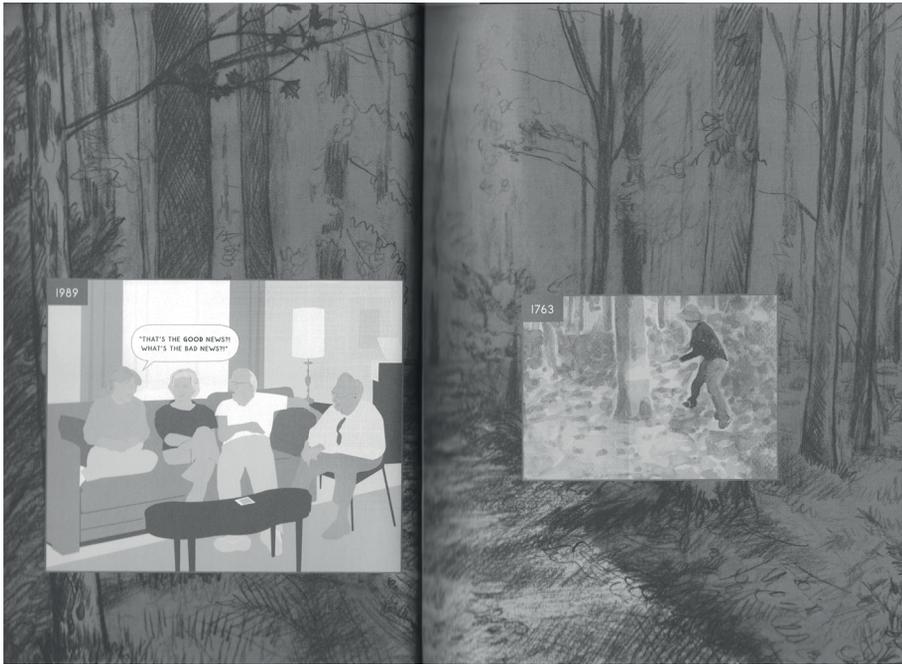


Fig. 1. Double-page from Richard McGuire's *Here* (2014). The beginnings of deforestation. *HERE*. Copyright © 2014, Richard McGuire, used by permission of The Wylie Agency (UK) Limited.

The reader/viewer actually learns (more than 50 pages) later that the forest had been wiped away by 1906, as the double-page image shows a row of houses in its place, with the “time-transgressive human-altered” archaeosphere (Zalasiewicz 35) extending everywhere. The layering of different temporal perspectives on the same and across multiple pages, yet always in the same place, creates “a cross-temporal intimacy,” which is crucial because “through space, we can elucidate the binds of capitalism, colonialism, and neoliberalism so central to progressive time” (Sobelle 212). Over the next pages, the reader/viewer once again jumps in time, from the 1770s to the 1980s, back to the original “nothing” (an undefined space filled with clouds) in 3,000,500,000 BCE, and then to two future apocalypses, one around 2111, when humanity disappears from the picture and a vast ocean covers the Earth, and one in 2313, when humans reappear only to be faced with a (man-made?) bio- and radioactive catastrophe which forces them to walk in protective suits on what has now turned into a barren desert (fig. 2).

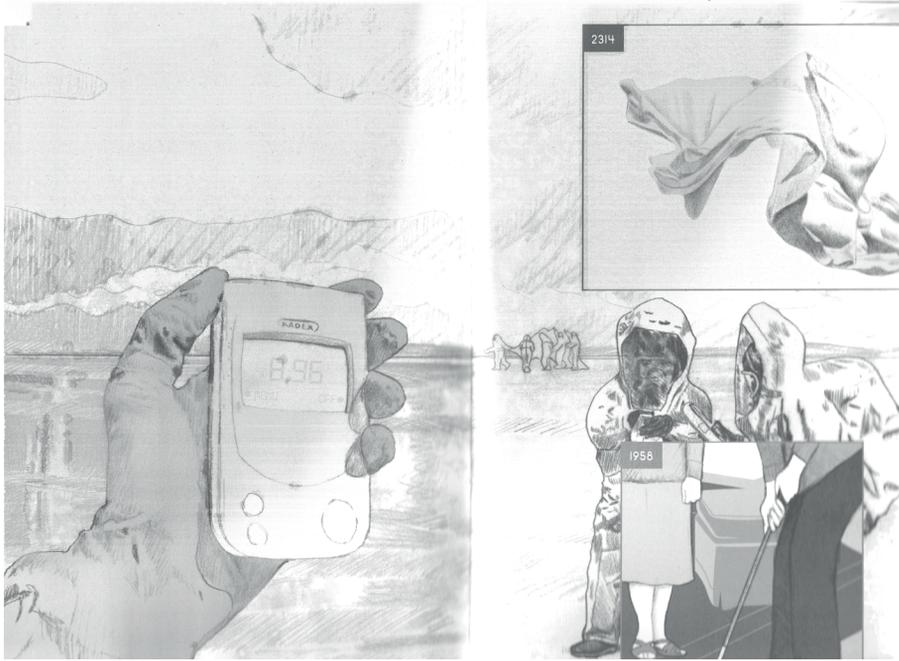


Fig. 2. Double-page from Richard McGuire's *Here* (2014). Bio- and radioactive catastrophe. HERE. Copyright © 2014, Richard McGuire, used by permission of The Wylie Agency (UK) Limited.

While it is at this point that the narrative ends for humans, which is an apocalyptic narrative and temporal development that *Paying the Land* and *Swamp Thing* envisioned but never realized, “the after” is still viable for the Earth. In 22,175, *Here*'s chronological end point, nature is reborn and new more-than-human lifeforms appear. Is this a warning for humans and/or a “happy ending” for the environment which is finally liberated? It is for the reader/viewer, the co-creator of the story, to decide. Still, while the final geological “nothing” is not shown, the pressure of “deep time” coded in *Here*, combined with a human yearning for (comics) closure, point to it.

CONCLUSION

In navigating their ways through the stories and temporalities of “the end,” “the after” and “the *longue durée*,” Joe Sacco's *Paying the Land*, Scott Snyder and Yanick Paquette's *Swamp Thing* and Richard McGuire's *Here* acknowledge the apocalypse but also present scenarios in which human and more-than-human life continues. As such, they engage with both the more contemporary understanding of the apocalypse as “a catastrophe

of overwhelming proportions and dystopian consequences that leads to the end of the world as we know it” and the more traditional definition according to which “‘apocalypse’ is essentially about a ‘revelation’ of a sense-making utopian teleology” (De Cristofaro 3). The environmental apocalypse envisioned in the three analyzed comics is thus transformed into a story of regeneration and/or warning.

Still, as products of Western, American culture, in equal measure responding to, and resulting from, the Anthropocene, these texts make the reader/viewer reflect on time, temporality, and the future as narratives. Looking at the three texts reversedly, *Here*, one of the most thoughtful representations and meditations on time, makes us realize that, as Timothy Clark observes, “[v]iewed on very long time scales, human history and culture can take on unfamiliar shapes, as work in environmental history repeatedly demonstrates” (54). Addressing the “deep time” perspective, or the movement from “nothing to nothing,” *Here* self-consciously points to its own futility as a narrative. Nature, not narrative, will ultimately survive, the comic seems to suggest. This, in turn, makes one approach the highly commercial *Swamp Thing* with ironic distance. While all of us want to see good triumph over evil and witness the victory of the more-than-human hybrid of the human and the natural over death, the repercussions of falling for such an apocalyptic scenario, as explained by Swyngedouw, are potentially catastrophic. Still, the possibility of human and environmental reconciliation and regeneration coded in *Swamp Thing*, which opens up the “deep time” perspective, may be instrumental in realizing the difference between the pace of the ongoing environmental degradation for humans and for the planet, insofar as what is slow in human terms becomes instantaneous for ecosystems. These competing perspective of “slow” and “fast” are also explored in *Paying the Land*. In stark contrast to *Swamp Thing*, Sacco explores how the Dene fall victim to “slow violence” (Nixon 2), actively structuring his comic in such a way as to make the reader/viewer realize the conflicting temporalities in/of the Anthropocene.

Ultimately, while all three texts differ in their visions of time and degree of complexity (after all, they are also conditioned by genre, insofar as comics journalism and superhero comics work with different comics traditions), what unites them is that they make the reader/viewer reflect on their role in the narrative and, by extension, in real life, asking whether environmentally destructive culture can change. To quote Clark, these texts ask whether “human capacity for engagement” may extend “beyond certain scales in time and space” (182). As much as the reader/viewer looks for closure, a moral, an unequivocal and optimistic “yes,” the answer may be a form of an Anthropocenic cul-de-sac because the discussed narratives and their temporalities are only human.

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John Michael Greer

Winter's Tales*

1. CHRISTMAS EVE 2050

Jane tucked the pie into the oven, wound the timer, and found herself blinking back tears. It was going to be a good Christmas this year, for the first time in too long. For once they'd been able to get a Christmas ham, and though they'd had to hoard ration coupons all year to do it, she didn't regret all those dinners of squash and beans from the garden out back. There were presents for the children, candles for the table, more than enough food for everybody: just like old times.

It wasn't just Christmas, either: life was good, better than it had been since the years before the war. She and Joe had good jobs at the metal recycling plant down the street; she did bookkeeping, and he'd just been promoted to shift foreman. Nothing the plant used was likely to hubbert any time soon, too, so their jobs would be around for a while. Inflation was low enough you hardly noticed it, not much more than thirty per cent a year since the latest currency reform. Food still cost too much, but you could count on getting it, and electricity was cheaper now that the new solar plant was online most of the time.

"Honey?" Joe's voice, calling from the living room. "Everybody's ready."

"I'm on my way." She took off the oven mitts and went out of the kitchen to where Joe and the children were waiting.

Memories from Jane's childhood jarred against the cramped little living room, the one bare light bulb hanging from the middle of the ceiling, the radio playing tinny holiday music in one corner. Back then, Christmas meant snow, colored lights, the balsam scent of a Christmas tree, crowds of relatives from all over, TV and internet entertainment blaring in the background. All of that was long gone, of course. Snow hadn't fallen since the big methane spike in '24 sent the climate reeling. Electricity cost too much to waste, and nobody cut down trees these days, though it wasn't

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a labor camp offense any more, the way it was when fuel ran short during the war. Traveling across country was for soldiers, prisoners, government officials, and the very rich; TVs were too expensive for most people, and the government and the army hoarded what was left of the internet after e-warfare and electricity shortages got through with it. Still, there were cards and decorations on the Christmas shelf, and stockings to hang beneath.

They always opened one special present each on Christmas eve, but stockings had to go up first, and that brought a sad moment. She and Joe hung theirs, then stepped aside for Joe Jr. He had three stockings in his hands: one for himself and two for the children they'd lost. With all the solemnity a twelve-year-old could muster, he put the stockings on their hooks: one for him; one for Cathy, who died age three from drug-resistant pneumonia; one for Brett, who died age seven when the hemorrhagic fever came through in '45. Then he stepped aside, too, and turned to look at the fourth person there.

Molly wasn't Jane's daughter, though it was hard for both of them to remember that sometimes. She was the child of their friends Bill and Erica. Bill was a derivatives salesman who got caught cooking his books in the crash of '41, went to labor camp, and died there. A very pregnant Erica moved in with Jane and Joe, gave birth to Molly, and lived with them until the same epidemic that killed Brett took her too. So Molly had three stockings of her own to hang. She was small for her eight years, and had to stretch to get the stockings on their hooks.

Once all the stockings were in place, Joe crossed the room to his armchair, sat down with a grin, and took four small packages from under the end table with the air of a magician pulling a rabbit out of a hat. Each one was wrapped in a bright scrap of cloth. Jane recalled wrapping paper from her own childhood, used once and thrown away, and wondered why anyone even in those days put up with such waste. Didn't people have better things to do with all the money they used to have? Jane was more sensible; once the family's presents were unwrapped, the cloth wrappings went back to the quilt drawer where they came from.

Joe Jr. got his present unwrapped first. "Sweet," he said in awed tones. "Look at it." The slide rule sparkled as numbers slid smoothly past one another. He had a gift for math, so his teachers said, and he'd won a cheap slide rule in a contest when the government launched a Sustainability Initiative two years back. The government was always launching Sustainability Initiatives, but this one actually made some sense: pocket calculators cost close to a month's wages these days, and word on the street was that some of the minerals needed for the chips were about to hubbert, so Jane and Joe worked extra hours to afford a professional

model. Joe Jr. would need tech skills and an exempt job to stay out of the army; even with the war over, going into the army meant coming home maimed or dead too often to take any chances.

The wrappings of Molly's present came open a moment later to reveal two books with bright flimsy covers. Jane caught the flicker of disappointment before the child put on a bright smile. Molly hadn't tested high enough to get into charter school, and since the war, that meant no school at all unless she could get her scores up next year. She was bright enough, and good at math, but reading was a challenge. One of the old women who kept themselves fed tending and teaching the local children guessed that Molly had dyslexia, but what exactly that meant and what could be done about it, Jane had never been able to learn. She gave Molly a hug, hoping she would understand.

She and Joe opened their presents, knowing that each contained something they already owned—one of Joe's ties and a pair of Jane's earrings, wrapped up late at night so the children wouldn't know. After the slide rule, Molly's books, and the ham, there wasn't money for more luxuries. The rest of the presents, the ones that would wait for morning, were clothes and other necessities. They always were; it would take much better times to change that.

A chime from the kitchen caught everyone's attention. "That's the pie," she said. "First one in to help set the table gets an extra slice." The slice was for Molly, of course, though Joe Jr. made a game of it, racing her into the kitchen and losing on purpose. Jane and Joe followed at a less hectic pace. The four of them had the table set in minutes: ham and applesauce, sweet potatoes, cabbage, mashed carrots, a plate of homemade Christmas candies, and the squash pie steaming over on the counter: more food in one place than Jane ever thought she'd see again during the worst part of the war, enough for everyone to get gloriously overfull for a change. The plates and silver were Bill and Erica's, real 20th-century stuff.

They mumbled their way through grace, an old habit not yet quite put away. Jane and Joe had belonged to one of the Christian churches years back, but drifted away around the time the last traces of religion got shouldered aside in favor of political propaganda for one of the prewar parties, she didn't remember which. These days, you saw a lot of churches lying empty or converted to something else. Most of the really religious people Jane knew belonged to some other faith, Buddhist, Gaian, Seven Powers, or what have you. She'd thought more than once recently about visiting the Gaian church up the street. The Gaians took care of their own, and that appealed to her a good deal.

She loaded her plate with food, glanced at the window. Warm December rain spattered against it, blurred the windows of the apartment building

across the street into vague yellow rectangles and turned the unlit street into pure darkness. Joe Jr. chattered about the slide rule and his hopes of getting an apprenticeship with an engineer someday. Jane glanced across the table at Molly, then, and saw past the taut smile to the too familiar look of disappointment in her eyes.

Somehow that was the thing that brought the memories surging back up: memories of Christmases from Jane's childhood, when her family lived in a sprawling suburban house with its own big yard and the world still seemed to work. She remembered snowmen in the yard and sled tracks down the street; the big Christmas tree in the corner of a living room bigger than their apartment was now, sparkling with lights and decorations; dinners where even the leftovers made a bigger meal than anyone could eat; driving—in a car, like rich people!—to a bright sprawling space called a shopping mall, where anything you could think of could be bought for money you didn't even have yet; gifts that didn't have to have any use in the world except the delight they brought to some child's eyes; all the extravagant graces of a world that didn't exist anymore.

Tears welled up again, but they were tears of anger. *Why, goddammit?* She flung the question at the memories, the bright clean well-fed faces of her childhood. *Why did you have to waste so much and leave so little?*

Joe saw the tears, but misread them. "Beautiful, isn't it? Just like old times."

She kept her smile in place with an effort. "Yes. Yes, of course."

2. SOLSTICE 2100

Bits of windblown rubbish clattered down the street as Molly reached for the doorlatch. She'd been at church most of the day helping get everything ready for the solstice ritual, and had come home now only because the boy would be back from school soon and would need some getting ready himself. For that matter, she had a few preparations of her own to make, and one more than anything else. She opened the door, closed it quick behind her to keep dust out.

Once inside she took off coat and dust scarf, shook out hair the color of old iron, brushed dust off her hands: no water to spare for washing them, not since autumn rains failed this year. Still, the little two-room shack was as clean as dry rags and a meticulous eye could make it. The few furnishings she had—table and two chairs, cooking stove, cupboard, washboard and washtub—glinted in the vague light from the four small windows; not a spot of rust on any of them, and not because the blacksmith who made them used some fancy metal, either. Good plain salvaged iron kept if you

took care of it, and it didn't put a burden on Earth Mother or stray into the extravagance that got Old Time people in so much trouble with Her.

Knowing the boy would be home soon, she went into the bedroom right away, stepped past the two iron bedsteads to the room's far end and unlocked one of the trunks there. Homespun was good enough for everyday but holidays called for better. She considered, chose a dress the color of Earth Mother's own good green, set it on her bed. That would do. A small box inside the trunk gave up a pair of earrings with bright stones—her mother's, worn only on special days these twenty years now. Then, from the bottom of the trunk, she pulled a package wrapped in coarse brown cloth. Her hands shook a bit as she set it on the bed next to the dress.

A few minutes later, dressed for holiday, she came out of the bedroom and put the package on the table. Clatter of the latch told her she was just in time. The door flew open, letting in a cloud of dust and a boy, brown-haired and barefoot, in clothes that had seen many better days.

"Earth's sake, Joe, shut the door!" she chided. "You'll let all the dust off the street in with you."

"Yes'm." Abashed, the boy pulled the door shut, submitted to a thorough dusting with the cleanest of the rags. "There," Molly said. "How was school today?"

That got her a sullen look. "I don't want to go any more."

She said nothing, pursed her lips. "I don't," the boy repeated. Then, in a rush of words: "Pacho doesn't have to go to school any more. He works for his brother the savager."

"Salvager," she corrected.

"Everybody says it 'savager.'"

"You can say it however you want with your friends, but at home we speak good English."

Joe gave her an angry look. "*Sal*-vager. That's what his brother does, stripping metal in the towers, and Pacho helps him. He says his mom's happy 'cause he's bringing money home."

"Because."

Another look, angry and ashamed at the same time. "Because he's bringing money home. I bet I could make as much as he does, 'stead—" He caught himself, glared at her. "Instead of sitting in old man Wu's house and learning stuff that doesn't matter any more anyway."

So, Molly thought, it's come to this already. "It matters more now than it used to, back in Old Time. You look at Pacho now, and you think he's got a trade, he makes money, and that's the end of it. But all he'll ever be is a salvager. You deserve better."

He said nothing, met her gaze with a hard flat look. That angered her more than anything he could have said. "You think school doesn't matter,"

she snapped. “You don’t know how many times I cried because I didn’t get to go to school, or how many times I did without because the jobs I could get without schooling paid barely enough to live on. And I promised your mother—” She hadn’t meant to bring up Linny, now of all times, but no point in trying to unsay it. “I promised your mother you’d get an education and I’m not going to break that promise.”

Joe looked away, his face reddening, and Molly berated herself inwardly for mentioning his parents. That had to sting, though Earth Mother knew there were plenty of families in the same case these days, young and old with no blood relation living together under one roof after plague and famine and two civil wars finished with the people they called family beforehand. At least she’d known Jeff and Linny back when Joe was born, had changed his diapers and fed him goat milk from a bottle often enough to feel like some sort of family.

Only one way to mend things, she decided. She’d meant to wait until after church, but that couldn’t be helped. She went to the table. “Come over here. I want to show you something.”

He came after a moment, still looking away, trying to hide the wetness on his cheeks. Molly unwrapped the package, revealing an old book and a long thin shape in a case of cracked black plastic. “What’s that?” Joe asked.

“Take a look.”

He picked the case up, gave her a wary glance, opened it. The slide rule caught the light as he took it out, numbers still readable on the yellowing plastic. “Hoo! Where’d you savage this?”

She let it pass. “I didn’t. That belonged to my brother Joe. When he died in the war, the army tried to send his things to my mother. We were in the refugee camp by then, but one of the families who stayed behind in our neighborhood kept the package for us until the fighting was over and we came back. And this—” She pointed to the book. “This was just about the only thing that didn’t get looted from our apartment. It’s one of Joe’s schoolbooks, and it teaches how to use a slide rule like this one. You need to stay in school so you can learn to read it.”

“I can read better than anybody in my class.”

“You can’t read this.” Meeting his angry look calmly: “Try it.”

That was a gamble—she couldn’t read more than a few words out of the boy’s schoolbooks, for that matter—but as he flipped through the pages and his shoulders hunched further and further up, she knew she’d won it. “Tom Wu says you’re a better reader than anyone in your class, too. That’s why it’s important for you to stay in school, so you can learn to read this and books like it. Do you know what my brother was going to do with his slide rule? He wanted to be an engineer, before they drafted him. He wanted to make solar engines.”

"Like the old rusty ones by the mill?"

"Yes. Nobody knows how to build them any more, or even how to make the old ones work. Maybe you could figure that out. People would be glad to get electricity again, you know."

She watched his face, waited for the right moment, as dreams collided somewhere back behind his eyes, Joe-the-salvager against Joe-the-engine-maker, Joe-the-bringer-of-electricity. "That's why," she said, "I decided to give these to you." That got a sudden look, wide-eyed, no trace of the sullen anger left. "But," Molly went on, holding up one finger, "only if you promise me you'll stay in school. They would be wasted on a salvager. They should go to someone who'll learn how to do something with them."

Joe opened his mouth, closed it, swallowed. "Okay," he forced out.

"You promise you'll stay in school? All the way through?"

"I promise."

Molly allowed a smile, indicated the book. "Then they're yours. You can keep them in your trunk until you know what to do with them." He picked up the book and the wrapping cloth, gave her an uncertain look, as though half expecting her to take them back. "While you're putting them there," she said then, "you should get something nicer to wear, too, and quickly. We shouldn't be late for church, especially not on solstice day."

"Yes'm." He started toward the bedroom, stopped halfway there. "Didn't people use to give each other presents on solstice day?"

Memories jabbed at Molly: the apartment she'd grown up in, full of soft furniture and the glow of electric light, scent of a big holiday dinner wafting from the kitchen, new clothes every year and Christmas stockings with real candy in them, and the look on her brother's face when he got the slide rule that Christmas when she was eight. People had so much back then! "Yes," she told the boy. "Yes, we did."

His face grew troubled. "But wasn't that wicked?"

"No." Was it? She pushed the thought away. "There was plenty of wickedness in Old Time, all that extravagance, and next to nobody sparing so much as a thought for Mother Earth that gave them life. But I don't think it was wicked for my mother and father to give Joe a slide rule."

Joe took that in. "Then this'll be my solstice present," he announced, and took it into the bedroom.

3. NAWIDA 2150

"Mes Joe? She kee."

The old man looked up from his book, saw the boy's smiling brown face at the door. "Da Manda Gaia?"

“Ayah, en da gran house. Habby Nawida!” He grinned and scampered off. Joe closed the book and rose slowly to his feet, wincing at the familiar pain, as the habits of half a lifetime picked at the boy’s words. Nawida, that was from old Spanish “Navidad.” Ironic that the name remained, when the faith it came from was no more than a memory now. Half the words in Alengo were like that, tenanted with the ghosts of old meanings like some haunted building in the old ruins.

He got his cane and a bundle wrapped in cloth, looked out the open door to make sure the rain would hold off a little longer. Out past the palms and mango trees, dark clouds billowed against the southern sky. Those promised another round of monsoon within a day or so, but overhead the sky was clear and blue all the way to space. He nodded, left the little thatched house and started down the broad dirt path that passed for the little village’s main street.

Ghosts, he said to himself as a pig trotted across the way, heading off into the rich green of the fields and the jungle beyond them. Alengo itself—that had been “our lingo” back when it was a makeshift pidgin born on the streets of a half-ruined city. Half Spanish, half English, half Mama Gaia knew what, that was the old joke, but the drought years turned it into a language of its own. These days people spoke Alengo all along the coast from Tenisi west to the plains, and only a few old fools like Joe kept English alive so that somebody could still read the old books.

He wondered what old Molly would have thought of that. She’d spent most of his childhood bribing and browbeating him into learning as much as she thought he could, and went to Mama Gaia convinced she hadn’t done enough. He hadn’t expected to step into old Tom Wu’s footsteps as the village schoolteacher, either, but somehow things turned out that way. Ghosts, he said to himself again. It wasn’t just the language that they haunted.

Off to the left a stream that didn’t exist at all in the drought years splashed its way between jagged lumps of concrete and young trees. There stood the grandest and saddest ghost of all, the little brick building they’d raised for the waterwheel-driven generator. What a project that was! Dan the blacksmith, ten years in the Earth now, did all the ironwork just for the fun of it, and a dozen others helped put up the building, craft the waterwheel, and wind the coils. Even the village kids helped, scrounging wire from the old ruins.

They got it working, too, turning out twelve volts DC as steady as you please. That was when reality started whittling away at the dream of bringing back Old Time technology, because they didn’t have a thing they could do with that current. Light bulbs were out of reach—Joe worked out the design for a vacuum pump, but nobody could craft metal to those tolerances any more, never mind trying to find tungsten for filaments or gases for

a fluorescent bulb—and though he got an electric motor built and running after a lot more savaging, everything anyone could think of to do with it could be done just as well or better by skilled hands with simpler tools.

Then someone savaged an Old Time refrigerator with coolant still in the coils. For close on twenty years, that was the generator's job, keeping one battered refrigerator running so that everyone in the village had cold drinks in hot weather and milk that didn't sour. That refrigerator accomplished one thing more, though, before it finally broke down for good—it taught Joe the difference between a single machine and a viable technology. It hurt to admit it, but without an industrial system backed with cheap energy to churn out devices it could run, twelve volts of electricity wasn't worth much.

When the refrigerator rattled its last, then, Joe bartered the copper from the wire—worth plenty in trade by then—for books for the village school. He'd done well by it, too, and brought home two big dictionaries and a matched set of books from Old Time called the Harvard Classics, mostly by authors nobody in the village had ever heard of. His students got plenty of good English prose to wrestle with, and the priestess borrowed and copied out one volume from the set because it was by one of the minor Gaian saints, a man named Darwin, and no one else had ever seen a copy. Still, he'd kept one loop of wire from the generator as a keepsake, and left another on Molly's grave.

A voice broke into this thoughts: "Ey, Mes Joe!" A young man came past him, wearing nothing but the loincloth most men wore these days. Eddie, Joe remembered after a moment, Eddie sunna Sue—hardly anybody used family names any more, just the simple mother-name with a bit of rounded English in front. "Tu needa han?" Eddie said. Before Joe could say anything, he grinned and repeated his words in English: "Do you need any help?"

That got a ghost of a smile. "No, I'm fine. And glad to see you didn't forget everything I taught you. How's Emmie?"

"Doing fine. You know we got a baby on the way? I don't know if you got anything in your books about keeping a mother safe."

"Sharon should have everything I do. Still, I'll take a look." Sharon was the village healer and midwife, and all three of her medical books came by way of Joe's school library, but the reassurance couldn't hurt. Emmie was Eddie's second wife; the first, Maria, died in childbirth. That happened less often than it used to—Sharon knew about germs and sanitation, and used raw alcohol as an antiseptic no matter how people yelped about how it stung—but it still happened.

"Thanks! I be sure they save you a beer." Eddie grinned again and trotted down the street.

Joe followed at his own slower pace. The street went a little further and then widened into a plaza of sorts, with the covered marketplace on one side, the Gaian church on another, and the village hall—the gran house, everyone called it—on a third. Beyond the gran house, the ground tumbled down an uneven slope to the white sand of the beach and the sea reaching south to the horizon. A few crags of concrete rose out of the water here and there, the last traces of neighborhoods that had been just that little bit too low when the seas rose. Every year the waves pounded those a bit lower; they'd be gone soon, like so many of the legacies of Old Time.

Another irony, he thought, that what brought disaster to so many had been the salvation of his village and the six others that huddled in the ruins of the old city. It took the birth of a new sea to break the drought that once had the whole middle of the continent in its grip. Another ghost hovered up there in the great thunder-gray billows to the south—the day the monsoon clouds first came rolling up over the sea and dumped rain on the parched and dusty land. He'd been out in the plaza with everyone else, staring up at the clouds, smelling the almost-forgotten scent of rain on the wind, dancing and whooping as the rain came crashing down at last.

There had been some challenging times after that, of course. The dryland corn they grew in the drought years wouldn't handle so much moisture, and they had to barter for new seed and learn the way rice paddies worked and tropical fruit grew. Too, the monsoons hadn't been so predictable those first few years as they became later: Mama Gaia testing them, the priestess said, making sure they didn't get greedy and stupid the way people were in Old Time. Joe wasn't sure the biosphere had any such thing in mind—by then he'd read enough Old Time books that the simple faith Molly taught him had dissolved into wry uncertainties—but that time, at least, he kept his mouth shut. People in Old Time *had* been greedy and stupid, even the old books admitted that, and if it took religion to keep that from happening again, that's what it took.

He crossed the little plaza, went into the gran house. The solemn part of Nawida was over, the prayers said to Mama Gaia and all the saints, and the bonfire at midnight to mark the kindling of the new year; what remained was feasting and fun. Inside, drums, flutes and fiddles pounded out a dance tune; young women bare to the waist danced and flirted with young men, while their elders sat on the sides of the hall, sipping rice beer and talking; children scampered around underfoot, bare as the day they were born. People waved greetings to Joe as he blinked, looked around the big open room, sighted the one he needed to find.

He crossed the room slowly, circling around the outer edge of the dancing, nodding to the people who greeted him. The one he'd come to meet saw him coming, got to her feet: a young woman, black-haired,

wearing the plain brown robe of the Manda Gaia. Hermandad de Gaia, that had been, and likely still was west along the coast where Alengo gave way to something closer to Old Time Spanish; Fellowship of Gaia was what they said up North where something like English was still spoken. The Manda Gaia was a new thing, at least to the Gaian faith, though Joe knew enough about history to recognize monasticism when he saw it.

"You must be the schoolteacher," the woman said in flawless English, and held out a hand in the Old Time courtesy. "I'm Juli darra Ellen."

"Joe sunna Molly." He took her hand, shook it. "Yes. Thank you for agreeing to come."

"For three years now we've talked of sending someone here to see you, since we first got word, so your letter was very welcome." She motioned him to a seat on the bench along the wall. "Please. You look tired."

He allowed a smile, tried to keep his face from showing the sudden stab of pain as he sat. "A little. Enough that I should probably come straight to the point." He held out the cloth-wrapped bundle. "This is a gift of sorts, for the Manda Gaia."

The cloth opened, revealing a battered book and a narrow black case. She glanced at the spine of the book, then opened the case and pulled out the old slide rule.

"Do you know what it is?" Joe asked her.

"Yes." Carefully, using two fingers, she moved the middle section back and forth. "I've read about them, but I've never seen one. Where did you find it?"

"It's been in my family for around a hundred years." That was true in Alengo, at least, where "mi famli" meant the people you grew up with, and "mi mama" the woman who took care of you in childhood; like everyone else, he'd long since given up using Old Time terms of relationship. "The book explains how it's used. I can't claim to be an expert, but I've done some respectably complex math on it."

"This thing is precious," she said. "I'll take it to our mother house in Denva, have it copied by our craftspeople there, and bring it back to you."

"That won't be necessary. I don't think it'll be possible, either." He met her gaze. "Cancer of the bowels," he said then. "Not the way I would have chosen to go, but there it is. It's been close to three years now, and by the time you get to Denva and back I'll most likely be settling down comfortably in the earth."

"Mama Gaia will take you to Her heart." Seeing his smile: "You don't believe that."

"I think the biosphere has better things to worry about than one old man."

"Well, I won't argue theology."

That got another smile. "Pity." Then: "I have one other thing to ask, though. I hear quite a bit about the Manda Gaia these days. They say you have schools in some places, schools for children. For the last twenty years all my best pupils have gone into the church, and there's nobody here to replace me. I'd like to see someone from your order take over the school when this thing gets the better of me. I wish I could say that's a long way off."

She nodded. "I can send a letter today."

"Thank you. You've made a cynical old man happy, and that's not a small feat." The dance music paused, and in the momentary hush he fancied he could hear another, deeper stillness gathering not far off. He thought about the generator again, and the concrete crags battered by the waves, and wondered how many more relics of Old Time would be sold for scrap or washed away before the world finished coming back into balance.

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“Looking to the Past to Reinvent the Future”: Writing About the Long Descent, Practicing Green Wizardry *A Conversation with John Michael Greer*

CA & ASM: You are not officially an academic, but in our eyes your work on the critique of progress as a religion and on the opportunities and pitfalls of a “de-industrial” descent ranks among the most creative and exciting on the market—by a long shot. One remarkable aspect is that while dismantling the modern idea of progress, you doggedly refuse to slide down the other, twin slope of the modern imaginary—that of catastrophic collapse and apocalypse. You were an early witness to how the neoliberal backlash successfully halted the advent of appropriate technologies in the late 1970s and 1980s, and how the Overton window for a still relatively serene transition to sustainable lifestyles was abruptly shut (Greer, *Green Wizardry*). This seems to have convinced you that “catabolic” decline is the actual path our industrial civilization is going to follow into a de-industrial future as it chronically overshoots the biosphere’s limits (to paraphrase William Catton, one of your intellectual mentors). You have called this the “Long Descent” and published one of your most acclaimed books under that title (Greer, *The Long Descent*). What signs do you identify at present that this descent is clearly underway, and how do you fend off the twin objections that you’re (a) being pessimistic and (b) feeding hopelessness?

JMG: I’d like to start my response by questioning the idea that the myth of apocalypse is in any way separate from the myth of progress. The connection between these two isn’t just a matter of shared heredity, though of course that’s a dimension worth examining; as Philip Lamy pointed out quite some time ago in his book *Millennium Rage*, these and most other visions of the future are “fractured apocalypses,” fragments

of narrative from the Book of Revelations pulled out of context and rearranged to suit the needs of contemporary prophecy. Yet the connection is not limited to this.

The myth of progress only fulfils its social function when it's paired with the myth of apocalypse. Taken together, they carry out a good cop/bad cop routine on our collective imagination of the future, allowing the galaxy of possible futures to be flattened out into a binary choice, in which utopia and oblivion are the only alternatives and the only way to reject one is to embrace the other. More, whatever isn't one must be the other: we haven't plunged into the abyss yet, so we must be progressing, and we have to keep progressing along current lines (and thus funnelling wealth into the same set of pockets) because the only alternative is a plunge into the abyss. It's a convenient weapon in the contemporary politics of technology, where new products vie to be anointed by the corporate media as the next inevitable step in the march of progress, and those who aren't enthusiastic enough about the techno-gimmick du jour are accused of wanting to go back to the caves (the inevitable endpoint of the apocalypse narrative), of standing in the way of progress, or of wanting the apocalypse to happen.

All this is necessary background for my answer to your question. Here in the United States and in some other industrial nations as well, standards of living for most of the population have been tracing out a ragged decline since the 1970s. One measure of this is that in 1972, a family of four living on one working class income in the US could afford a home, a car, three meals a day and all the other necessities of life, and still have some left over for the occasional luxury. In 2022, a family of four living on one working class income in the US is probably living on the street. Outside the bubble-environments of the well-to-do, life in the world's notionally richest country is a squalid mess, marked by deteriorating infrastructure, widespread poverty, intractable social conflicts and pervasive hopelessness that can best be measured by our sky-high rates of drug addiction and suicide. If that doesn't count as decline, I'm not sure what would. Only the pretence that apocalyptic collapse is the only alternative to progress keeps the ongoing scale of our decline from being noticed and discussed by more than a few.

Such perspectives are very often countered by a line of argument that can be summed up as "But we have cell phones!" It's true that a handful of technological innovations have been parlayed over the last few decades into a suite of information technologies that weren't available in 1972. That fact doesn't outweigh the many other things that have declined precipitously since that time. Having a cell phone does not make up for a lack of good jobs at decent pay, affordable housing, public utilities in good condition, adequate nutrition at reasonable prices, or the other

things industrial nations once provided for their citizens and now do not always offer except to the well-to-do. It bears remembering that you can starve to death in a burnt-out basement with a working cell phone clutched in one hand.

As for labels such as “pessimism” and “hopelessness,” those are subject to the same distortions as the terms I’ve just discussed. I’ve been called a pessimist and a purveyor of hopelessness for pointing out that our species is unlikely to get what we may as well call the *Star Trek* future—the stereotyped future vision that fixates on interstellar travel and human colonization of other star systems. It should be obvious that there are many rich, complex, interesting human futures that don’t feature our species metastasizing across the galaxy in oversized metal phalluses, and it should be just as obvious that suggesting that the *Star Trek* future won’t happen does not rule out a vast number of these. That this isn’t obvious—that the only future that counts as “optimistic” and “hopeful” in the eyes of today’s culture is one in which current trends keep going in a mindlessly linear fashion out to infinity—shows the power of the paired myths of progress and apocalypse as instruments of mental limitation: Blake’s “mind-forg’d manacles” given a comprehensive technological upgrade.

CA & ASM: The richness, size, intricacy and architecture of your body of writings taken as a whole—not to speak of the spiritual practices with which you openly accompany them—are so unique and original that trying to encapsulate their objective seems like a Sisyphean task. Nevertheless, the trilogy of books centering around your novel *Retrotopia* offers an entry point that’s as good as any, and probably better than most. (The trilogy is composed of *After Progress*, *Retrotopia*, and *The Retro Future*.) On the back cover of *Retrotopia*—a story about an envoy from the Atlantic Republic of America, basically a de-industrial wasteland hoping to reconstruct itself, visiting the neighbouring Lakeland Republic which has embraced an altogether different, appropriate-tech future—the slogan hits the reader like a lightning bolt: *Forward to the past*. In a very real way, this phrase lends access to the whole of your work as a writer on de-industrial pathways, as a practicing Druid and as an operative mage. (Yes, let’s just put that out there right away. Let’s also emphasize that in your conception, “magic” is not what one popularly associates with the word. More on that in a moment.) Would you agree that one thing that’s central in your work is a specific way of blurring the boundaries between the past and the future, of making what has worked in the past an integral part of what might work again in the future—which fully coheres with the rejection of the modern notion of perpetual progress which we discussed above? Does this mean we can and should travel in

time in both directions, neglecting the difference between the old and the new? How would you convey your conception of time to a reader wishing to be initiated into your philosophical universe?

JMG: Any writer who claims that there's one and only one theme that's central to their work is either a bit of a monomaniac or has been spending too much time reading literary criticism! No, my writing has no single objective, and of course it's also relevant that my views on various subjects have changed considerably from the time of my first publications more than a quarter century ago. My work all relates in one way or another to the relation between past, present and future, granted, but that's true of any writer: all writers inherit language, genre, subject matter and a galaxy of other things from the past, and rework these in the present with an eye toward some conception of the future. Equally, every writer without exception has some sense of what the past has to offer the future, whether that sense expresses itself in the attempted re-enactment of the past by traditionalists, the attempted rejection of the past by the avant-garde, or some less hackneyed response.

I suspect the role of time in my work stands out to many readers nowadays precisely because I dissent from the modern mythology of progress. Most writers nowadays place their work seamlessly into the standard narrative of the grand upward march from the caves to the stars, and that placement doesn't stand out as interesting to most readers precisely because the narrative is so familiar to them. Since I see history as a cyclic rather than a linear process, by contrast, the past is always a resource for the present and the future: I can always ask, "What happened the last time someone tried this?" and get insights that seem useful to me, while the believer in progress is stuck insisting that every turn of events must be wholly unprecedented because the past is irrelevant to the future. That makes my writing startling to those, the majority these days, who have never imagined that the past might be relevant to their lives.

I do want to point out that my Druid spirituality has much less to do with the past than most people seem to think. Druidry is a modern tradition of nature religion; it draws inspiration from the few surviving scraps of data we have concerning the ancient Celtic Druids, but as a living tradition it dates from the early eighteenth century, when small groups of eccentric British intellectuals adopted the old name for themselves and their nascent vision of a spirituality of nature. The Druid organization I headed for twelve years was founded in 1912—a little this side of Celtic antiquity! Modern Druidry might best be seen as one of the indigenous nature religions of modern Anglo-American culture. Yes, I know that the term "indigenous" is taboo in relation to industrial cultures, which is one of the reasons I find it useful here.

CA & ASM: One of your central ideas is that in the future, progress—if that word still has any meaning—will come through widespread “ecotechnic” (in the sense of Patrick Geddes) experimentation and, therefore, through an artisanal and unpredictable process of “muddling toward frugality” (to borrow a phrase from another mentor of yours, Warren Johnson) which will rely very little on massive governmental subsidies and a lot on small-scale, community-level initiatives. (All this is set out in detail in Greer, *The Ecotechnic Future*, as well as *The Wealth of Nature*.) Dissensus and decentralization appear to be the name of the game—yet, you have expressed regret and even a bit of scorn at how movements such as Voluntary Simplicity and Transition Towns have, in your opinion, been swallowed up and rendered ineffective by consumerism and the relentless drive to maximize corporate profits. What do you think will protect future experimentation with appropriate technologies from not succumbing to the same fate? Do you believe that one key element will be their ability to counteract the massive mind manipulation—the “thaumaturgy”—of commercial advertisers and corporate political operatives? How could this be done in practice?

JMG: Here again I have to start by taking issue with the terms of the discussion. “Progress” is a mythic narrative. Doubtless it could be applied to ecotechnics, and indeed it was so applied during the heyday of the appropriate-technology movement of the 1970s—it’s very often forgotten that in those days, passive solar heating and homescale windpower were the last words in cutting-edge progress—but as a mythic narrative it has no fixed content. Anything can be defined as progress, and which content will be given that label at any one time will be determined by complex and contested social processes, without any necessary relation to the fitness of the content. Once you start insisting that progress will only come in this or that way, you’re caught in the myth.

Let’s set the entire language of progress to one side, recast your question, and see if it makes more sense. The near to middle future of the industrial world is taking shape in a complex landscape of competing influences in which the major political, corporate and non-profit power centres (three heads of the same ungainly beast) and the mass media they dominate form one pervasive factor. Another pervasive factor is the downward pressure exerted by resource depletion, environmental disruption and the other unwanted but inescapable products of our civilization’s frankly hare-brained attempt to achieve infinite growth on a finite planet. Those two large-scale factors inevitably influence the environment in which Johnson’s “muddling toward frugality” is taking place.

Johnson’s choice of phrase highlights the crucial point here. We are talking about muddling, not about movements. Voluntary simplicity, the

Transition Town movement, and their varied equivalents are all part of the muddling. I've criticized these at times, and I think the criticisms are justified; in particular, I've done my best to challenge those movements that have claimed that they have the solution to the predicament of industrial society. It is in the nature of a predicament that it has no solutions, only responses.

The decline and fall of industrial civilization has been under way for much of a century now. To judge by past examples, neither we nor our grandchildren's grandchildren will see the end of that process. In that immense movement, dissensus and decentralization have two roles. First, they are useful strategies for those of us who want to weave the patterns of our lives and communities in the context of the Long Descent, on the one hand, and the failings of the power centres of our society on the other. Second, they are inevitabilities in the longer run, precisely because consensus and centralization are only viable when a society has the coherence and the resource base to support them. We no longer have that coherence and we are rapidly losing the resource base, so dissensus and decentralization are increasingly the only options we've got. Taking them up and using them before we are forced to do so by the pressure of circumstances can be another form of useful muddling.

Magic, the art and science of causing change in consciousness in accordance with will, is another form of useful muddling. Positing a grand confrontation between Gandalf and Sauron as your model for the future, however, does not seem especially helpful to me! Even in the novels in question, it was the patient muddling of Frodo and Sam, passing under the radar of the contending powers of the age, that made the difference. In much the same way, I'd like to suggest that simply empowering individuals to muddle through with a little less interference from all sides, the corporate media among them, is the most useful thing a teacher of magic can do just now. Nor is the corporate media as omnipotent as its putative enemies like to insist. To a very real extent, people blame the media and the corporate system for their own compliance, instead of reflecting on why they comply so easily.

CA & ASM: In *The Wealth of Nature*, you write that “[r]elocalized communities must be economically viable or they will soon cease to exist, and while viable local communities will be possible in the future—just as they were in the Middle Ages—the steps that will be necessary to take to make them viable may require some serious rethinking of the habits that now shape our economic lives” (22). Assuming we ward off the malevolent thaumaturgy of the corporate elites, will we need to engage in the “theurgy”—the personal work of changing the way we think and feel—needed to rethink our habits? You seem to indicate as much when, in the

same book, you envisage “a future for Victory Gardens,” which symbolize the appropriate tech toolbox you call “green wizardry” in the book with the same name: organic gardeners, conservationists, solar-power buffs and the like. The allusion to wizards is not fortuitous, since for you, as you reminded us a moment ago, magic is basically “the art and science of causing changes in consciousness in accordance with will” (Greer, *The King in Orange* 4). So according to you, will the future be decided by a duel of one kind of consciousness change against another—of the green wizardry of sustainable practices against the darker magic of planet-denying economic growth? And what are the odds of the former being victorious?

JMG: It sounds from your question as though you think that planet-denying economic growth is possible in more than the very short term. I find that an exceedingly dubious claim. If your car has half a litre of gas in the tank, your destination is a hundred miles away, and there are no gas stations between where you are and that distant goal, does it make sense to say that whether the car will reach the destination will depend on a struggle among the passengers?

It’s a notion as pervasive as it is delusive among today’s intelligentsia to see human beings as the only active factor in an otherwise passive cosmos, and to insist on that basis that the future depends on who gets to tell the cosmos what to do. I suggest that a less hubristic take on the nature of collective change may be useful here. The belief that economic growth is as inevitable as it is beneficent, the central ideology of twentieth-century industrialism, was not the cause of the great petroleum-fueled economic boom of that century—it was one of the effects of that boom. Human beings figured out how to extract fantastic volumes of cheap energy from the planet’s store of fossil carbon, *and therefore* ideologies that celebrated the consequences came into fashion.

The all-time peak of conventional world petroleum production was reached in 2005, and the ordinary inertia of human thought has kept those ideologies in place up to the present. As it becomes obvious that they are no longer functional, we can expect them to be discarded and replaced with other ideologies better suited to an age of declining energy and resource supplies, in exactly the same way that older ideologies suited to relatively stable energy and resource supplies went out of fashion when the exploitation of fossil fuels hit its stride. Such shifts inevitably begin on the cultural fringes—that is, out here where I spend my time—and so it’s possible that my work will turn out to be a small part of that reconfiguring. It’s at least as possible, of course, that the core ideas of the de-industrial future are taking shape in the heads of other fringe intellectuals in Lagos or Montevideo or Mumbai.

CA & ASM: You lend quite a lot of credence to authors such as Oswald Spengler (*The Decline of the West*) and Ioan Couliano (*Eros and Magic in the Renaissance*), who might legitimately be categorized as “Traditionalists” (see e.g., Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*). The constellation of those who revolt against the modern world is rather complex—but once one promotes, as you do, a heightened agnosticism vis-à-vis any hierarchy between the past and the present, and once one argues that many older or even ancient aspects of human life are better suited than newer ones, how does one disentangle oneself from the suspicion that one is harking back to an idealized past made up of oppressive traditions and possibly authoritarian regimes? On the whole, your socioeconomic outlook as it transpires from your books seems pretty progressive, so how do you avoid—how to put it—problematic regressions? Are ecology and druidic spirituality bulwarks of sorts against unpalatable forms of traditionalism, as seems to be the case for instance in your *Mystery Teachings from the Living Earth*? Or do you feel the question should be asked differently, because pitting progressive against regressive reproduces the modern fetishism of progress?

JMG: Traditionalism has become quite the buzzword of late, and it’s been applied as freely and as carelessly as some other buzzwords of recent memory. Yes, I know that Mark Sedgwick and others have labeled Oswald Spengler as a Traditionalist, but that claim strikes me as risible: at best, rooted in an embarrassing failure to grasp the nature of Spengler’s project. Spengler argued that one of the normal stages in the life cycle of a great culture was the replacement of plutocratic oligarchies (disguised as republics) with populist autocracies, and that this was going to happen in the Western world in the next few centuries. He was not saying that this was a good thing, or for that matter that it was a bad thing, but simply saying that this is what happens and we might want to be aware of that. Accusing him of glorifying autocracy is a little like insisting that the weatherman who predicts a coming snowstorm wants you to freeze in the dark.

Regarding Couliano, two comments may be relevant. First, I have yet to see any attempt to describe him as a Traditionalist that isn’t straightforward guilt by association—he can be linked to Mircea Eliade, so he must have caught Trad cooties! Second, the only idea of Couliano’s that I use is his analysis of modern advertising and propaganda as third-rate sorcery. I disagree sharply with the rest of his analysis of magic in *Eros and Magic in the Renaissance*, and in fact I’ve put some elements of that dispute in print. He was a fascinating man but I don’t find his ideas especially useful or relevant.

As for Traditionalism properly so-called—the ideology created and deployed by René Guénon, Julius Evola and their heirs—it derives from the myth of progress in exactly the same way that Satanism derives from sacramental Christianity: it embraces all the preconceptions of its parent belief system but inverts all the moral markers with a Miltonian “Evil, be thou my good.” The believer in progress insists that what is new is better precisely because it’s new, and what is old has been disproven by the mere passage of time. The Traditionalist stands this on its head, insisting with equal heat that what is old is better precisely because it’s old, and every novelty is a degeneration. It’s the self-same vision of linear time moving from one moral extreme to the other, varying only in which end gets which moral tag. What Spengler is saying, by contrast, is that history moves in cyclical patterns of rise and fall, and that labelling any part of those patterns with moralizing labels is an irrelevant self-indulgence, on a par with considering summer virtuous and winter wicked.

Notice, to turn to another aspect of your question, the way that certain common modern attitudes suggest that if one claims that *any* premodern way of doing things is preferable to its modern equivalents, this amounts to glorifying and wanting to reimpose whatever aspects of the past are least acceptable to the modern imagination. That’s a pervasive strategy in the rhetoric of progress. It’s worth unpacking that strategy a bit. First, notice that it’s quite simply irrational; I promise you that it’s entirely possible to recognize the quality of a German camera made between the two world wars, and even to take pictures with one, without being overwhelmed with a desire to put on an armband and start goose-stepping!

Beyond that, it’s central to the argument we’re discussing that each historical period must be seen as a package deal, as though you can’t use the camera we’re discussing without also taking on the armband and the ideologies that go with it. That’s another central theme in the contemporary politics of technology. If you can pick and choose from the elements of previous eras, after all, it would then follow that you can pick and choose from the technologies available in the present: assessing each of them according to your own needs and desires, let’s say, and refusing to buy into those that don’t interest you. That’s not an attitude the corporate system can tolerate. Consumers are supposed to buy what they’re told, not to choose this and reject that! From any other perspective, however, it should be obvious that the freedom to accept or reject any given technology is essential to individual autonomy in an age of plutocratic industrialism.

CA & ASM: As we emphasized at the beginning, and as the title we chose for this interview makes abundantly clear, your endeavour to *look to the past to reinvent the future* is utterly fascinating. The multifarious ways in

which you shed light on how this reinvention could happen—through impressively competent excursions into political science, economics, technological knowledge and religious studies—make you one of the most relevant thinkers in the crowded landscape of what, for better or for worse, can be called “sustainability studies.” What you bring to the field is a distinctive refusal to cordon spiritual questions off from the rest of what can be talked about. By showing very convincingly that the modern belief in progress is a form of civil religion, by insisting that a graceful and livable path towards a de-industrial future will only be possible if consciousness changes according to our will, and by pointing out that our willing a different—possibly very ancient—relationship to nonhuman living beings and to the whole cosmos is a matter of survival, you inevitably point towards THE question that looms behind all discourses on sustainability: how can we fully accept our transience and mortality as living organisms, and how can we resist the will to transcend the physical world and to seek our “true home” outside of physical boundaries and limitations (be it through eternal growth or through the conquest of outer space)? How can we avoid the Christian and theistic *contemptus mundi* while both rejecting capitalist materialism and getting reconciled with the living Earth as mortal beings? As expressed so poignantly by the frantic businessman in the graphic-novel version of your remarkable short story “The Next Ten Billion Years,” “*Humans are the masters of this rock. We won’t just give up like pathetic animals! If we die out it will be by our own hand, we will blow it all up! We’ll never just fade away!*” (10 Billion).

JMG: It’s not as though we have a choice. You can insist at the top of your lungs that you will live forever, after all, but that won’t keep you from getting old and dying. In exactly the same way, people in today’s industrial cultures can (and no doubt will) cling to the various fantasies of pseudo-transcendence through technology long after those fantasies have been definitively disproven by the course of events. I think it’s quite likely that centuries from now there will be little circles of believers clinging to the dream of the interstellar future, long after the last spacecraft have been chopped up for scrap metal and the last satellites have become artificial meteors or lumps of orbiting space junk: I put just such a circle of believers, in fact, into my de-industrial novel *Star’s Reach*.

The future, again, does not depend primarily on what “we” (however that very elusive pronoun may be defined) decide to do about it. As the Long Descent unfolds, some people will adapt to it, changing their thinking to fit the new reality of contracting energy and resource supplies, and some will not. On average—there will doubtless be exceptions—those who make that adaptation will be more likely to thrive than those who

refuse it. Now that belief in limitlessness is no longer adaptive, it will begin to lose its grip on our collective imagination and be replaced by other ideas better suited to new conditions. That’s the way human culture adapts to changing times. Shrieking “Humans are the masters of this rock!” was an exercise in absurdity even at the peak of the industrial age—did you know, for example, that a mid-sized hurricane releases more energy than is contained in the bombs in all the world’s nuclear arsenals? Now that we no longer have the resource base to keep prancing around pretending to own the planet, such attitudes will be even less helpful than they were, and I expect them to fall out of fashion over the next century or so.

Thus, the “changes in consciousness in accordance with will” I recommend to my readers and students are on a considerably more modest scale. On the one hand, it so happens that the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century mental exercises I study and practice—yes, you can call those “magic” if you like—are effective ways to help foster personal change, in subtle as well as obvious ways. On the other, one of the essential features of adapting to an age of decline is learning to foster a rich and reflective inner life, rather than mindlessly projecting demands and desires onto the outer world and demanding that material things fill needs that are ultimately mental and emotional in nature. The magical traditions I practice and teach can help with that, too. They aren’t the only way—there are many other options—but for those who prefer them, they have their charm.

CA & ASM: The title, narrator and general structure of your novel *Retrotopia*—which imagines a government envoy, in 2065, traveling from a dystopian United States to a self-sufficient country around the Great Lakes area that has instituted five different energy and infrastructure regimes, or “tiers” (ranging from roughly the technological level of 1830 to that of 1950), leaving people in each region the choice of how much, and what kinds of, technology they want to subsidize with their taxes—seem to be inspired by Ernest Callenbach’s 1975 novel *Ecotopia*. Like Callenbach, you obviously researched and thought carefully about the practical, economic and even psychological-emotional aspects of a sustainable society, and the result is a grippingly readable portrait of a world that seems all-in-all much more pleasant and meaningful to live in than the contemporary United States with all its consumerism, social media culture, food waste, traffic jams and extreme disparity between poor and rich. We are actually printing in this issue an excerpt of a screenplay based on *Ecotopia*. What’s your relationship to Callenbach’s novel and how did you encounter it? And what role, if any, did it play in your thinking and your feelings about sustainability (since novels incite emotions as well as ideas)?

JMG: I encountered *Ecotopia* for the first time in its original small-press edition in the Burien Public Library, Burien, WA—that’s in the southern suburbs of Seattle if anyone is keeping track. This was in 1978 or so, while I was in high school; I found it fascinating. I reread it several times in the years that followed and also read the short-lived magazine *Seriatim*, which was founded to promote Ecosophian ideas. Callenbach’s book was the first utopian novel I read, and it got me reading utopias in general, all the way back to Plato’s *Republic* and all the way forward to the latest products of the 1980s and 1990s. That doubtless played a large role in inspiring my venture into the same genre in *Retrotopia*.

That’s not to say that my ideas about utopia match Callenbach’s! His work was very much a product of its time, awash with the standard tropes of his own cultural matrix. I don’t think it’s unfair to call it exactly the kind of utopia you would expect from a middle-class San Francisco ex-hippie in the Seventies. Of course, I had it in mind while I was writing *Retrotopia*; I began it much the same way, with a traveller from today’s America (lightly disguised as the Atlantic Republic), and some of the scenes in my story were influenced by scenes in Callenbach’s. On the other hand, the ending of *Retrotopia* was a deliberate rejection of the ending of *Ecotopia*, and by extension of many other utopias down through the years. The usual gimmick is that the traveler settles down in the utopian society, washing his hands of his former society and abandoning his loves and loyalties back home. I wanted to suggest another option—and yes, in case you were wondering, my ending was also written in conversation (or rather in contention) with the exquisite moral ambiguity of one of Ursula K. Le Guin’s best stories, “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas.”

CA & ASM: One final question, about the amazingly rich and poignant story we have included in this volume, “Winter’s Tales,” which imagines three future Christmases (in 2050, 2100 and 2150), two of which are no longer Christmas as we know it, but a solstice celebration and a future holiday called *Nawida* (based on the Spanish word for Christmas, *navidad*). In this story you deftly conjure up three worlds, each more deindustrialized than the last, moving through stages of scarcity and salvage to low-tech sustainability, but paradoxically, the atmosphere of each moves from nostalgia and even bitterness (in the nearest future) to, well, adapted and evolved to a new climate and energy reality. Literature scholars will be particularly intrigued by the way you show language and religion evolving syncretically as time passes, as temperatures keep getting hotter, as energy sources dry up and as the United States breaks up into smaller republics. The story forcefully illustrates your arguments—made in *After Progress* and many other publications—that the decline of energy resources and

technologies will not lead to an apocalyptic end of the world, but to many gradual changes to the world as we know it. How did this story—with all its rich world-making texture and detail—come about? And do you think that stories can sometimes “transmit” ideas better than reasoned arguments?

JMG: Reasoned arguments are among the weakest of all incentives to insight and change. We all know what it’s like to reason our way to one course of action and then do something else! As I see it, the human capacity for abstract reasoning, powerful as it is, is the latest, least stable and most fallible aspect of human consciousness, running atop a standard-issue social primate nervous system that is much more stable and reliable. Reasonably enough, most of us use the primate brain to make most of our decisions for us, relying on emotions, memories, social cues and all the other familiar gimmicks that got our ancestors through millions of years of hard times. That’s why fiction, which speaks the language of the primate brain, so often does a better job of communicating to the whole person.

As for how “Winter’s Tales” came into being, that’s a little complicated, because those three stories—they were first published online as independent tales—marked a turning point in my writing. In my teen years I set out to become a writer of science fiction and fantasy novels, and over the next decade and a half finished five or six manuscripts and mailed them to publishers, amassing a fine collection of rejection slips. (In retrospect, the novels were pretty dreadful.) Finally, I gave up on fiction, decided to try nonfiction instead, and my first manuscript was snapped up by one of the largest niche publishers in its field. That was a pretty convincing argument to me, so I concentrated on nonfiction for the next decade, and published a string of moderately successful books on various subjects.

Fast forward to the end of 2006. This was early in my blogging career, while I was still trying to figure out how best to get my readers to realize that I wasn’t caught in the fake opposition between progress and apocalypse, and they didn’t need to be caught there either. I’d sketched out an imagined future in a 2004 essay using three lives at long intervals, and it occurred to me to try doing the same thing in more detail. The result was the three stories that became “Winter’s Tales.” They were very well received by my readers. I did another sequence of stories the following year, “Adam’s Story,” about a young man with a crippled arm leaving a dying town near the Pacific coast and ending up in another town with a future. That was also well received, and so I revised the best of my old novels, *The Fires of Shalsba*, and started a new novel set in de-industrial North America circa 2480, *Star’s Reach*. Those both found publishers, and so I returned to fiction more generally. *Retrotopia* wouldn’t have been written if “Winter’s Tales” hadn’t gotten the response it did.

I should probably mention, however, that most of my fiction is not about the end of the industrial age. Again, my writing has no one single theme or objective; most of my novels have been written simply because I had a story I wanted to tell. They range from space opera set on a colony world (*The Fires of Shalsha* and its sequel *Journey Star*) to H. P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu mythos seen through a funhouse mirror (*The Weird of Hali* series and the rest of my "tentacled" fiction) to a political-military thriller (*Twilight's Last Gleaming*), among other things. Doubtless readers will find common themes in them, since they're the products of my somewhat quirky imagination, but they're not intended to belabor the same set of points. Sometimes I simply like to tell a story.

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John Michael Greer (b. 1962) reflects and writes about the future, both as a science fiction author and as a thinker—who has been publishing both books and blog posts on “energy descent” since 2006—on the de-industrial trajectory that awaits contemporary, industrialized humanity. One of the most astute commentators on the links between ecology, economy, technology, and religion, he describes himself as a moderate Burkean conservative and has achieved wide recognition for his critique of the “religion of progress” and for the “middle way” he traces between the two polar-opposite imaginaries of endless progress and growth, on the one hand, and abrupt collapse and apocalypse, on the other.

His novel ideas about a plurality of technological regimes and about “technological choice,” as well as his cogent advocacy of appropriate technology as an answer to many of the ecological and economic woes of industrial culture, make him a fitting successor to thinkers such as Ernst F. Schumacher, the author of *Small Is Beautiful*. Greer lives in Rhode Island and definitely tries to walk his talk, choosing to forgo quite a few of industrial late modernity’s luxuries and amenities.

Aside from his influential environmental analyses, he is also a prolific writer of fiction and has published, among other things, a seven-volume cycle entitled *The Weird of Hali*, which adopts an “alternative” perspective on H. P. Lovecraft’s mythos and the non-human creatures that people it, and a number of “de-industrial” novels that seek to describe what a post-industrial world characterized by much lower energy consumption and a variety of technological choices might look like. He is also intensely interested in esoteric thought and practices and is a member of the Druidic Order of the Golden Dawn, which he founded in 2014. From his point of view, being a practitioner of a form of spiritual ecology (along

with hands-on energy descent practices which he calls “green wizardry”) and writing about energy descent and the de-industrial future are part and parcel of one single thing—namely, to actively explore the implications of, and to start actually living in, a culture that has dumped the illusory, modern narrative of progress by the wayside.

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How Deep Time Can Help Shape the Present: Existential Economics, “Joyful Insignificance” and the Future of the Ecological Transition

ABSTRACT

An awareness of deep time—both humanity’s deep past and the Earth’s deep future—and an understanding of its existential implications can significantly enhance the chances that humanity might still be able to transition towards an ecologically sustainable way of inhabiting the biosphere. This essay explains in detail why this is so, using analysis of a science fiction story that evokes existential horror at humanity’s ultimate cosmic insignificance. With the tools of “terror management theory” (a paradigm of existential thought based on the work of Ernest Becker and emphasizing the saliency of the denial of death in human motivation and behaviour) and of “existential economics” (an approach postulating that the way in which the economic system is organized and operates is crucially influenced by this widespread denial of death), the essay suggests that death denial has turned into the capitalist denial of life, and that only a deep reconciliation of humanity with its true ontological place in the universe will make it possible for us to transition towards a regenerative rather than a destructive system. This will entail new modes of human thinking, feeling, and acting anchored in a shared sense of “joyful insignificance,” as well as a renewed sense of “cosmic indigeneity”—a sense that all humans are indigenous to this planet and that this fact has major implications for how we ought to live into the deep future, anchored in our deep past.

Keywords: deep time, ecological critique of modernity, ecological transition, cosmic insignificance, denial of death, Ernest Becker, terror management theory, existential economics.

NARRATING THE DEEP FUTURE

In his short story entitled “The Next Ten Billion Years,” John Michael Greer offers a chronicle of the deep future of humanity and Earth, imagining how successive global civilizations will arise and then collapse in sequence, and how intelligent species, resembling *homo sapiens* less and less, will follow one another over billions of years. What is striking about the story is the manner in which it shows anthropocentrism fading forward into insignificance as the millennia pass, the deep future swallowing up all but the last shreds of the memory of humanity’s presence on Earth. In the graphic-novel version of the story, entitled *10 Billion* (Greer, Knoesen and Knickrehm), a significant narrative twist is added: the chronicle of the deep future is spoken during an occult ceremony performed by a venerable seer, and is addressed to a businessman who came to ask this seer for his vision of the distant future, in hopes of finding out how he could use technologies such as Artificial Intelligence, nuclear fusion and space travel in order to serve the needs of humanity and make his own corporation—and therefore himself, symbolically if not physically—immortal.

As the description of the deep future of the planet unfolds with less and less human presence (after a protracted period of descent and disintegration of human civilizations with future humans becoming as different from *homo sapiens* as the latter is from the Neanderthals), the businessman slips into ever more profound despair, as well as impotent anger. Already after the glimpse into the 1,000-year future, he exclaims: “Absurd! So humanity becomes nothing more than a bunch of subsistence farmers and nature worshippers!? Where is my corporation? Where is my A.I.?” Much later, at the end of a one-million-year dive into the deeper future, he sits despondent on his chair and, when asked if he is okay, complains: “I don’t matter? I will have no lasting impact. What’s the point?” Later still, having had to listen to the seer’s description of Earth and its eleventh and last intelligent species, in the shape of highly sophisticated water clams, he bursts out: “So there is no point in my A.I.? No point in pursuing nuclear fusion or travelling to the stars? I will double my donation if you tell me how to realize an A.I.! It will solve all our problems.” The seer, of course, refuses and instead moves to the last stage of his vision: ten billion years in the future, when the Earth has died and the first intelligent species on a neighbouring planet, not resembling a human in any way, sits on a rocky peak, lifts what looks like a teeth-circled perception organ mounted at the end of a fleshy tube, and takes its first “look” (or whatever the equivalent might be) at the vast universe. When asked by the seer whether he is satisfied, the businessman gets up and leaves, stammering: “I’m insignificant! Mankind doesn’t last! We don’t even go extinct with a bang! Nothing matters!”

The print version of the story ends with a metaphysical question addressed to us in the present:

The creature's [meaning that first intelligent post-Earth species] biochemistry, structure, and life cycle have nothing in common with yours, dear reader. Its world, its sensory organs, its mind and its feelings would be utterly alien to you, even if ten billion years didn't separate you. Nonetheless, it so happens that a few atoms that are currently part of your brain, as you read these words, will also be part of the brain-analogue of the creature on the crag on that distant, not-yet-existing world. Does that fact horrify you, intrigue you, console you, leave you cold? (Greer, "The Next Ten Billion Years" [a] 143)

If we are to take our cue from the despondent businessman in the graphic novel, the reaction is likely to be one of horror—and indeed, the creature is drawn to be rather Lovecraftian, an eldritch apparition from the very deep future, and above all a seeming negation of everything that humanists understand under the notion of “progress” in the anthropocentric sense. It is probably no coincidence that the worm-like creature vaguely resembles a less tentacled, more winged version of the *shoggoth*, one of the species of Ancient Ones that people Lovecraft's weird world, and in particular his 1936 story “At the Mountains of Madness.”

As Greer reveals in his remarks preceding a later printed version (Greer, “The Next Ten Billion Years” [b]), he was initially inspired to write his story in 2013 by a blog post authored by the Italian academic, extractivism specialist and peak-oil activist Ugo Bardi, also entitled “The Next Ten Billion Years,” which delineates two different scenarios. In one of them, computers and A.I. allow humans to survive for a while under optimal high-tech conditions and, in parallel, generate over the millennia a form of superintelligence—a “new planetary intelligence” capable of terraforming Mars and Venus—which will eventually recreate a new universe after the “current” one has wound down, ten billion years from now, from heat death. In the other scenario, this technological progress does not occur and the universe—including the Earth and the humans inhabiting it—move through cycles of decay and resurgence in a natural, unassisted way, with no superintelligence saying at the end, marking a new beginning, “Let there be light.” Clearly, the businessman in the graphic novel is in part a stand-in for Bardi: as Greer suggests, Bardi himself is supremely depressed by the idea that humanity will end up leaving the stage and other intelligent Earth species will be evolving, after which the Earth will gradually get swallowed up by an expanding Sun (so that the last Earth species goes extinct forever), and finally a new intelligent species will be arising naturally in another part of the universe. Bardi is despondent, so Greer claims, at the idea of a humanity not being ultimately redeemed and

being made *cosmically significant* again by a superintelligence it made possible through its own past technological prowess in the area of A.I. This is why Greer emphasizes that Bardi's project, which is to suggest that we need today to choose the "right" rather than the "wrong" scenario, and to throw all our efforts into transcending human finitude by creating a posthuman deep future where a computerized form of human intelligence can perform a new, quasi-Biblical act of creation, "only makes sense if you happen to be a true believer in the civil religion of progress" (Greer, "The Next Ten Billion Years" [b] 289).

This suggests an interesting connection between the contemporary literary tradition of weird horror, at least in its Lovecraftian version, and the modern belief in technological and civilizational progress: deep time haunts the modern present in reverse, so to speak. The so-called monsters that symbolize humanity's cosmic insignificance are not, in Greer's story, remnants of a deep past as they are in Lovecraft's Mythos cycle. In "The Next Ten Billion Years," and especially in the graphic novel, the possibility of horror for which Greer leaves room comes from the fact that the intelligent species of the deep future—the upright-walking raccoons emerging thirty million years after the extinction of humanity, the crow-like bipeds of a hundred million years from now, the industrious and intellectually superlative corbiculae living one billion years in the future, and the final creature (or, as it were, the first creature of a new world-cycle) with its wormlike and multi-mouthed body—are not Ancient Ones but rather "New Ones," if I may call them that. They are just as indifferent to the human species, but they deny its significance from the deep future instead of from the deep past. The New Ones have not always been here, as have the Old Ones in Lovecraft's Mythos; they have *never been here* and will only be here once we are not. If anything, the abruptness of the cosmic insignificance hurled at modern humans is even harsher here than in Lovecraft, where at least the Old Ones coexist with humans and occasionally clash with them; here, they "post-exist" the human species, harbouring no memory whatsoever of its erasure from the universe. All of humanity's supposed "progress" is forgotten, or even worse—not even known to ever have taken place. This is the essence of the existential horror felt by the disillusioned businessman as he listens to the seer's successive visions.

BIOPHOBIA, THE QUEST FOR COSMIC SIGNIFICANCE AND THE DENIAL OF DEATH

Greer's plausible claim is that it is also the horror more or less consciously felt by Bardi, and which motivates his flights of fancy about a cosmically miraculous A.I. solution, designed to give hope to the believers in the civil religion of "progress." It even has, according to Greer,

the classic structure of evangelical rhetoric—the awful fate that will soon fall upon those who won't change their wicked ways, the glorious salvation awaiting those who get right with Progress, and all the rest of it. Of course, the implied comparison with Christianity can only be taken so far. Christians are generally expected to humble themselves before their God, while believers in progress like to imagine that humanity will become God . . . The horrible fate that awaits the sinful [in Bardi's version of the secular religion of progress] is simply that nature will be allowed to go her own way, while the salvation awaiting the righteous is more or less the ability to browbeat nature into doing what they think she ought to do—or rather, what Bardi's hypothesized New Intelligence, whose interests are assumed to be compatible with those of humanity, thinks she ought to do. There's plenty that could be said about the biophobia—the stark shivering dread of life's normal and healthy ripening toward death—that pervades this kind of thinking . . . (Greer, "The Next Ten Billion Years" [b] 289–90)

As we will see presently, it is precisely this biophobia, driven by the denial of death, that underlies the horror felt by those who, like the greedy but ultimately anguished businessman, recoil with "shivering dread" from the seer's vision of a deep future in which humans, both through natural causes and through wilful choices, have become extinct. And as I will argue later in this essay, if the wilful portion of humanity's extinction is to be warded off, and if something like an ecological transition is to be feasible within the context of our "long descent," it is this biophobia and its multiple manifestations in culture and society that will need to be addressed through new means. The first step, for now, is to delve more deeply into the meaning of the expressions "cosmically significant" and "cosmic insignificance" which I used in the previous section.

I used these expressions on purpose because they connect with the ideas of a thinker who, I believe, is fundamental for the understanding of our modern industrial predicament—namely Ernest Becker, the American anthropologist and philosopher, author of the landmark books *The Denial of Death* (1973) and *Escape from Evil* (1975). One of Becker's main claims is that all human beings, as living and hence precarious and mortal organisms, have an inherent need to cultivate self-esteem and find purpose in their existence through participation in what he calls "hero systems." These are cultural constructs which, by offering people ways to belong to, and embrace, wholes that transcend the individual, provide both day-to-day meaning and teleological orientation. A key notion in this context is what Becker calls "cosmic significance" (or sometimes also "cosmic specialness"), which he initially casts within the framework of existential child psychology:

The child is unashamed about what he needs and wants most. His whole organism shouts the claims of his natural narcissism. And this claim can make childhood hellish for the adults concerned, especially when there are several children competing at once for the prerogatives of limitless self-extension, what we might call “cosmic significance” . . . We like to speak casually about “sibling rivalry,” as though it were some kind of product of growing up . . . But it is too all-absorbing and relentless to be an aberration, it expresses the heart of the creature: the desire to stand out, to be *the* one in creation. . . . Sibling rivalry is a critical problem that reflects the basic human condition: it is not that children are vicious, selfish, or domineering. It is that they so openly express man’s tragic destiny: he must desperately justify himself as an object of primary value in the universe; he must stand out, be a hero, make the biggest possible contribution to world life, show that he *counts* more than anything or anyone else. (Becker, *Denial of Death* 3–4)

While it is very likely that—contrary to what Becker and some of his followers have occasionally appeared to claim—this characteristic is more a historically situated (as well as gendered), modern-Western trait than a human universal, it certainly translates adequately into the norms of industrial and consumerist “progress” and their linear and redemptive vision of time:

When we appreciate how natural it is for man to strive to be a hero, . . . then it is all the more curious how ignorant most of us are, consciously, of what we really want and need. In our culture anyway, especially in modern times, the heroic seems too big for us, or we too small for it. Tell a young man that he is entitled to be a hero and he will blush. We disguise our struggle by piling up figures in a bank book to reflect privately our sense of heroic worth. Or by having only a little better home in the neighbourhood, a bigger car, brighter children. But underneath throbs the ache of cosmic specialness, no matter how we mask it in concerns of smaller scope. . . . It doesn’t matter whether the cultural hero-system is frankly magical, religious and primitive or secular, scientific, and civilized. . . . The hope and belief is that the things that man creates in society are of lasting worth and meaning, that they outlive and outshine death and decay, that man and his products count. . . . Western society since Newton, no matter how scientific and secular it claims to be, is still as “religious” as any other . . . : “civilized” society is a hopeful belief and protest that science, money, and goods *make man count* for more than any other animal. (Becker, *Denial of Death* 4–5)

A deeply ingrained yearning for cosmic significance, as well as a translation of this yearning into material and financial accumulation: these are, according to Becker, the main ingredients of what he calls the “plain

debasement and silly heroics” of industrial and consumerist capitalism—“the plain debasement and silly heroics of the acquisition and display of consumer goods, the piling up of money and privileges that characterizes whole ways of life” (*Denial of Death* 7). One of the main claims I will make later in this essay is that such substitute heroics can and should be replaced by *more existentially lucid, less acquisitive, and more biosphere-centred heroics* if a genuine ecological transition, compatible with resource depletion and reduced material expectations, is to take place. On our way to establishing this claim, however, we first need to delve more deeply into the main cultural and existential cause for the modern-Western quest for cosmic significance.

Becker’s most enduring and influential contribution to the humanities is his thesis—which has since spawned a vast scientific literature and given birth to a whole new sector of academia called “terror management theory” (see e.g., Solomon, Greenberg and Pyszczynski, *The Worm at the Core*; Harvell and Nisbett)—that what drives the heroic quest for cosmic significance and its social, economic, political and cultural manifestations is the *denial of death*, or more precisely the various strategies we use unthinkingly in order to push the awareness of our fragility and mortality, along with the existential terror it creates in us, out of our day-to-day consciousness:

The first thing we have to do with heroism is to lay bare its underside, show what gives human heroics its specific nature and impetus. Here we introduce directly one of the great rediscoveries of modern thought: that of all things that move man, one of the principal ones is his terror of death. After Darwin the problem of death as an evolutionary one came to the fore, and many thinkers immediately saw that it was a major psychological problem for man. They also very quickly saw what real heroism was about . . . heroism is first and foremost a reflex of the terror of death. (Becker, *Denial of Death* 11)

The implications of Becker’s approach have been cogently summarized by three of its most well-established contemporary representatives:

We humans all manage the problem of knowing we are mortal by calling on two basic psychological resources. First, we need to sustain faith in our cultural worldview, which imbues our sense of reality with order, meaning, and permanence. . . . Since we’re constantly on the brink of realizing that our existence is precarious, we cling to our culture’s governmental, educational, and religious institutions and rituals to buttress our view of human life as uniquely significant and eternal. But . . . the paths to literal and symbolic immortality laid out by our

worldviews [also] require us to feel that we are valuable members of our cultures. Hence, the second vital resource for managing terror is a feeling of personal significance, commonly known as *self-esteem*. . . . Self-esteem shields us against the rumblings of dread that lie beneath the surface of our everyday experience. Self-esteem enables each of us to believe we are enduring, significant beings rather than material creatures destined to be obliterated. (Solomon, Greenberg and Pyszczynski, *Worm at the Core* 9)

It is precisely this self-esteem which, in Greer's short story, we witness the businessman losing as the seer's successive visions deconstruct and annihilate his entire worldview of technological progress as a source of eternal salvation from cosmic insignificance. It is most probably also this threat to cosmic self-esteem that leads Ugo Bardi to present the computerized birthing of a planetary intelligence capable of terraforming distant planets *as if* humans still existed and *as if* they were directing it, as a secular-religious source of solace that, in his eyes, the mere succession of cycles of birth, growth, decline and death in nature cannot possibly provide.

In direct continuity with these insights, the Polish-British thinker Zygmunt Bauman connects this quest for death-denying self-esteem and worldview validation directly to the project of modernity, and most specifically the ambition of the eradication of death through modern, hyper-technological medicine as a precursor to the project of transhumanism:

The promise to conquer if not mortality, then each and any specific *cause* of death, fits the self-confidence, nay hubris, that marked the modern spirit from the beginning and through most of its history. Drawbacks seemed but a temporary nuisance, all evil but a relic of past human folly which triumphant civilization will eventually extirpate, all affliction but a side-product of ignorance soon to be replaced with foolproof knowledge. Libraries were written on the not-yet-realized, but certain to materialize, human omnipotence . . . (Bauman, *Mortality* 145–46)

According to Bauman, it is this very omnipotence that has become the content of modern rationality itself—almost as if modern reason were *defined* by its capacity to “kill death,” as he puts it (*Mortality* 152):

Once the diffuse and inhuman prospect of mortality has been localized and “humanized,” one need no more stand idle waiting for impending doom. One can do *something*, something “reasonable” and “useful.” One can be active, and act in an instrumentally rational fashion. Conforming to modern mentality, one can cast death and survival as “problems.” And then one can think seriously about the solution to these problems, and apply to the solution all the tested faculties and skills with which modernity armed its residents. (Bauman, *Mortality* 153)

As exemplified by Greer's frightened but enormously ambitious businessman who wants to build an immortal corporation, as well as by Bardi's transhumanist fiction of a planetary intelligence carrying forth into the deep future humanity's yearning for immortality, modernity itself turns out to be the project by which the denial of death turns into a culturally sanctioned biophobia which, in turn, parades as rationality and denies its own historicity.

In other words, the denial of death hides inside historical modernity, which itself hides inside the culturally rationalized denial of nature. This explains a rather disturbing fact—namely, that in his final book, published posthumously after he died of cancer at age fifty, Ernest Becker couches his theory of death-denying cultural heroism in a stark and extremely dark naturalism that seems to make biophobia all but inevitable, and even a hallmark of all genuine humanity. Greer appears to be resoundingly vindicated in his accusation, which we heard at the beginning of this section, that modern fantasies of eternal salvation through perpetual progress are inextricably bound up with (as he said above) “biophobia—the stark shivering dread of life’s normal and healthy ripening toward death” (Greer, “The Next Ten Billion Years” [b] 290). To drive this point home in the most striking of manners, here is Becker’s very Lovecraftian (much more than Darwinian) description of humanity’s existential predicament within nature:

The only *certain* thing we know about this planet is that it is a theatre of crawling life, organismic life, and at least we know what organisms are and what they are trying to do. At its most elemental level the human organism, like crawling life, has a mouth, digestive tract, and anus, a skin to keep it intact, and appendages with which to acquire food. Existence, for all organismic life, is a constant struggle to feed—a struggle to incorporate whatever other organisms they can fit into their mouths and press down their gullets without choking. Seen in these stark terms, life on this planet is a gory spectacle, a science-fiction nightmare in which digestive tracts fitted with teeth at one end are tearing away at whatever flesh they can reach, and at the other end are piling up the fuming waste excrements as they move along in search of more flesh. . . . Each organism raises its head over a field of corpses, smiles into the sun, and declares life good. (Becker, *Escape from Evil* 1–2)

This vision of “nature, red in tooth and claw,” to quote Lord Tennyson (1850, canto 56) who opposes it directly to “love Creation’s final law,” completes the trap into which Becker’s dark naturalism locks us. This is because this mortality—which, if Becker is to be believed, humans are quite justified in denying as ferociously as it pursues them—now becomes,

in the next step, the basis for the quest for perpetual accumulation and growth through the pursuit of immortality-bestowing *economic heroism*: “Immortality power . . . came to reside in accumulated wealth” (Becker, *Escape from Evil* 87). True enough, Becker’s ultimate hope was that, once people have been made aware by “a world-scientific body” of the mystifications wrought by self-preservation, they “might struggle, even in anguish, to come to terms with themselves and their world” (*Escape from Evil* 168).

But what are the odds of such a struggle succeeding when it is set within an existential condition as overpowering *and universal* as the one he describes? Becker observes that

[o]nce the organism is satiated, this becomes its frantic all-consuming task, to hold onto life at any cost—and the costs can be catastrophic in the case of man. . . . For man, . . . this organismic craving takes the form of the search for “prosperity”—the universal ambition of human society. Now, prosperity means simply that a high level of organismic function will be maintained, and so anything that works against this has to be avoided. In other words, in man the search for appetitive satisfaction has become conscious: he is an organism who *knows* that he wants food and who *knows* what will happen if he doesn’t get it, or if he gets it but falls ill and fails to enjoy its benefits. Once we have an animal who recognizes that he needs prosperity, we also have one who realizes that anything that works against continued prosperity is bad. (Becker, *Escape from Evil* 2)

This naturalization of the necessity of “continued prosperity” for incurably death-denying human animals who fear nature’s teeth and claws leaves precious little room, it seems, for anything else than the dreams and expectations embodied in Greer’s greedy and delusional businessman, and in Bardi’s transhumanistic and equally delusional fantasy of an A.I.-perpetuated human creative intelligence ruling the cosmos. In the short run, such an essentialization of biophobia makes growth, accumulation and aggressive resource extraction into rational behaviour, and modernity into the obvious response to mortality, even as Becker’s theory—and its empirical application in experimental and clinical psychology—deconstructs this biophobia as an unconscious mystification due to the denial of the very mortality that is presented as a realization, within the deathly theatre of nature, of pure Lovecraftian horror. The trap is, indeed, complete.

However, we have gained some clarity. We now see that in order for the evocation of a deep future peopled by post-human creatures recomposed from the atoms left over by the decomposition of our human descendants to trigger—to paraphrase Greer—consolation instead of horror, that is,

in order for the modern notion of progress and its many avatars such as growth, linear time and unchecked resource extraction to no longer rule our relationship to the future, we need to recognize that the industrial and consumerist economy we have constructed over the past three centuries is not an existential escape hatch, but is actually part of the trap. This is the main message of what I call *existential economics*, to which I now turn. Only once we have spelled out clearly the ways in which industrial and consumerist capitalism is rooted in a specific way of denying death—hence of denying nature—that can be overcome and changed, will we be capable of reconciling ourselves with our recent past (the past 5,000 or perhaps 10,000 years), as well as with our very distant, deep future (the next 100 million or the next billion years) and of spearheading a genuine ecological transition.

AN EXISTENTIAL PERSPECTIVE ON ECONOMIC LIFE

Existential economics seeks to understand the role played by existential factors in economic phenomena. Existential factors are whatever plays a key role in people's search for the meaning of their lives. This covers what is usually known by the expression "human condition." A basic assumption of existential economics is that every single agent in the economy carries their existential anxieties into their actions. The basic question asked in existential economics is what role key aspects of our human condition play in economic phenomena.

Existential economics is based on two key ideas which we discussed in the previous section. First, a very basic feature of the human condition is the all-pervading fear of death, and of finitude more generally. This implies that almost all human action in society is unconsciously coloured by death terror—*both* for those who are fragile and precarious *and* for those who appear to be successful and solid. Second, a very basic feature of cultural and social life is the all-pervasive denial of death. This implies that social life, and hence also economic life, has to be understood as a more or less sophisticated device for the repression of death terror—more precisely, a collective device by which each individual is rendered able to manage his subliminal fear of death. As we saw, Becker calls this the hero system: all cultures aim to offer up and impose in socialization certain models of heroic existence by which individuals can reassure themselves as to their cosmic significance.

These two key features have implications for the observable behaviour of both individuals and corporate entities within the economy. For instance, it has been shown that "mortality salience" (the fact of making participants

in a psychological lab experiment acutely aware of their mortality) played a significant role in the cautious and even outright hostile reactions of the German population to the introduction of the euro currency (Jonas, Fritsche and Greenberg). Terror management theory practitioners Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg and Tom Pyszczynski claim that “the historical record and empirical research provide convergent support for the proposition that the denial of our mortality is at the root of humankind’s feverish pursuit of wealth” (“Lethal Consumption” 139). What would an existential-economics analysis of the current overall economic and social situation look like? Let us simplify the picture as much as possible by dividing the population into three categories: consumers, businesses and the government.

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Consumers spontaneously translate the basic existential anxiety into an addictive search for cosmic significance through the acquisition of goods—material commodities, but also immaterial images and purchasable virtual realities—as well as through the pursuit of the financial wealth that will expand their access to such goods. Consumerism, the systematic use of material goods in order to fill the “hole within,” is one of the main contemporary results of this dynamic (Bauman, *Consuming Life*; Turley). The thirst for material and financial wealth is one of the main implications of consumerism (Kasser; Solomon, Greenberg and Pyszczynski, “Lethal Consumption”).

Businesses, which are structured sets of individuals, function according to a logic in which each member feels they must contribute as much as possible to the firm’s growth and profitability—even when the firm is a “psychopathic” corporation (Bakan) which, by design, is immortal and has the legal duty to maximize surplus value for its shareholders. Management methods are created which “enrol” individuals by creating enthusiasm for profit-generating activities—sometimes to the point of obsession, especially for higher-ranking white collar workers, but increasingly for blue collar workers as well (Sennett; Boltanski and Chiapello). Here too, the underlying causality is existential: we participate in the antics of profitability and growth because we believe (or have been educated to believe) that they will give our precarious life some meaning and stability by being a source of self-esteem. This enrolment logic is accentuated by the consumerist thirst for financial wealth, which since the 1990s has led an increasing number of consumers to become shareholders as well, playing on financial markets in order to supplement labour incomes which stagnate due to ferocious competition between firms.

Moreover, the fear of old age and death has led more and more very wealthy individuals to elect public officials who have, over the past four decades, pushed for increasing liberalization of financial flows, and this

has led to the increased “financialization” of pensions, especially in Anglo-Saxon regions (Blackburn) and some Eastern European countries. The reason why governments have become increasingly sensitive to the voices of the rich (Formisano) is, among other things, because the fear-driven ideology of growth has become so widespread that politicians, themselves seeking existential meaning and cosmic significance through reputation and re-election, buckle to mainstream incentive arguments of the “trickle-down” type according to which death-denying economic growth can only be generated through the death-denying enrichment of the already well-off.

There is a twofold causality going from the system towards our human condition, and from our human condition towards the system. Both causal directions are essential to a full understanding of what the capitalist market economy is about. Existential economics fully heeds the two directions of the system-to-human causality and roots the questioning within the basic idea that this system-to-human causality is driven by the response of the system to the human fear of precariousness, suffering and death, which takes on very different hues and colours, and translates into very different behavioural patterns, depending on where one is located within the system.

It is the desperate quest of the Western industrial ego for “cosmic significance” through extraction, possession and accumulation that renders our economic system so utterly unsustainable from an ecological point of view. This does not mean that existential economics neglects political power relations and the abuse of wealth asymmetries and inequalities—in fact, these very phenomena themselves are rooted in the same anxious, ego-centred quest for significance and fear of insignificance (Strenger) that also drives ecological destruction. All these mechanisms are locked together into one huge systemic logic, driven invisibly by modernity’s alliance with men’s and women’s quest for death-denying self-esteem and worldview validation through a belief in technological “progress” and economic growth (Greer, *After Progress*).

How can human beings live with the inner tension between the desire for immortality and the knowledge of mortality? Part of the answer, says Ernest Becker, lies in the search for a *conscious life* lived without existential lies. In the existential perspective, individuals are to develop what I have called “critical acceptance” (Arnsperger, *Critical Political Economy* and *Éthique de l’existence post-capitaliste*). It is a way of living in which we still play along with the mystifications of the hero system of culture and social life, but we stop projecting our denial of death outward through the economic decisions we make in search of self-esteem. We accept that we are still caught in an industrial and consumerist capitalist game ridden with death denial—ours and others’—but we begin to gain some critical distance from it. We see how our “success” inside the game is mainly a reflection

of a skewed arrangement by which our quest for self-esteem has trumped others' similar quests, and we see how our "failures" have been mainly due to power asymmetries connected, once again, to the unequal systemic pathways through which others' quests for self-esteem have been able to trump ours. Moreover, we realize how the whole bulk of these frantic quests for industrial-consumerist self-esteem, in the service of the denial of death, has had a disastrous impact on nonhuman species, as well as the biosphere in general.

Such a realization does not come easily within the modern Western mindset. It requires opening up to an internal force, a creative energy directed not at false, death-denying heroics but at the search for a life that accepts death while at the same time accepting not to be free of the fear of death—a life, in other words, in which there is a *conscious fear of death*, a lucid consciousness of death as the centre of life and thus, at the same time, a life in which the burden of death—on oneself and on others—becomes lighter, not heavier (Brown). Is industrial and consumerist capitalism conducive to such a path? In my view, which is informed by existential economics, it is not. Instead, industrial and consumerist capitalism makes the individual burden of death ever heavier—and *less* conscious—by creating a hero system that focuses on a materialistic way of satisfying the drive-to-defend through the drive-to-acquire.

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“JOYFUL INSIGNIFICANCE”: DEEP TIME, COSMIC INDIGENEITY AND THE FUTURE OF THE ECOLOGICAL TRANSITION

It is not wealth, consumption, status or recognition which are problematic in themselves; what is detrimental—and can be seen only through the lens of existential economics—is the fact that wealth, consumption, status and recognition are being hijacked by people's death-denying aspirations to an infinity which neither wealth nor consumption nor status nor recognition can ultimately bestow. As a result, as I have argued at length elsewhere (Arnsperger, *Critique de l'existence capitaliste*), modern Western humans have come to *confuse material goods for spiritual resources*, in the deeply rooted belief that the former can offer what the latter used to promise: a respite from finitude, a forgetfulness of death and a certainty of finding refuge from one's precarious existence.

Therefore, it is also not existential heroism in itself that is the problem; we cannot help trying (and needing) to push death awareness out of our day-to-day consciousness in order to focus on the tasks and aspirations at hand. What we can and should avoid is *death-and-destruction-amplifying*

existential heroism. What we could and should reject is *misplaced* existential heroism which misleads us into locating the object of our yearning—cosmic significance, a sense of meaning and purpose in an evolving natural universe—where it cannot possibly be found: in finite, perishable goods and in a blind faith in technological progress and economic growth which (as the anguished businessman in Greer’s story exemplifies) will never satisfy us, because it *can* never satisfy us.

The key task—and in late modernity it has become an arduous one, to be sure—is to uproot biophobia by recognizing that it splits us down the middle, psychologically and existentially speaking, because it makes us deny two crucial facts: from the viewpoint of our objective mind, we are natural parts of nature and the cosmos; from the point of view of our subjective mind, nature and the cosmos are a spiritual part of us (Greer, *The Way of the Golden Section* 3–4). The first fact is the linchpin of scientific modernity and is, by that token, very familiar to us, but without the second fact—which flies in the face of all forms of modern rationalism and reaches back into Western humanity’s relatively recent past, from the Renaissance backwards into tribal and indigenous times—it is so conducive to existential angst that it is no wonder modern Western humans, who live fully immersed in object relations, amputated of their subjective mind, have developed the specific death denial syndrome diagnosed by Becker and his successors.

If nature and the cosmos are not subjectively part of us—to be more exact, of an “us” that is much larger and more omnipresent than each of our Western industrial egos—then the deep-future visions of Greer’s seer are, indeed, unbearable. The “skin-encapsulated ego” (Watts), if persuaded it is the be-all and end-all of a human subject who is a mere object in an objective cosmos, cannot possibly rejoice in the spectacular, eon-long cycles of birth, decay, death and regeneration that will preside over the succession of worlds throughout the next ten billion years. The anxious quest for cosmic significance so keenly put forward by Becker stems from the fact of having lost our subjective minds—the part of our individual minds that is, as myriad spiritual and mystical traditions throughout history testify, fully capable of perceiving, and feeling at home in, the entire “hierarchy of heaven and earth” in which the objective human animal is but a point of passage between the outer expanses and the inner depths (see e.g., Hall, Harding, or Singer). It is only once this metaphysical but also very concrete capacity has been recovered that the frantic demand for cosmic significance can be relinquished in favour of what I would call a “joyful insignificance.” To the anxious objective mind, this sounds precisely like what needs to be avoided at all costs; within the millennia-old traditions of humanity—which some will wish to call “esoteric” or “occult”—it is

what needs to be developed by all means possible. Joyful insignificance is a way of settling into the twin immensities of inner consciousness and outer materiality, rejecting neither and inhabiting both in the knowledge, which at this point can only be called *wisdom*, that both immensities are welcoming instead of hostile. To go back to Greer's earlier question, only by this sort of momentous shift in consciousness towards a reconciliation with our cosmic insignificance as a matter of fact, can horror at the sight of the seer's visions be replaced by consolation—and perhaps even joy. Heroism, in Becker's sense, needs to be de-coupled from the quest for cosmic significance and re-coupled with the age-old veneration of deep time: the deep past of our cosmic origins (see e.g., Swimme and Berry), as well as the deep future of our vaster self's evolution not just in but *as* the cosmos itself, unfolding, dying and being reborn (see e.g., Stager).

This rather staggering (for the modern objective mind) change in perspective implies that making it possible to settling into and inhabiting these twin immensities in a way that will allow us to *joyfully reinhabit the Earth in radically non-destructive ways* is the signal task for any spiritual practice worth its salt in these waning decades of the industrial world. This entails all the concrete implications that come with the “long descent” towards a de-industrial future, i.e. living with significantly fewer resources on much smaller geographical areas and making many of the—illusory and death-denying—material comforts and luxuries of the industrial present a thing of the past (Greer, *The Long Descent*). It also entails, however, a radically new form of being in the world, which I will call “cosmic indigeneity”: if Earth science and geology have taught us one thing at the existential level, it is that just like older Indigenous peoples were and still are quietly and joyfully—but also frugally—connected to a place or a land as their meaning-giving area of inhabitation, de-industrial peoples will be connected, indeed *indigenous*, to the entire cosmos. They will be “geologically human” (Wood) and, from that consoled and reconciled vantage point, they will become capable of truly embracing new forms of de-industrial heroism—in particular, for the modern West, the quiet and joyful heroism of voluntary simplicity (Grigsby) and of the transition town movement (Hopkins).

From the vantage point of the Western industrial objective mind, these forms of heroism are linked to imaginaries of self-sacrifice and self-deprivation. To the cosmically indigenous subjective mind, however, they are among the best available forms of planetary reinhabitation. For as the seer asks the anguished businessman at the end of Greer's story (*10 Billion*): “You think that because nothing lasts forever it means that nothing matters? Every person dies. Every civilization dies. Every species dies and eventually so does the Earth and the universe itself. So? The question is what we do while we're here.”

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William deBuys

Robustness and Vulnerability: Caring for the Earth in an Age of Loss

THE FUTURE OF AN ARID LAND¹

The old metaphor of the canary in the coal mine has lost its edge. When applied to global warming and climate change, the relevance of its parts has become reversed—the canary is clearly dead, and it died a good while ago, its warnings mostly ignored. The coal mines of the world, meanwhile, are busier than ever, as the power plants they serve pump vast amounts of CO₂ into the atmosphere. A better metaphor for the present human predicament is the frog and the kettle of water. Everybody knows that the frog, if thrown into hot water, will leap out. No problem there. But we pity the frog placed in cool water because, when its kettle is gradually heated, the complacent frog hasn't the sense to escape, and it stays until it boils.

... Climate change is transforming the polar regions of North America fastest—melting ice, thawing permafrost, and drowning polar bears—but for most people who live in the Lower 48, those transformations are nearly as remote as a tsunami hitting Borneo. While we lament such calamities at a distance, the warming kettle, now rattling up toward a boil, is working changes closer to home that promise sweeping transformations. The place where those changes might best be observed is a region already straining from rapid growth, whose water resources are stretched to the utmost—the aridlands of the North American West. What happens under the turquoise skies of the continent's most celebrated landscapes will presage changes that human frogs in kettles the world over can expect to experience.

¹ This section is excerpted from William deBuys, *A Great Aridness: Climate Change and the Future of the American Southwest*, Oxford University Press, 2011. © William deBuys 2011. All rights reserved. Reprinted by kind permission from Oxford University Press.

In that land of exceptional beauty and complexity, the remotest arroyos and mountaintops bear witness to a changing climate. They give their testimony in the form of tree rings, vanishing wildlife, insect outbreaks, the dust-blown ruins of ancient villages, and the behavior of wildfires. The story they tell is already reshaping the politics of the Colorado River, on whose water nearly thirty million people depend. It also adds a subtext to the violence and human suffering along the U.S.-Mexico border. Adapting to the changes now underway will ultimately require the metamorphosis of cities like Phoenix and Tucson, if those cities are to preserve a modicum of the quality of life they now possess.

... The North American Southwest is hardly alone in its predicament. It stands as proxy for the large portion of the world that will experience similarly powerful impacts from climatic change. The die-back of forests in the Mediterranean Basin, uncontrollable fires in Australia and Russia, floods in Pakistan, and the drying-out of southern Africa are all part of the global dynamic. What sets the Southwest apart, endowed as it is with abundant financial, human, and technological resources, is that nowhere else will the drama be acted out more elaborately—or reported more thoroughly. . . .

... *[N]othing big happens for just one reason.* This may sound like a trivial matter, but in fact it is important. Notwithstanding the attraction of tidy, sound-bite-ready, just-so stories, most things happen not for one reason but for many. It takes a lot to destabilize, let alone dismantle a civilization, like that which once dwelled at Chaco Canyon or Mesa Verde, and it also takes a lot to cause an otherwise stable and self-replicating forest community to begin behaving in self-extinguishing ways it rarely or never did before. The more one looks at any situation, the more one marvels at the interlocking gyre of causes and effects. Part of the beauty of the world, even including its disasters, is its complexity.

Almost inevitably, wherever multiple causes are gathered, one or more will prove to have been produced by humans, a fact which leads to another theme, that *the human contribution to change in the natural world more often catalyzes than dictates the outcome.* It energizes and speeds the interaction of forces that are already present and at work, rather than deciding the result outright and single-handedly. We see this in the “flip” of desert grassland to mesquite and other shrubs, where overgrazing helped bring about vast landscape changes in the space of a few generations that otherwise might have taken centuries. The idea that *it would have happened anyway*, however, should console no one. There is always chance. No set of potentials has just one outcome. If humans had not influenced the desert grasslands as they did, they would surely have influenced them in a different way. Indeed they did so for

eons before Europeans arrived in North America by collecting mesquite beans for food, possibly on a very large scale. Long ago, in such a case, with a different catalyzing influence, yet another result ensued. The forces latent in nature have the potential to move ecological systems toward multiple future states; human activities help select the direction of the move.

A third theme . . . concerns the *enormity of human capacity for adaptation*. At various times and under various circumstances—from the great droughts of the medieval era to the cardboard shanties of today’s Mexicali—simply surviving in the Southwest has been a signal achievement. But the people of the Southwest have done far more than merely survive. They have erected a great hydraulic civilization in one of the most intimidating environments on the continent. Vast quantities of ingenuity, wealth, and cooperation have made this achievement possible. It is a heritage fit to inspire both pride and emulation. Today the robustness of the Southwest’s past achievements is perhaps matched by its vulnerability, and the people of the region will need to call on even greater amounts of the qualities that allowed their successes if they are to meet the challenges of the decades to come.

The answers to these challenges will be plural, not singular, but no answer will count for much—it will not in fact be an answer—if it is not backed by strong social will and collective commitment. A professional class of policy wonks, land managers, and water buffaloes, the usual suspects to whom the public defers on environmental matters, cannot handle this set of problems on their own. There needs to be broad debate and broader understanding. There needs to be a citizenry aware of the stakes.

... The idea of fiber lends itself to metaphor: it will take fiber to contend with the changes of the future and not least to endure the uncertainty that will attend them. Ultimately, the best answers to the climate change predicament in the North American West lead back to mundane matters: we need to get on with what we should have been doing all along, including limiting greenhouse gasses. We need to take care of unfinished business on the border, in our forests, and in water management. It wouldn’t hurt to love the desert, too: there will be so much more of it; and to protect the rivers and to give the diversity of nature our serious respect. No silver bullet will make the coming decades of the Anthropocene more tolerable. There is only the age-old duty to extend kindness to other beings, to work together and with discipline on common challenges, and to learn to live in the marvelous aridlands without further spoiling them. It is an old calling and a great one. We have already had a lot of practice. We should be better at it. We can be.

EARTHCARE ON A HIMALAYAN TRAIL²

We will not “fix” the present wave of extinction or the climate crisis, in the sense of returning to a richer and more stable past. The jig, one might say, is mostly up. So, how to proceed? How to deal with the anger, sorrow, and very real grief that such profound changes produce? I began my journey in the Himalaya wondering if the time had come to apply the ethics of hospice to the care of Earth.

The idea of *hospice for Earth* is easily misunderstood. Of course, Earth is not dying. It has supported life for billions of years, and no matter what we do, our planet will generate life in myriad forms for billions more. But aspects of Earth are passing away. Soon more than an alarmed community of scientists and activists will mourn the lost stability of the Holocene climate, as it becomes clear that a warmer, more energetic, and more turbulent climatic regime has replaced it. Meanwhile, the Sixth Great Extinction, the unmistakable wave of human-caused species loss, which is already underway, will accelerate in proportion to the vehemence of the changes the new climate brings. So, yes, there will be a lot of death, a lot of “patients” breathing their last. And the emotional and spiritual toll on the caregivers who attempt to mitigate those losses and on others who consider themselves family to the ailing world will tap our deepest wells of fortitude.

In Dolpo, the clinics conducted by the Nomads expedition, in villages far from hospitals and laboratories, became theaters in which to observe a particular set of ethics. Most of the time, we could not “fix” our patients—could not put them on long-term drug therapies, let alone intervene with surgeries or other dramatic measures. Instead, the medicine the Nomads clinicians practiced, whether drawing on Western science or on the traditional healing arts of the Himalaya, was old-fashioned. It emphasized person-to-person contact and relief from immediate suffering. In a phrase, it prioritized *care over cure*. Also, it frequently required both patients and practitioners to avoid preoccupation with probabilities over which they had no control—to relinquish their attachment to outcomes—and to focus on the fullness of the present. These ethics, while contrary to the main thrust of Western medicine, are central to hospice and palliative care, and they are far from being defeatist or despairing. As we trekked through the brilliant mountains, the idea of applying such ethics to our troubled planet seemed to me to open possibilities that felt liberating and reenergizing. It offered the prospect of revising one’s “terms of engagement” in serving the planet, and this, in turn, raised the possibility of engaging more effectively and with a lighter heart. . . .

² This section and the next are excerpted from William deBuys, *The Trail to Kanjiroba: Rediscovering Earth in an Age of Loss*, Seven Stories Press, 2021. © William deBuys 2021. All rights reserved. Reprinted by kind permission from Seven Stories Press.

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... A conservationist friend argues that to prophesy the end of anything is an act of hubris. We cannot know the future, she says, and we delude ourselves if we think we can. To foretell the demise of great waves of the world's wildlife is an act of overweening pride. She may be right. Chance never sleeps. My own hope, such as it is, lies in surprise, and surprises of various kinds may ultimately alter our calculation of outcomes for the wild world. This may already be happening. Some of the contra-indicators for the Sixth Great Extinction include:

- **Urbanization:** as more people crowd into megacities, some rural areas become depopulated. Without constant hunting, wood-gathering, grazing by domestic livestock, and other human-caused disturbances, many natural systems, including their wildlife, will rebound. India provides examples of this, and in some of the vacated rural areas, wildlife—even tigers, provided they are protected from poaching—are making a comeback. (The trend, however, can also reverse: not just in India but throughout the world, the economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has sent many impoverished city-dwellers back to their natal villages and to a resumption of subsistence activities. The collapse of tourism, meanwhile, has deprived many villagers of the means for living lighter on the land.)
- **Speciation:** some authorities maintain that rapid adaptation and global mixing in wildlife populations is producing not a sixth extinction, but a sixth genesis. In a way, it is a failsafe argument: evolution guarantees that life on Earth, given a chance, will diversify. The question is: Will the rate of diversification surpass the rate of loss? Those who say yes seem to rely more on faith than data.
- **Technology:** perhaps scientists will manage to accelerate biological adaptation to new global conditions. One promising area involves developing new strains of coral capable of tolerating warmer and more acidic seas, as Madeleine van Oppen and the late Ruth Gates have striven to do at their respective labs in Australia and Hawaii. Perhaps such new strains will be successfully seeded into the Great Barrier Reef and other cornerstones of marine diversity, and perhaps analogous “fixes” may be found for other ecosystems. That’s a lot of “perhappes,” but, hey, don’t be a party pooper.
- **“Geoengineering,”** the application of technical fixes at a planetary scale, may avert the worst impacts of climate change, benefitting natural systems as well as people. So say the advocates of re-jiggering the planet. One proposal involves deploying space-tech umbrellas in the upper atmosphere to reflect more of the sun’s energy away

from Earth. Another calls for pumping vast amounts of water (with what energy?) back onto the Greenland and Antarctic icecaps to refreeze during winter, thereby forestalling the rising of the seas. Of geoengineering one thing is sure: its potential for moneymaking is oceanic. As conditions worsen, desperate societies will clutch at increasingly wild ideas, while companies hungry for giant contracts will launch sales promotions at the scale of national political campaigns. Perhaps such schemes will live up to their hype. On the other hand, perhaps they will amount to no more than a lavishly expensive ghost dance for industrial capitalism.

- Enlightenment: humans, the hopeful say, will rein themselves in, protecting and restoring habitats on a massive scale. Maybe so, but so far, not so good. Protected areas, which often exist more on paper than in actuality, and the careful management of surrounding buffer lands have certainly slowed negative trends, but they are far from reversing them on a broad scale. And people, in general terms, continue to behave . . . well, like people.
- Epidemic: disease might decimate human population, as actually happened in the fourteenth century when the Black Death triggered a rewilding of many parts of Europe. A much greater calamity swept the Americas when Old World diseases, on the heels of Columbus's voyages, reached populations unadapted to them. (The consequences—because forests reclaimed vast amounts of abandoned farmland—may have included a lowering of atmospheric CO₂ and a cooling of the climate, producing the so-called Little Ice Age, which began in the sixteenth century.) A repeat experience, enacting tragedy at a colossal scale, is horrific to contemplate but lies within the universe of possibilities. The economic shutdowns brought on by the novel coronavirus in 2020 produced hints of nature's potential for resurgence: peccaries, emus, elephants, and other species were seen to be wandering city parks and streets (although many supposedly corroborating videos proved inauthentic). While such anomalies make for entertaining YouTube clips, beyond the roads and houses, back in the swamps and forests, genuinely significant extensions of habitat may also have occurred. Even if such changes prove transitory, they illustrate one way in which rewilding can start. Outcomes that are worse for humans and better for most critters may ensue with the inevitable onset of the next pandemic. But the price to pay may very well exceed our most ghoulish imaginings, and such a cost, like the cost of every terrible thing, will fall most heavily on the poorest and most vulnerable among us.
- Combinations of the above: unexpected linkages produce surprise. Although ignorant of the future, we can nevertheless prepare. If we build enough arks and keep them afloat, and if the current expansion

of Petri Earth eventually abates, or at least shifts to a more forgiving phase, perhaps the worst outcomes now predicted may be averted. And then what? A new and enduring equilibrium? Maybe, so long as runaway warming does not take us past thresholds from which there is no return. But don't count on it.

Let's be real: we don't live in the gentle Holocene anymore. Alteration of the climate has delivered us to the Anthropocene, and the heat already loaded into the climate system guarantees increasing impacts for decades to come. Even if we start doing everything right tomorrow, our path will not lead back to where we used to be. As Bill McKibben has observed, "We've lost [the] fight, insofar as our goal was to preserve the world we were born into. That's not the world we live on any longer, and there's no use pretending otherwise."

We are in a sick room. The patient is a tough old coot, still with plenty of vigor, but key systems are declining. There's no turning back the clock to an earlier period of robust health. From here on, adaptation will be a primary theme, with lots of workarounds, prostheses, and propping up to keep things working. We need to give the right kind of care, in the right way. How to proceed? What ethics should guide us? Perhaps the proper model is not far away.

Palliative care and hospice care differ from each other. In the first instance, patients may live a long time, although compromised, and may ultimately die of something unrelated to their debility. In the second, the present illness is deemed terminal, although the time frame for its culmination may be unknown. The differences are important, but in each case the manner of providing care and support is similar. The aim is to alleviate suffering and preserve the highest possible level of awareness, function, and enjoyment. The benefits of such a path accrue to both the patient and the caregivers, as well as to the patient's family and friends.

In the years ahead, the intensifying crises of Planet Earth will elicit a Niagara of crazy behavior. Panaceas will sprout like mushrooms after a rain: "Plant my tree on five million acres and all will be well!" "Build my machine and make carbon pollution a memory!" Myths of denial will morph into myths of escape, and cultish "End Times" fervor will flourish. Some of the hopeful say that, when things get bad enough, the dead-end nonbelievers will finally come to their senses. Let's hope so. Some might shift allegiance and choose to live in a fact-based world. But millions of others will keep walking down Crazy Street because, for them, deviation would cost too much in bewilderment, lost relationships, and eroded identity. People will keep behaving at least as badly, and as well, as people typically behave. Those among us who escape the worst of the calamities will find it challenging to continue necessary work and avoid shutting down.

Which is why the ethics of hospice and palliative care deserve consideration. Prioritize care over cure. Remain unattached to outcomes. Focus on the now. Maintain endurance for the long haul. Such ideas offer an emotionally and spiritually resilient approach to Earthcare. What they imply in terms of projects and policy, however, is difficult to say. A “managed retreat” before the inevitability of sea-level rise, rather than the construction of doomed seawalls, would be consistent with those values, as would material support for those whose homes and cherished places are abandoned in the retreat. Also consistent would be a deep skepticism about “heroic” interventions, such as atmospheric umbrellas and genetically manipulated plants and animals, which may spawn hosts of unintended consequences. Rich societies will have multiple options, poor societies fewer ones. In either case, blanket policies, are sure to fray under the wearing realities of cost, societal will, and the peculiarities of individual situations.

My personal, albeit limited, experience in hospice work has taught me that, if you keep your head and are reasonably diligent, surprisingly good things can happen, both for you and for the patient. That word again: “surprise.” Everyone has heard the adage, often attributed to Mark Twain, that nine-tenths of good luck is preparation. My guess—call it my hope—is that this principle applies also to Earthcare. Luck favors the prepared planet. It also favors the prepared caregiver.

Along with the toothbrushes, dehydrated eggs, and dried fruit that I lugged to Nepal, there was a bag of several hundred stretchy red rubber bracelets, with “G.R.A.C.E.,” in yellow letters, stamped into the band. We distributed them among the members of the expedition and handed them out, along with solar lights and spare clothing, to patients and their loved ones at our clinics.

G.R.A.C.E. is a mnemonic. It stands for steps in a methodology that Roshi Joan, with various colleagues, developed for clinicians.³ Like most mnemonics, its use of language is a little tortured, but its purpose is pedagogical, not poetic. Its intent is to prompt those who take care of the seriously ill to remember, not so much what to do, but how to be.

G stands for *gathering attention* (the caregiver’s, not the patient’s).

R for *recalling intentions* (what is the present purpose?).

A for *attuning* (both to oneself and to the patient and others).

C for *considering* (what action will serve the purpose?).

E for *engaging* (doing it) and then *ending* (acknowledging and learning from what has transpired).

³ Halifax, Joan. “G.R.A.C.E. for Nurses: Cultivating Compassion in Nurse/Patient Interactions.” *Journal of Nursing Education and Practice*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2014, pp. 121–28. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5430/jnep.v4n1p121>. (Note added by the author.)

It's no accident that four of the five steps precede the actual doing. Preparation. Clarity of mind. The heightened awareness and extra moment it takes to tilt the odds toward benefit. In my first-aid kit, I carry a plastic card that outlines a similar series of steps for assessing emergencies and making first-order diagnoses. When people are in pain, bleeding, or unconscious, your mind speeds up and a hundred thoughts compete for attention. Or maybe you freeze. Unless you are so experienced that reflex alone will produce correct results, a checklist merits the time it takes to consult it. You sort things out; you do things in order; you don't skip steps. G.R.A.C.E. is like that. It helps a caregiver navigate stormy emotional seas. It outlines a process for getting centered and remaining so. The patient receives coherent treatment, and the caregiver benefits too: anxiety and internal conflict might not be banished, but they don't overwhelm.

Some emergencies, like car accidents, happen fast. Others, like climate change and the woes of Petri Earth, begin invisibly and seem to have no end. I keep my G.R.A.C.E. bracelet where I can see it when I work at my desk. Sometimes it helps. It reminds me to approach difficult situations as though they were patients in a clinic: take a deep breath and start at *G*. Get centered. Strong back, soft front. And go from there.

*

THE RIGHT WAY OF WALKING

Hospice is a compassionate triage. So is Earthcare. You balance a dedication never to quit with the discipline to recognize endings. You pause to honor the passing of whatever is lost: mobility, autonomy, life itself; wildness, species, ecosystems. You remind yourself that, even as Kanjiroba melts, it inspires; that beauty, though diminished, remains. Sometimes you need a lot of reminding. . . .

I'd come on the trip thinking that hospice ethics might usefully apply to Earthcare, and nothing I had learned from Roshi, the medicos, or our stoical patients contradicted that. Yet I had not gone further. I had a sense of *so what?* The formulations I had made and the formulations I had borrowed seemed worthwhile, but they were at best only recipes. Where was the real grub?

I dwelled in such ruminations, plodding along, when I became aware of a kind of counterpoint welling up in the background of my thoughts. No one can explain how words and ideas come to mind. The manner of their

summoning eludes us. Yet the mystery of unframed thoughts becoming manifest attends us daily, and every walker knows that walking seems to foster it. It is as though the physical shock of our footfalls shakes loose notions we never suspected our minds contained and frees them to float into consciousness.

At first, I couldn't grasp the idea hovering in the back of my mind, couldn't cast it as a thought. It was a shadow, no more. Then, strange to say, a light fell on it and it took form. It presented itself as a sentence: "The right way to carry the grief is the right way of walking." I heard it in my mind's ear, as though it were made of sound. I replayed it, hearing it again. Once. Twice. Several times. The words were clear but the sentence seemed a riddle.

I was walking. The sentence had arrived like a telegram, sender unknown. It had a rhythm that fit my steps. I marched to it, silently chanting. I didn't understand what the words were trying to tell me, but I liked their sound and I kept their cadence. I walked a hundred paces, repeating the sentence like a mantra. Then I reversed the phrases and walked another hundred: "The right way of walking is the right way to carry the grief."

When I thought about the grief, it was not hard to identify. It was the stew of sorrows brewed from climate change and the woes of Petri Earth. It was the distress aroused by our planetary dilemma and by our failure as a society, even as a species, to respond in full, to assent to what we know.

Grief was not the riddle. Walking was. What was the right way? Our expedition had walked for five weeks. Life had contracted to the essentials of food and shelter, movement and rest, work and play. Every hour's effort had been embedded in a stern geography. The requirements of place and mission asserted demands that none of us could meet alone. We had to cooperate, act together, and so we formed a community. We served. We learned. We walked. We found a settled pace, literally and figuratively. For a time, we were nomads. The trail became home. . . .

 **Christian Arnsperger**
 **Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet**
University of Lausanne

“The Paradise of How It Has to Be”: Writing About the Future of the Earth in a Time of Decline *A Conversation with William deBuys*

Christian Arnsperger & Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet: Your book *The Walk* ends with you standing at the edge of the meadow near your New Mexico homestead and observing a band of horses bicker and fight. For an instant, you find yourself wishing for the calm and the quiet to return—and then you tell yourself (but also your riveted reader): “. . . and I think, no, not the tranquil beauty of mere moments ago. Instead this, the perfection of disorder and desire. The paradise of how it has to be. This is it” (*The Walk* 151). It appears to be a very meditative stance, a kind of attitude of letting go and letting be. Would you say that it also reflects your view of how we need to react nowadays to ecological degradation and civilizational decline—as a “perfection of disorder and desire”? Are you an advocate of stepping into the future with a stoic’s mind, with a bodhisattva’s heart?

William deBuys: *The Walk* begins with a parallel meditation: that looking at the grain of wood in a desktop can lead to reflection on the biome that produced the wood, that the view out a window can lead to consideration of the stars, that the annoyance of a fly can be a portal into exploring the depths of one’s own psychology. These are not random journeys; they possess a logic. In the same way, the cranky antics of horses pestering each other—the perfection of disorder and desire—leads back to intrinsic tensions in the phenomenon of life. In slow ways or fast, living things test their environment and each other; they adapt; they select. Through their actions they express their being. That’s what the horses were doing, which is central to the final epiphany: that without tension and turmoil, life is sterile—it is not really life—and real beauty is impossible. The epiphany,

which I try to show rather than discuss, is that in order to have the things we love the most, we must also live with things that are much harder to love or even to accept. Life is a wholeness, and as humans we want to pick and choose among its aspects. The scene that concludes *The Walk* says that a true embrace of life includes all of its aspects. And in any case, picking and choosing is futile.

A friend who is a Protestant minister said that *The Walk* expressed a view more Jewish than Christian. I don't know if that is correct, but what she was trying to say is that Christianity promises perfection in an afterlife (although only for adherents who pass the tests of faith and good behavior). To varying degrees, Judaism and other religions and philosophies emphasize the here and now, classical stoicism among them. I find much value in stoicism's precepts and have been impressed to learn that its ethics are highly congruent with those of Buddhism. A bodhisattva being a seeker of the right and good, your formulation of “stepping into the future with a stoic's mind, with a bodhisattva's heart” captures that convergence and crystallizes a worthy goal for all of us.

CA & ASM: Your body of writing is very impressive in its scope and, while you are clearly deeply rooted in the American West and in New Mexico in particular, the spectrum of themes on which you have chosen to work looks, to the superficial gaze, somewhat eclectic at first: from the path you walk on almost daily at El Valle (*The Walk*) to the monumental ecological and hydrological disaster of the Salton Sea in southern California (*Salt Dreams*), from the life of a northern New Mexico villager (*River of Traps*) to the quest for the last surviving *saola* in Borneo (*The Last Unicorn*), from the excavation of the writings of the first chroniclers of the Southwest (*First Impressions*) to the history of how a private ranch in northern New Mexico became a public nature preserve (*Valles Caldera*), from the writings of the eminent geologist, explorer and conservationist John Wesley Powell (*Seeing Things Whole*) to the cataclysms caused in the Southwest by climate change (*A Great Aridness*), from the meditative chronicle of a Himalayan trek to bring medical care to remote mountain villages (*The Trail to Kanjiroba*) to the meticulous rendering of the natural and human history of the vast Sangre de Cristo mountain range (*Enchantment and Exploitation*). Add to that a number of forewords and prefaces to books about such diverse beings and places as the Colorado River, the Rio Grande or Las Vegas—and there emerges an almost baroque cathedral of extremely well-informed environmental thinking intertwined with sparse but always deep and moving existential insights. Yet, when seen as a whole, your work consistently balances involvement and detachment, loving attention and blunt factuality, sensitivity to beauty and awareness of decline, piercing

grief and inner peace. And so there is no eclecticism after all; in fact, a profound coherence seems to have patterned your entire writing life. Would you agree that its axial theme is that of genuinely experiencing both loss and joy within the passage of time—the fleeting time of a fragile human life but also the “deep time” (as Earth scientists now call it) of tectonic and glacially slow planetary transformations?

WdB: The temporal tension between human time and Earth time commands our attention. These two vastly different scales of perception enable us to generate a binocular view of our place within the cosmos. I will quickly confess, however, that if I had concerned myself with such lofty ideas when I started out as a writer, I might have found the trail ahead too steep. Instead I asked very basic questions: Where am I? Who is he? What’s been going on here? Those three questions respectively underlie my first three books. That simplicity, I think or maybe I just hope, continues through the rest of my work, even to my last book which asks, How shall I carry the grief I feel about the world?

The “axial theme” you identify is perhaps more an end point than a starting place. It is where the discoveries prompted by those basic questions have led. I hasten to add that my journeys are not particularly analytical and certainly not intentionally so. Irrespective of where I wind up, I tend to get there by finding and following stories, not by reasoning alone. If the stories are good, they engage the heart as well as the head, and the journey becomes infinitely more satisfying. If the trails that the stories follow tend to arrive in a place where the theme you mention—the tension between the scales of human time and Earth time—becomes palpable, well then, that raises another question: either there is an objective and durable significance to that tension, or the convergence simply reflects the “wiring” of my own small, subjective consciousness. I hope the former is true, but I am happy to leave it to others to render judgment.

CA & ASM: At the present time, we are living an epoch where the fleetingness of our short human lives is colliding with an unheard-of acceleration in our planet’s transformation. Tectonic and glacially slow changes are still taking place, of course, but they’re being eclipsed by the galloping speed of climate change—or “global weirdness,” as you prefer to name it—and all its accompanying apocalyptic horsemen. In several of your books, writing as a conservationist, you discuss extinction and the fact that it is already too late to “preserve the world we were born into” (as the environmentalist Bill McKibben says). Could you expand on why, in your eyes, “too late” does not mean simply “there is no hope”?

WdB: Part of the answer, for me, is in episode 35 of *The Trail to Kanjiroba*:

Earth’s beauty is inexhaustible. Even where the world is most diminished, beauty remains. The forces that erode the life of the planet can reduce but not eliminate that beauty, for beauty is intrinsic to the planet. Or if not to the planet, then to the way we Sapiens have evolved to see it. And the beauty belongs to us, inheres in us, and needs to be conserved in us too, for we are a part of the planet. . . . If beauty is infinite, then the need—no, the obligation—to defend such beauty is also infinite. It will last as long as beauty lasts, and so the obligation will have no end. . . . defending the beauty of the world [is] a calling that [will] never go silent. And . . . to serve such a calling . . . produce[s] something that all of us seek, which is *meaning*, durable and real.

A longer, fuller answer is much more complicated. Change is inherent to life. Crystals can replicate themselves but they are not alive—their replication remains changeless and sterile. Living things change and *adapt*, and along the way they experience loss and death. As you say, climate change is greatly accelerating the rate of change living things must try to endure. Many will not adapt fast enough. Human appropriation of Earth’s energy and habitats, and the careless destruction of the wild world resulting from that appropriation, also accelerates the rate of change. But beauty will persist, even as it is destroyed. We mustn’t forget that.

A second part of the long answer is that when we talk about hope, we have to be clear about what we ask the term to mean. If our notion of hope depends on returning things to how they used to be before our present worries existed, then indeed there is no hope. We cannot get back to an idealized *status quo ante*. But true hope, as I try to explain in episode 45 of *Kanjiroba*, is not the same as optimism and it is not simply a yearning for the elimination of anxiety. True hope requires us to place faith in the uncertainty and unknowability of the future. Sooner or later, something unforeseen will occur. It may be positive, negative, or both. Whatever its valence, we must prepare ourselves to wring the greatest possible good from it. During the long years of Soviet domination of Czechoslovakia, Václav Havel prepared himself for an eventual deliverance; Nelson Mandela did likewise during more than three decades of imprisonment. Neither man knew whether the Soviet Union or apartheid would collapse in his lifetime, but each was able to make the most of the opportunity that came to him because he never gave up hope.

A third element of the long answer is that there is no bottom to how bad climate change and the suffering it engenders can get. Despair and inaction only guarantee more loss. We must engage. We must assent to what we know. We must strive to conserve the best and avoid the worst,

even as the definitions of both continue to change. There is no defensible and moral path that does not include taking action, and action, because it seeks to change the odds for outcome, is inherently hopeful.

CA & ASM: Your latest book, *The Trail to Kanjiroba*, is an account of your care-delivering journey with Roshi Joan Halifax and a team of doctors and other medical practitioners to a remote area of the Himalayas. It is also a wonderful literary account of the development of the field of geology, Darwin's travels as they led up to his formulation of the theory of evolution and other aspects of Earth science. What ties these disparate subject matters together?

WdB: The book concerns itself with environmental grief—my struggle, and everyone's struggle, to come to terms with both the human destruction of the wild world and the grave losses, already arriving, that attend climate change. But the book is equally a celebration of the beauty of Earth.

The book grows from a paradox: that we people of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries are the first people in the timeless history of our species to be able to tell ourselves the story of our origins, the origins of the life around us, and even of our planet—without resorting to magic or fantasy. Think of it: we needn't invent a mythology to explain our place in the universe. We possess an explanation that is real, measurable and wholly defensible. And yet, even as we possess this near omniscience, we are well advanced in destroying much of the creation of which we are a part. Many would say we are destroying the most beautiful portion of that creation.

The two great theories of Earth science, one from the nineteenth century, one from the twentieth, make possible this deep knowledge of our origins and of our planet. The first, of course, is Darwin's theory of natural selection and the second, less well known, is the theory of plate tectonics, which cohered and began to win acceptance in the 1960s, when those of us now old were children.

Without digressing into a discussion of aesthetics, I would argue that complexity and awe are linked elements of what we call beauty, and that the more we partake of the complex insights these theories provide into the workings of the world, the greater our awe and the greater our appreciation of the beauty of creation can grow. And so, even as *The Trail to Kanjiroba* takes the measure of our planetary woes and seeks the psychological and spiritual resources not to lose heart in the face of them, it also seeks a deepened awareness of the beauty of the world—and of the moral resources such an awareness can offer. In my view, these two strains are complementary, and without the second, success in the first becomes much harder to attain.

CA & ASM: You joined the medical mission to Nepal partly to see if the ethics of the doctors and other practitioners might offer ideas or values that could be applied to care of the Earth. You were particularly curious about the expedition’s prioritization of “care over cure,” which also lies at the center of hospice ethics. Could you explain what it means to think about the Earth and about ecology in terms of hospice care, and why it doesn’t simply mean “giving up”? When you speak of “hospice” as an attitude to adopt in the face of the ecological crisis, is the dying patient the biosphere or the human race? As you acknowledge in your book, the term could be easily misinterpreted in a number of ways. Could you explain exactly what you mean and why “hospice” seems like a valuable framework to adopt at this point in time, and if you believe it is also still worth “fighting for” radical societal change in order to move towards living within our planetary means?

WdB: It is important to recognize that the concept of hospice, as applied to Earth care, is an imperfect metaphor. Earth is not dying, and neither is the human species. In the context of deep time, life will continue on this planet, as it has for billions of years, expressed, as Darwin put it, in “endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful.” And at the shorter timescale of centuries and millennia, there is little probability that the human species—now almost 8 billion strong—will disappear. (Although in the context of deep time, pretty much all species are guaranteed to go extinct or metamorphose into radically different forms, as birds evolved from dinosaurs.)

But at that shorter timescale of human time much indeed is dying, and these losses include myriad species of plants and animals, as well as human languages and cultures. These will be joined by the loss of many places—geographies that as a result of rising seas, melting glaciers or other impacts of climate change will be fundamentally transformed and their biomes largely erased.

Such losses promise to challenge us in profound and intensifying ways, and the ethics of our medical expedition, which are similar to those of hospice care, offer a moral framework for moving forward without capitulating to despair. While on the trail our expedition had no access to x-rays, scans, blood labs or other sophisticated technologies. We were obliged to prioritize care over cure and to focus on optimizing the present. We were challenged to maintain a “strong back” and a “soft front”—facing every new crisis with both resolve and compassion. We strove to reduce the suffering of the present moment while increasing its joy, clarity and relatedness. We tried not to worry about outcomes we could not control. As applied to Earth care, this approach might mean that we sometimes

spare ourselves the vain hope of “fixing” things and instead settle into the more realistic mode of making conditions as good as they can be for as long as possible, meanwhile being prepared to bear witness to death and other endings—and to honor them. These ideas require a longer and deeper discussion, which fundamentally is why I wrote the book.

Interestingly, however, the most valuable lessons I learned about handling grief arose from a different source. They were embedded in the discipline and practice of living on the trail, which is to say they arose from the necessity of continuously “learning how to walk.” These lessons are encapsulated in the last sixteen words of *The Trail to Kanjiroba*:

Every day a yatra

Every situation a clinic

Absorb the beauty

Build an ark

Be alive

To unpack those words, however, you have to take to the metaphorical trail and read the book—or so I think. (For starters, *yatra* means pilgrimage.) What I learned was that acquiring a set of precepts or applying a particular methodology, although useful, was not as important as the task of organizing and focusing one’s mentality, one’s inner self. That’s where the greatest difference and the most useful preparation can be made. I am seventy-two years old and I am still learning to walk. That realization, in its strange way, is comforting. Somehow it makes the long metaphorical distances and steep climbs more tolerable, and it makes the topography of grief more navigable.

A word about “radical social change”: many agendas are crowded beneath that very elastic umbrella, and I am in favor of most of them. Must all be achieved in order to avert the worst of climate change and save the wildness that remains? Probably not. Can an excess of social turbulence delay or prevent attainment of planetary stability? Probably, yes. Can we know, in advance, the optimal combination of social and environmental reform? We cannot. Immanuel Kant wisely said, “From the crooked timber of humanity, nothing straight was ever made.” To contend with climate change the global community may need to produce something straighter than we have ever produced before. The struggle to do so will change us, even as the world around us changes.

CA & ASM: One of the deepest issues raised by modernity is that of teleological time, viewing temporality as linear and leading either inexorably to Progress or to Apocalypse (possibly followed by paradise, if you look

to the Bible as a source, or by a post-apocalyptic dystopia, if you look to popular culture). Do you have any thoughts on the question of time, and on how our cultural concepts about time influence our actions (or our failure to act)? Isn't there a risk that, being caught between the fleeting temporality of a human existence and the towering deep temporality of the biosphere's evolution, one might feel paralyzed and fatalistic? Aren't the twin beliefs in perpetual progress or in an impending apocalypse a defense mechanism against this paralysis? Do you see your role as a writer as trying to provide a middle ground between these two modern forms of inertia?

WdB: Teleological time is a burden of human myth-making that civilization might do well to put down. People want to believe that the future has an address, that events lead toward an intended destination, be it a Second Coming or a Mad Max dystopia or any of a thousand other imagined possibilities. These are distractions from living responsibly in the present. Worse than distractions, they are a kind of anesthesia dulling us to the existential moment. I frequently hear people say, everything happens for a purpose. That's nonsense. That is akin to a basketball player thanking God for guiding his three-point shot to the basket. (Don't we wish that God, if she exists, has better things to do?) One of the fundamental lessons of Darwin's theory of natural selection is that evolution is ruled by contingency: biological change arises randomly; some changes work out; most don't; organisms interact with other organisms and with their inorganic environment in countless ways, creating the ungoverned, churning complexity that is the miracle of life on Earth. As J. B. S. Haldane said, "The universe is not only queerer than we suppose, it is probably queerer than we *can* suppose." No teleology that our furiously busy human minds can imagine can capture that "queerness" which today we would call complexity.

Darwin was pilloried for suggesting that a biological relationship existed between apes and humans. The worry was not just that humans had hairy cousins with unattractive habits but that humanity's place on the throne of creation was insecure. The last sentence of *On the Origin of Species* speaks of "endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful [that] have been, and are being, evolved." His use of the present imperfect tense—"are being"—tells us that Creation is not finished, the first week of Genesis is still the week in which we live. This repudiation of the Christian teleology of his time may have been his greatest heresy, and much of mankind finds it troubling to this day.

Looked at another way, however, a rejection of teleology is liberating. We are freed to become participants in the great on-going project of creation. We are here, now, on a glorious pinprick of life within the vast sea of the

universe, and we are free to act. What more do we want? We don't need to choose between deep time and human time. Both are real. And we needn't feel trapped between them either. We need to be able to think at both scales without blurring or confusing them. In the blurring lies the moral danger. If we say to ourselves, "Deep time teaches that new species will always evolve, so we don't need to worry about extinctions occurring now," that's an error of scale. People say that kind of thing to avoid feeling moral responsibility for what's going on around them. In a way, they invite the paralysis you mention. It is a cop-out. We need to embrace the two scales of time and make good use of the binocular vision they bestow upon us.

CA & ASM: In *The Trail to Kanjiroba*, when discussing your ethics of hospice care, you describe geoengineering as "perhaps . . . no more than a lavishly expensive ghost dance for industrial capitalism" (195). In comparing the hypermodern imaginary of geoengineering to this Native American spiritual movement, born at the time out of both deep despair and desperate hope, what points or parallels are you trying to draw out?

WdB: You have nailed our probable predicament with your phrase "deep despair and desperate hope." Given the failure of the global community to abate its pollution of the atmosphere—and given also the unlikelihood of a reversal of that failure anytime soon—"deep despair and desperate hope" will be very widely shared. Under such circumstances, humans show a talent for inventing fantastical salvation strategies and convincing each other that those strategies, no matter how far-fetched, are right, proper, and essential to support. The Ghost Dance was a heart-breaking example of this. Its charismatic apostle was the Paiute spiritual leader Wovoka who preached that the Ghost Dance, properly practiced, would halt the westward migration of whites and restore Native America to unity and prosperity. The dance spread quickly from tribe to tribe and was fervently adopted, but, obviously, it did not produce the hoped-for results.

The suffering and loss resulting from climate change can be expected to produce similarly wishful thinking, possibly leading to the adoption of risky, speculative and exorbitantly expensive technologies for carbon capture, planetary cooling or goodness knows what. Probably a few of the proposed technologies will have merit, but on the whole I suspect we will see the birth of a Golden Age for scam artists at all levels from individuals to mega-corporations and governments. The accelerated herd behavior and intellectual flaccidity of social media pretty much guarantee it. Humans do this kind of thing. It doesn't matter whether you are a Native American watching your world get crushed in 1890 or almost anyone in, say, 2050, witnessing mass migration, starvation and storms. If you are human, you will clutch at such straws as are offered, and in our hyper-commercialized

world, you will probably contribute resources toward them, directly or through taxes, even if they are worthless.

CA & ASM: You have made your home in New Mexico, which like many other parts of the United States is a place scarred by settler colonialism and the destruction of Native cultures. Some survive, and in the case of the Pueblo tribes (as suggested by two of your fellow New Mexicans from the University of New Mexico, Gregory Cajete in *A People's Ecology* and David E. Stuart in *Anasazi America*) the ways of life they still practice today are much better adapted to prolonged droughts and heatwaves than those of mainstream Anglo-Americans. In *A Great Aridness*, you explicitly state that the future that awaits the American Southwest because of runaway climate change is but a prefiguration of what billions of other humans will also need to face sooner rather than later. At the end of *Enchantment and Exploitation*, you write:

The traditional cultures of the region are not mere aesthetic ornaments. . . . Like a rare plant or a unique ecosystem they are irreplaceable. Society needs to conserve them both for the answers they give to the basic problems of existence and for the fresh new questions they pose about the proper relation of people to each other and to the land. (318–19)

Do Indigenous lifeways offer resources to face grief and loss in today's ecologically imperiled world, and to look into the future differently than modern, “progress”-drunken Westerners have tended to do?

WdB: Maybe the old lifeways offer specific tactics for surviving the turbulence of the future. Maybe not. Should we always keep a three-year supply of grain stored in a back room in case drought or war hobbles our harvests next year? I doubt it. But I am pretty sure the old ways offer a wealth of metaphor that can help us think about how to cope: what is the modern analog to those rat-proof bins filled with maize? Let's come up with an answer to that.

Maybe we don't need to dance to summon the rain clouds or to assure fertility in the biome to which we belong, but the self-restraint and respect for nature inherent in such a practice will never lose relevance. I don't believe there is any doubt that we have much to learn in terms of perspective and attitude from appreciating the long-time people of this world.

When the screws of drought tighten or a horrible politician attains high office, some of my Anglo friends muse about moving where it is wetter or where the political climate is more agreeable. The contrast with the Native

community could not be greater. In countless public meetings, I have grown used to hearing tribal representatives, first, begin their comments with a prayer, and second, preface their message with the statement, “We are not going anywhere.” In the hard days to come, I will not begrudge the exodus of people who want to leave. May they go in peace. But I will be more interested in the people who stay behind—the people “who aren’t going anywhere.” They will be a select group. Granted that personal economics will also have much to do with who stays and who goes, on balance, the character of the “stickers” will favor tenacity, grit and loyalty to place. I am all for that. In the last chapter of *A Great Aridness* I repeat something that a Zuni friend, Edward Wemytewa, told me: that the Zuni word for the long-ago inhabitants of the Zuni homeland translates to something like “fiber people.” They were people honed by hard work and short rations until they had no fat on them and no softness. They were physically tough, and their minds were the same. In their sinewy frames they had the fiber, physically and spiritually, to survive in an unforgiving world.

The hotter, drier future that arrives more fully every day may demand something similar from us and our descendants. The odds may be poor, but the future is unknowable, and out of the uncertainty of the years ahead, good things may emerge. The Native people of the Southwest embody the stamina, patience and resolve that the future will require of us.

CA & ASM: Your books all deal with natural places and the human experiences and entanglements they afford. How did you start writing, and is it the same impulse that keeps you writing now, thirty years later?

WdB: I call my writing studio “the Sentence Factory,” and I like to think I put in a pretty good shift on a regular basis. When I don’t—because of travel or calamity or distraction—I feel the lack. I think this may be because writing is the means by which I process the world. It is how I make sense of my experience. I suspect this is true of most writers. The origin of this proclivity may go back to childhood and to the earliest experiences of reading, which for me, as for millions of others, writers and non-writers alike, revealed itself as riveting and wonder-filled antidote to loneliness. (Immersion in nature was another.) In any event, I have come to think of writing as “the art of finding out what you know—and feel.” I don’t think I come to terms with things—I don’t see them in full—until I write about them. I am not saying my understanding becomes complete, but if I stick to the task of writing, it becomes as good as I can get it to be.

Three journeys feed *The Trail to Kanjiroba*. In 2016 and 2018, I joined the Nomads Clinic for expeditions through Dolpo. Those two journeys totaled almost three hundred miles of walking and close to three months living on the trail. The third journey was no less an adventure. It

entailed more than four years of writing, trying to make sense of the lived experiences and seeing them anew in the light that was generated by words on a page. How this works is a mystery to me, but each sentence, as it takes its place on the page, seems to create new light, new possibilities, while shadowing or eliminating others. Following those possibilities or, through revision, going back and recapturing lost possibilities in order to follow them in a new direction, entails a continuous process of discovery. This is what gives life to a narrative, and I like to believe that in the best writing this between-the-lines excitement of discovery somehow communicates itself to the reader and raises his or her experience to the highest level.

There is a second side to the urge to write that doesn't specifically concern discovery or understanding. It is the drive to make something beautiful. From a lifetime of reading, we develop a sense in our mind's ear of how good writing sounds, how it feels when absorbed in the mind. We hear the music of language. The writers I most admire compose this music, which is not just music you listen to but music you can inhabit, a sort of alternate reality built from words alone. And so I think of writing, not just as the art of finding out what you know and feel, but as an art of composition, of beauty-making and world-creation. I suppose that when the work goes well, when the sense of discovery is present and something beautiful is emerging, the writer experiences a physiological “high,” like a runner's high, a feeling of well-being, if not a mild ecstasy. An intense session at the writing table can leave you completely exhausted but also deeply satisfied. As in the case of other addictions, this happy state is no doubt brewed from endorphins. In that respect, I suppose I am sometimes no different from a lab rat seeking food pellets at the end of its maze. As long as the reinforcement is attainable, as long as the journey to reach it feels good and necessary, I'll keep writing. I will have to.

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William deBuys (b. 1949) lives and writes in northern New Mexico at his homestead in El Valle, in the vicinity of Taos. Originally from the East Coast, he was educated in Baltimore, MD and Chapel Hill, NC before moving to the Southwest five decades ago where, as he puts it in his autobiographical notes,¹ he got “a new education” that “went farther and deeper.” This early and momentous, tectonic shift in his life

introduced me to a culture far from home and to ethics of community and place that were foreign to the privileged world in which I'd grown up. It also tutored me in the requirements of living with the land. My teachers were my Hispanic neighbors and the beautiful, rugged mountain country that enveloped our valley.

Not a fluent writer from the outset, he gradually grew into the role after he struck an almost animistic deal with the nature around him. By accident, he found the wreck of a crashed airplane in the Pecos Wilderness that stretches out between Santa Fe and Taos, while he was struggling to write about that rugged and beautiful landscape. Having received a reward for this fortuitous finding, he felt he had been given

a grant from the mountains themselves, and it caused me to believe that if I quit my [writing] project, which at times I desperately wanted to do,

¹ See <https://williamdebuys.com/about-william-debuys/>

I would be breaking the terms of the grant. No one would ask that the money be returned, but I feared the karmic consequences if I walked away. So I persevered. I kept making bad sentences hoping good ones would eventually come along. In time, they did, and the going got easier.

Many decades and prizes later, deBuys has an impressive *oeuvre* to show for this early pact with the local mountains. The local humans have followed suit in recognizing his talents, and he has since then received a number of awards, among them a New Mexico Governor’s Award for Excellence in the Arts, as well as recognitions from Zuni Pueblo and Santa Clara Pueblo for service to their communities in his work as a conservationist.

He has established himself as one of America’s foremost writers on the many interfaces between wild nature and human nature, on the delicate interlacing of longing, joy, grief and hope in the face of ever dwindling wildness and ever more threatening anthropogenic alterations of the biosphere. Of his latest book, *The Trail to Kanjiroba*, which forms a kind of “accidental trilogy” with *A Great Aridness*—on climate change—and *The Last Unicorn*—on extinction and the loss of biodiversity—he writes: “Having written about climate change and species extinction, I [was] seeking consolation. I needed to find a constructive way of living with the discouraging implications of what I had learned about the problems plaguing Earth. Without giving in to numbness or futility, I needed both to acknowledge the dire state of things and still remain committed to changing them. I also felt a need to celebrate Earth’s beauty.”

ECO-ANXIETY AND ANTHROPOCENE NOSTALGIA

 **Philip Hayward**

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Firing up the Anthropocene: Conflagration, Representation and Temporality in Modern Australia

ABSTRACT

The European colonization of Australia introduced a new population into a continent in which Indigenous people had practiced cyclic burning as a form of ecosystem maintenance since time immemorial. The settlers' complete disdain for Indigenous knowledge and related practices caused these customs to largely fall into disuse. One result of this was an increased vulnerability of landscapes to bush fires, a factor that has risen to the fore in the early twenty-first century. The fires that have swept across the landscape with increasing frequency and ferocity have provoked fears of a rolling, fiery apocalypse that might make living in many areas of the continent untenable. This marks a new phase of settler anxiety that has been fuelled by extensive coverage of fires on broadcast and digital media platforms. Blending discussions of Indigenous culture, 19th-21st-century European settler visual art, literature and modern communications media, this article begins by examining the nature of Anthropocene modernity and the very different worldviews and practices of Australian Indigenous peoples. Particular attention is given to senses of time and of living and working with fire. Subsequent sections open up the topic with regard to the planetary present and how we might adjust to the future.

Keywords: Anthropocene, fire, Australia, *tempus nullius*.

INTRODUCTION: A PLACE OF FIRES

Australia is the driest inhabited continent on the planet. The government agency Geoscience Australia identifies that around 35% of the continent's land mass receives less than 250 millimetres of rain per year and is classified as desert, a further 35% receives less than 500 millimetres, rendering it semi-arid, and rainfall is erratic in the remaining 30%. As a result, Australia, and eastern Australia in particular, is highly fire prone. Indeed, Geoscience Australia emphasizes that “[b]ushfires are an intrinsic part of Australia’s environment. Natural ecosystems have evolved with fire, and the landscape, along with its biological diversity, has been shaped by both historic and recent fires.” The fire pattern identified above is one that Australia’s flora and fauna adapted to during the *longue durée* of the pre-colonial period. However, the situation since colonization has been markedly different, as settlers have changed land use, significantly influenced by European models of cultivation and settlement, and have constructed extensive built environments, particularly along Australia’s eastern coast.

This article approaches its subject informed by personal experience. I write as an inhabitant of the eastern Australian coast who experienced the impact of the extensive fires that afflicted the region in the summer of 2019–20 and struggled to understand their scale and their implications for the future. Similarly, I started writing this article in December 2020, when more than half of the precious world heritage listed landscape of K’gari (“Fraser Island”), which I have often visited, was on fire (destroying its distinct flora and fauna and endangering human lives), and as I warily monitored smaller fires closer to my home. The article represents an attempt to make sense of this situation, its representations and discourse surrounding it in order to understand how “we”—i.e. a planetary population—got to “here,” i.e. the Anthropocene, and how we might survive and adapt.

EXPERIENCE OF FIRES

As if going into battle, the knapsack
 full on my shoulders, its pipe and nozzle
 slung up like a rifle.
 We fought along the river, seeing shrubs
 explode, riddled with fire,
 eerie sounds of trees shrieking
 like things alive, feral, flames like faces
 spilling down into the ferns.

We staggered, sick with the hammering heat,
dousing endless flames that slammed at us
like nightmares, sullen ghosts
groping at our limbs. We plunged
into that day's red thunder,
subsumed like suiciders who stare into
the rifle, gulp the flame. Individuals
meandering in something huge.
We choked in smoking semi-darkness,
shadows through the lead-coloured
air of limbo. (Salom)

The opening verse of Australian poet Philip Salom's "Bushfire" is perhaps the most striking literary representation of what it is like to be a firefighter faced by a major blaze. It is as fresh and relevant at time of writing (watching similar firefighters on television struggling to combat the conflagration on K'gari), as it was when it was written forty years ago. Yet something profound has changed in the intervening period. In the 1980s the moment of the Anthropocene was only dimly discernible. Evidence was littered across the planet but hadn't been pulled together in a grand theory and narrative. Such developments occurred some twenty years later when a number of scientists and scientific bodies moved to adopt the term "Anthropocene" to identify a new epoch in which humans had exercised a decisive impact on the planet (Zalasiewicz et al.).

Writing before this paradigm shift came into play, Salom presents an apocalyptic, war-like scenario. The fire-fighter protagonist is on the "front line" of the fire, his spray nozzle slung "like a rifle" over his shoulder. Fittingly in this regard, the poem invites comparison to works by World War One (WW1) poets such as Wilfred Owen, whose "Dulce et Decorum Est" (1920) conveyed images of a choking mustard gas attack in which "someone still was yelling out and stumbling / And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime." Owen's work attempted to convey the inhumane and apocalyptic carnage of trench warfare in WW1 in which men were tormented by new weapons technologies deployed in harsh and wearying weather conditions. For Owen's generation, WW1 was a close to unimaginable tragedy that many hoped would be the "war to end all wars." By and large, poets and artists with first-hand experience of combat confined themselves to a grim realism nightmarish enough not to require any supernatural association. But Salom's poem readily engages with such elements ("sounds of trees shrieking / like things alive, feral, flames like faces" and "flames that slammed at us / like nightmares, sullen ghosts / groping at our limbs"). The bushfire is represented as *spirited*, antipathetic and vengeful. This element echoes earlier Australian settlers' perceptions

of bushfires and a sense of imminent, fiery apocalypse that has repeatedly manifested itself in Australian colonial and postcolonial society.

One of the first notable European settlers' representations of the scale, intensity and terror of an Australian bushfire was produced by English artist William Strutt in 1864. His painting *Black Thursday*¹ is striking on a number of levels. With its elongated (quasi-cinemascope) format, glowering darkness and smoke and its representation of a chaotic mass of humans spread across the canvas, Strutt's painting strongly resembles battle-scapes painted by previous European artists, such as Salvator Rosa's *A Cavalry Battle* (c. 1650) or William Sadler's *Battle of Waterloo* (1815). Strutt's painting shows a dark russe sky with trails of smoke and a thin horizontal band compressing horsemen, people on foot and terrified domestic and indigenous animals. Corpses of animals litter the foreground and strange, spectral, flying creatures cluster in a group at the top centre of the image. The scenario is not simply one of crisis but rather one of an apocalypse. *Black Thursday* is strongly informed by two sensibilities: the nature of Australian settler society in the mid-nineteenth century and the artist's own biographical position. The painting, executed thirteen years after the event depicted, represents the tragedy that befell the European settler community and the (scattered and depleted) Indigenous population of Victoria in 1851. European colonization of Victoria began in 1803, with the establishment of a small settlement on Port Phillip Bay. The city of Melbourne was founded in 1835 and the estimated settler population of the state in 1851 was c. 77,000 (the extent of the Indigenous population was not recorded).

As in other areas of Australia, colonial settlement involved multiple and varied acts of aggression, deprivation and marginalization of Indigenous communities. Occupying a land area of 227,436 square kilometres, the settler population was thinly scattered across Victoria and comprised tentative pioneers in a land whose cyclic weather patterns were still a mystery. Victoria experienced extreme heat and drought in 1850 and then, in February 1851, strong, dry winds blew down from the north. These winds fanned small bushfires into a conflagration that swept across a quarter of the state, causing widespread flight of settlers and massive destruction of farm animals, native wildlife and properties. Strutt conveys the intensity of this experience on a suitably epic scale that appears to reflect his own trauma. Arriving in Melbourne from England in 1850, the artist—like other British settlers—had no experience or perception of large-scale forest fires, which were virtually

¹ See reproduction online at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_Thursday_bushfires#/media/File:WP_Black_Thursday.jpg

disappearing as deforestation progressed across Britain in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.² Without clear pictorial antecedents, Strutt adopted a battlefield scenario to represent the event, with one twist: its scene is, more correctly, one of a panicked rout in which the losers crowd the canvas as the victorious elemental fire consumes all before it.

The lack of European settler frames-of-reference for understanding drought and bushfire is also manifest in a small group of other nineteenth-century paintings. Ignorant about and disinterested in Indigenous mythologies and culture more generally, British settlers brought European sensibilities, motifs and paradigms to bear upon their experience of Australia and used these in a range of representational media. One minor strand in this was the attempt to personify various aspects of the Australian environment through figures derived from European mythologies and art-historical traditions. This is particularly evident in two striking paintings that reflected on drought and bushfire in very different ways from Strutt's *Black Thursday*. To a modern sensibility these images may seem distinctly mannered, but they represent creative attempts to come to terms with and represent key aspects of the Australian environment and of settler anxieties concerning it. The first was painted by Charles Conder, who emigrated to Australia from England in 1884 at the age of sixteen. During the first two years of his residence he worked as a surveyor for the New South Wales (NSW) Land Office and then took a job as an artist for the *Illustrated Sydney News* until 1888, when he relocated to Melbourne. Conder's initial employment took him around NSW at a time when eastern Australia was in the grip of an extended drought that had commenced in 1880, delivering NSW its driest years since records began. His 1889 painting *Hot Wind*³ reflects his experiences of searing summer heat and wilting vegetation so vastly different from the climate and landscapes he had grown up with. The painting was influenced by the European Symbolist movement, which attempted to counter the Naturalist movement in literature and painting with figures and scenes that represented the human experience through resonant symbolism (Goldwater).

Conder represents the hot wind as generated by a malevolent young female whose appearance is typical of late nineteenth-century Symbolist figures (Dijkstra). She is a tormenting, flame-haired, *femme fatale* who lays on the sand, her legs wrapped in ambiguous material that renders them tail-like (like a desert mermaid). The snake that views her, its head

² Similarly, major urban fires, such as the one that afflicted Westminster in October 1834, were exceptional events.

³ See reproduction online at: <https://fineartamerica.com/featured/4-hot-wind-charles-conder.html>

raised, is reminiscent of the serpent in the Biblical Garden of Eden. Yet the landscape is very un-Eden like. Only a few small dry plants rise through the sand in the foreground and the slope to the left of the image is brown and dry. Off to the far right is a small, indistinct cluster that represents the city towards which the woman is blowing the smoke from her brazier. She is also, notably, white, representing a European imagination of the hot wind personified as a young Caucasian woman rather than any figure from Indigenous Australian culture. A similar vision is also evident in the work of Arthur Streeton, who was born and raised in Victoria. His painting *Spirit of the Drought* (1887) is similar to Conder's in palette and subject but eschews a brazier to represent heat and fire. Instead, he cloaks his standing female nude with swirls of red that both suggest flames and the blood that is absent in the skeletons lying at her feet (recalling the similar bodies featured in Strutt's painting). The Symbolist moment was fleeting in Australia, and subsequent representations of the dry landscape largely ditch imaginings of the spirit of the bush, drought or fire, but such paintings are notable for attempting to imaginatively make sense of the hot, dry and volatile continent. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries the allusive characterizations of fire as elemental, conveyed in Salom's previously discussed verse, are as close as we come to mythologizing the blunt forces of drought and conflagration.

TEMPUS NULLIUS

While expert opinions vary (Clode 3–52), it seems likely that one of the contributing causes of the fires that plagued areas of Australia in the nineteenth and successive centuries was the cessation of Indigenous burning practices that had been undertaken by multiple generations as a form of eco-system management (Daily). Indeed, the coastal grasslands that first attracted European settlers due to their easy navigability on foot or horseback and for their potential as grazing land for cattle or sheep were the result of sustained cyclic burns. These kept combustible plant materials to a minimum, prompted fresh growth and ensured an absence of tangles of deadwood that might impede movement. The burns, which have been characterized as both “quick” and “cool” (Korff), differ from uncontrolled ones in that they do not damage soil nutrients, plant root systems or seeds and are limited in scale, allowing fauna to escape. The arrival of settlers and the massive (deliberate or incidental) depletion of Indigenous populations caused regular burning to cease and stocks of combustible material to accrue. The lack of perception of Indigenous peoples exercising ongoing landscape stewardship reflects

more general, racist-colonialist perceptions of Indigenous peoples' lack of accomplishments and socio-cultural development and, thus, a perception of them as *lacking history*. The colonial perception and doctrine of Australia being a *terra nullius*—literally “nobody’s land”—prior to colonial settlement is well known and was a guiding principle of Australian law until it was overturned by the Australian High Court’s judgement in the Mabo case in 1992 (AIATSIS).

Along with the colonial assertion of *terra nullius* there has been another pervasive (if less remarked and less formalized) perception of the pre-colonial period as, essentially, *tempus nullius*: empty, unclaimed time: pre-history as an irrelevant blur of everyday events without plan, progression, innovation or impact. This perception necessarily precluded any sense of Indigenous people’s landscape-shaping history and regular stewardship. In an intriguing contemporary twist, Krznaric has taken this idea further and argued that the modern moment, more generally, is fixated on the present and therefore views both *the past and the future as tempus nullius* in a manner that is dismissive of history and uncaring of the future (qtd. in Darmody). Deep Aboriginal history is often referred to as the “Dream Time,” a period in which the landscape and its inhabitants were created by supernatural agency.

For Indigenous Australians this is not remote in the manner of ancient history in the Western world, but is rather a powerful originary moment that resonates in the present and extends into the future. It thereby offers Indigenous people a spiritual asset that can resist colonial and post-colonial repression. The so-called “Dreaming stories” complement the “Dream Time” but often reflect more specific and less prosaic aspects of human inhabitation of land and include tales, songs and visual representations. Such material records Indigenous maintenance burning and uses of fire for hunting, as in the vivid works of contemporary Pitjantjatjara artist Jorna Newberry, which render controlled burns in dark red waves over desert landscapes (see Japingka Aboriginal Art). Both the Dream Time and Dreaming stories are very much part of contemporary Australian Indigenous life and are acknowledged by more liberal/inclusivist non-Indigenous Australians. There is obviously a severe disjuncture between such worldviews and perceptions of there being a historical *tempus nullius* in pre-colonial Australia. Indeed, belief in *tempus nullius* and in the latest moment of the brief period of colonial settlement as being the crucial “now” is antithetical to Indigenous beliefs. This issue was made vividly apparent in early 2020 through the actions of the mining giant Rio Tinto Zinc (RTZ). In order to expand one of its iron ore mining areas in Western Australia, RTZ destroyed a 46,000-year-old Indigenous heritage site in the Juukan Gorge, ignoring objections and in full knowledge of the damage it

was doing. Despite media condemnation, the resignation of some senior executives, a public apology and an adverse finding against the company in a parliamentary report, there is no evidence that the company has shifted its priorities and senses of value. Its focus remains resolutely on the now.

Differing and contested notions of time also recur in public debates in other ways. During the peak of the 2019–20 bushfires, Green groups asserted that the fires were evidence of climate change and made pressing arguments for the Government to acknowledge and address this. In response, right-wing Australian politicians frequently stated that “now” wasn’t “the time” for such discussions. They also did not indicate what the “right time” for such discussions might be, simply attempting to postpone these into an indefinite future. This returns us to Krznicaric’s contention that we are increasingly regarding the future as *tempus nullius* in a manner that enables us to effectively dump discussions, measures, waste problems and general planetary degradation into it in an effort to enjoy the last vestiges of extractivist advantage while we can. This is a chillingly callous scenario that offers bleak prospects for the planet. Of course, there are counter-voices and a growing international commitment to zero carbon emissions *sometime* in the near future, but there is an increasing absence of any belief, narrative or rhetoric of progress and/or utopianism in the West. In its place—in liberal/environmentally sensitive contexts, at least—the hope is for slowing the rate of planetary degradation so that some semblance of a liveable future can be held onto.

As Whyte so persuasively identifies, a number of Indigenous perceptions of both the discourses that produced doctrines such as *terra nullius* and such contemporary concepts as *tempus nullius* are significantly different from Western/settler paradigms. In particular, some Indigenous perspectives on climate change “situate the present time as already dystopian” (Whyte 224) and, similarly, regard themselves as confronting Anthropocene climate change through the lens of “having already passed through environmental and climate crises arising from the effects of colonialism” (226). From such perspectives, the current moment is but one in a series of environmental catastrophes that have been caused by colonialism and extractivism (227). Important as such perceptions are within the broad conceptual framework explored in this paper, Indigenous peoples share a common interest with settler populations in seeking to limit the conflagration of ecosystems and natural and built landscapes. As Indigenous proponents of traditional Australian burning practices assert, even at this late stage in colonialism and the Anthropocene, we can still “look after the landscape” through traditional burning techniques (Victor Steffensen qtd. in Faa) in ways that benefit both Indigenous and settler inhabitants, and serve to educate the latter in the process.

REPRESENTING THE FIERY SUBLIME

In terms of representational principles and practices, there are both key similarities and key differences in how we can represent longer-term environmental issues and immediate emergencies. Both are vital and pressing but conflagration brings with it its own sense of urgent nowness. Fire is a compelling spectacle and while pyromania is a well-documented individual “disorder” within western psychiatry (Grant and Kim), the perversity of the impulse is in fact broadly dispersed. This is evident in the contemporary moment through what Demos describes as the “aesthetic delectation” of fire when images produced “in the thick of things” allow the “viewer, distanced, protected—at least temporarily so” to “witness destruction as a sublime aesthetic object . . . as disaster drives a networked imaging system in which viewers are able to escape the clutches of death, even as they can witness, in acts of perverse enjoyment, its visual, if not physical, encroachment.”

The notion of fiery destruction as a “sublime” aesthetic object requires some consideration. In common usage the term “sublime” combines a dual sense of aesthetic intensity and of awe, of being close to overwhelmed by an aesthetic object or experience. It’s ambiguous as to whether there is anything conventionally pleasant and/or pleasurable about such a response and, indeed, the sublime may be perceived as terrible and, thereby, as inducing terror. Drawing on the work of eighteenth-century philosopher Edmund Burke, Des Pres identifies that terror (in all its manifestations) is inherently connected to (and, in some senses, interchangeable with) sublimity and attracts us—albeit perversely—through offering us a prospect of our own annihilation. This is, of course, the basis of disaster fiction as a genre, providing vicarious thrills that enable us to fleetingly confront darkest fears and extreme visions of local and/or or planetary turmoil. As Page has identified, with particular regard to representations of New York in peril, cities are often the focus of such fictions, offering densely packed “sets” that can be demolished, exploded or inundated in various ways. In these regards, the media coverage of the events at the World Trade Center on 9/11 were preceded and given a genre context by fictional work but with the ante massively upped by the realization that the spectacle was actually happening. Somewhat surprisingly, fire disaster films have been few and far between and have mostly concerned urban disasters (such as John Guillermin’s *Towering Inferno* [1974] or Ron Howard’s *Backdraft* [1991]). One of the most notable exceptions to the previous characterization was Joseph Kosinski’s *Only the Brave* (2017), a film that focussed on a team of fire fighters that lost 19 of their members during a wildfire in Arizona in 2013. The film was widely praised by reviewers for

both its effective representation of human tragedy and its impressive CGI generated fire scenes, with Ebiri praising what he characterized as its “regal grace” and “controlled elegant approach” to its subject.

Notwithstanding the accomplishment of Kozinski’s film, one of the problems faced by fiction filmmakers is that their CGI effects and staged scenes cannot match the scale, variety and impact of actual conflagrations. This is particularly the case in the twenty-first century when an array of airborne, lightweight and/or highly portable cameras can provide multiple perspectives on bush fires. These allow us to both regard their scale from afar and witness the drama of moving fire-fronts, spot fires and incinerations at ground level. Our implication into the spectacle depends on how deeply fire terrifies us and what empathy we have for the populations, as well as the environments and regions far from us and/or in locales we may barely know. There is also a broader factor. While fires may have been common historically, particularly in fire-prone areas such as the West Coast of the United States or Eastern Australia, perceptions of their increasing frequency and intensity in the Anthropocene, and of our inability to prevent them, effectively paralyzes us, both in general and, particularly, at peak moments in fire seasons that seem to be increasing in duration. As Demos colourfully asserts: “[H]istory is itself burning with these fires, overwhelmed by current emergency alerts. Imminent disaster demands response, but there’s no time for structural analysis of etiology. We seem to be blinded by emergency, restricted to its immediacy, magnifying the emergency itself.” In this, we are stuck, fascinated, scared and imperilled by the conflagration of the present.

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DISCUSSION—CHALLENGING TIMES

Increasingly, the present and the future appear to have been conquered by the forces of the Anthropocene that our high carbon producing, industrialized societies have unleashed. Krznaric has posed the question in terms of how we might “de-colonize” the future, and this metaphor has some pertinence. If we see colonialism and the extractivist enterprise as innately correlated, as Gómez-Barris has argued, the challenge is to commence that decolonization and to learn the lessons of “Deep Time”: the “3.8 billion years of R and D” (Darmody), developed on the planet by natural (i.e. in this context, largely pre-human) systems. Krznaric’s discussions identify the need for a new enlightenment that is radically different from *the* Enlightenment that occurred in the West in the eighteenth century and opened the way for science and industry to usher in the Anthropocene.

The fundamental challenges facing humanity in the early twenty-first century are clear. In order to limit traumatic phenomena such as major changes to weather patterns and the inundation of lowlands we need to lower carbon emissions as quickly as possible and prevent further clearance of forests. This is the “core business” of the Green movement and it is vital and urgent. But another, more complex challenge involves adaptation. While the best prospect for nature regenerating itself in patterns that resemble those of the recent past would be for humans to suddenly disappear from the planet (as Weisman makes vivid) this seems somewhat unlikely, though not altogether impossible (given the likelihood of further pandemics). Increasingly it seems that the best-case scenario will involve us slowing and partially limiting Anthropocene phenomena and adapting to them.

One of the traumas experienced by a particular group of Australians in the summer of 2019–20 concerned the combustion of rainforests. People such as myself, who frequent areas populated by subtropical rainforest vegetation (in my case, the far northern eastern corner of NSW referred to variously as “Northern Rivers” or “The Rainbow Region”) were caught by surprise by the recent fires. The dense and usually moist ecosystems had previously appeared to be effectively immune to bush fires, breaking their progress when fire-fronts and/or spot fires occurred in grasslands or eucalypts. But 2019–20 was different. The intensity of the fires, fed by the considerable fuel-bases they consumed, swept into rainforest areas and burned-out vegetation that has no “tradition” or mechanisms for coping with such burns in the same manner that grasslands or particular species of trees have. The safe spaces of the rainforest, which activists such as I have toiled to preserve and protect, suddenly appeared colonized by the Anthropocene and their futures were instantly rewritten. It was a salutary experience, one that turned a blowtorch onto complacency and wishful thinking.

Adaptation has been key to both human and multi-species’ survival and development throughout global history. Indeed, evolution is a paradigmatic adaptive mechanism. But it is the pace of Anthropocene change that is most challenging and dismaying. The unfolding great extinction event of the Anthropocene is one in which species are recognized as endangered and their numbers variously plummet or disappear more quickly than activist efforts to protect them can be effectively mobilized. Each and every intervention to protect an endangered habitat and the species it houses is important but we are deluded if we think that such local successes are in any way remedying global extractivism and environmental devastation. We are protecting fragments and such fragments may well be all we have left. But fragments are vulnerable, and humanly induced

global warming and regional drought patterns are implacable forces. Two of the scariest phenomena presented to the Australian public during the 2019–20 fire crisis were the fire tornado and the supercell bushfire. These are related to, but significantly more powerful than, the phenomenon of small, heated whirlwinds bearing ash, cinders and smoke often referred to as “fire devils.” Revisiting the late nineteenth-century Symbolist paintings discussed in the first section, it is not difficult to imagine Conder’s fiery siren blowing such little twisters from her brazier, or even for the red swirls surrounding Streeton’s *Spirit of the Drought* to represent such a phenomenon, but fire tornados and supercell bushfires require a larger contextual frame to comprehend. Fire tornados are basically an amplified form of fiery whirlwind, spectacular and dangerous enough, but in supercell thunderstorms—generated by localized weather systems known as pyrocumulonimbus that feature large, rotating updrafts—the whole system can spin, generating intense, fast winds (Dowdy, Fromm and McCarthy) that can easily surprise and overwhelm fire crews or residents attempting to defend their homes. The scale of these phenomena overwhelms human perception and agency, and provides an Old Testament-type vision of a fiery Hell manifesting on Earth.

The existential challenges facing human society in the early twenty-first century are daunting. Staring into the flaming abyss of gigantic bushfires or into the flowing inundation of coastal lowlands can be overwhelming and, in the author’s specific context in Eastern Australia, there is a basic but pressing question of how to continue living in a fire zone with any degree of optimism about the present, let alone the future. The challenge involves engaging with time in its multiplicities; of shifting from the now-ism that defines our twenty-first-century lifestyles and worldviews and reasserting the past, present and future as overlapping. In this, the future—or, more precisely, our imagination of the future—can be seen to determine the present, perhaps even more than the present determines the future. If we can conceive a future in which our efforts to slow and stall the Anthropocene have some tangible results, we can imagine adapting to a future that, while significantly different from the present, is still bearable and can provide a platform to integrate natural and human entities and energies in more productive and balanced ways. There is (necessarily) no return to the past, to past ecosystems and past inhabitation practices that have been irrevocably altered. But new scenarios and new prospects for integrated deep ecologies and greater sustainability can inspire us to reconcile disparate worldviews and concepts of environmental stewardship if we can snap out of *now-ism* and inhabit time in a distinctly different manner and with a more profound sense of responsibility.

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Propheying the End of Human Time: Eco-Anxiety and Regress in J. G. Ballard's Short Fiction

ABSTRACT

Despite being written half a century before the term “eco-anxiety” (Gifford and Gifford) was coined, J. G. Ballard’s disaster fictions can be read in the context of the social psychodynamics of climate change. My aim in this article is to demonstrate that in J. G. Ballard’s fiction, climate catastrophes and the devastation of nature cause the characters to realize that the Earth is not going to be able to sustain human life much longer, and their psychological reaction is either subdued anger or strange numbness. In order to do this, I analyze two short stories by Ballard: “Deep End” (1961) and “Low-Flying Aircraft” (1975) and show how their protagonists are affected by the landscape they inhabit: de-populated wastelands whose wildlife is extinct or mutated. I argue that it is their awareness that human civilization on earth is coming to its end that results in the state of mind akin to eco-anxiety. The characters are immersed in their own inner space and in these stories clocks mark not the passage from past to future but a countdown to the end.

Keywords: eco-anxiety, J. G. Ballard, climate fiction, science fiction, inner space.

J. G. Ballard went quite a long way in terms of recognition—from the relatively marginal position of eccentric science fiction author in the 1960s to a contemporary British “great” in the 1990s. It was the artistic and commercial success of his semi-autobiographical novel *Empire of the Sun* (1984) that established his position as an important contemporary novelist and resulted in the dissemination of certain critical clichés. Specifically, his name began to be associated with war fiction and autobiography, and the fantastic catastrophic scenarios he had been creating for years began to be interpreted as projections of his wartime traumas (Luckhurst; Gasiorek; Baxter; Francis). Yet, as his early disaster fictions are often concerned with catastrophes related to abrupt changes in the climate—both natural and anthropogenic—this part of his *oeuvre* is being rediscovered today by critics interested in climate fiction (cli-fi).

J. G. Ballard’s disaster fiction, written half a century before the term “eco-anxiety” (Gifford and Gifford) was coined, can be read as profound studies of climate-related mental conditions. The first to talk about eco-anxiety were journalists: in 2008 columnist Katherine Ellison wrote a text for *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment* where she interviewed a number of therapists who claimed that eco-anxiety (or “eco-worry”) was a legitimate source of distress. Then, in 2016 climate reporter Tyler Hamilton published “Climate Change Is Wreaking Havoc on Our Mental Health, Experts Say,” which was based on the research of the American Psychological Association (APA).

More academic publications followed: Robert Gifford, a University of Victoria psychology professor, and a member of the American Psychological Association, wrote (with Eva Gifford) a research paper entitled “The Largely Unacknowledged Impact of Climate Change on Mental Health,” where they claim that feeling powerless in the face of irreversible climate change is a serious hazard to public’s mental condition:

Climate change can affect mental health even before its actual appearance. Distress related to impending environmental change, such as habitual ecological worrying and “eco-anxiety,” has been increasingly noted. . . . many people are often unconsciously anxious, unaware of just how concerned they truly are about impending environmental changes. This lack of awareness often slowly diminishes, to be replaced by increasingly severe anxiety about how dire the situation has become. (292)

Interestingly, sixty years earlier, J. G. Ballard was interested in such “unconsciously anxious” characters who react to the changing environment by retreating to their “inner space” (Ballard, *A User’s Guide* 197). In 1962 he

claimed that every apparently objective phenomenon, such as time, should be described as “what it is, one of the perspectives of the personality” (Ballard, *A User’s Guide* 198), thus making all reality subjective. In “Fatally Confused” (2012) Michelle Bastian, who is interested in how people perceive time in the age of climate change, discusses precisely such a subjective temporal dimension of eco-anxiety. She contrasts “the wide array of calendars, schedules, timetables, and so on, that arise from social institutions, logistical systems, personal life, and communications systems,” with the feeling that “far from being able to coordinate our actions with the significant changes our world is currently undergoing, we are increasingly out of synch” (24). Ballard’s artistic intuitions are very similar.

In my opinion, his concentration on the human mind’s suffering from an awareness that nature is slowly dying is Ballard’s insightful contribution to both disaster fiction and the contemporary humanities in general. My aim in this article is to show that J. G. Ballard’s climate catastrophes make the characters mentally suffer as they are traumatized by the fact that the Earth is not going to be able to sustain human life much longer. In his fiction the countdown of the time we have on the planet has already begun. To do this, I analyze two short stories by Ballard—“Deep End” (1961) and “Low-Flying Aircraft” (1975)—and show how their protagonists are affected by the landscape they inhabit: de-populated wastelands whose wildlife is extinct or has mutated. It is the characters’ awareness that human civilization on earth is dying that causes their anxiety or makes them numb and withdrawn. Thus, they sense the approaching end of measurable time conceived as a linear progression of human culture and, allegorically, for them clocks show not the passage from the past to the future but from the present to the end. In “Deep End” and “Low-Flying Aircraft”—two thought-provoking stories which are rarely discussed by Ballard’s critics—it is the environmental changes that affect the inner space of the protagonists, and this process is described in a detached, scientific way.

J. G. BALLARD AND CLI-FI

The idea that human-made climate change might lead to the demise of the human race is a well-known science fiction scenario. As early as 1934, in a disaster novel entitled *The Strange Invaders*, D. W. Alun Llewellyn describes earth in the clutches of a new Ice Age, in which humankind has retrogressed as a result of bloody wars and the habitable area is gradually decreasing: “*The Strange Invaders* looks at this planet and the ecological change upon it as a result of Man’s abandonment of Mind as a motive force

of his evolution” (Smith 340–41). Two decades later, during World War II, H. F. Heard wrote “The Great Fog.” In this short story, careless human experiments put an end to the world as we know it. The army biologists try to produce an edible mould to be used as an unlimited source of food for the army since it grows everywhere and is able to increase humidity. Yet the unstoppable spreading of the mould changes the climate forever: the earth is covered with a dense fog that makes it impossible to see at a distance, travel, make fire, weld metals or store food. The human race does survive, but it devolves and is reduced to living without the advantages of technology.

In the following years, more works of environmental science fiction were created, but it was not until the 1960s that J. G. Ballard published his climate disaster novels, among them *The Drowned World*, which today is considered the precursor of the new branch of environmental science fiction called cli-fi. The term “cli-fi” was coined by journalist Dan Bloom in 2011 and has been gaining popularity ever since. In “Fantastic Futures? Cli-Fi, Climate Justice, and Queer Futurity,” Rebecca Evans notices that “cli-fi, defined as literary works that describe climate change, existed before it was named” (96). This last remark is relevant for the discussion of Ballard’s 1960s climate disaster novels: in *A Wind from Nowhere*, the Earth is ravaged and human civilization is destroyed by a gigantic, unstoppable global hurricane; in *The Drowned World*, the melting icebergs flood most of the continents and change habitable areas into over-heated archipelagos; in *The Crystal World*, a strange saturation of matter makes the planet hostile to biological life; and in *The Drought*, human-made pollution of the oceans stops vaporization and results in the cessation of rains. This list only includes novels; simultaneously, Ballard wrote short fiction in which human psychological reactions to climate disasters were scrutinized. All his protagonists face the aftermath of climatic devastation. As a result, they “traverse liminal states, often as psychological as physical, in which civilization recedes to the status of memory, and existence comes to be dominated and defined by the environment and its monothematic transformation” (Clarke 7). Critics such as Jim Clarke, Rachele Dini and Adrian Tait emphasize that Ballard wrote his cli-fi in the decades when intellectuals were first realizing that the biosphere had been being systematically damaged for years—at least since the Industrial Revolution—and that the changes might prove irreversible and lethal. Clarke writes in “Reading Climate Change in J. G. Ballard”: “[b]efore there was climate change, there was nonetheless climate fiction” (7). Rachele Dini gives her analysis of waste and recycling in Ballard’s texts a telling title: “‘Resurrected from its Own Sewers’: Waste, Landscape, and the Environment in J. G. Ballard’s 1960s Climate Fiction.” Adrian Tait, in “Nature Reclaims

Her Own: J. G. Ballard's *The Drowned World*," juxtaposes passages taken from *The Drowned World* with quotes from Rachel Carson and bulletins relating to recent findings of the Intergovernmental Panel for Climate Change (158). Reading Ballard today, "in the shadow of the still-unfolding event of global warming" (Evans 95), when social psychodynamics in the times of climate change are researched academically (Wasdell; Gifford and Gifford), Ballard's climate disaster fiction strikes these critics as profound psychological studies of people awaiting acute trauma. His characters experience "surges" of anxiety (Taylor), or, alone in the depopulated world, they feel a strange numbness.

Yet, towards the end of his writing career, Ballard published his late novel, *Rushing to Paradise* (1994) in which he overtly attacks and critiques a fictional cult of environmentalists, if not their agenda. *Rushing to Paradise* is a story of the French Pacific island of Saint Esprit, which was to become a site of nuclear tests but, thanks to an environmentalist campaign led by the charismatic and unpredictable Dr. Barbara, has been turned instead into a sanctuary for endangered species. The few volunteers who stay with her on the island to tend the animals are forced to live through the traumatic experience of taking part in the cruel sociological experiment conducted by this demented woman. The book, narrated from the point of view of one of the volunteers, a teenage boy, is an intertextual echo of William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. Their stay on the island becomes an examination of the latent parts of human nature and tests the endurance of the psyche faced with the danger of such radical ideologies as pacifism, environmentalism and feminism in their most militant faces. Thus, trying to retrospectively code Ballard's fiction as cli-fi is an oversimplification though his early disaster novels link to the theme of environmental catastrophe; yet Ballard's protagonists are unsure whether to resist disaster at all, and they often unconsciously long to perish.

Whether it makes sense to call Ballard's early fiction cli-fi is currently being discussed, and there are also critics who are reluctant to call him a forefather of the contemporary literature about climate change because of the anti-environmentalist novel discussed above. Yet Ballard's generation knew that increasing pollution was dangerous and writing about climate catastrophes before global warming became a widely discussed issue was less surprising than it might seem today. Moreover, most of the climate catastrophes he describes are not anthropogenic and Ballard's interest in climate is less significant than his fascination with surrealism and trauma. In one of the first important critical assessments of his fiction, *Earth is the Alien Planet: J. G. Ballard's Four-Dimensional Nightmare* (1979), David Pringle writes: "[Ballard's] favourite device was a biospheric disaster: a world of the near future changed into a series of surrealistic

landscapes” (9). Therefore, Ballard is primarily interested in the minds of those characters who are affected by “surrealistic” climate change and who are aware that the earth is incapable of sustaining human life much longer. Similarly, in 1997, in a classic of Ballardian criticism, “*The Angle Between Two Walls*”: *The Fiction of J. G. Ballard*, Roger Luckhurst observes that Ballard’s disaster fictions “abandon both the concern with representing the path of the catastrophe . . . and any thought of a circular return to the reinvented social world. They take place *between catastrophes*, in the space after the initial catastrophe and the ‘catastrophe’ which follows, death” (38, italics in the original). For these critics Ballard’s interest in climate issues is just a pretext to study the inner space of his characters. In 1962 J. G. Ballard published his artistic manifesto, the famous article “Which Way to Inner Space,” where he claims that ambitious science fiction should abandon repetitive space stories and investigate the inner space of the human mind. In explaining his ideas he writes:

SF has a continuing and expanding role as an imaginative interpreter of the future. . . . The biggest developments of the immediate future will take place, not on the Moon or Mars, but on Earth, and it is *inner* space, not outer, that needs to be explored. The only truly alien planet is Earth. In the past the scientific bias of SF has been towards the physical sciences—rocketry, electronics, cybernetics—and the emphasis should switch to the biological sciences. (Ballard, *A User’s Guide* 197)

The most important narrative technique should be psychological speculation. “I’d like to see more psycho-literary ideas, more meta-biological and meta-chemical concepts, private time-systems, synthetic psychologies and space-times” (197), he concludes. I would like to propose that the perception of time in the age of climate change might be considered such a “psycho-literary” idea.

J. G. BALLARD’S PROTAGONISTS ON THE DYING PLANET

The persistent thought that human time, and the linear time of Western civilization’s progress, is coming to an end causes Ballardian protagonists to realize that they live between catastrophes: the irreparable destruction of the biosphere and the moment of the end of all human life on earth. This is the case of the protagonists of both “Deep End” and “Low-Flying Aircraft”: their distress is related to the environmental change they see around them. Ballard’s protagonists tend to contrast the hectic urban modern life, which is all about hurrying and multitasking, with the pastoral

timelessness of nature—a “Wordsworthian nostalgia” (Anderson 43). The moment nature visibly changes—temperatures rise, ice caps melt, animals stop migrating—anxiety attacks them. Though nature is not, and has never been, unchanging, they are conditioned to believe it should be so, and experience distress.

“Deep End” is a story of Holliday, a young boy who lives on what used to be the Atlantic seafloor but is now a salty desert interspersed with mutated kelp fields. “The frantic mining of the oceans in the previous century to provide the oxygen for the atmospheres of the new planets” (Ballard, “Deep End” 239) resulted in the destruction of the seas and nearly the entire human race has migrated to other places in the Solar System; only a few elderly people decided to stay and live out their last days near lake Atlantic, surrounded by the empty launching platforms. Holliday suffers from chronic depression and yet is reluctant to leave; some compulsion whose nature escapes him forces him to stay. In the story, we see how the accidental discovery of a live dogfish in a puddle of saline water makes him believe that he has taken the right decision and that zoological life on earth is going to be rekindled. He becomes a self-appointed guardian of the planet, but when he sees the children of the emigrants waiting for their departure for Mars kill the fish for sport the following day, he understands that nature is doomed. Holliday’s trauma is uncannily similar to the feelings of an “absence of hope” (Hamilton) which is characteristic of the victims of eco-anxiety.

Similar, though less acute, feelings are shared by the protagonist of “Low-Flying Aircraft,” a youngish man named Forrester living in a depopulated Europe. Together with his wife, he is waiting for their baby to be born in an empty hotel in a deserted sea resort with only a few elderly people around. The continually increasing levels of radiation are slowly changing the planet: the sunshine is getting brighter and brighter, and although the survivors are physically fit, they suffer anxiety and trauma. For tens of years, only one in about a thousand pregnancies ends happily. Most infants are born terribly disfigured and, as they are considered unable to survive, they are put to death painlessly. After many such births, the Forresters are strangely convinced that this time the baby will be healthy. This does not happen, yet Forrester accidentally finds out that the mutated infants—both human and mammalian—are nature’s attempts to prepare the fauna for some over-heated ultraviolet-lit future of the planet. Feeling strangely detached, he decides to give his newly born son to a mutated young woman who lives in the mountains. Forrester comes to believe that there is probably going to be some future for a post-human species that is adapted to the new environment, but human time is definitely coming to its end. For generations people have

been killing their mutated babies who in fact are not disfigured but more evolved than their parents. Ironically, only these babies deemed retarded and disfigured have the best chance of survival.

Both narratives tell a similar story of a mixture of hope and despair and—although written in the third person singular—they are focalized exclusively by the narrators. In both, Ballard skilfully uses free indirect discourse, which allows him to create an apparently objective picture of the deteriorating biosphere and the dilapidated remnants of human civilization while suggesting that this is how the narrators see their worlds. What the narrators have in common is their comparative youth in an ageing world, the anxiety with which they watch the decline of nature and of the human species, and their readiness to draw conclusions that other characters prefer not to see: specifically, that our time on earth is coming to its inevitable end as either we are going to destroy nature and leave, or nature is going to irreversibly change us. Significantly, the process is inevitable: it is in the nature of civilizations and species to end. Humans use up the resources of the planet preparing for the final departure, or biological life on earth mutates because the planet enters a new stage of its existence. It is not due to anyone's choice but because it is the way of the universe. Human linear time is contrasted with millennia-long cycles of cosmic time, which is non-linear.

Moreover, the decay of the biosphere and the destruction of the countryside, which are described in detail in both stories, serve as correlatives of the characters' mental states. The salt fields of mutated kelp, "their genetic shifts accelerated by the radio-phosphors" (Ballard, "Deep End" 237), the oppressive heat, the seabed of old buried under endless salt heaps and the deserted launching platforms make Holliday compare the shores of lake Atlantic to "a white lunar garden" (Ballard, "Deep End" 237). Though he feels the strong need to stay on earth, the planet itself grows alien before his eyes. For Forrester, the empty resort town with its abandoned airfields, promenades and pleasure domes bathed in over-bright unnatural light are just like the surreal landscapes on the canvases at the Dali Museum in Figueras, which are peopled with "the surrealist's flaccid embryos and anatomical monstrosities" (Ballard, "Low-Flying Aircraft" 830). Dali's paintings reflect how Forrester sees the depopulated Mediterranean: deformed pregnancies and herds of hundreds of shaggy-haired bullocks, "sightless creature[s], clearly mutant[s]" high in the mountains. The animals, as he later guesses, have adapted to see ultra-violet.

Both narrators project their anxiety onto very white, very bright and very hot landscapes, and both are keen observers of mutations who realize that the biosphere is rapidly changing into an environment unable to host human life. This impression is reflected in numerous passages describing

the depopulation of the planet. Holliday feels like “a Robinson Crusoe in reverse,” and knows that the people urging him to emigrate are right when they say: “You are the last man on the beach who decides to stay behind when everybody else has left. Maybe you are a poet and dreamer, but don’t you realize that those two species are extinct now?” (Ballard, “Deep End” 238). He meets very few people even though all who have left live close together since there is only a narrow layer of oxygen-containing air, and to survive one must stick to the lowest plains of what used to be an ocean bed. The pervasive feeling of loneliness is increased by the fact that entire zoological classes of fauna are extinct and for ten years no one has seen any larger wildlife.

Similarly, the Forresters have been living in “an almost depopulated world” (Ballard, “Low-Flying Aircraft” 829) for as long as they can remember. For them, a town inhabited by fifteen or twenty people is quite big, yet Forrester vaguely remembers that in his childhood he used to see more than a few holidaymakers on the Mediterranean beaches. He works in Geneva making inventories of the huge stockpiles of foodstuffs and medicines left from the old days: they are going to last for decades keeping the ever-dwindling population alive. Significantly, he notices that “most of Europe’s urban areas were deserted altogether, including surprisingly, some of its great cathedral cities—Chartres, Cologne and Canterbury” (Ballard, “Low-Flying Aircraft” 838). Religion can give people no consolation, and they do not despair but silently die away; he himself calmly accepts “the terrifying logic of this reductive nightmare” (Ballard, “Low-Flying Aircraft” 832), and compares people “closing down the western hemisphere” to “a group of circus workers dismantling their tents and killing their animals at the season’s end” (833). Immersed in his inner space he feels numb rather than desperate.

Holliday in “Deep End” and Forrester in “Low-Flying Aircraft” are much younger than the people around them. In the former story, all of Holliday’s peers have already departed for Mars or will be departing in a couple of days, and the few people who decide to stay are too sick (his best friend, a retired marine biologist who has only one lung) or too old to leave the planet. During an interview with an emigration officer, the boy is warned: “[T]he average age of the settlement is over sixty. In ten years, you and Granger may well be the only two left here, and if that lung of his goes you’ll be on your own” (Ballard, “Deep End” 236). In “Low-Flying Aircraft,” both the Forresters are much younger than any other non-mutated human being. We learn that they were born themselves in a period when healthy infants were a rarity and, in their lifetime, there has never been much hope for “rekindling . . . fertility” (Ballard, “Low-Flying Aircraft” 834).

Most importantly, both protagonists unconsciously wait for the final catastrophe, the ultimate end of human life on earth, and, despite all their efforts to remain hopeful, they know there is no hope. Finding the healthy dogfish that has adapted to salty waters, Holliday cheerfully exclaims: “Earth isn’t dead and exhausted after all. We can breed new forms of life, a completely new biological kingdom” (Ballard, “Deep End” 241) only to soon find the fish being killed. This act of purposeless human violence is confirmation of his innermost belief that the cosmic countdown cannot be stopped, and the human race must perish. His friend’s weak attempt at consolation, “it’s not the end of the world,” enrages him (Ballard, “Deep End” 243); it is the ultimate end of *his* world. Empathy with the zoological kingdom is shown as a strong instinctive force similar to a contemporary person’s strange distress when reading about the disappearance of coral reefs he or she has never seen, as the boy feels involved in the mass extinction, and the death of the zoological species wreaks havoc on his mental well-being. Forrester’s reaction to trauma is numbness: he follows an inner impulse to save his mutated son, but he does not try to find the colony of post-human children—they belong to another race. The mutated girl, his real kin, should nurse the mutated boy. Forrester’s world is doomed and human time is ending:

Isn’t it obvious that we were intended to embark on a huge replacement program, though sadly the people we are replacing turn out to be ourselves. Our job is simply to repopulate the world with our successors. As for our need to be alone, this intense enjoyment of our own company, and the absence of any sense of despair, I suppose they are all nature’s way of saying goodbye. (Ballard, “Low-Flying Aircraft” 839)

Ballard’s protagonist is unconsciously aware that human destination is extinction and his reaction is “the absence of any sense of despair,” or rather, a bizarre mixture of hope and despair. Instead of mourning or trying to fight the inevitable he willingly embraces disaster, which is strangely comforting for him as it resonates with scenarios encoded within his inner mind. In this unhappy, disintegrating world Holliday and Forrester sense that the time of the human race is approaching its end.

COUNTDOWN AND THE PRE-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER

Interestingly, in both “Deep End” and “Low-Flying Aircraft,” the protagonists realize that they live at the end of the linear, western time of progressing history, at a point of regress, when chronometers melt away,

just like in the Dali paintings Forrester so adores. Young Holliday is told by his friends that “Earth is dead and buried. Past, present and future no longer exist here” (Ballard, “Deep End” 238). He knows that when his last companions, who are much older than he is, die, he is going to be left stranded and alone on the extinct planet, leading a strange existence with no clocks, no changing of the seasons, nothing to wait for. Forrester senses the irrevocable end of human history as we know it and the advent of a new timeless era when new kinds of mammalian species will rule the planet. A mutated girl fascinates him as a denizen of this unknown alien future: her eyes are sheltered from the day’s sun, but she is capable of seeing blazing lights that would ruin human eyes. Another character, an elderly doctor, tells him that the girl collects broken clocks which she uses to create surreal collage-like contraptions:

She has a huge collection of watches with luminous dials, hundreds of them, that she’s been filching for years from the shops. She’s got them all working together but to different times, it’s some sort of a gigantic computer. God only knows what overlit world nature is preparing for her, but I suppose we won’t be around to see it. (Ballard, “Low-Flying Aircraft” 839)

Listening to the doctor, Forrester feels symbolically excluded from the bizarre future of the post-human, timeless race: the earth is changing and the girl represents an adaptation. Her strange eyes are not a defect but a preparation for the “overlit world” with an increased activity of the sun. In this world the girl (and the mutated children) will thrive and Forrester (and other people) will have to die.

The notion that human time of recorded history, time measured in years and imagined as a line stretching from the past to the future—from the beginning of history to the end of the human world—is only a moment in comparison to the vast temporal domains before and after appeals to the protagonists of both “Deep End” and “Low-Flying Aircraft.” Ballard contrasts two aspects of time: one is logical and linear and Newtonian “absolute time that charts a single all-compassing movement from the past to the future” (Bastian, “Inventing Nature” 104); the other is the seeming chaos of apparently random changes in nature.

It is worth remembering that what we consider to be “history” is but a short period of the recorded time before and after which stretch the uncountable millennia of unrecorded geological time. In “How the Concept of Deep Time Is Changing,” David Farrier compares the changes in nature induced by humankind to the deep-time processes shaping the planet’s biosphere for aeons: “[C]ycles of sedimentation and erosion, a process

of lifting up then grinding down rocks that required timescales much grander than those of prevailing Biblical narratives” (Farrier). People used to imagine human time as a road leading ahead, but today we tend to think rather in terms of how much time is left for us before the new post-human epoch. Similarly, Michelle Bastian insightfully notices that “standard clock time is not adequate in the context of climate change” (“Fatally Confused” 39). Bastian compares the temporal aspect of current eco-anxiety to what people felt during the Cold War when the Doomsday Clock was created by the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists in 1947 to indicate the likelihood of nuclear war according to “the commonly understood convention of midnight to signify the end of time” (Bastian, “Fatally Confused” 39). She notices that the minute hand was not signifying quantitative time but the probability of disaster, and the same convention is used today when the Doomsday Clock is used to indicate how probable an end of the world prompted by climate change or biological weapons is. Now the Clock shows that the ecological catastrophe is very near (Bastian, “Fatally Confused” 39). Similarly, Ballard’s protagonists know that the human epoch is coming to an end.

In “Low-Flying Aircraft,” Ballard suggests that surrealist art anticipates the inevitable demise of human civilization and our psychological reaction to it. Watching the already mentioned Dali paintings of deserted landscapes, which he calls “a collection of newsreels from Hell” (Ballard, “Low-Flying Aircraft” 830), Forrester is fascinated. He clearly appreciates the painter’s prophetic instincts, yet it is the remark of another character, an elderly doctor who helps the mutated girl, that tells us what he sees on the canvas: “The ultimate dystopia is the inside of one’s own head” (830). Just like Holliday, Forrester internalizes the disaster and suffers not from any acute panic but from an unresolved sense of loss, helplessness, and frustration. “A sharp guess at the future” (830), the doctor comments on Dali’s catastrophic paintings when he sees how moved Forrester is by them.

Forrester can hope that his mutated son and other children will one day inherit the earth but he also knows that for him and his wife there is no future. David Wasdell uses the term “collective pre-traumatic-stress disorder” to describe such a feeling—the terror of annihilation which people feel when they know the future is going to be much different than all they know and feel and try to visualize life beyond the transition:

The clinical diagnosis of global psychodynamics would be one of collective post-traumatic stress disorder. But from the fixated position of collective regression to an idealised pre-trauma state, the impingement is projected into future time. In fantasy, the catastrophic impingement has not yet taken place, but is imminent, feared and to

be avoided at all costs. . . . This collective pre-traumatic stress disorder transforms the hope of birth into the terror of annihilation, blocking our capacity to envisage life beyond the transition. Here then lie the roots of the paranoid-schizoid syndrome mobilised collectively in the face of environmental change. Foetal assumptions and primitive defences against peri-natal anxiety become fatal assumptions and dysfunctional dynamics when applied to the reality of contemporary life on island earth. (Waddell 9)

Thus the “collective post-traumatic-stress disorder” that human populations are known to have suffered after great disasters is slowly being replaced by a “collective pre-traumatic-stress disorder”: being traumatized by an unavoidable catastrophe that is yet to come. What people feel is their own powerlessness, an unresolved sense of loss and frustration; they fear an increasingly uncertain global future and the eco-anxiety generated by this fear is not addressed in any constructive manner as it seems that nothing can be done to avert the final catastrophe. The protagonists of “Deep End” and “Low-Flying Aircraft” are in precisely such a situation: awareness that natural cycles have been destroyed and that human time is slowly coming to its end traumatizes them, and they replace measuring the passage of time with a countdown of the remaining days or years of the human species. Their eco-anxiety results from the fact that they know they face years of inevitable regress.

Ballard describes their states of mind by adopting the characters’ perspectives: we see the destroyed landscapes through their eyes and their focus on symbols. The fish in “Deep End” and the apparently healthy pregnancy in “Low-Flying Aircraft” represent vain attempts to re-establish the natural order of things of the past. The surrealist paintings of Dali and the mutated girl’s shiny collection of useless clocks also symbolize the regress of human time on a dying planet. Both stories are about a lost hope that time can be turned back and that nature can become stable again. Yet in both cases, disasters happen—the fish dies, the world is depopulated—and the protagonists are forced to realize that they are witnessing the end of human time and the end of human civilization.

Recently, eco-anxiety has become a buzzword. People who witness the gradual deterioration of the climate are said to develop an unconscious fear of the future, for example, they get “gripped by a sudden and profound sense of despair over the ecological collapse of coral reefs” and they are overwhelmed by “this surge of anxiety” (Taylor). Ballard’s characters react to environmental disaster in a more complex fashion (though Holliday does feel a sudden and profound sense of despair over the death of his fish). They are aware that they live in the last days, and the approaching

end of human time makes them think about the future in terms of a countdown. They feel resignation and retreat to their inner space—thus their stories are the ultimate narratives of regression. Though Ballard’s (climate) fiction, written half a century before global warming, is neither the only nor the first attempt to depict climate disasters, he is prophetic in his concentration on how this change affects human minds.

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The Nature of Irrevocability: Anthropocene Nostalgia in Hayley Eichenbaum's Photography Series *The Mother Road*

ABSTRACT

The recent acknowledgement of the Anthropocene, resulting from the increasingly visible human-induced effects on the biosphere, has ultimately obliterated the nature/culture division (Latour; Chakrabarty), prompting sociocultural changes (Autin). Hayley Eichenbaum's photography series *The Mother Road* (2015–19) serves as a prominent example of a contemporary American cultural text which reinterprets existing aesthetic strategies and shows symptoms of what I propose to identify as Anthropocene nostalgia. This new sentiment is characterized by the awareness that a return to the past is impossible and would be pernicious, given the detrimental effects of reckless capitalism fuelled by twentieth-century American consumer culture. This article aims to analyze this distinctive type of nostalgia and its juxtaposition with the Anthropocene in Eichenbaum's series. An analysis of *The Mother Road* identifies why and how this new sentiment corresponds with the aesthetics of previous decades, as well as notions of temporality and time. Building on previously conceptualized traditions as codes of reference, Eichenbaum reinterprets the representation of Route 66 by playing with its iconography, creating images which evoke desolate, quasi-post-apocalyptic landscapes. With the use of synthetic colours, digital manipulation, kitsch imagery, and mindful deconstruction of past aesthetic strategies, the analyzed series demythologizes the past and displays the loss of both nature itself and of pre-Anthropocene perception.

Keywords: Anthropocene, temporality, Hayley Eichenbaum, Route 66, nostalgia, kitsch.

The Anthropocene has led to disastrous consequences for the biosphere. It has also marked a fundamental shift in global understanding of natural and cultural phenomena, as well as their interdependence. The division between nature and culture has been recently deemed obsolete, as the new climate change-induced geohistorical period leads to a redefinition of what we understand as nature, making us more “earthbound” than ever (Latour, *Facing Gaia* 38). The growing awareness of an impending natural catastrophe leads to eco-anxiety (Ojala), irreversibly changing the common perception of natural, cultural, and social relations. The Anthropocene is then understood as a “dissonant difference” (Colebrook 6), as well as “the most pertinent philosophical, religious, anthropological and . . . political concept” for our times (Latour, *Facing Gaia* 116). As a result, the crisis of climate change, along with its widespread repercussions, finds its resonance in culture, including the arts, leading to reinterpretation of different ideas and notions. A salient example of this is the emergence of a new type of nostalgia.

This article investigates the intersection of nostalgia and the Anthropocene in a photography series by a young American artist based in Milwaukee and Los Angeles, Hayley Eichenbaum (1992–). Entitled *The Mother Road* (2015–19), this series employs the new mode of nostalgia to which we will henceforth refer as “Anthropocene nostalgia.” Unlike other modes of this sentiment, this type of nostalgia does not elicit a yearning for the past despite the aesthetic appeal of the images and clear references to the previous decades. This considerable revision of the old notion is associated with (and caused by) the recent common acknowledgement of the Anthropocene and its negative consequences. Contradictory in its nature, Anthropocene nostalgia refers to the past but does so in a critical manner, with the use of aestheticization, irony, digital manipulation, and an unvarnished yet accurate representation of the previous decades. The majority of the aforementioned tools are employed by Eichenbaum in the discussed series. Significantly, the images we will analyze evoke a post-apocalyptic landscape that has been emptied of people, visualizing the world on the verge between unrestricted technological progress and an Anthropocene apocalypse. *The Mother Road's* desolate, post-industrial sceneries show the havoc of laissez-faire capitalism, which is one of the major causes of the current state of the environment (McDuff). Elements of Route 66 infrastructure presented in the photographs, although in a state of decay, are heavily aestheticized, hence the term “nostalgia” juxtaposed with the concept of the Anthropocene. Nevertheless, as the Anthropocene means “a radical change in the conditions of visibility and the subsequent transformation of the world into images” (Emmelhainz), the photographs which we will discuss serve as a remarkable example of this shift, without

belonging to the conventional environmental photography genre. There are other representatives of Anthropocene nostalgia in contemporary photography (such as Troy Paiva, Emmanuel Monzon, Christopher Soukup, or Dana Yurcisin), and the aesthetic strategies they employ are varied. The specificity of Eichenbaum's images lies in that they challenge the traditional roles of nostalgia and Anthropocene-related photography by reproducing and altering past aesthetics and apparatuses.

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Eichenbaum's *The Mother Road* (as well as the concepts of nostalgia and the Anthropocene) is closely related to the notions of temporality and memory. The images portray the icon of "the Old America"—the famous Route 66 with all its surrounding infrastructure, such as elements of Google architecture, diners, trailers, and other emblems of petroleum culture. The photographs perfectly encompass the long-gone past and the post-industrial present, picturing "a place where deterioration and romance coexist" (Eichenbaum, "Hayley Eichenbaum on Going Viral")—a landscape highly characteristic of the imagery of Anthropocene nostalgia.

Time and the notion of temporality have been crucial in defining nostalgia—both as a sentiment and as a cultural construct. Recognized in the eighteenth century as "a suffering attached to a memory" (Fuentenebro de Diego and Ots 406), nostalgia has been since then understood as longing for the past. The term was once again reinterpreted at the close of the twentieth century by Fredric Jameson in *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991). Jameson analyzed nostalgia as a mode, that is, the imagination of a given period and specific aspects subjectively attributed to it rather than its realistic representation. He famously described this tendency as "nostalgia for the present" (Jameson 279), which allows us to consume the past in the form of "stylistic connotation[s]" (19). Another distinguished theorist in nostalgia studies, Svetlana Boym, proposed a different classification, also inherently linked with memory and temporality. In *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001), she described two categories: a restorative nostalgia and a reflective one. Restorative nostalgia involves taking a real action resulting from a strong willingness to return to the past—this feeling often manifests itself "in total reconstructions of monuments of the past," putting emphasis on *nóstos* (Boym 44). In turn, a reflective type has no intention of changing anything, as it is "dwell[ing] in *álg[os]*"—lingering on a "patina of time" and focusing on the poignant feeling of wistfulness (Boym 41). Along with the more theoretical works appeared analyses concentrated

on specific, not yet examined types of nostalgia. In *Monochrome Memories* (2002), Paul Grainge discussed the 1990s American nostalgia that referred mostly to the first half of the twentieth century by means of black-and-white images. Therefore, I propose Anthropocene nostalgia as a new, twenty-first-century mode of this sentiment, as it effectively encompasses the intersection of major categories of the current era: time, temporality, and climate change.

Similarly to nostalgia, the Anthropocene is a notion significantly entangled with time in multiple ways. According to Timothy Morton, time is a crucial factor in defining the so-called hyperobjects. Hyperobjects (examples of which are the solar system, uranium, or styrofoam) are defined by time; they are stretched out over time to the point of being imperceptible, or rather, subliminally overlooked. With the Anthropocene being one of the most representative examples of Morton's concept, hyperobjects "envelop us, yet they are so massively distributed in time that they seem to taper off" (Morton 55). In coherence with the complex relationship between time and space which we will observe in Eichenbaum's photographs and in the type of nostalgia they represent, Morton defines the Anthropocene as an era when "we're no longer dealing with time or space as containers, but including time and space as dimensions of the high-dimensional phase space," with time "rippling through" the objects. Therefore, he advocates for a growing awareness of the climate crisis and for "thinking hyperobjects as transdimensional real things" in order to transit to an "ecological age" (Morton 73). Interestingly, Eichenbaum's images seem to play a role in this kind of transition (though not in a direct form, the way the awareness-raising environmental art does): they show how time has "rippled through" the objects she captures. This effect is emphasized by synthetic colours that accentuate the extent to which the Western world has intentionally turned away from nature, altering and destroying it over the course of centuries. Thus, contrary to Kathryn Yusoff and Jennifer Gabrys's claim that "[c]limate change is a social, environmental, and scientific phenomenon that is characterized by its relationship to futures" (518), I argue that it is defined mostly by its relation to the past, as well as to the present it has so severely affected, given the recently accelerating pace of irreversible environmental degradation.

Taking the above into consideration, the irrevocable transience of time is painfully experienced in the era of the Anthropocene. It is highlighted by emptiness that accompanies the sceneries pictured by Eichenbaum, asserting that the Mother Road is long past its heyday. With the recognition of the Anthropocene as a possible new geological period came realization that human history and Earth history have been ultimately interwoven. Since "[t]he narrative of world history has now collided (in our thoughts)

with the much longer-term geological history of the planet or—as we now think of it—of the Earth system” (Chakrabarty 23), this situation has brought about serious consequences for the perception of time and our position in world history. As a result, humans are both deemed responsible for and feel helpless against the current state of the environment, with “the main revolutionary event . . . behind us, since we have already crossed a few of the nine ‘planetary boundaries’ considered by some scientists as the ultimate barrier not to overstep” (Latour, “Agency” 1). Given the massive, long-term changes to the biosphere that cannot be reversed over the course of human life (if at all), we come to acknowledge the tragic predicament we are in, when “there is no prayer, and no chance of escaping to anywhere else” (Latour, “Agency” 4). Thus, acknowledgement of the transience of time does not bring hope for the resolution to the environmental problems. Also, it makes it impossible to long for the previous decades—a time when we failed to take urgent action that could have led to substantial mitigation of the climate change effects (Rich). Therefore, Anthropocene nostalgia appears to be an effective and powerful expression of these complex feelings, with bittersweet reflection upon our pre-Anthropocenic convictions in a time of uncertainty and helplessness.

The author of *The Mother Road* herself stresses the importance of the issue of temporality in her series. “A trip through the American South West,” she claims, “is one way to feel like you’re avoiding the forward nature of time” (Eichenbaum, “Hayley Eichenbaum on Going Viral”). As avoidance is one of the main coping mechanisms for different forms of anxiety, including the above-mentioned eco-anxiety (Holahan et al. 659), the artist hyperbolizes the escapist feeling she refers to by “clearing” the photographs. In the process of post-production (that is, digital editing of the images), she erases all the elements that make the photographs seem more earthly. To achieve precise geometrical organization with unrealistically clear lines and symmetry that characterize *The Mother Road* (see fig. 1 and fig. 4), the artist disposes of the “visual clutter”:

I have one rule: Clean it up. Take out the distractions. All images are genuine moments, with the visual clutter removed (such as excessive power-lines, garbage, etc.) that does not contribute to my final vision. . . . When I upload the images, I begin to edit out what I perceive as disorder. (Eichenbaum, “Hayley Eichenbaum on Going Viral”)

The extensive manipulation of the images, which attempts to rid the landscapes of traces of realism, in a paradoxical way challenges the avoidance of “the forward nature of time,” performatively proving such an avoidance to be impossible to imagine. Given the aforementioned painful

acknowledgement of the irreversibility of time, specifically in relation to the recognition of the rapid, negative environmental change and its hazards, Anthropocene nostalgia reduces the restorative sentiments to absurdity. The above-discussed restorative nostalgia, as conceptualized by Svetlana Boym, calls for a return to the past in terms of politics, social norms, and cultural strategies. The use of Anthropocene nostalgia in contemporary texts (such as *The Mother Road*) indicates how perception of time and history has been significantly altered by the acknowledgement of climate change and its severe effects. Given the current environmental situation, an attempt to return to the previous decades in the above-mentioned categories would turn out to be grotesque and false—if not tragic—just like the artificially-looking landscapes in Eichenbaum's works.



Fig. 1. Eichenbaum, Hayley. "The Mother Road I." Hayley Eichenbaum, <http://www.hayley-eichenbaum.com/mother-road-series-ii/2019/6/21/lxrjtia08jipubpff7igjk02hish5i>, accessed 3 Sept. 2021. Printed by permission of Hayley Eichenbaum.

NATURE AND KI'TSCH IN THE ANTHROPOCENE

Although, as already indicated, *The Mother Road* is not environmental photography, the representation of nature in Eichenbaum's works is distinctive and deserves analytical attention. If at all present in the discussed images, the elements of flora are suppressed, as if crushed by the burden of the ubiquitous concrete. Bushes and trees, often pruned and trimmed into

geometrical shapes, look either highly artificial or lifeless and somewhat withered. They are devoid of any trace of natural environment, since there is no soil around them—only cement. Substantially marginalized, the depicted flora feebly leans out of the buildings, borders windows, or grows in tiny patches of soil between pavements and edifices. As regards the representation of fauna, there is one photograph in the series that portrays an animal (fig. 2). In this picture, a grey donkey, sauntering down the pavement, past an unidentified, abandoned building, constitutes a surrealistic compositional counterpoint to its surroundings. Clearly not in its natural habitat, the animal appears ill-maintained, noticeably neglected, with its ribs showing. Thus, nature in Eichenbaum's visuals is presented as subjugated, reduced to nothing more than an aesthetic addendum to a landscape drastically altered by humans. Traditionally categorized as a domesticated, working animal, the donkey reminds us of America's agricultural past before industrialization, urbanization, and the expansion of the fossil fuel industry. Nevertheless, the photograph, employing Anthropocene nostalgia, does not evoke yearning for that time—it remains clear that the shift from agriculture to industry, marking the emergence of the Anthropocene (cf. Steffen et al.), cannot be overturned. Hence, Eichenbaum's series does not moralize or provide us with simple solutions. Instead, it illustrates the complexity of problems resulting from the Anthropocene as it is—with all the aspects and cause-and-effect relationships of this new geological period.

It is important to note that *The Mother Road* photographs and Route 66 itself are characterized by the aesthetic of kitsch. Interestingly, kitsch imagery can also be observed in other cultural texts employing Anthropocene nostalgia (e.g., Troy Paiva's *Lost America* [2013] or the photography series by Dana Yurcisin [2018–22]). To quote Eichenbaum, her series intended to “examine an environment that remains dependent on the adoration of its glory days and celebrate its surviving kitsch” (“Hayley Eichenbaum Captures the ‘Wilting Romanticism’”). Kitsch and aestheticization (another aforementioned characteristic of the nostalgia in question) are tightly linked, as aestheticism—“impos[ing] a generally more subtle and complex signified than would be possible with other connotation procedures” (Barthes 24)—“has to lead kitsch to descend into life” (Harries 142). It is also a way to resort to illusion, an “act of compensation” (Jameson 147) in the face of global crises, such as the ongoing environmental degradation. Eichenbaum's photographs aptly illustrate this phenomenon, juxtaposing the unnaturally coloured icons of old-style American consumerism with the sense of desolateness and eeriness. One of the provided images (see fig. 1) serves as a good example of this strategy: the donut shop, though extremely neat and coloured—visibly

aestheticized by the artist—is abandoned, with virtually no indication of human activity. This intersection of kitsch and gloominess arguably has a symbolic resonance, suggesting a powerful yet nuanced commentary on the nature/culture paradigm.



Fig. 2. Eichenbaum, Hayley. "The Mother Road XI." *Hayley Eichenbaum*, <http://www.hayley-eichenbaum.com/mother-road-series/q7tehaflnajqy8wiunp1v5r51h2j>, accessed 10 Sept. 2021. Printed by permission of Hayley Eichenbaum.

What is more, kitsch emerged as a prevalent aesthetic at the same time as the Anthropocene. As Clement Greenberg states, it did not exist before the modern era and is most likely “a product of the industrial revolution” (9). Greenberg links the emergence of kitsch with universal literacy, which is the result of industrialization and urbanization. Since literacy became a basic skill, it “no longer served to distinguish an individual’s cultural inclinations, since it was no longer the exclusive concomitant of refined tastes” (9). Thus, neither “formal culture” nor “folk culture” seemed fit for the newly-created social classes: proletariat and petty bourgeois. As a result, an aesthetic of kitsch was created: an “ersatz culture . . . destined for those who, insensible to the values of genuine culture, are hungry nevertheless for the diversion that only culture of some sort can provide” (Greenberg 10). As pointed out above, the industrial revolution, with its significant economic, social, and cultural changes, is considered as one of the possible starting points of the Anthropocene (Steffen et al.), which might explain why kitsch is one of the characteristic tools of Anthropocene nostalgia.

Apart from the above-discussed correlations, the aesthetic of kitsch is also very often associated with the notion of nostalgia, regardless of the sentiment’s modes. This relation has its psychological explanation: “[W]hen we feel vulnerable and dependent, a longing for safety and relatedness [nostalgia] attracts us not only to familiar and trustworthy individuals but also to conventional aesthetic stimuli charged with positive emotions (kitsch)” (Ortlieb and Carbon 1). Although this theory applies to the traditional type of nostalgia that evokes longing for a certain period, it is in accordance with the *modus operandi* of Anthropocene nostalgia as well, since Ortlieb and Carbon mention a longing for safety and relatedness, which is very present in times of trauma and anxiety such as ours, provoked by the awareness of the impending climate catastrophe.

RE-READING OLD STRATEGIES AND AESTHETIC FORMS

An important aspect of the mode of nostalgia employed in *The Mother Road* is the reproduction of past aesthetics and cultural trends. Existing traditions and structures are being reframed and manipulated to demonstrate the tragedy of our predicament resulting from the drastic changes to the climate. According to Fredric Jameson’s aforementioned theory of nostalgia, the urge to refer to elements of the culture of previous decades, or to present contemporary imagery as if it belonged to the past, is caused by the crisis of historicity. “Everything in our culture,” writes Jameson, “suggests that we have not, for all that, ceased to be preoccupied by history,” yet “we also

universally diagnose contemporary culture as irredeemably historicist, in the bad sense of an omnipresent and indiscriminate appetite for dead styles and fashions; indeed, for all the styles and fashions of a dead past" (285). Nonetheless, when he describes his idea of "nostalgia for the present," he refers to a phenomenon observed in the second half of the twentieth century. In the first two decades of the twenty-first century, I argue, the use of past styles has been purposefully reinterpreted by artists (especially those belonging to a younger generation, such as Hayley Eichenbaum)—not to sentimentally refer to a given period or to "nostalgify" the present (thus making it more of a product than a part of history), but to critically reflect on how environmentally harmful activities of the previous decades have caused the crisis we are trying to deal with nowadays. Thus, Eichenbaum's series displays multiple references not only to the previous era, picturing the emblems of bygone American myths, but also to the artistic visual traditions of the United States, deconstructing the works of icons of the past, such as Edward Hopper or the New Topographics.

Thus, one of the ways in which the photographs allude to the previous decades is, as indicated above, through a peculiar exploitation of then-powerful symbols of America, such as key elements of Route 66's infrastructure. Allegedly the most famous American highway, the Mother Road (as it was named by John Steinbeck) crosses eight states and three time zones. It was officially removed from the United States Highway System on June 27, 1985, after having seen its heyday in the middle part of the twentieth century ("History of Illinois Route 66"). Before that time, it was one of the major arteries of the country, with "a distinctive roadside culture" (Gambino) created around it. Its parking lots, motels, gas stations, and diners were filled with large numbers of people daily. Almost 40 years since its decommission, it has become a mere tourist attraction. Thus, Eichenbaum's work shows the highway as "more of an impoverished great-grandmother" (Gambino) than the Mother Road. The eerie feeling evoked by the analyzed photographs is substantially heightened by digital manipulation through which the depicted objects—now nearly or completely out of use—appear ready for non-existent customers. Apart from aestheticizing the images in terms of composition and colour scheme, Eichenbaum uses light effects in the editing process, so that old neons or out-of-use vending machines look not only brand new, but also as if they were in operation. As a result, the imagery of naïve, Google architecture of old-fashioned venues (such as teepee-shaped curio shops or deserted pawn shops), digitally enhanced in a clearly artificial way, fosters the awareness of the time distance separating us from the Mother Road's glory days. These images of tattered remnants of this American icon are a bitter commentary on the drawbacks of rapid technological development—one of the most important factors associated with the Anthropocene (Cera). In fact,

Route 66 itself has fallen into disuse because of the expansion of automobile industry. Paradoxically, its increasing popularity “with traffic swelling beyond its two-lane capacity” (Gambino) rendered it inefficient, so that it had to be replaced with several other freeways (“History of Illinois Route 66”). Eichenbaum’s photographs document the results of what was then seen as economic and technological progress, and what created a culture built on the automobile industry and fossil fuels. Juxtaposed with heartrending emptiness and distressing neatness, the visuals conjure up a post-human imagination, an effect of the Anthropocenic changes (cf. Zylinska).

Another way in which Eichenbaum’s photographs interact with the past is through the reproduction and reinterpretation of past styles and modes of expression—a technique characteristic of Anthropocene nostalgia. *The Mother Road* photographs seem to have been influenced by aesthetics of several past decades, from as early as the 1940s and 1950s, when the Beat poets initially contributed to mythicizing the highway, to the 1970s and 1980s. Listing her inspirations, Eichenbaum mentions works from the 1960s and 1970s—when the objects and places she pictures in her photographs were created and reached their most flourishing period. What she considers her “immediate influences” are the works of Stephen Shore and William Eggleston, as well as science-fiction films of the 1960s and the early films of Stanley Kubrick (Eichenbaum, “Hayley Eichenbaum on Going Viral”). Apart from that, resemblances between Eichenbaum’s series and the *oeuvre* of such acclaimed American artists as Edward Hopper, Edward Ruscha, or representatives of the New Topographics movement of the 1970s cannot go unnoticed. However, she employs past aesthetics, artistic strategies, and techniques only as codes of reference: despite considerable aesthetic similarities, the photographer markedly departs from the original ideas of her inspirations in terms of purpose, composition, and style.

As for the above-mentioned photographs—by Shore, Eggleston, Ruscha, and the New Topographics—it is vital to note that they document what was considered modern in the America of the 1960s and 1970s: gas stations, cars, and motels. Therefore, there is nothing “nostalgic” in these images—at least in a traditional, non-Jamesonian understanding of the word. At the time, the works of Eggleston and Shore were considered groundbreaking, “feel[ing] like raw and direct vision . . . describ[ing] the hues and textures of 1970s America” (Campany 170) and focusing, to quote Eudora Welty, on the “everyday . . . mundane world” (qtd. in Twersky). So whereas the aforementioned images from the 1960s and 1970s present the contemporaneity of the era, Eichenbaum’s photographs picture elements of the past that have had a significant negative impact on the present, as reckless capitalism has contributed to the massive exploitation of the environment. The difference is quite complex yet significant, and

so is the phenomenon of Anthropocene nostalgia itself: both Eichenbaum and the photographers she refers to capture venues created in the same era, but the purposes of their artistic decisions, as well as the effects, are divergent, which manifests the profound change in perception caused by the awareness of the Anthropocene.

In addition, despite obvious resemblances between her photographs and 1970s American photography, Eichenbaum adopts a diacritical strategy with regard to style and composition, which is particularly noticeable when one compares *The Mother Road* with the works of the New Topographics or Edward Ruscha. The subtitle of the New Topographics' first exhibition was "Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape," since they put an emphasis on the urban and suburban areas of the United States in the 1970s. At the time, the country's developing economy allowed to ceaselessly urbanize what was left of the famous American wilderness. The results of this shift from natural landscapes to industrial ones were documented by photographers such as Lewis Baltz, Robert Adams, or Nicholas Nixon. Given their shared main area of interest, as well as thematics seemingly congruous with that of *The Mother Road*, one could assume that Eichenbaum would compose her photographs likewise. However, the New Topographics, as well as Ed Ruscha (who greatly influenced the movement), marked their works with an apparent lack of composition, concentrating on "mundane but oddly fascinating topography" (O'Hagan). Images of trailer parks, high-voltage lines, and roads were intended to appear "deskilled" and "deadpan" (Campany 54). As is implied by the word "topographic," the photographs were supposed to portray the landscape as it is, without any changes or embellishment, unlike Eichenbaum's works. Shot mainly in black and white, the New Topographics' visuals were "stripped of context" or colour—they were intended to enhance the "sense of dislocation or placelessness" (Rosenberg 225). Similarly, Ed Ruscha's acclaimed collection *Twenty-six Gasoline Stations* which, like Eichenbaum's series, constituted a documentation of Route 66 and its infrastructure, consisted of images that were "plain visual statements" with "no poetry," as if "they might have been real estate photos or snapshots found and reused" (Campany 54). In contrast, *The Mother Road* photographs, though documenting the placelessness of today's world (just as the works by the New Topographics), are characterized by the above-mentioned precise composition and use of stark colours (see fig. 1). As a result, despite the same, or very similar, subjects, the "man-altered landscapes" of the 1960s and 1970s appear strikingly natural in comparison with Eichenbaum's surrealistically neat outlooks of the human-defined era she depicts and plays with.

As already mentioned, *The Mother Road* is significantly influenced not only by photographs, but also by paintings of the old American masters such as Edward Hopper. Similarly seemingly serene and vacant, both Eichenbaum's

and Hopper's *oeuvres* are critical of the current socioeconomic and cultural affairs (Joseph). The subjects of both artists' works—motels, diners, or gas stations—are also analogous. Thus, Eichenbaum (again) emulates the aesthetics not only of past infrastructure but also of past artistic and visual traditions, translating them into a painfully precise illustration of the Anthropocene and its possible future threats. Picturing the shattered remains of Route 66—a cultural icon that “became a stage on which Americans acted out their aspirations” (Gambino) only several decades ago—Eichenbaum presents the inevitable results of Anthropocenic activity by depicting landscapes of deteriorated car-dependent infrastructure devoid of humans (see fig. 3). Importantly, the photographs provide no specific indication of when they were taken (apart from the obvious suggestion that they were captured a long time after the Mother Road's prime). Therefore, these images can be seen as both documenting the present and predicting the future effects of human-induced climate changes, as climate migration (and, hence, land abandonment) is cited as one of the major consequences of the Anthropocene. The so-called climate exodus is soon to take place in various regions of the world, including the United States, as 13 million Americans will be “forced to move away from submerged coastlines” and “one in 12 Americans in the Southern half of the country will move toward California, the Mountain West or the Northwest over the next 45 years because of climate influences alone” (Lustgarten).

Hopper's works are human-centred, “speculating on past and impending events, on the relationships between the characters, and on the desires and anxieties” (Joseph). Conversely, Eichenbaum's photographs are, as discussed above, lacking human representation, which is characteristic both of the visualities in the Anthropocene and, more specifically, of photographs employing Anthropocene nostalgia. Since the very name of the new geological period concentrates on humans that are responsible for the destruction of the biosphere, a nonhuman perspective has recently proliferated in art (especially photography), as claimed by Joanna Zylińska. Thus, “the practice of imagining and imaging a certain future ‘after the human’ from the viewpoint of the here and now” has become a “[predominant] . . . aesthetic and visual trope” (Zylińska 85). A response to it is a recent trend of “enclosing and enframing” the ecological crisis “in a series of horrifying yet ultimately digestible images” to turn catastrophe “into visual entertainment as a form of relief” (Zylińska 88), which is convergent with Eichenbaum's aestheticization strategies. The dichotomy between representation of the quasi-post-apocalyptic world almost completely devoid of human presence and the use of aesthetics aiming at “visual entertainment” is particularly characteristic of Anthropocene nostalgia and the climate-related anxieties from which it stems.

Hopper's "great theme" is the aloneness and solitude of "insecure selfhoods in a country that is only abstractly a nation" (Schjeldahl), concentrating on human alienation. As pointed out above, the motif of solitude and abandonment in Eichenbaum's works is exercised differently, from a nonhuman point of view. She presents a world where the lonely (abandoned) objects are not persons, but places—left bereft by the rapid pace of technology which has led to catastrophic climate change. Although today's technology is seen as a twofold power—contributing "to the detachment and also connection of people and nature; domination, domestication as well as caring and protecting nature and humans"—swift technological changes, especially those fueled by the substantial growth of fossil fuel industry, as in the case of Route 66's demise, have been consequently "associated with massive environmental degradation, enhanced social inequities, and threats to human health and survival" (Dube et al. A1). Thus, the Anthropocene and the increased rate of technological development are closely related; hence another term proposed as a name for the same geological epoch: technocene.



Fig. 3. Eichenbaum, Hayley. "The Mother Road XII." *Sight Unseen*, https://sightunseen.com/content/uploads/2017/01/Eichenbaum_12.jpg, accessed 12 Sept. 2021. Printed by permission of Hayley Eichenbaum.

While Anthropocene nostalgia uses (and reproduces) existing aesthetic strategies, the cultural texts that employ it go beyond the typical, well-known genres. Therefore, the series we are discussing also differs greatly from environmental photography—both thematically and aesthetically. Represented by such artists as Ansel Adams or Richard Misrach, the environmental genre develops either an “emphatic eco-centric approach’ bearing a ‘misanthropic’ streak” or the one that “centers on the vulnerability of human existence” (Heine 277). Instead of explicitly presenting the effects of the human impact on the biosphere, implementing either one or both of these strategies, Eichenbaum’s works provide a much more layered critique of the Anthropocene. The absent humans, abandoned post-industrial spaces, and destroyed elements of nature have all reached the same, miserable position. The past, the present, and the possible, dystopian future are interconnected in *The Mother Road*: elements of past infrastructure which contributed to climate change (the past), portrayed vacant and abandoned (the present), with an extensive, unnatural aestheticization that shows the wrong direction of the Anthropocene’s civilizational progress (the future). Presented drive-in motels and gas stations, though heavily coloured by Eichenbaum, are nowadays visibly out of use (see fig. 3). Undeniably, they belong to the long-gone era when climate and the environmental impacts of fossil fuels (and, thus, the car culture they represent)—such as water and air pollution, extreme weather, ocean acidification, or sea level rise (Bertrand)—were not a subject of public debate. This conscious negligence has resulted in the serious biosphere disturbance we are currently witnessing, with its more negative effects to come in the upcoming decades (cf. Rich). *The Mother Road* photographs take part of this rhetoric, though not as directly as the aforementioned eco-art. As one of the provided photographs shows (see fig. 3), the depicted motel stands in the middle of a plain, with no infrastructure around it—desolate and decayed. Its windows and doors are boarded up, which clearly indicates no chance of returning it back to operations; it is a ruin that will soon become nothing more than construction waste. Thus, vivid colours added to the presented landscapes ironically counterpoint the destructive changes forced by the Anthropocene, showing the effects of the domination of culture over nature within the well-known nature/culture paradigm. Another example of use of this peculiar irony stemming from the disturbance of balance between nature and human activities on Earth can be observed in a photograph depicting the small, one-storey building with an old-fashioned trailer standing next to it (see fig. 4). The bungalow is decorated in a compelling manner: a vista of hoodoo landforms is painted on one of its walls. This seemingly incongruous element—the representation of a landscape typical of nearby-located states such as New

Mexico or Utah—is symbolic of the new, Anthropocene-induced reality: the effacement of boundaries between natural sceneries (which are being systematically destroyed by humans) and their human-made imitations is a metaphor of ultimate dominance over the environment, the results of which we are suffering from.



Fig. 4. Eichenbaum, Hayley. “The Mother Road IV.” *Hayley Eichenbaum*, <http://www.hayley-eichenbaum.com/mother-road-series/3aihs33414ltmrdy6jiptwa7fau0ap>, accessed 16 Sept. 2021. Printed by permission of Hayley Eichenbaum.

CONCLUSION

In her photographs, Eichenbaum does what is specific to Anthropocene nostalgia: she plays with the images of the past to show that a return to the previous decades, as well as to the previous geological era (that is, the Holocene), is impossible. Capturing the abandoned symbols of 1960s and 1970s capitalism—the “non-places” (Augé)—*The Mother Road* series is far from being nostalgic in a traditional way. The mode of nostalgia in question creates a sense of temporal ambiguity by alluding to different aspects of the past, including past aesthetics. Strongly coloured and aestheticized, the

landscapes in Eichenbaum's photographs are devoid of human presence. This post-apocalyptic vision reflects the results of the swift development of capitalism which, along with consumerism and industrialization, has led to the current state of the environment. As Route 66 is considered "a tremendous cross section of American history" (Gambino) where the country's heritage is preserved, Eichenbaum skillfully plays with this imagination. By employing Anthropocene nostalgia, she presents a moral dichotomy between cherishing American car culture traditions and acknowledging climate change as a looming global catastrophe. Therefore, unlike the conventional type of nostalgia which troubles time and manipulates the way a given period is remembered to evoke a sentimental longing, the sentiment in question—because of its intersection with the Anthropocene—allows for a deconstruction of the techniques of its traditional counterpart to critically contemplate the past. Portraying hollow places that were emblematic of the previous decades, *The Mother Road* visuals manifest not only the effects of aggressive human activity but also the inevitable passage of time.

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INDIGENOUS PASTS, PRESENTS AND FUTURES

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Environmental Neocolonialism and the Quest for Social Justice in Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were*

ABSTRACT

The article addresses the problems of environmental degradation, as illustrated and explored in Imbolo Mbue's recent novel *How Beautiful We Were* (2021), which juxtaposes the fictional oil company Pexton's corporate greed with the push for rapid economic growth in a less developed world. Intrusions into the fictional African country's sovereignty are manifested by foreign capital's extraction of its most valuable natural resource—oil—which results in environmental harm and the disruption of Indigenous, communal life. The novel critiques the hazardous methods of crude oil exploitation, which put human health and life at risk. It demonstrates how uneven distribution of oil's benefits sanctions corruption and fosters economic injustice, while all attempts at restoring justice are thwarted as much by local as by foreign culprits. The novel's defense of traditional ways and the critique of Western modernity and capitalism encourage the search for grounds on which alternate epistemologies could be built. At the intersection of Western dominance and Indigenous response, the novel explores how local groups mobilize the visions of the past to oppose extractive projects. As the novel's nostalgic title signals the happy times now bygone, its multigenerational interest brings modernity into focus. Finally, I argue that the novel's memories of colonial extractive practices not only highlight the importance of resource temporalities around resource extraction but also emphasize their impact on the future of local communities.

Keywords: petrofiction, extractive neocolonialism, modernity, Africa.

The history of modernity is driven by access to energy. Not only has this resulted in urbanization and industrialization, but it continues to function as a mode of social difference and a source of social inequality. “Petromodernity” (LeMenager 71) or “petroculture” (Szeman 3) are the names given to a modern industrial society that is dependent on the production, consumption, and reproduction of oil. Consumer-oriented societies use petroleum not only in the production of motor fuels and lubricants, but also in plastic, pharmaceuticals, cosmetics, pesticides, and fertilizers. The international market’s demand for crude oil has had a destructive effect on the communities in which oil processing takes place. In fact, “[i]ndustrialized nations have been the world’s greatest consumers and generators of hazardous wastes” (Adeola 45), while “[o]il and gas companies are critical actors in the global debate on climate change and have played an important role in shaping much of the business—climate change discourse” (Levy 75). Negative environmental impacts of oil extraction contribute to global warming. Although Africa contributes about 3.7% of the emissions of global toxic greenhouse gases, compared with the USA’s 20% (Minter et al.), the devastating effects of climate change affect this continent unlike any other. As climate change is both a scientific and cultural phenomenon, the rise of environmentalist discourses, such as ecocriticism, has helped develop new environmental awareness based on the fact that petroleum cannot continue to be burned at the current rate without causing the earth’s climate to change in unpredictable ways.

Imbolo Mbue’s novel *How Beautiful We Were* (2021) explores transnational colonial-capitalist systems from an Indigenous perspective, demonstrating the persistence of colonial structures and their detrimental effect on the nation’s development. The novel addresses these issues through a four-generational story about a conflict between the residents of the fictional African village of Kosawa and an American oil company called Pexton. When farmlands become infertile, children die from drinking of toxic water, and the repeated promises of clean-up and financial reparations fail to be delivered, the villagers seek help from their government and abroad. Pexton embodies the threat of extractive neocolonialism in the form of a multinational corporation, which forever disrupts Kosawa’s communal way of life lived in close proximity to nature. The villagers try various schemes to get rid of Pexton, while facing not only a powerful opponent but also the local corrupt elites that are conspiring with the foreign investors. Critiquing both local and Western culprits in brokering national economic development, the novel dramatizes the story in which oil is presented as “a harbinger of El Dorado and unprecedented wealth, avarice and power” (Watts 61).

Though the story unfolds in alternating points of view, the novel centers on the Nangi family, whose daughter Thula leads the campaign for justice. Through the portrayal of a female protagonist and her involvement in collective resistance, the novel acknowledges women's roles in fighting against petroviolence. The Africana and Religious Studies scholar Julian E. Kunnie identifies the power of women in spiritual and social practices of Indigenous societies to be one of the responses to the ecological and environmental crisis in Africa (437–43). This decades-spanning fight for agency and human dignity is set against the exploration of modern capitalism and the persistent consequences of the West's colonial legacy. Though the fight yields no winners, the novel reveals a complex relationship between the modern capital's inexorable drive for profit and the people who are not afraid to challenge the social and environmental costs of an oil-based economy.

As a collaborative means of addressing environmental and social problems, postcolonial ecocriticism explores ways in which we imagine and represent the relationship between humans and the environment. Read through this critical lens, Mbue's novel offers a "contrapuntal reading" (78), to use Said's words, of the story of oil imperialism, in which the USA manipulates and supports a dictatorial puppet government of fictional Kosawa in order to maintain control over its natural resources: "[I]hey all arrive here believing they have the power to take from us or give to us whatever will satisfy their endless wants" (Mbue 103). Attaining economic sovereignty for many postcolonial, developing nations—what Spivak calls the "worlding" of the Third World (92)—is still a work in progress, while local lives and lands are appropriated by foreign capital. Economic progress, however, is often beneficial only to the nation's ruling elite, and, as in the case of Mbue's novel, tied to economic injustice and environmental harm.

The Kosawa government's forcible management of natural resources can be viewed as a postcolonial version of ecological imperialism: "the forced march to industrialization" [which] has had disastrous cultural, as well as ecological effects" (Guha 196).¹ Projects such as the novel's fictional Pexton oil drilling company, which are subsidized by transnational, or in the case of the novel, American commercial interests, affect Kosawa in similar ways to other countries from the Global South by pushing them into economic bondage. This implementation is reflected in the concept of the neocolonialist "*iron triangle*, which defines the mutually-supportive influence, financial, and policy-making (and policy-*applying*) relationships

¹ Ramachandra Guha refers here to the Himalayan peasant antideforestation movement in the 1970s.

between the executive branch of government, the legislature, and special interest groups” (Adams 24, italics in the original). One such group is the Pexton crew, mostly workers brought in on short-term contracts, who live in gated compounds and “whose brothers and uncles and cousins and tribesmen worked in government offices” (Mbue 74). The American anthropologist James Ferguson observes that “the enclaves of mineral-extractive investment on the continent are normally tightly integrated with the head offices of multinational corporations and metropolitan centers, but sharply walled off from their own national societies (often literally walled, with bricks and razor wire)” (379). Such is the reality of the people of Kosawa, who are completely disconnected from oil production except for its toxic side-effects on their environment. Even though Pexton built the school, the clinic, and the meeting hall (Mbue 47), they are situated in the Gardens, the company’s gated community, and intended only for the employees and their families. The local people do not benefit from such enterprises, which are strictly exploitative and fail to bring any social investment.

With its focus on the uneven distribution of oil’s benefits and dire consequences to peoples and territories where it is found, Mbue’s novel represents “petrofiction,” the label coined by Amitav Ghosh in his review of Abdelraman Munif’s quintet of novels *Cities of Salt* in the March 1992 issue of *The New Republic*. Graeme Macdonald uses another term: “oil fiction,” defining the genre as “contain[ing] certain thematic preoccupations: volatile labor relations and ethnic tensions, war and violence, ecological despoliation, and political corruption” (31). Both labels form part of ecocritical studies, allowing us to focus on the nuanced conflicts in the novel between Pexton, which embodies Big Oil business, and the company men with the corrupted local elite, represented by the village leader Woja Beki: “We knew he was one of them . . . Pexton had bought his cooperation and he had, in turn, sold our future to them” (Mbue 5). As a cosmopolitan form of intellectual activism, petrofiction brings into focus issues that appear less compelling to more traditional forms of literary criticism. Situating the novel in an ecocritical frame validates the attempt of petrofiction to tell a complex political story that stretches beyond the initial oil encounter in order to demonstrate the broader geography of petromodernity, one that sharpens our sense of both the spatial and temporal dimensions of environmental crisis.

The first paragraph of the novel introduces the actors of the conflicts: “us”—the people of Kosawa, who are the victims, and “them”—“the men from Pexton” (4), who are the perpetrators, with the foreign business and the corrupt local government in the background. To further the binary opposition, a stereotypical portrayal of an African village, where barefoot

children fetch water from a well and chase “goats and chickens around into bamboo barns” (3), is juxtaposed with the symbols of the affluent, western world: “fine suits and polished shoes” (3), “briefcases” (4), “the hilltop mansion of the American overseer” (33)—the emblems of male corporate dominance. The image of a poor, rural village contrasted with the attributes of modern capitalism highlights not only an economic but also a culture gap between the two worlds. The hostility between the two groups is accentuated by the use of loaded language, such as “liars, savages, unscrupulous, evil” (3), and reflected in the narrator’s blatant hostility: “We should have cursed their mothers and their grandmothers, flung pejoratives upon their fathers, prayed for unspeakable calamities to befall their children. We hated them” (3). However, the initial binary is later deconstructed by the narrative employment of the villagers’, not the Pexton men’s, point of view, evincing ultimately that “them” is a complex amalgam of foreign interests, corrupt locals, and clueless African workers who are just as much victims as the “we,” who fight against and also collaborate with the foreign investors.

In line with the “oil fiction” genre, social injustice and corruption are presented as the main forces behind the conflict in the country, with oil revenue accounting for the most of the government income. The petroleum industry is presented as the only large employer other than public administration, hence social and environmental concerns are ignored in favor of financial returns in what Appel calls “a modular capitalist project, in which disentanglement from and thinning of liability for local conditions is intentional, always incomplete, and, in fact, requires sticky entanglements with local people and environment” (706). Everyone in Kosawa knows that “Pexton has been paying off people in the district office to shut their eyes” (Mbue 38). Michael Klare’s rhetorical question corresponds with Mbue’s plot: “And what do Africans get out all of this? Except for thousands of holes in the ground, various large-scale environmental catastrophes, and a scattering of heavily guarded villas and Swiss bank accounts for well-connected elites, not very much” (174). Kosawa’s story is dramatized as a harbinger of a world to come, in which, at least some of the villagers’ descendants may enjoy the benefits of modern urban life, whereas the majority will continue to suffer from the detrimental effects of colonial exploitation. The ensuing erosion of the Indigenous way of life, moreover, complicates the meaning of progress and highlights nostalgia for the world “in which [their] spirits were whole” (Mbue 359).

Aside from the investigation of the human costs of colonial exploitation, Mbue’s novel queries the relationship between literary imagination and the physical world thereby developing new modes of representation at the intersection of environment and culture. By “offering

the aesthetic experience of congruence between the human imagination and the physical environment, [it] enables the submersion of the reader not just into the text, but also into the world it represents” (O’Brien 145). The fictional world of Kosawa is portrayed through the images of toxified spaces, places, and bodies, what Lawrence Buell calls “toxic discourse.” Three major aspects of toxic discourse enumerated by Buell can be found in Mbue’s narrative: a contaminated or disrupted pastoral vision, images of total pollution, and a “David-versus-Goliath” fight of the oppressed against the oppressors (647–51). James Phelan highlights the importance of the mimetic component, which involves an audience’s interest in the characters as possible people and in the narrative world as like our own (5). One of the focal points in the novel is the mimetic representation of the violence of resource extraction, as exploration and exploitation of oil reserves are regarded as two of the most destructive activities to the environment, which involve deforestation and the installation of drilling equipment and pipelines: “[W]hatever life was left in the big river disappeared . . . The smell of Kosawa became the smell of crude. The noise from the oil field multiplied; day and night we heard it in our bedrooms, in our classroom, in the forest. Our air turned heavy” (Mbue 32). Disruption of soil structure causes erosion, which harms local flora and fauna, while the toxic waste contaminates surface and groundwater, robbing the community of the source of drinking water: “When the sky began to pour acid and rivers began to turn green, we should have known our land would soon be dead” (3). Repeated oil spills contaminate rivers, which contributes to reduced fish stock for consumption and sale. Broken pipelines flood the fields, which become no longer arable, or cause fires that destroy farms. As ecocriticism locates the text in the world, the world of Kosawa is presented as the epitome of human devastation of nature.

It is not only the disturbing images of environmental pollution that the story highlights, but also the vulnerability of the local population that is exposed to its hazards. Diseases that surreptitiously plague the villagers form an embodied means of witnessing “slow violence,” to use Rob Nixon’s concept. Some children develop “rashes and fevers” (8), and others, like Wambi, suffer from a cough: “When the cough hit, his eyes watered, his back hunched out, he had to hold on to something to steady himself” (7–8). Night and day gas flares release toxic chemicals, which are responsible for respiratory problems. Since the combustion of petroleum products is carcinogenic, increased cancer rates are observed: “We remembered those who had died from diseases with neither names nor cures—our siblings and cousins and friends who had perished from the poison in the water and the poison in the air and the poisoned food

growing from the land that lost its purity the day Pexton came drilling” (5). The health risks from chemical exposure are evident “[w]hen we began to wobble and stagger, tumbling and snapping like feeble little branches” (3), but the harm will have a lasting effect on “the farms that might not be fruitful . . . [and] the children who [will never get] a chance to grow up” (139). As economist Emmanuel U. Nnadozie writes about oil production in Africa more generally, it is also true for the people of Kosawa that “the discovery of oil is a curse that means only poverty, hunger, disease, suffering, deprivation, and exploration” (75).

Mbue’s novel critiques the hazardous methods of crude oil exploitation, which not only degrade the natural environment but also put human health and life at risk.² Oil is used as a trope for blurring the boundaries between environment and body, as both are equally exposed to its harm. In this way the narrative highlights their interconnectivity and mutual importance. The textual and visual significance of the disturbing images of an environmental disaster and human vulnerability lies not only in their emotional appeal, thereby showing the disastrous consequences of unsustainable development, but also in sensitizing the audience to the position of the countries that are dependent on mineral extraction for the principal source of revenue. However, it is not only a vivid landscape of destruction and loss of the natural habitat but also the erosion of local customs and practices caused by Pexton’s arrival that the novel demonstrates. It challenges Western realist representation when it relates to African cosmology in the description of rituals and ceremonies. Embodied in African spirituality and experience, Mbue’s narrative is intrinsically communal and manifests strong bonds between family members, as opposed to the individualism of Western art. In this way, the form of the story itself constitutes a practice of resistance against Western, anthropocentric paradigms of knowledge that are centered around the objectification, control, and domination of non/human nature.

Foreign capital’s mining of natural resources and ensuing environmental degradation often result in the removal and persecution of frontline Indigenous communities: “[W]hile Indigenous peoples are only 5% of the world population . . . they are involved in 40% of all environmental conflicts globally” (Alier and Meynen). As the story of Kosawa shows, Indigenous populations are disadvantaged by the conflict over control

² Compare the discussion of M. Watts and E. Kashi’s multimedia project *Curse of the Black Gold: 50 Years of Oil in the Niger Delta* as an ecology of suffering and as a site of trauma in Cajetan Iheka’s “Ecologies of Oil and Trauma of the Future in Curse of the Black Gold” (2020).

of oil resources, and their concerns impacted by extractive regimes are pushed to the margins. When extractive projects, such as Pexton, enlist the power of the corrupt state to advance their neo-colonial ideology, what Segun Gbadegesin calls “toxic terrorism” (191), the consequences of their activities extend across multiple generations. Stripped of mineral rights, the people of Kosawa are deprived of the benefits from oil revenues and unable to obtain adequate compensation for the environmental degradation of their land, while their non-formal, Indigenous expertise is ignored, and the “ways of knowing the world and knowing the self . . . are trivialized and invalidated by Western scientists and experts” (Briggs and Sharp 664). Thom Davies finds this pattern “repeated the world over, [when] environmental risks are commonly placed in the path of least resistance, near communities with the smallest reserves of political, economic, and social capital” (416).

Rob Nixon considers the work of conveying such prolonged environmental impacts on Indigenous communities to be one of the main “challenges posed by slow violence” (2).³ As Nixon explains, social inequality and discrimination form the foundation on which slow violence is built: “[I]hose people lacking resources [become] the principal casualties of slow violence” (4). However, it is not only the physical damage but also psychological toll of the ubiquitous death that slow violence communicates: “We hated that we went to bed in fear and woke up in fear, all day long breathed fear in and out” (Mbue 9). Slow violence is disguised in futile promises, such as the one that “drilling for oil would bring something called ‘civilization’ to our village . . . a wonderful thing called ‘prosperity’” (73), assuring that “our grandparents would be in awe of what a beautiful life they offer” (73). It is not only responsible for social harms but it gestures to uneven structures of power that allow such injustices to appear and continue. By bringing attention to the ways in which environmental degradation and hazards affect poor people of colour, Mbue’s novel responds to Cheryll Glotfelty’s appeal: “Where are the other voices?” (xxv).

Davies expands Nixon’s characteristic of slow violence being “out of sight,” by posing a crucial question: “[O]ut of sight to whom?” (414). “In asking this question,” he adds, “and taking seriously the knowledge claims of communities who live in toxic spaces, we can begin to unravel the power structures and politics that sustain the uneven geographies of pollution” (414). Mbue’s narrative provides an answer to Davies’s question,

³ Nixon defines “slow violence” as “a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (2).

gesturing at local and foreign culprits who share the same desire for profit and disregard for moral authority: “They said all they ever did was pay the government for the right to drill our land—why should they be responsible for our government’s incompetence?” (136). As Davies concludes: “[S]low violence persists because those ‘arresting stories’ do not *count*. Crucially, a politics of *indifference* about the suffering of marginalized groups helps to sustain environmental injustice, allowing local claims of toxic harm to be silenced” (421, italics in the original). Literature, however, is one of the ways in which these concerns may be voiced within a broader scope, thereby familiarizing the global audience with environmental problems by allowing to empathetically imagine the lives of socially marginal people, such as the residents of Kosawa. The novel’s environmentally-framed social critique not only humanizes the people displaced by oil extraction but makes them visible by putting them within a concrete framework of place and time. In fact, a sense of compassion, with which the author foregrounds Indigenous worldviews and spirituality, is a unique feature of the novel. Mbue’s narrative represents the spiritual not only as real but also as realistic. For example, the twins, who act as the “village medium and medicine man” (27), and the laws of the Spirit have guided the people of Kosawa in maintaining these relationships in a respectful way, so as not to upset the holistic balance. An Indigenous worldview is presented as conducive to living in harmony with the universe, and as such should be honored for its integrity. Thus, the narrative convergence of the real and spiritual promotes an Indigenous perspective, which is deemed authentic and complementary.

The author escapes ethnocentricity by locating Kosawa’s problem in a transnational context. For example, the novel acknowledges that similar ecological problems are to be found in the US, where Native American communities resist the pipelines that “deprive their land of its sanctity” (207).⁴ In another reference to Native American history, the narrative evokes the infamous white settler-state policies towards Indigenous communities, which resulted in their marginalization and annihilation: “Across America today are pockets of people who were made prisoners on their land. The land of their ancestors was taken from them, and now they live at the edge of society” (213). There are stories about a place in the US “where children are drinking poisoned water” (207),⁵ and “where

⁴ See Nick Estes’s *Our History is the Future: Standing Rock versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance* (2019), in which the author tells the story of northern Plains peoples, providing context for contemporary struggles.

⁵ See Laura Pulido’s article “Flint, Environmental Racism, and Racial Capitalism” (2016), in which she discusses the poisoning of water supply in Flint, Michigan as an example of environmental racism and the everyday functioning of racial capitalism.

land is disappearing into the sea” (207) due to oil extraction. When Thula Nangi, the Kosawa character who serves as the narrative center of the novel, comes to America on a scholarship, she sees it as an opportunity to learn more about the ways to help her people fight for social justice. Seeing the same harm done to others, she demonstrates the awakening of a global environmental awareness: “But now that I live here I’m realizing that something far more complex is going on all over the world, something that binds us to these beset Americans and others like us in villages and town and cities in nations big and small” (208). In this way, the story about a small African village gains importance as it becomes a parable of colonial and postcolonial domination and the eradication of traditional lifeways, as well as environments.

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Bringing literary discourse into a relationship with the world, a story about a fictitious Kosawa finds its parallel in African history, when, “[i]n the early colonial period, in particular, private companies with their own private armies (from King Leopold’s Congo to the British South Africa Company) long ago pioneered methods for securing economic extraction in the absence of modern state institutions” (Ferguson 380). Grandmother Yaya’s recollections reclaim the colonial past by re-telling the story through an Indigenous voice, which uses irony as a strategy of resistance and subversion. The woman evokes the tragic history of the African continent, which started with the European explorers who “had traveled here to understand what kind of people we were, why we behaved the way we did, how they could help us so we could live better lives” (Mbue 217). Then, others came “to tell us about their Spirit. They said their Spirit would bring us out of the darkness we didn’t know we were living in. We would see the light” (219). Even though “Kosawa was spared when men began arriving from the coast looking for humans to snatch and sell,” they welcomed groups “of escapees presenting stories of villages emptied out by snatchers” (221). “Nowadays young people talk about the oil as if it’s our first misfortune; they forget that, long before the oil, the parents of our parents suffered for the sake of rubber” (222), says Yaya, referring to the Western demand for natural rubber that resulted in forced labor in colonial Africa: “If a man fled without delivering his quota of rubber, the interpreters came for his family. Children were pulled from their huts and beaten in village squares because their fathers had escaped the rubber plantations. Wives were raped. Mothers punched. No one was spared” (223). Finally, before “the masters had decided to return to Europe” (224), they set up the government, picking the president whose sudden death they engineered “after they decided he wasn’t an obedient servant” (225). His Excellency, the new President, follows in the footsteps of the colonial rulers, and “the day he ascended to the top in Bézam, this

country became his property. From it he harvests whatever pleases him and destroys whoever displeases him” (226). With his nominal sovereignty and economic dependence on foreign capital, His Excellency gives the Kosawa land to Pexton. By bringing colonial history to the conversation, the author highlights its persistent relevance. Kosawa’s story is thus presented, Mbue argues, not as an exception but as a continuation of a systemic violence perpetrated against this region.

African raw materials, such as rubber and oil, and local export market economies have long been subordinated to the interests of the Western capital. In fact, with the continuing demand for rubber, the only change has been in a technological process, as “[m]ore than half the world’s rubber now comes not from weeping wood but gushing oil” (Harford). Yaya’s memories highlight the destructive impact of the policies of colonialism that impeded African economic development and created a reliance on imported goods. The infrastructure that developed, especially in its executive capacity, was designed to exploit the natural resources and bring profit to the privileged minority, local and foreign. Kunnie also finds the roots of ecological devastation of the African continent in the past:

The holocaust of chattel enslavement of Africans followed by colonialist conquest and occupation is what precipitated the ecological crisis in Africa, particularly through the introduction of deep mineral mining and extraction of vital resources along with erasure of forests, trees, and underbrush through military invasions and incursions into the hinterlands of Africa from coastal lines, particularly in West Africa and Southwestern (426).

Yaya’s story demonstrates that the problems described in the novel do not result from the present-day political and economic challenges, but are deeply rooted in Africa’s colonial past.

The author escapes the frames of Africa’s postcolonial victimhood by signaling the ways of resistance on the part of local community. The narrative offers alternative scenarios that could reconstruct the world of Kosawa and seek justice for its residents. However Mbue consequently avoids binary systematizing, by showing no consensus among the villagers about how to proceed. Some look for solutions inside the country, like the village leader Woja Beki, who encourages the people to wait and trust Pexton to do the right thing, or Thula’s brother Juba, who “got into the sole government leadership school in the country,” hoping one day to form “a government made of people like us, those who had suffered the consequences of bad policies and knew how things ought to be”

(Mbue 334). Nonviolent ways are promoted by 'The Movement for the Restoration of the Dignity of Subjugated Peoples, which recommends "talking about how we can peacefully bring about change with dialogue, negotiation, common ground, more dialogue" (207). There are those who decide to take matters into their own hands, such as Thula's father Malabo, and disappear without a trace. Others rely on American activists, such as Austin, who "believes in dialogue, in people sharing their stories, hearing others' stories, enemies gaining new perspectives on each other" (275). Domestic revolutionaries, such as Thula, use a grassroots movement to motivate the community members to take responsibility for their country, teaching "her students things the government didn't wish its future leaders to be taught" (343). None of the attempts to seek justice is given textual prominence, nor are the protagonists portrayed only as heroes or villains, as all efforts are presented as important, even if not equally effective.

As the story unfolds, however, nothing the protestors do poses a real challenge to Pexton, which uses the hypocrisy of corporate double-speak, claiming that "Kosawa was spreading lies about Pexton and, in the process, hurting His Excellency's image" (172). Juba's first days of work as a civil servant leave him no hope of eradicating corruption: "Repeatedly, I was told my job was to clean up numbers, not to ask questions about why large sums of money could not be accounted for" (335), so he jumps on the bandwagon and amasses "riches from payoffs" (337). Austin no longer fools himself "that a story he's written may entice his countrymen to reconsider their ways of thinking and being" (274). When Thula's plea loses in an American court, she knows they have lost, as "[f]iling a lawsuit against the government and Pexton in a Bézam court would be ludicrous" (344). Finally, she meets her death together with the Five, a militant group she has helped to set up, during a failed kidnapping of the Pexton executive.

Oil discourse is co-extensive with the social, and Mbue's narrative brings these two domains of inquiry into dialogue, while blurring the lines between victims and perpetrators, between those who want to fight the American corporation or take their money. "[Y]ou'll see that the ones who came to kill us and the ones who'll run to save us are the same" (103), prophesizes Konga, one of the villagers. And indeed the novel gradually deconstructs the stark binarism which is set up in the first paragraph, ultimately showing how some of the villagers become murderers while the Pexton workers are revealed as victims of circumstance. Even the corrupt elites have reasons for their cynicism, rooted in their own trauma and dislocation.

Mbue's novel provides a compelling portrait of colonial exploitation, in which a "global system of hyper-capitalism is transgressing key planetary

ecological boundaries” (Dawson and Amatya 3). This representation of an ecological crisis does not imagine an alternative future other than the destructive petroculture: “[O]n all sides the dead were too many—on the side of the vanquished, on the side of the victors, on the side of those who’d never chosen sides” (Mbue 340). It gestures at the past while questioning the very foundation of the African countries: “We were different tribes thrown together with no common dream. We were forced to build upon sinking sand, and now we’re crumbling from within” (335), and at the present, arguing that “[o]il violence is generated by the evil twins of authoritarian governmentality and petro-capitalism” (Watts 62), fueled by lack of transparency and accountability. Demonstrating the devastating consequences of the processes of industrial resource extraction, it imagines the future, as the downfall of Kosawa allows to reflect on the future of many vulnerable developing countries.

The story about a small African village goes beyond a focus on oil extraction to question the terms of the struggle between Indigeneity and modernity. As there is no retreat from encroaching modernity, its impact on the children of Kosawa eludes easy classification. Even if the children of the village are compensated by scholarships and personal wealth, this triumph of modernity entails the destruction of their unique cultural heritage. The vanishing of a traditional way of life erodes their basis for self-identification and robs them of communal support. Invoking the imagery of the traditional Indigenous lifeways of Kosawa not as backward and primitive but rather as their own legitimate world, rich in mutual responsiveness and care, the author questions the worth of the gains of Western modernity. The irony is that the novel acknowledges the importance of education; the heroine, Thula, craves Western education and benefits from it, just as the author herself is an educated woman. The narrative, however, refuses to conclude that the modern Western life is better than the traditional life of the villagers. One can grieve for Kosawa and lament the futile struggles of its people, or be inspired by their determination and resistance. But the dignity and respect with which the narrative posits the acceptance of the passing of time and the changes that inevitably come with it make the story truly poignant, and even elegiac. What else is there left for people involuntarily locked in a struggle between Indigeneity and modernity if not memory and nostalgia, the title seems to suggest.

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Apocalypse When? Storytelling and Spiralic Time in Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves* and Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God*

ABSTRACT

Contemporary climate fiction (cli-fi) frequently invokes the concept of apocalypse to explore the experience of living through the era of unprecedented climate change and environmental disaster that has been named the Anthropocene. Yet, as often as apocalyptic narratives are deployed to express those anxieties and experiences, they so often ignore the histories and presents of peoples who have already lived through multiple apocalypses—in particular, the ongoing violence of settler colonial exploitation of the land now called North America. Considering the role that settler colonialism has played in the development of the current crisis, we turn to two recent works by the Métis writer Cherie Dimaline and Ojibwe author Louise Erdrich to consider how the act of cultural storytelling challenges Western notions of linear temporalities. Our analysis of Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves* will explore how the settler-colonial narratives of scientific progress is challenged through Indigenous storytelling and collective memory, and our analysis of Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God* will examine how Indigenous modes of understanding operate through a cyclical timescape that allows for alternative methods of existing with and within the larger world.

Keywords: Indigenous literature, speculative fiction, apocalypse, storytelling, survivance, settler colonialism.

INTRODUCTION¹

The term Anthropocene remains the de facto way of discussing the current geological era characterized by environmental crisis brought upon by the exploitation of the planet's natural resources by humans, though many have proposed alternatives such as Plantationocene, Capitalocene, and even Chthulucene among others. The proliferation of labels comes from the fundamental flaws of a term like "Anthropocene," which implies an equal share of responsibility for human involvement in the current climate crisis, erasing centuries of Western colonial and capitalist exploitation of the land and its peoples (Hayman 78). The practices that have stripped the land of its resources, resulted in the extensive loss of biodiversity, and produced massive amounts of pollution, are directly tied to the modernizing project and Enlightenment humanist privileging of man above all else.

The relationship between Indigenous² peoples and the land is fraught, as Western colonial narratives often treat ecologically-minded Indigenous cultures as primitive and premodern. Even contemporary ecocritical work is not free from the fetishized and appropriative view of Indigenous knowledge about the land. However, as Indigenous scholars and artists alike have shown, the experience of being Indigenous to North America offers generative ways of thinking about what it means to face the threat of ecological disaster. With a history of apocalyptic events in the form of settler colonialism's destruction of their lands, their people, and their cultures, Indigenous peoples' relationship to the apocalypse is not so much a future to be feared, but a cyclical continuation of what has already been their reality for the last six centuries.

This unique position leads to a different type of dystopian narrative, one that centres the resurgence of Indigenous knowledge and practices as solution to the threat. To look to the past, however, is not the same as white narratives of an idealized agrarianism; rather, the turn to the past is a temporal mode of understanding that there is no linear movement forward. In two recent novels, Cherie Dimaline and Louise Erdrich deploy alternative temporalities that reject the Western narrative of modernity and its linear progression and instead operate within a framework of

¹ The authors of this essay identify as non-Indigenous women of colour; this essay is not meant to speak over or speak for Indigenous scholars or Indigenous knowledge-keepers. Rather, the authors intend to highlight the importance of Indigenous perspectives to the discussion of modernity and the Anthropocene presented in this issue.

² The authors recognize that many different peoples and nations exist within the literatures we discuss in this essay, who cannot and should not be collapsed under one neat term or definition. Where possible, we have included the specific people or nation being referred to; where we are speaking of multiple nations or peoples, we have used "Indigenous" as a descriptor for the sake of ease and clarity.

cyclical or spiraling time. These temporalities, accessible to the Indigenous characters of each novel through the act of storytelling, allow for the Indigenous characters to challenge the settler-colonial state and reclaim Indigenous sovereignty. Our analysis of Dimaline's novel *The Marrow Thieves* (2017) will explore how the settler-colonial state is challenged through multi-nation Indigenous storytelling, knowledge, and collective memory; we then turn to Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God* (2017) to examine how Ojibwe modes of understanding operate through a cyclical timescape that allows for alternative methods of existing with and within the larger world.

STORY, MEMORY, AND LANDSCAPE IN CHERIE DIMALINE'S *THE MARROW THIEVES*

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In his critique of dystopian and post-apocalyptic literature's perspective of the Anthropocene, Potawatomi scholar Kyle Whyte writes that Indigenous perspectives "offer the idea that we confront climate change having already passed through environmental and climate crises arising from the impacts of colonialism" ("Indigenous Science (Fiction)" 226). *The Marrow Thieves*, a young adult novel by Métis author Cherie Dimaline, serves as an excellent example of Whyte's critique. Set approximately forty years in the future, *The Marrow Thieves* imagines a world plagued by climate change and disease, the first major crisis consisting of the "Water Wars," a decade during which fresh water became scarce (Dimaline 24). After the Water Wars, "the rest of the continent sank into a new era. The world's edge had been clipped by the rising waters . . . Half the population was lost in the disaster and from the disease" (26). These diseases eventually result in the inability to dream, which causes insanity in those afflicted. The only people unaffected by this disease are Indigenous peoples, leading white settler-colonists to believe that the bone marrow of Indigenous people is the disease's cure. "Recruiters" capture Indigenous people and hold them in a future version of residential schools while they extract bone marrow. In the post-apocalyptic landscape of the Anthropocene, Dimaline's reordered world is a reflection of past and present apocalypses: Indigenous bodies become literal commodities in yet another settler-state-enacted genocide.

Francis, called "French," the novel's teenage Métis narrator, is alone on the run from Recruiters after losing the rest of his family. A small group of other Indigenous escapees—a mixture of Cree, Anishinaabe, White River, and Métis peoples—are travelling northward to where a larger group of Indigenous survivors are rumored to be living outside of the influence of the oppressive settler-state's Recruiter program. While they travel,

the found-family participates in collective storytelling that pushes back against settler-colonialist progress narratives and uses collective memory to reestablish ties with the poisoned, post-apocalyptic landscape.

COMMUNITY, COLLECTIVE MEMORY, AND STORYTELLING

The Marrow Thieves is structured to elevate storytelling as a method for community and identity-formation, presenting its non-linear flashbacks and alternate timelines through communal storytelling. Dimaline uses two kinds of storytelling, “Story” and “coming-to stories,” both of which function as an anthology of collective memory and knowledge from which the characters construct their own identities and survive the post-apocalyptic world. Patrizia Zanella argues that the coming-to stories and Story speak back to Canada’s paltry attempts to reconcile a history of genocide enacted by the violent settler-colonial state; the “shared oral history” in *The Marrow Thieves* “reveals settler colonialism’s co-constitutive attempts at . . . Indigenous elimination” (177). This elimination attempt played out in the Canadian government’s residential schools, where Indigenous children were separated from their families and stripped of their cultures, as well as in the removal of Indigenous groups from their lands to make that land available for the settler-colonial state to exploit. Dimaline critiques this history (and the lack of reparations for it) through the stories her characters tell. Collective storytelling becomes an important space for the individual Indigenous characters to reclaim their identities, communities, and lands while resisting settler-colonial constructs.

“Coming-to” stories are the personal accounts of each character in the novel describing the way they came to join the refugee group, providing a space for each character to define themselves and the way they survived settler-colonial violence, rather than being defined by Western constructs (Fachinger). By ending each coming-to story at the point of the individual joining the community of survivors, the collected stories function as an anthology of memory. This anthology produces its own epistemology that works toward creating an Indigenous-defined future. Wab, an Anishinaabe girl who is the oldest of the youth, tells her story after she sees a man in the wild who abused her in the past. Her previous reluctance to tell her story resulted in the other youth speculating about her past and identity, but the elder Miigwan, overhearing their speculations, reminds them: “Everyone tells their own coming-to story. Everyone’s creation story is their own” (Dimaline 78–79), emphasizing that each member of the group is free to

define themselves and tell their story when they are ready. Significantly, Wab only chooses to tell her story when she recognizes the telling of it is necessary for the others' safety. Her story, which is one of the most difficult ones in the novel and includes extensive child neglect and sexual assault, doubles as identity-creation and a warning about a man who later betrays them. Likewise, Miigwan's coming-to story is told soon after Wab's and serves as a warning not to trust even other Indigenous strangers, as some are working for the Recruiters: Miigwan's husband Isaac was captured after they took in several people the couple assumed were Indigenous refugees (100–07). Wab and Miigwan's personal apocalypses become part of the group's collective memory, which influences the youth to be rightfully wary towards the newcomers—and underscores the importance of individual storytelling to the protection of the wider community.

The second kind of storytelling, "Story," collapses apocalypses, weaving the history of residential schools—compulsory education for all First Nations children in Canada that aimed to "civilize" a "primitive" people from the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth—with Dimaline's imagined institutions where Indigenous people are kept and their bone marrow extracted. "Story" is told primarily by Miigwan (Miig), one of the two elders of the refugee group, whose Anishinaabe teachings are significant as resistance against Westernized education, particularly in light of the residential schools the novel critiques both directly and in analogous form (Dimaline 23). Every night, the group gathers by the fire to listen to a piece of Story, though the novel itself presents Story in two sections, separated by nearly sixty pages, and forms the backdrop of the novel: the history, present, and future of Indigenous peoples. Miigwan weaves in the history of residential schools with the settler-state destroying Indigenous lands for the sake of capitalism, resulting in environmental, political, and economic collapse in Canada (Dimaline 24). The telling of Story by the fireside every night serves to rekindle traditional Indigenous knowledge, passing it from one generation to the next. As Frenchie narrates, Story might be "a hundred years in one long narrative, blunt and without detail. . . . It was imperative that we know. [Miig] said it was the only way to make the kinds of changes that were necessary to really survive" (25). Miig's purpose in Story is for the youth to survive, not only physically, but also culturally, by remembering their collective history, learning from it, and keeping it for future generations. However, Story is not limited to one direction, Elder to youth: one of the teenagers, Rose, vocally rebels against the way Miig tells Story. French says "she became part of Story . . . And we loved the way she rebelled anyway; having been raised by old people, she spoke like them. It made us feel surrounded on both ends—like we have a future and a past all bundled up in her" (32). As Sium and Ritskes write, "[s]tories as

Indigenous knowledge work to not only regenerate Indigenous traditions and knowledge production, but also work against the colonial epistemic frame to subvert and recreate possibilities and spaces for resistance” (III). Story is a mode of resistance against colonial whitewashing of the past; Story is also living and current, flexible to the needs of the storyteller and the listeners both, keeping it from becoming stagnant history unable to be negotiated or reinterpreted. Story and coming-to stories are an integral part of forming an Indigenous-centered community and identity.

STORYTELLING AND SPIRALING TIME AS RESISTANCE TO PROGRESS NARRATIVES

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The settler-colonial state, motivated by capitalism, cannot see Indigenous peoples or their land as anything other than commodities to be bought and sold, even in the midst of environmental collapse. Miigwan explains during Story that at the beginning of the Water Wars, White settlers “turned to Indigenous people” and their knowledges of the environment, “looking for ways we might guide them” (Dimaline 88). But a short while after settlers attempted to learn from Indigenous ways, Miig claims: “they changed on us . . . looking for ways they could take what we had and administer it themselves” (88). This led to the belief that Indigenous peoples’ bone marrow could cure the disease brought about by settler destruction of the environment: the Recruiters are partly a symbol of history—the residential schools where many Indigenous children were stripped of their cultures and languages, abused, and murdered—and partly a symbol of what constitutes scientific “progress” when constructed within and by a violent settler-state.

This dystopian future Canadian government’s solution to widespread disease is to murder Indigenous peoples in order to cure settlers (particularly wealthy, white people, according to Story). In her essay on *The Marrow Thieves* and Indigenous sovereignty, Laura Maria De Vos writes: “The settler colonial project limits Indigenous nationhood to . . . something from a long ago past that is no longer relevant . . . [and] which makes Indigenous sovereignty unthinkable in the present, let alone the future” (6). Though the events of the past have occurred again, and are still recurring, Indigenous community and sovereignty become an alternative to Western narratives of progress. “Progress” for Indigenous people as it exists in Dimaline’s novel is not linear, but spiralic: temporality is cyclical, as the stories of the past are needed to explain the present and look toward a future that is not new. As De Vos explains in the same essay, the “Indigenous experience of time [is] informed by a people’s particular

relationships to the seasonal cycles on their lands, which acknowledges the present generations' responsibilities to the ancestors and those not yet born" (2). French and his companions show the possible future(s) for Indigenous youth even in the Anthropocene, spurred by their Elders' teachings of responsibility to the land and to future generations.

Miigwan tells the youth in Story that in the first apocalypse, settler-colonialism, Indigenous people survived despite the genocide and cultural oppression enacted by the settler state. In the first half of the novel, between the sections of Story and coming-to stories, French and his young companions spend time learning from the two elders of the group, Miigwan and Minerva. Every day the groups divides into "old-timey" roles, as French puts it: Hunters and Homestead. Miigwan teaches the youth how to hunt respectfully while Minerva teaches them how to care for food, as well as words of the Cree language (Dimaline 31–41). While these roles would seem primitive from a Western point of view, to the Elders it is a return to the relationship the Anishinaabe, Cree, Tutchone, and Métis peoples (and others) had to the land. As Michael Dockry and Kyle Whyte write, "[s]ettler colonialism involves the efforts of a society to replace existing ecological relationships and establish their own in the lands of another peoples" (98). This line of thinking is important in establishing that the Anthropocene is not the work of *all* peoples—Indigenous peoples do not have the same history of affecting the land as settler-colonialists, who altered the environment beyond recognition through exploitation. Toward the beginning of the novel, French says during these "old-timey" lessons given by his Elders, "I came from a long line of hunters, trappers, and voyageurs. But now, with most of the rivers cut into the pieces and lakes left as grey sludge pickers on the landscape, my own history seemed like a myth along the lines of dragons" (Dimaline 21). But throughout the novel, French reconnects with his ancestors' ways as he observes his Elders' lessons, as well as Story and the coming-to stories.

This reconnection is particularly evident during a scene when French is hunting and comes across a moose. While at first he imagines how impressed the others will be with him for killing such a large animal, a moment later French empathizes with the moose, thinking of the animal as a survivor much like himself: "It was like [the moose] was a hundred years old, like it watched all of this happen. Imagine being here through it all—the wars, the sickness, the earthquakes, the schools—only to come to this?" (49). French considers the moose's ability to survive, to resist the threat of settler-colonialism and habitat destruction, and then turns to thinking of the ways in which his community could use the moose's body. But French realizes they "could not travel with the meat before it rotted . . . we'd be leaving half, at least half, behind to rot," leading him to

decide not to kill the moose, despite his worry that refusing to kill could result in his community going hungry (49–50). While French’s decision could impact his community physically, his unwillingness to kill a creature of which they would be forced to waste a considerable portion shows that he has been paying attention to Miigwan’s teachings about hunting—and to Story, when Miig recounts the way the settler-colonial state wasted and exploited the resources provided by the land (24–26). French’s decision is an important part of his character development. As he says early on in the scene, “I always listen to my Elders” (49).

Dimaline’s novel argues that Indigenous people’s knowledges are complete in themselves; their theories and connections with each other and with their environment are enough to move them spatially and chronologically through any apocalypse. In her essay on Indigenous young adult dystopian literature, Sandra Cox writes: “Dimaline participate[s] in a radical speculation that extends survivance out of the past, through the present, and into the future” (66). Dimaline likewise connects chronological *survivance*—a term Chippewa scholar Gerald Vizenor coined, meaning a “sense of native presence over absence, nihility, and victimry” (1)—to environmental survivance in the sense that the characters move toward their stolen homelands and bring healing to both themselves and the land. As Miig tells Frenchie toward the end of the novel: “All we need is the safety to return to our homelands” (Dimaline 193). If disaster is cyclical, so is healing; the end is never really the end.

BACKWARDS, FORWARDS, SIDEWAYS: SPATIOTEMPORAL MOVEMENTS IN *FUTURE HOME OF THE LIVING GOD*

Where Dimaline’s *The Marrow Thieves* collects the stories of a mixed group of Indigenous peoples forced to move continuously through the land, Erdrich’s *Future Home of the Living God* is one woman’s story of navigating Indigeneity in the different spaces of city, suburbs, and reservation. The dystopian setting of this novel is biomedical in nature as well, but framed in terms of evolution, specifically that evolution begins to “run Backwards” leading to the commodification of pregnant women as the government seeks to access and control their reproductive power. The novel is epistolary in nature, written as a journal in which 26-year-old Cedar Hawk Songmaker, an Indigenous woman who was adopted by a white liberal family, narrates approximately five months’ time following the beginning of an undefined ecological disaster. Directly addressing her unborn child throughout the entries, Cedar narrates her pregnancy, reconnecting with her birth mother

and Ojibwe heritage, and attempting to maintain her independence as the government imprisons pregnant women.

Adopted into the Songmaker family, Cedar was severed from her cultural and biological heritage and instead raised with white fetishization of her Ojibwe identity. The Songmakers attempt to celebrate Cedar's Indigeneity, but always through an exoticized and whitewashed lens: Cedar's adoptive mother, Sera, has a history of "self-invent[ing] ceremonies, which she put together from her eclectic readings on Indigenous culture and Rudolf Steiner" (Erdrich 53). Sera's reliance on Steiner, a twentieth-century Austrian philosopher and spiritualist, implies a disregard for the culturally and personally significant specificity of Cedar's Ojibwe heritage. Further fetishized within the white institutional setting of her childhood school—she is referred to as "Native girl! Indian Princess!" and treated with reverence in her school for her "hotline to nature"—Cedar experiences a crisis of identity when in college she meets other Indigenous students who had been raised within their cultures (4). Cedar's experience of the ecological disaster coincides with the reclamation of her Ojibwe heritage as she seeks out her genetic history. Though she instigates a meeting with her birth mother purely to gain medical information, Cedar's entrance into the reservation marks the beginning of her transition into Indigenous modes of being that reject white notions of linear temporality.

STORYTELLING, IDENTITY, AND INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGES

Cedar first begins her education in Ojibwe cultural practices when she enters the space of the reservation. She cannot find her mother's house as she was not given a specific address but rather a series of vague directions that force Cedar to go down multiple "false-alarm" roads before finally finding her destination (14). These spatial diversions symbolically mark Cedar's uncertain relationship to her Ojibwe identity. She develops her Indigeneity in fits and starts, which introduce Cedar to the principle of indeterminacy and, more importantly, the embrace of uncertainty that marks Indigenous knowledges in this novel. Silvia Martínez-Falquina writes that "Erdrich theorizes uncertainty as a way of denouncing the vulnerability of the rights of women and Natives" (165). Or, in other words, uncertainty marks a way of being in the world in which vulnerability has become the norm. Though this is denounced within the context of colonialist exploitation of Indigenous peoples, particularly women, this also marks a different way of experiencing the world that leaves Cedar uniquely prepared for the dystopian events to come.

Even upon finally reaching her biological mother's house, Cedar's mother and the rest of her family refuse to give her the information she seeks forcing her instead to continue confronting the sense of uncertainty. Cedar's grandmother ignores her completely until Cedar finally reveals that she is pregnant. This information manages to get her grandmother to speak, but again in a way that seemingly evades the question: "the word 'pregnant' may have registered, because that word triggers a story, and then another story, many of them. . . . She seems to have lived out many versions of her own history" (Erdrich 34–35). That the grandmother offers Cedar traditional narratives rather than genetic information shows that she prioritizes Ojibwe cultural knowledge over Western scientific knowledge, and also reminds Cedar that inheritance is about more than just genes. Lorena Laura Stookey notes that Erdrich's "fiction commonly features the telling of stories within stories in what might be regarded as arrangements of narratives that resemble Chinese boxes" and that they "serve a variety of functions," one of which is to remind the reader that reality "must always be understood in respect to point of view" (16). This style is reminiscent of Dimaline's grouping of coming-to stories within the larger framework of *Story*, but, in an uncharacteristic show of narrative restraint, Erdrich withholds the grandmother's actual stories, instead giving us only the list of titles. The withholding of these Ojibwe stories, which include "the Story of the Two-Faced Child, the Tooth-Spitting Grave . . . and others which [Cedar] can't just now recall" forces readers unfamiliar with this cultural background to confront their own subject position and either actively search for Ojibwe stories or to sit with the feeling of uncertainty that Cedar herself experiences throughout the novel (Erdrich 35).

Instead of giving the reader what are presumably traditional Ojibwe stories, Erdrich incorporates pieces of a book that Eddy, Cedar's biological mother's husband, is writing. The book is not necessarily about Indigeneity, though it does incorporate aspects of Indigenous philosophy; instead, it is an over 3,000-page collection of "reason[s] not to kill yourself" (29). There is a level of the absurd in this collection, but this is tempered by the pathologizing of Eddy's mental state, which is described as manic-depressive. By incorporating the fractured and disturbing musings of Eddy's fascination with death and dying, and withholding the traditional Indigenous narratives of the grandmother, Erdrich prioritizes sharing the debilitating effects of settler colonialism on the Indigenous psyche. Cedar is not the only Native American with a fractured identity; even those living on the reservation have a tenuous and broken hold on their identities and culture.

It is also through the act of storytelling that Cedar comes to understand her Indigenous identity, and most importantly for her to begin challenging

her white beliefs through her adoption of Indigenous knowledges. Rather than accept the narrative that evolution is running backwards, Cedar reframes the issue:

So if evolution has actually stopped . . . then we would not see an orderly backward progression of human types that evolutionary charts are so fond of presenting. Life might skip forward, sideways, in unforeseen directions. We wouldn't see the narrative we think we know. Why? Because there was never a story moving forward and there wouldn't be one moving backward. (54–55)

This passage early in the novel requires the reader to experience the uncertainty that marks precarious living. Erdrich never provides definitive reasons for why species are rapidly changing; however, she does hint that it is related to climate change with multiple references to events like the melting of the permafrost, winters without snow in Minnesota, and strings of natural disasters (8–9). These moments are fleeting, as are the news fragments that remind the reader that humans are not the only ones affected by the molecular changes: “[S]mall-celled creatures and plants have been shuffling through random adaptations” (44) and prehistoric animals return to the planet (92). Though not as overtly interested in the relationship between Indigenous peoples and the land as *The Marrow Thieves*, the more-than-human world is far from absent from the pages of Erdrich’s novel. The urban setting of *Future Home* unsettles the myth of the nature-culture divide that plagues modernity. In the prologue of *There There*, Cheyenne and Arapaho novelist Tommy Orange reminds us that to be a part of the urban is not to be divorced from the environment; rather, “[a]n Urban Indian belongs to the city, and cities belong to the earth” (11). Like *There There*, Erdrich’s focus on an urban location challenges the tendency to read Indigenous cultural practices, particularly those related to environmentalism, as premodern.

Traditional representations of Indigenous peoples located in North America have focused on smaller towns or reservations as the locus of Indigeneity leading to the invisibility of Indigenous life in the city. By moving Cedar through the various locations within the city, her parents’ suburban home, and the reservation, Erdrich reminds us that the experiences of Indigenous peoples have been diverse and complex and lead to subject positions as “hybrid entities” (Kot 7). These different spaces operate as contact zones, not just for people like Cedar who confront various images of indigeneity, but also contact with the environment and different environmental practices. With the history of settler colonial violence, Indigenous peoples have been forced to turn to collective identities, to share

their knowledges across tribes and space (Whyte, “Indigenous Climate Change” 157–58). The history of violent relocation and exploitation has forced Indigenous peoples to learn how to adapt and continue to adapt. Even as cultures are preserved through the act of storytelling, the ability to adapt has also created the conditions through which Indigenous peoples may experience a resurgence and reclaim sovereignty.

ALTERNATIVE TEMPORALITIES AND INDIGENOUS RESURGENCE

Through the epistolary form, Erdrich promotes a layered, multifaceted understanding of temporality. The journal format is used to track the unfolding of the biomedical crisis, but it also narrates the development of her child, including detailed descriptions of what stage of development it should be at any given time. Cedar’s painstaking documentation of its development indicates an at least partial acceptance of the linear temporality imposed by Western science and the calendar. Yet even as she operates within that temporality, Cedar challenges it: through the story she tells, Cedar challenges the narrative of progression that attempts to explain the biological changes happening to humans and animals. She ties this temporal shift to the body itself, to the gene sequence: “Our entire evolution up until now has apparently been coded into some part of the blood or tissue we haven’t noticed or deciphered. . . . Our bodies have always remembered who we were. And now they have decided to return” (Erdrich 68). She later adds to this discussion of genetic mutations: “We talk about how the redundant gene, or twin, becomes a kind of ghost gene, a silent pseudogene. An untranslated DNA sequence” that carried the “history of our genetic mishaps” (106–07). Though these passages indicate a sense of failure, she further challenges any understanding of backwards movement as regression, instead positing that the evolutionary changes might be to “restore us to some former physical equilibrium” (107). Like *The Marrow Thieves*, *Future Home* engages with the idea of modernity as something constantly reformed by shifting understandings of the past. Erdrich’s gene functions much like Rose’s challenging of Story: history is not merely a thing to be carried forward, but something to be challenged and adapted, something that mutates so that the past is reformed within and for the present.

The temporal shift, insofar as it relates to the idea of progress and evolution, exists not only within the body, but ties the material conditions of life to the abstract quality of time. Despite the apocalypse generally being regarded as an ending, whether to the world or to a particular way of life, Cedar’s embrace of Indigenous knowledges allows her to understand

it merely as another time of change and potential: “I have that sense of time folding in on itself, the same tranced awareness I experienced in the ultrasound room. I realize this: I am not at the end of things, but the beginning” (92). This moment of realization that the apocalypse is not definitive but rather an opening, a moment of possibility, mirrors an earlier conversation with her stepfather, Eddy, in which he rejects Cedar’s assertion that the world is ending:

“Indians have been adapting since before 1492 so I guess we’ll keep adapting.”

“But the world is going to pieces.”

“It is always going to pieces.”

“This is different.”

“It is always different. We’ll adapt.” (28)

At this point in the novel, still operating within her white upbringing, Cedar seems to accept the narrative that the apocalypse is a form of ending, that the only way of understanding what is happening is to think in terms of linear progress. Eddy, however, reminds Cedar that Indigenous Americans have already survived multiple apocalypses all related to the violent and debilitating practices of settler colonialism that include not only the widespread decimation of the Indigenous population, but also the destruction of the land and the loss of Indigenous cultural practices.

Rather than treat this latest development as an ending, the Ojibwe see it as merely another challenge to adapt to. The fall of the US government and rise of a fundamental Christian authoritarian state marks a time of Indigenous resurgence and reclamation that revitalizes the entire space of the reservation. Like Miig’s focus on educating young people in *The Marrow Thieves*, Eddy “[t]hinks of survival measures, ways to draft our young people into working for a higher purpose . . . He wants to make the reservation one huge, intensively worked, highly productive farm” (226). They have also fought back against “[t]he chimookamaanag . . . the white people, and . . . seized the National Guard arsenal up at Camp Riley, which is on our original treaty grounds” (227). This moment, then, that disrupts the linearity of time to create an open space of transformation leads to not only a resurgence of Indigenous identity and culture, but also a literal reclamation of the land that was stolen. It does not erase the history of settler colonialism, evident in the damage to the environment that will remain, but it does signal a turn toward possibilities that did not exist before.

As hopeful as the resurgence of the Ojibwe tribe is, Erdrich does not depict a complete overthrow of the settler colonial state. The gains made

by the Ojibwe people do not erase the damage done by settler colonialism: the damage to the environment remains as does much of the precarity of life for people living on the reservation. The legacy of disenfranchisement is not immediately nor completely overcome; the novel ends with Cedar once again held in a detention center, having been turned in by members of the tribe who are “broke, so dead broke . . . [and] need the money” (248). Further, Cedar gives birth to a baby boy who is immediately taken from her and placed in the care of the new state order, continuing the separation of Indigenous peoples from their identity and community. What Erdrich offers is an ambiguous and ambivalent ending in which the collective appears to experience a resurgence, though individual members might still be trapped within settler colonial mindsets or institutions.

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CONCLUSION

For many speculative writers, cli-fi (climate fiction) has become a generative space to express anxieties regarding the extended trauma of waiting for the apocalypse while feeling powerless to prevent it. Dystopian, apocalyptic, and post-apocalyptic narratives have exploded, but they tell only one story of the apocalypse: they depict a world that is ending, with clear boundaries for before and after. They often miss that apocalypses have happened and continue to happen globally. The fear of the apocalypse also makes it easy to forget that the word does not only signal the biblical end of times, but that apocalypse can refer to any revelation. Dimaline’s *The Marrow Thieves* and Erdrich’s *Future Home* remind us that there is no singular apocalypse. The definite article “the” only makes sense when one belongs to a group who has not yet lived through an apocalypse. Apocalypses are multiple, personal, as well as collective, and they cannot be understood as simply an end. The stories that we tell about apocalypse matter for thinking about our position in the world.

Potawatomi botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer’s *Braiding Sweetgrass* opens with a comparison of the Potawatomi creation story of Skywoman’s fall to the earth with the biblical story of the Garden of Eden. Kimmerer offers the story as a way to remind us that the stories we tell about where we came from affect the stories that we tell about our present and our future. She notes that the cosmology offered by Skywoman is one in which humans are part of the world, not one in which ownership of the planet is given to humans. Perhaps reframing the idea of apocalypse and of the temporal mode the apocalypse inhabits might allow for a shift in our cosmology, and thus a shift in the stories that we tell about human relationships with the land and nonhuman animals, creating an environment more sustainable for us all.

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Márkomeannu#2118, the Future is Already Here: Imagining a Sámi Future at the Intersection of Art and Activism

ABSTRACT

The 2018 edition of the Sámi festival Márkomeannu elaborated a narrative about the future of both the environment and society by articulating fears of an oncoming apocalypse and hopes for Indigenous Sámi futures through a concept presented to festivalgoers via site-specific scenography, visual narratives, and performances. This essay, addressing the festival as a site of artistic activism, reveals the conceptual bases and cultural significance of the festival-plot in relation to Indigenous Sámi cosmologies, the past and the possible future(s) in our time marked by escalating climate change. I argue that Márkomeannu-2018, providing a narrative about the future in which, amidst the Western societies' dystopic colonial implosion, Indigenous people thrive, can be regarded as an expression of Indigenous Futurism. Counterpointing 19th-century theories predicting the imminent vanishing of Indigenous peoples while positioning the Sámi as modern Indigenous peoples with both a past and a future, this narrative constitutes an act of empowerment. Sámi history and intangible cultural heritage constituted repositories of meaning whereas a folktale constituted a framework for the festival-plot while providing an allegorical tool to read the present.

Keywords: Sámi festivals, artistic activism, climate change, Indigenous Futurism.

INTRODUCTION

Colonial anthropogenic climate change¹ is increasingly threatening the environment. According to Streeby, the physical and socio-economic ramifications of climate change will have a particularly destructive impact in the global South and in what she calls the “South within the North,” i.e. the Arctic and its local Indigenous communities, among them the Sámi, the only recognized Indigenous people of Europe (Guttorm). Climate change is already damaging the environment in the world’s northernmost regions. Such dramatic mutations are experienced by young generations bearing witness to how climate change is altering their ancestors’ worlds in unforeseeable ways.

Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia have partitioned Sápmi, Sámi peoples’ ancestral homeland, since the 16th century. Among the worst consequences of colonial encroachment, forced conversion to Christianity led to a gradual loss of Indigenous worldviews and ritual practices. Albeit highly localized and characterized by significant variations, Sámi worldviews shared some important features: no founder, no scriptural authority, no codified doctrines; fluidity, adaptability to socio-cultural changes. Sacred authority came from spirits by revelations in dreams and states of altered consciousness (Rydving). Indigenous Sámi worldviews were polytheistic and animistic, with humans sharing the world with other-than-human entities transcending most humans’ perception, their relations characterized by reciprocity and respect (Helander-Renvall 50–53).

In addition, the Sámi developed a profound understanding of nature, through centuries-old interaction with their surroundings. Experience-based knowledge of natural phenomena enabled Sámi societies to thrive in the Arctic, perceived by colonial settlers as harsh and inhospitable. Sámi months’ names testify to both Sámi’s deep knowledge of the Arctic environment and its natural cycles and to ancient subsistence activities depending on such knowledge (Bergman). Ancient Sámi societies most likely had a cyclical or spiralling understanding of time and temporality. Although influenced by cyclical models, following colonial assimilation and integration into hegemonic societies, today Sámi people live according to linear understandings of time (Helander and Kailo). Assimilation led

¹ In “Indigenous Science (Fiction)” Kyle P. Whyte highlights that “anthropogenic climate change” does not have a clear-cut meaning, encompassing a wide array of human influences upon the environment: from gradual changes enabling nature’s adaptation to disruptive settler colonialism. Worst-case scenarios associated with it are those shaped by colonial/capitalistic encroachment. A distinction between anthropogenic climate change and colonial-induced climate change demonstrates the intersection of colonialism, capitalism, industrialization and environmental depletion highlighting how post-apocalyptic Western narratives revolving around environmental crises’ consequences fail to acknowledge the connections between colonial violence and climate disaster.

to many other major structural changes including language shift. Only a minority of Sámi now speak one of the Sámi languages (Gaski). Despite persisting stigmatization, in recent decades scholars and activists have engaged in language revitalization processes (Pasanen).

However, colonialism persists in subtle forms. Critical analysis of the impact of mining, windfarms, dams and other forms of land-grabbing shows that Indigenous (and marginalized) communities suffer from destructive land-exploitation more than members of hegemonic cultures do. In Sápmi, these phenomena are widely attested, hindering Indigenous practices like reindeer-herding, a traditional Sámi subsistence activity based on the management of semi-domesticated reindeer herds seasonally migrating across the tundra. Reindeer-herding is obstructed by States' regulations, increasingly changing ecological conditions and the expansion of multinationals' environmentally-destructive activities: logging, mining, and energy production (hydro-electric dams, windfarms) along with pollution threatened pastures, forests and settlements, to the long-term detriment of local habitats and cultural-specific lifestyles. The multiple manifestations of colonialism have encountered various forms of resistance: in recent decades, politically-engaged Sámi artistic expressions have prominently articulated Indigenous Sámi resistance against the colonial overtones permeating Nordic societies.

Through the lens of the Márkomeannu festival, this paper examines a Sámi response to these challenges. In 2018, Márkomeannu engaged with hopes for, and fears of, what the future might bring. That festival edition offered its guests a highly articulated plotline implemented through site-specific art and a 3-day-long participatory performance in which they were co-opted as actors. The plotline, published on the Márkomeannu website, is set 100 years in the future and foresees the Earth wrecked by climate change and social inequalities. In this post-apocalyptic scenario, only Indigenous peoples have managed to preserve nature and culture in isolated enclaves framed as Indigenous sanctuaries, one of which Gállogieddi, where Márkomeannu takes places.

Site-specific artworks conveyed strong social and environmental messages grounded in contemporary concerns over the future of Sápmi while offering an emic perspective over Sámi pasts and present. This festival theme is ascribable to the literary genre of Indigenous Futurism, a theoretical lens I will use to address the meanings conveyed by Márkomeannu-2118. The reflections above make Márkomeannu-2118 particularly interesting for this issue of *Text Matters* because it enables observation of how Indigenous Sámi are trying to make sense of past, present, and future challenges deriving from anthropogenic climate change, socio-economic disparity, and colonial violence through written, visual and performative arts.

Furthermore, it offers an emic perspective of Indigenous understanding of recent Sámi history in relation to environmental exploitation on the part of multinational companies and the Fennoscandinavian States, the latter seldom publicly perceived as colonial powers exerting violence against local Indigenous people. Epitomizing Indigenous resilience while embodying hope, Márkomeannu-2118 symbolizes Indigenous creativity and politically-engaged cultural activism, challenging Western understandings of apocalypse while calling for action against the potential devastation of climate change.

This article develops themes I addressed in my PhD thesis, for which I conducted 16-month-long fieldwork (employing qualitative methods such as semi-structured in-depth interviews and participant observation) in Sápmi, as a young, female Italian anthropologist. My sources for this essay include interviews with the Márkomeannu-2018 CEO and written and/or visual material from the festival, as well as my own fieldwork observations while a volunteer at Márkomeannu-2118.

INDIGENOUS FUTURISM, A BRIEF OVERVIEW

Scholars (see Whyte, “Indigenous Science (Fiction)”); Trexler) agree that Indigenous Futurism—a term coined by Indigenous scholar Grace Dillon—constitutes a powerful means for imagining a future that, albeit devastated by colonial anthropogenic climate change, allows Indigenous peoples not only to survive but to thrive. Dillon developed Indigenous Futurism from “Afrofuturism,” a cultural-philosophical movement analyzing the intersection of technology and African diasporic cultural expressions. Grounded in postcolonial theory, Afrofuturism encompasses understandings of history, time and temporality diverging from Western ones, speculating about realities in which Black identities are normative rather than marginalized. Built upon these premises, Indigenous Futurism articulates Indigenous perspectives of not only the future but also the past and present. Counteracting Indigenous absence from mainstream speculative genres (Medak-Saltzman; Streeby), Indigenous Futurism offers a means of projecting Indigenous peoples not just as individuals but as communities in the future, providing a way of counteracting Western narratives, rooted in nineteenth-century positivist social sciences that excluded Indigenous peoples from the future, thus making this movement an act of resistance against colonialism.

In Indigenous-sensitive scientific literature, this aspect is often framed through an intergenerational approach highlighting that the authors’ present is past generations’ future and their lifespan is their descendants’ past (Claisse and Delvenne; Medak-Saltzman; Streeby),

as Whyte explains in his 2017 article: “Our Ancestors’ Dystopia Now: Indigenous Conservation and the Anthropocene.” Whyte emphasizes that devastating features associated with apocalypse in Western cultures are familiar to Indigenous peoples worldwide: many Indigenous societies have *already* experienced socio-cultural apocalypses in the past and are still living in their aftermath. Apocalypse concerns the future as much as the past (Horton 60) while also being lived in the present: radical relocation and concurrent cultural disintegration, often accentuated by the disruption of relations with non-human entities connected with ancestral homelands, meant “lost access to a culturally or economically significant plant(s) or animal(s) due to colonial domination” (Whyte, “Indigenous Science (Fiction)” 226). These animals or plants were not just inaccessible but as if extinct, a situation evoking Western post-apocalyptic scenarios.

BRIDGING TEMPORALITIES: MÁRKOMEANNU-2118

Today, Márkomeannu is a well-established musical and cultural pan-Sámi festival held on the premises of the Gállogieddi Sámi open-air museum. Attended mostly, but not exclusively, by Sámi, Márkomeannu is a venue for Sámi artisans and artists to sell their products and *duodji* (handicrafts). Inspired by Sámi values—i.e. leaving no traces in nature of one’s passage—and contemporary environmental concerns, Márkomeannu aims at environmental sustainability. Clearly marked recycling and composting bins encourage waste sorting. Volunteers keep the festival-areas clean during and after the festival; free fresh water is available; served in compostable crockery, most of the dishes are locally produced.

In 1999, when it was first held, it was a small-scale event arranged by the local youth to celebrate their Márka-Sámi identity based on small-scale farming, long stigmatized by Norwegian and hegemonic reindeer-herding Sámi cultures alike. The festival’s name encapsulates its aims: Márkomeannu is a compound noun formed from two North Sámi words: *Márku*, designating the inner areas of the mountainous Stuornjárga peninsula,² and *Meannu*, meaning “noise/party” and “riot.” Márkomeannu is a party and a rebellion against cultural oppression in the Márka. Since its early editions, the festival has been characterized by ethno-political overtones, often engaging with political debates in Sápmi. Based on these premises, the theme of Márkomeannu-2018 is consistent with the festival’s spirit.

² Stuornjárga (Norwegian Sápmi) stretches along the border between Skánit/Skånland-Tjelsund (Troms-Finmark) and Evenássi/Evenes (Nordland).

Although held in late July 2018, Márkomeannu was imagined to be taking place in 2118.³ The shifting temporality between present and future was the core of the storyline. Introduced to the public through promotional material (videos, digital content and short texts) the festival-concept informed every aspect of the event framing public discussion, seminars, theatrical performances and art exhibitions. Fusing elements of reality, history, and Sámi non-Christian worldviews, the Márkomeannu-2118 plotline was encapsulated in the following text available on Márkomeannu's webpage:

100 years have passed, and the earth is caught in unavoidable darkness. The year is 2118 and the world is about to collapse in power struggle, nuclear war, colonization and environmental disasters. The indigenous peoples have found a way to create their own sanctuaries hidden from the dark colonial power led by the power-hungry world chancellor Ola Tsjudi. The Sámi peoples' sanctuary is at Gállogieddi, where they are trying to build a new world for themselves. The combination of new quantum technology and the rediscovery of the ancient Sámi belief have enabled society to return pioneers from ancient times. Over the years, much of the Sámi tradition and wisdom have disappeared in the struggle to survive as people. The pioneers are retrieved from the *Saivo* (the land of the dead) to assist in the creation of a peaceful, well-organized society. (Márkomeannu-2118)

Here, references to Sámi recent history (ancient Sámi beliefs being lost as consequence of cultural assimilation) and concerns for the future merge. The text describes possible repercussions of colonial anthropogenic climate change on Earth and human societies 100 years from now. By portraying an apocalyptic future, the organizers created a transposition of the present by exacerbating current political dynamics while warning about what might happen if today's socio-environmental behaviour does not change. To do so, as I shall demonstrate, Sámi folktales worked as their framework.

Alternating tones characterize the text: gloom and pessimism, conveying a sense of helplessness, when describing Earth devastated by Ola Tsjudi, and hope and reassurance in the portrayal of Indigenous enclaves where nature and Indigenous societies survive. Cultural insiders were aware of a deeper message—encoded in the names—transcending the dichotomy. As the text suggest, Sámi from all Sápmi gather where Márkomeannu takes place: at Gállogieddi, a backcountry for a long time perceived as marginal not only by the hegemonic Norwegian society, but also by other Sámi communities (see Skåden, “In the Pendulum's Embrace”).

³ Márkomeannu-2018 organizers consulted Sámi author Sigbjørn Skåden—one of the festival founders—discussing various aspects of the festival, including the festival-plot. Skåden was then working on his 2019 book *Fugl*, the first sci-fi novel written by a Sámi author.

OLA 'TSUDJ: A FUTURE FOE FROM 'THE PAST'

The epithets employed in the festival's introductory text constitute key elements for understanding the 2118 festival-plotline. The first character the reader encounters is the evil Chancellor Ola 'Tsjudi. This appellation evokes in Sámi audiences a set of emotions grounded in their history and folklore; whereas the title of chancellor conjures science-fiction scenarios, echoing the galactic enemy *par excellence*, the *Star Wars* series Supreme Chancellor Palpatine, the name "Ola 'Tsjudi" is culturally meaningful, as the then festival CEO explains:

It was kind of a fun reference for us. I'm on Sápmi's Norwegian Side. When a person from the majority talks like a representative for the Norwegian society, he is an "Ola Nordmann," or "Ola Norwegian." . . . "Ola" stands for a prototypical colonizer's male first name, and then "Tsjudi" was a hint to the stories about Čuđit people that used to raid Sámi villages. We wanted a name that had some fun puns to it, but also with some historical references that can be played with. We didn't put a lot of talk into it, but we wanted it to be a pun. It was a bit funny, even though he was an evil controlling dictator. (Reinås Nilut)⁴

In other words, the common Norwegian name Ola has various connotations while metonymically standing for the stereotypical male Norwegian agent of the hegemonic colonial society engaged in exploitative actions, be they mining, logging or damming. The fictional surname 'Tsjudi bears strong connections with Sámi folklore as it is modelled upon Čuđit, the folklore enemies looming over Sámi *siidas* (social units). Cultural outsiders—like myself—were able to grasp 'Tsjudi's implicit meanings only if we had previous knowledge of Sámi folktales but Sámi festivalgoers immediately identified the Chancellor with the enemies of their oral tradition. Ironically, the name is reassuring: Sámi are aware that, at least in folktales, their enemies are defeated. This conveys a message hidden between the lines: the Sámi will survive Ola 'Tsjudi.

In Sámi folktales, the "Čuđit" are fearsome human foes who plunder helpless Sámi communities, menacing the survival of Sámi society. Čuđit folktales revolve around a prototypical plot complying with a specific narrative repetitive in time and space: a band of merciless thieves murder Sámi to steal their belongings. The Sámi hero/ine manages to trick them and saves the rest of the community. To drag the enemy to their death, s/he resorts to her/his knowledge of the local landscape to her/his advantage. This hero/ine is known in Sámi as *ofelaš* (plural: *ofelaččat*), pathfinder.

⁴ The transcriptions reported in this contribution are not verbatim as I omitted repetitions. As agreed during the interviews, which were held in English, the name reported here is my Interlocutor's real one.

Čuđit legends have long offered a means, grounded in Sámi cultural heritage, of understanding the present. The early twentieth-century Danish ethnographer Demant-Hatt, reporting the dark emotions *Čuđit* evoked in her interlocutors, wrote: “[W]ith *Čuđit* legends, a sense of helplessness and fear of a horrible and overbearing enemy that never shows compassion, still remains behind these narratives” (104). Demant-Hatt suggested that, albeit set in a timeless past, *Čuđit* stories articulated contemporary challenges for the Sámi. *Čuđit* were not ancient enemies but narrative elaborations of hostile neighbours (Swedes, Norwegians, Finns or Russians). Similarly, Frandy considers *Čuđit* stories as reflecting border dynamics revealing colonial violence and the threat this process continues to pose to Sámi communities, their lifestyles and cultural values.

Today artists resort to these paradigmatic antagonists to represent the new collective enemy of the Sámi: multinationals and colonial infrastructures exploiting sub/arctic natural resources in Sámi territories. Through the *Čuđit*, Sámi folktales have become important tools for dealing with crises, as Nils Gaup’s 1987⁵ film *Ofelaš* shows. Set previous to the Christianization of Sápmi, *Ofelaš* offers a transposition of the *ofelaš-Čuđit* legend. In his analysis of Gaup’s film, Thomas DuBois considers the *Čuđit* to be dangerous not because “foreign, but rather, because they are evil: they have lost track of the unity which binds all things together and saves mankind from disintegration and depravity” (271). Almost 20 years after *Ofelaš* was produced, the prototypical figure of the *Čuđit* is explicitly used to criticize the exploitation of Sápmi through Indigenous frameworks. In 2016, the Sámi singer Sofia Jannok released a song entitled “*Čuđit*.” Translating the term as “colonizer,” she wrote on her Facebook webpage: “*ČUĐIT* is about the colonizing power.” Similarly, in a protest-poster, the anonymous Sámi artist-activist collective Suohpanterror⁶ relied on *Čuđit* symbolism to convey a political message. Suohpanterror openly established a link between the contemporary mining exploitation of Sápmi and Sámi storytelling tradition, providing a reading of the exploitation of Sápmi grounded in Sámi frameworks (Cocq and DuBois). The poster reproduces a *Čuđe*, extrapolated from Gaup’s film, pointing a crossbow at the viewer. Logos of mining companies exploiting Sápmi dots the background. A text

⁵ *Ofelaš* was produced soon after the protests against the construction of a hydroelectric power station on the Alta river brought environmental colonialism and systemic slow violence in Sápmi to a wide inter/national audience, leading to the establishment of the Sámi parliament in Norway (Minde).

⁶ Suohpanterror is an anonymous Sámi artist/activist group active since 2012, challenging stereotyped representations of Sámi cultures through provocative art-activism (Junka-Aikio). Suohpanterror is a pun merging the English word “terror” with *suohpan*, North Sámi for lasso.

in Sámi dominates the poster. Cocq and Dubois translate it as: “Sámi people! The Čuđit are back and they want our minerals.” The message of Suohpanterror poster’s resonates with Sofia Jannok’s “Čuđit” and, in my opinion, is twofold: the exploitation of Sápmi is not a new phenomenon but its extent is, and the methods of the mining companies are modern counterparts to the Čuđit raids. Nevertheless, the poster implies that as in folktales the Sámi defeat the Čuđit through their knowledge of the local landscape, so the Sámi today will manage to overcome the threat of colonial exploitation of Sápmi.

When referring to the Čuđit, contemporary Sámi artists and activists resort to narrative structures and lexicon originating in ancient Sámi worldviews but that, encapsulating the centuries-long struggle for survival and self-determination, emerge as appropriate to denounce neo-colonial practices and other forms of exploitation and oppression in contemporary Sápmi. The Čuđit represent a form of symbolic continuity between the threats of the past and those of the present, threatening Sámi survival and therefore their future as a people. Thus, these folktale enemies have become an important element connecting contemporary Sámi experiences to the Sámi past, and to a Sámi future which will only exist as long as these adversaries are defeated. Through artistic criticism (Berg and Lundgren) and art-activism, art has become one of the most important ways to express concerns, fears and hopes about the future of the Sámi people.

Therefore, the future evil chancellor Ola Tsjudi symbolizes contemporary threats to Sámi society. This menace, in the Márkomeannu-2118 plotline, is tackled by heroes/ines from the recent Sámi past: the pioneers.

OFELAČČAT: WALKING IN THE ANCESTORS' FOOTSTEPS

During the festival, the identity of the pioneers mentioned in the plot was revealed: they were Elsa Laula, Jakko Sverloff and Anders Larsen, three Sámi political activists who, between the late 19th- and the early 20th-century, contributed to the promotion and the protection of Sámi rights and cultural values. In the festival-material, the three activists are called “pioneers”⁷ in English, *veivisere* in Norwegian, and *ofelaččat* in North-Sámi. Both *veivisere* and *ofelaččat* mean “those who show the way,” i.e. guides or pathfinders. In

⁷ From the Latin *pedo*, foot soldier, “pioneer” has a colonial connotation, literally meaning: one among the first to move to/live in a new area. During fieldwork, it was not clear whether “pioneer” was employed ironically. The Norwegian *pioner* is often used when discussing early Sámi activists/politicians. Sámi scholar Lill Tove Fredriksen and Sámi author Sigbjørn Skåden describe Anders Larsen as a “*pioner*” in Sámi cultural life.

Sámi languages, *ofelaš* has come to mean “leader” but its importance lies in its original function as the hero/ine who saves the Sámi from the Čđđit. The three *ofelaččat* mentioned in the Márkomeannu-2118 text symbolize collective ancestors to all Sámi peoples, present and future. The encounter between the *ofelaččat* and their symbolic future descendants—incarnated by festivalgoers—delineates a dialogical narrative between descendants and ancestors (Whyte, “Indigenous Science (Fiction)”) at odds with Western linear conceptions of time but perfectly fitting within a spiral understanding of it, characteristic of many Indigenous understandings of time (De Vos 2–3).

According to the plotline, the *ofelaččat* were to guide the Sámi of the future in building a society inspired by Sámi values. The 2018 CEO Anne-Henriette Reinås Nilut explains:

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Sámi people in 2118 had managed to build a quantum-bridge to connect with Saivo, the Sámi afterworld, where some spirits live. They call these three spirit-guides back to help, guide them. Each of them had a specific role. Elsa Laula was chosen for her ability to unite people in a cause.

The recalling of dead leaders to guide new generations of Sámi in establishing a Sámi society is a narrative device grounded in Sámi ways of transmitting experience-based knowledge across generations: the young shall learn from the elders. Contemporary Sámi societies are still facing challenges similar to those Laula, Sverloff and Larsen dealt with 100 years ago: resource exploitation, curtailment of agency and sovereignty, stigmatization, forced assimilation. Consequently, these past leaders can teach new generations how to cope with familiar threats. The plotline projected these challenges in an imagined future in order to foster discussion on how to tackle them in the present. Anne-Henriette Reinås Nilut explains: “We wanted to challenge our audience. We wanted them to attend the festival not only for partying, socializing and music, but also to provoke some thoughts about the plot: What is a safe place for us? . . . and remind ourselves that we could survive anything.”

STAGING THE FUTURE

Site-specific art enacted the festival-plotline through sound installations, scenography, and digital drawings portraying the Márkomeannu-2118 future. The 3-day-long performance *Sáŋgarat máhccet* (*The Heroes Return*) engaged the public, allowing festivalgoers to participate in the plot. To fulfill the festival-concept, Márkomeannu organizers relied on the expertise of Siri Broch-Johansen (playwright), Stein Bjørn (project manager), Anders-Ándaris Rimpi (sound artist), Mari Lotherington (scenographer) and Nina

Valkeapää, Ánte Siri, and Aleksí Ahlakorpi (actors), who produced a sensory experience transforming Gállogieddi into a futuristic Sámi landscape.

In addition, illustrator Sunna Kitti produced ten drawings visualizing the concept, especially what unfolded outside Gállogieddi, not staged but left to festivalgoers' imagination. Kitti's drawings depict two different contexts: six images focus on colonial violence and Sámi attempts to escape from it; and four focus on Sámi thriving in colonial-free Sápmi. As with the festival's text, two contrasting notes characterize the illustration: the first six paintings are dark, violent, dramatic, their subjects suggesting both past and present events. Three of these images encapsulate both fears and optimism: in *Leading Family to Safety*, concerns over a contaminated Earth and hope for a safe future for Sámi peoples coexist. The drawings depicting a Sámi-managed future are light-coloured and reassuring scenes of joy, freedom, and harmony between Sámi and nature (as in *All is Fine Again*, fig. 1). The drawings draw upon actual events affecting Sámi peoples: for example, *Nuclear Fallout* evokes the effects of the Chernobyl disaster on reindeer-herding (Bostedt).

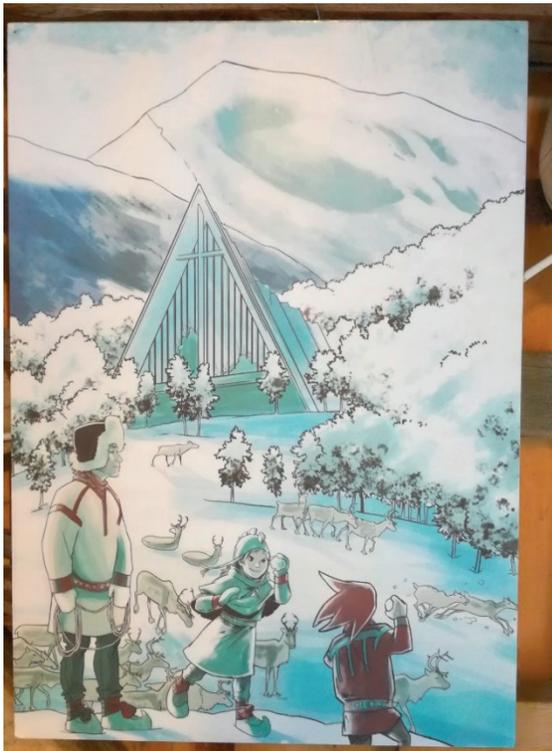


Fig. 1. Márkomeannu-2018, scenography, detail, 2018. A reproduction of Kitti's artwork *All is Fine Again* is hanging on the barn's wall. Photo by the author.



Fig. 2. Márkomeannu-2018, scenography, detail, 2018. A reproduction of Kittu's artwork *Forced Slaughtering* is hanging on the Gállogieddi Museum's barn. Photo by the author.

Forced Slaughtering (fig. 2)—showing shackled Sámi being forced to butcher their reindeer—evokes WWII episodes: Sámi in German-occupied territories were forced to slaughter reindeer to feed the soldiers and reindeer were killed upon the Nazi retreat (Evjen and Lehtola 34–35, 37). The image also alludes to colonial governments' control upon reindeer-herding by evoking a recent judiciary case epitomizing the conflict between Sámi reindeer-herders and the Norwegian government. The latter ruled against a young reindeer-herder, Jovsset Ánte Sara, who had to reduce his herd to comply with Norwegian regulations.⁸ Kittu describes “forced slaughter” as follows:

The Nordic countries have always had the custom of ensuring that a reindeer herder does not have too many reindeer, in which case the herd had to be slaughtered. For many, giving up their traditional livelihood is

⁸ Sara's case has gained international resonance also thanks to Sara's sister, the artist Máret Ánte Sara, who addressed colonial violence through art.

difficult . . . The dictator . . . can force the reindeer herders to work. When reindeer herding disappears, the area will be freed up to install other industries.

Similarly, in the festival narrative, the evil Chancellor wants to make the land profitable by installing factories and industries. This understanding of natural resources as something to be exploited rather than used and respected is at the core of the epistemological difference between Sámi and colonial approaches to resource-management. In the long term, the downsizing of reindeer-herding will threaten Indigenous economic subsistence systems, freeing the land for the colonizers and undermining the survival of the Sámi and their cultures.

Within the Márkomeannu-2118 framework, today-threatened Sámi cultures are the basis of daily life within Gállogieddi, a Sámi “Ecotopia” in a colonial dystopia. This ecologic utopia is a projection of aspirations towards Sámi sovereignty and relationships with nature based on reciprocity. The disintegration of Western institutions and the concurrent political/social/economic/environmental collapse emerge as the premises of Indigenous empowerment, epitomized in Kitti’s art in *All is Fine Again* (fig. 1). Set in Tromsø, this illustration shows reindeer roaming free in front of an adult man looking after the reindeer and two children playing, all dressed in Sámi clothing. In the background, the Sámi sacred mountain Sálašoavi/Tromsdalstinden dominates the landscape while woods surround the Arctic Cathedral, a symbol of the city of Tromsø, here depicted as collapsing.

LOOKING AHEAD: A SÁMI FUTURE AT GÁLLOGIEDDI

A political message lies between the festival-plot’s lines: if self-regulation and Indigenous sovereignty were the norm, Sámi peoples would thrive and they would do so by building on their ancestors’ collective knowledge. In contrast to Tsjudi’s tyranny, at Gállogieddi-2118 decisions are taken collectively, and the elders—represented by the *ofelaččat*—guide new generations. Gállogieddi-2118 thus resembles pre-colonial Sámi societies where decisions were collective, based on reciprocity and respect for non-human entities, offering an alternative to Western decision-making models (for instance, Scandinavian parliaments are the model for the Sámi on the Norwegian, Swedish and Finnish side of Sápmi). Nevertheless, Gállogieddi-2118 is not a re-enactment of the past. The Sámi of the future—as those of the present—embrace a certain version

of modernity, symbolized in the plot by “quantum technologies” while valorizing Indigenous Sámi epistemologies, represented by the Saivo/land of the dead and the ancient Sámi belief ruthlessly persecuted by Christianity and “rediscovered” by the Sámi of the future. The passage refers to colonial violence which, through enforced Christianization, suppressed native knowledge, and to Indigenous empowerment through decolonial reappropriation of Indigenous epistemologies. Rejecting the commonplace that sees the Indigenous peoples as not engaged in modernity and challenging teleological progress-oriented narratives interpreting the present as inherently more “advanced” than the past, the mixing of futuristic technology and ancient spiritualities is a foundation of Indigenous Futurism (Whyte, “Indigenous Science (Fiction)”); Trexler). Although not thoroughly examined by the organizers, this element is central to Márkomeannu-2118, substantiating the hypothesis that the festival represents an example of Sámi Indigenous Futurism.

The call for Sámi sovereignty of Gállogieddi-2118, grounded in Indigenous epistemologies, constitutes a critique of social problems Sámi face today because of assimilation, and resonates with contemporary battles Sámi people fight against corporations taking advantage of Sápmi’s natural resources and strategic position. Sápmi, rich in metals, wood and fish, is the centre of Arctic Europe. This region, once the ice melts, will be fully navigable, allowing new trading routes connecting Asia and Europe. Then, the local environment and Sámi activities like reindeer-herding—already heavily damaged by climate change—will suffer even more from infrastructures such as harbours and railways (Finland is already considering an Arctic railway) upon whose construction the Sámi have little say.

Agency and resilience are the cornerstones of the whole Márkomeannu-2118 concept, as it envisioned not only the existence of Sámi peoples in the future but also their flourishing. By proposing a Sámi utopia within a Western-made dystopia, the festival’s concept constitutes an act of resistance in its own right: the background story—and the festival itself—disproves 19th-century social Darwinist theories envisaging the Sámi as relics of a long-gone past. Not only did Western scholars consider Indigenous peoples as destined to vanish—and hence without a future—but they construed them as lacking a proper past. Disregarding Indigenous oral cultures, many Western scholars considered Indigenous peoples as “peoples without history” (Wolf X, XVI, 18, 335). A double negation, that of past and future, thus relegated Indigenous peoples to perpetual temporal marginality (Ginsburg and Myers 29–31), living in an atemporal dimension at the fringes of the present (Fabian 37). The future of 19th- and 20th-century Indigenous peoples is the present of contemporary Indigenous peoples. Their existence is an act of resistance against colonial

attempts to erase them in the past. Indigenous peoples across the globe have defied such understandings and, by engaging in Indigenous Futurism, are claiming their space not only in the present but also in the future. Imagining Indigenous existence in the future is a both a statement and an act of emotional and intellectual resilience (Medak-Saltzman 156). Furthermore, by envisaging Indigenous peoples thriving in the future, Indigenous Futurism not only offers ways of coping with the present, but also of standing up for Indigenous rights for generations to come.

The envisioning of a Sámi future at Gállogieddi builds on the strength that enabled the Sámi to survive as a people despite oppression, enforced assimilation, and land dispossession. This strength often derived from the close connection that the Sámi enjoy with their natural surroundings. As the imagined future Márka is separated from the wrecked Earth through an invisible barrier, festivalgoers had to go through to reach their haven (physically represented by a tunnel connecting the present outside the festival-area to the future inside of it), so locals perceived the mountains as protecting the Márka from Norwegian interference. Professor Geir Grenersen, who worked for many years in the Márka, explained to me (in a private conversation) that the mountains surrounding the Márka—making it difficult for Norwegians to reach Stuornjårga’s inner areas—were often conceptualized as the local landscape protecting its Márka-Sámi people from the Norwegian(ized) sea-culture. Thus, imagining a future Gállogieddi as a safe haven—visualized in the festival material as a bubble—actually transposes local conceptualizations of the Márka landscape and its protective function.

IMAGINING THE (WORST POSSIBLE) FUTURE TO CHANGE THE PRESENT

A call for action against colonial anthropogenic climate disaster is at the heart of the Márkomeannu-2118. The plotline urges festivalgoers to take actions to prevent the worst from happening, and the 2118-scenario from fulfilling itself. By envisaging a dystopic colonial world, Márkomeannu-2118 denounced past and contemporary socio-environmental malpractices and their catastrophic consequences, offering an insight into Sámi narratives concerning the connections between colonial violence and anthropogenic climate change. Such narratives, Whyte explains in “Indigenous Science (Fiction),” are often obfuscated by Western post-apocalyptic scenarios. Despite the gloomy future envisioned at Márkomeannu-2118, the storyline was designed as an inspiration and a means of fostering change. As Anne-Henriette Reinås Nilut explains, one of the festival-theme’s main purposes

was to encourage guests to reflect upon the role that individuals have at this critical time in human history:

We made an extreme scenario where the world is no longer in danger, the irreversible damage is already done. At the same time, it plays on this, that there is only the now. We wanted to challenge people to discuss themes of time and lifestyles, putting them into a different time [that] is not the time they are now. So [the plotline] was practical because it helps explaining the backstory. But also, part of our goal was to inspire guests to discuss deeper issues.

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Márkomeannu-2018's focus on the consequences of colonial anthropogenic climate change positions the festival's plot within the coordinates of Indigenous Futurism with influences from climate fiction. By creating an experiment of prefigurative practice through theatrical experience, engaging the participants in a future in which socio-climatic catastrophes have already occurred, Márkomeannu-2118 offered festivalgoers the opportunity to reflect upon the consequences of climate change and social inequalities. It also implicitly challenged Western economic systems exploiting resources and nature as if they were infinite disregarding the effects of this approach on the environment while urging festivalgoers to take responsibility for their future and that of their descendants.

Many of these plot elements resonate with cli-fi⁹ *topoi*. According to Trexler, the incommensurable scale of the oncoming climate disaster is hard to comprehend in the present, but climate fiction, by envisaging life in a future shattered by anthropogenic (colonial) disasters, has the power to make climate change and its consequences visible to contemporary audiences, motivating them to change their behaviour in an attempt to avoid climate catastrophe. While cli-fi may help fight climate change by instilling panic, Indigenous Futurism helps imagine a future for Indigenous communities in which they are once again in control of their lands and cultures. By making possible futures tangible and visible, cli-fi and Indigenous Futurism have the power to inspire social movements while establishing connections among different temporalities and spaces, offering a means to reflect upon climate change (Streeby; Jensen). Through art, activism, and Indigenous Futurism, Indigenous peoples—and peoples of colour—address the intersection between climate change and colonial violence, by evoking the future—and claim their presence into it—through performance and imagination, making futures present from an experiential perspective, translating speculations

⁹ Cli-fi (climate fiction) is a subgenre of sci-fi (science fiction). In the 1960s J. G. Ballard developed it further and it later became popular thanks to Dan Bloom (environmentalist) and novelist Margaret Atwood (DiPaolo).

into experiences. Through Indigenous Futurism, Indigenous authors and artists recall their people's past while imagining their possible futures. Moreover, they allow the public to reflect upon the present in the hope of avoiding worst-case scenarios. Colonial anthropogenic climate change is a serious threat to the world and it may ultimately result in the collapse of ecosystems, species loss and environmental depletion, the devastating potential consequences of these phenomena on human societies ranging from economic collapse to radical relocation causing drastic changes in peoples' lifestyles. As Márkomeannu-2118 shows, by engaging in cli-fi and Indigenous Futurism as a way of imagining Indigenous peoples in a near future shaped by climate change, Indigenous communities are trying to reclaim a future for themselves and their descendants.

CONCLUSION

The frame of Márkomeannu-2018 is embedded in the global Indigenous struggle for, and global concerns about, climate change and climate justice. As Hickey notes, Indigenous Futurism is expressed through written and visual arts and the enactment of the Márkomeannu-2118 storyline demonstrates performative arts' engagement with this cultural movement. Márkomeannu-2118 epitomizes Indigenous Futurism at the intersection of decolonial and environmental activism, ethno-politics, and art because it aimed to raise awareness of climate change and social inequalities, and is thus in line with those features Hickey identifies as intrinsic in Indigenous Futurism. Through the lens of a culture that endured colonization, Márkomeannu-2118 envisions a Sámi future shielded from the downfall of colonial societies caused by their capitalistic greed, in a haven built upon the implosion of the colonizers' society. In this dystopic utopia, Sámi cultures are the basis of continued existence. Besides reaffirming the Sámi presence in the present/future, this concept articulates contemporary concerns about climate change, especially in Arctic contexts. Whereas a key feature of Márkomeannu-2118 was hope, it also expressed Indigenous agency and resilience by being emblematic of cultural-artistic activism epitomizing both Indigenous creativity and political engagement. This also symbolizes a form of contemporary collective storytelling engaging the (festival) community and offering an alternative to Western perceptions of apocalypse grounded in a teleological linear understanding of time. Finally, it elicited action to prevent doom-laden climate change scenarios. Thus Márkomeannu-2018 may be regarded as a locus of resilience and resistance, as well as an arena for politically-engaged cultural activism that looks towards the future while treasuring the legacy of the Sámi past.


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INTERCONNECTIVITY AND ANIMACY

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“The Only Way Out Is In”: Transcending Modernity and Embracing Interconnectedness in Gary Snyder and Kenneth White

ABSTRACT

It seems that in order to overcome the current ecological crisis we need a new (global?) narrative. If the narrative of “progress” that has functioned as one of the Western cultural myths is linked to the notions of modernity and Enlightenment, then perhaps we need a new vision of modernity and “enlightenment.” This change might become part of a paradigm shift associated with a new view of ecology and the natural world, as proposed by Thich Nhat Hanh, the father of engaged Buddhism in the West. This paper aims to show how Gary Snyder and Kenneth White, two like-minded world-renowned poets and environmental activists, contribute to a new cultural paradigm: transmodernity. The non-dualism and Eastern philosophy that White and Snyder find valuable represent a rejection of Western modernity, and its cult of progress and telos. The emphasis will be placed on the importance of the Hua-Yen Buddhist philosophy, centred upon the metaphor of “Indra’s net,” and the ways in which it informs Snyder’s and White’s writing and Earth-centred activism. Snyder’s Buddhist anarchism is nowadays, more than ever before, intertwined with deep ecology. White’s radical geopoetics is becoming more and more popular, showing that the paradigm is shifting. As I will argue, the impact of “Indra’s net” on the dynamics of this gradual process is undeniable.

Keywords: transmodernity, Gary Snyder, Kenneth White, interbeing, geopoetics, engaged Buddhism.

“Mind is fluid, nature is porous, and both biologically
and culturally we are always fully part of the whole.”
(Snyder, “A Village Council of All Beings,” *A Place in Space* 81)

“Delusion is seeing all things from the perspective of the self.
Enlightenment is seeing the self from the perspective
of the myriad things of the universe.”
(Dōgen 77)

“I stand neither in the wilderness
nor fairyland
but in the fold
of a green hill”
(Jamie 131)

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AFTER “NATURE”?

The theme of transcending Western ideology will be central throughout this essay. In his 2015 book *After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene*, Jedediah Purdy offers an insight which connects Snyder’s and White’s writing on radical geopoetics and the need to go beyond the paradigm of Western culture:

The history of environmental lawmaking suggests that people are best able to change their ways when they find two things at once in nature: something to fear, a threat they must avoid, and also something to love, a quality they can admire or respect, and which they can do their best to honor. The first impulse, of fear, can be rendered in purely human-centered terms, as a matter of avoiding environmental crisis. The second impulse, of love, engages animist intuitions and carries us toward post-humanism, which is perhaps just another name for an enriched humanism. Either impulse can stay the human hand, but the first stops it just short of being burnt or broken. The second keeps the hand poised, extended in greeting or in an offer of peace. This gesture is the beginning of collaboration, among people but also beyond us, in building our next home. (288)

The second attitude—motivated by love, affirmation and care—might also be called the attitude of “interbeing.” This term has entered the Anglophone world thanks to the teaching of the late Thich Nhat Nanh, a world-renowned Buddhist Zen master, poet, author, scholar, and activist for social change, who was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Thich Nhat Hanh established hundreds of meditation centres around the world, but in the 1970s he moved to France,

and ever since that time he lived in the Plum Village monastery near Bordeaux, and served as a Dharma teacher in Europe, America, and Asia, practising and (thus) transmitting the philosophy of engaged Buddhism. In his view, Buddhist precepts must be practiced in the form of working for society (hence his tradition is often referred to as one of the schools of engaged Buddhism), particularly in the context of promoting peace, and saving the environment.

Nhat Hanh has written extensively on the philosophy of “interbeing.” In his article “The Order of Interbeing,” he introduces the core of his teaching which can be seen as a practical application of the *Heart Sūtra* and *Hua-Yen Sūtra*:

To be in touch with the reality of the world means to be in touch with everything that is around us in the animal, vegetal, and mineral realms. If we want to be in touch, we have to get out of our shell and look clearly and deeply at the wonders of life—the snowflakes, the moonlight, the songs of the birds, the beautiful flowers—and also the suffering—hunger, disease, torture, and oppression. Overflowing with understanding and compassion, we can appreciate the wonders of life, and, at the same time, act with firm resolve to alleviate the suffering. Too many people distinguish between the inner world of our mind and the world outside, but these worlds are not separate. They belong to the same reality. (Nhat Hanh 205–06)

Tiep means “being in touch with” and “continuing”; *hien* means “realizing” and “making it here and now” (205). In order to “inter-be,” to use one of Nhat Hanh’s favourite verbs, we need to “bring and express our insights into real life” (206). And as only “the present moment is real and available to us” (206), understanding and compassion must be seen and touched in this very moment. Nhat Hanh stresses that “[t]he secret of Buddhism is to be awake here and now. There is no way to peace; peace is the way. There is no way to enlightenment; enlightenment is the way. There is no way to liberation; liberation is the way” (207). I would argue that Nhat Hanh’s teaching is very close to Snyder’s *tzu-jan*—a concept which continuously appears in Snyder’s essays: “Tao seen as the ten thousand individual things we encounter in *contact*” (Hinton 135)—and his practice of the Wild: mindful affirmation of the moment, being open to what happens, being ready to welcome any obstacles, being *in contact* (see Kocot, “A Celebration of the Wild” 102–03). In *The Practice of the Wild*, Snyder quotes Dōgen who says: “When you forget the self, you become one with the ten thousand things” (160), and he adds: “[T]en thousand things means all of the phenomenal world. When we are open that world can occupy us” (160). Being open and *in contact* also means that we are not afraid to look within in order to find root causes of the problems we find around us. At some point of the

practice the distinction between within and without naturally disappears, but the path of non-duality needs to become our daily reality first.

For Thich Nhat Hanh and for Snyder, the web of relationships in an ecosystem resembles the Hua-yen Buddhist image of Indra's net, where, as David Landis Barnhill puts it,

the universe is considered to be a vast web of many-sided and highly polished jewels, each one acting as a multiple mirror. In one sense each jewel is a single entity. But when we look at other jewels, which themselves are reflections of other jewels, and so on in an endless system of mirroring. Thus in each jewel is the image of the entire net as whole. The jewels interpenetrate each other and, in Huayan's sense of the term, they share the same identity. Yet each one contains the others in its own unique way in its distinctive position, and so they are different. This type of identity does not imply being identical or involve merging into an undifferentiated One. ("Relational Holism" 86–87)

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Indra's net is a metaphor for the interconnectedness of all reality. The *Hua Yen Sūtra* (Sanskrit *The Avatamsaka Sūtra*) is one of the most influential Mahayana sūtras of East Asian Buddhism, rendered in English as *Flower Garland Sūtra*, *Flower Adornment Sūtra*, or *Flower Ornament Scripture*. It is particularly important for Zen and Ch'an Buddhists. Cook notes that without the practice and realization of Zen, Hua Yen philosophy "remains mere intellectual fun, never a vibrant reality" (26). One of the ways of making it a vibrant reality is to acknowledge and affirm the interdependence of all the elements of the net, to see the other as a reflection of oneself. This practice has been one of the most important legacies of Thich Nhat Hanh's life-long service for humanity.

"The Way Out Is In," the phrase figuring in the title of my essay, comes from Thich Nhat Hanh's teaching but, interestingly, it is also the name of the podcast made last year (2021) by the Plum Village's abbot, Brother Phap Huu, and Jo Confino, a lay Buddhist practitioner and journalist. This recent podcast, featuring Sister True Dedication (a former journalist and monastic Dharma Teacher ordained by Thich Nhat Hanh), discussed Thich Nhat Hanh's recent book, entitled *Zen and the Art of Saving the Planet* (2021). Here is how the author describes the need for change of our individual minds so that a collective change may follow:

When you wake up and you see that the Earth is not just the environment, the Earth *is* us, you touch the nature of interbeing. And at that moment you can have *real* communication with the Earth. . . . We have to wake up together. And if we wake up together, then we have a chance. Our way of living our life and planning our future has led us into this situation. And

now we need to look deeply to find a way out, not only as individuals, but as a collective, a species. (2, 4–5)

Thich Nhat Hanh’s philosophy of engaged Buddhism, practiced in the field of ecology since the 1970s, is very much in line with the message of Kenneth White, the founding father of the geopoetics project. On the website of The Scottish Centre for Geopoetics (founded in 1995 by Tony McManus and others, affiliated to the International Institute of Geopoetics founded by White in 1989) we can read the following:

If, around 1978, I began to talk of “geopoetics,” it was for two reasons. On the one hand, it was becoming more and more obvious that the earth (the biosphere) was in danger and that ways, both deep and efficient, would have to be worked out in order to protect it. On the other hand, I had always been of the persuasion that the richest poetics came from contact with the earth, from a plunge into biospheric space, from an attempt to read the lines of the world.

Since then, the word has been picked up and used, in various contexts. The moment has come to concentrate those currents of energy into a unitary field.

That is why we have founded the Institute of Geopoetics. (White, “Inaugural Text”)

I would argue that White’s vision of “geopoetics”—a responsible and mindful attitude of “plunging into biospheric space”—can be seen as an important voice in the world-wide discussion of the Anthropocene. Concentrating the currents of energy into a unitary field translates into a transdisciplinary (scientific and artistic) dialogue which in White’s view might offer deep and efficient ways of protecting the Earth. The history of the geopoetic movement shows that when scientists and artists engage in collaborative action, new and alternative ways of looking at our existence here on Earth emerge. What needs to be emphasized here is that, contrary to various “schools” of the Anthropocene, man is not posited at the centre of the picture. Man is seen as an important part of the system, but the positive change that is envisioned is predicated on the philosophy of non-duality, of showing respect for the sentient and non-sentient beings here on Earth. This is where White is at one with Gary Snyder and his call for Earth Democracy, a “place-based sense of communion where all beings are interconnected and all beings matter” (Wirth xxiii). For Snyder, this communion seems impossible to achieve without the cultivation of a practice of peace, and in that aspect his vision is very much in line with that of Thich Nhat Hanh.

The need to raise awareness about our unity with nature is of crucial importance, especially in the West. As Brother Phap Huu puts it in the aforementioned podcast, “there is no separation between us and the environment; we are the environment. How we live, how we act, how we are *is already a contribution*” (emphasis mine). That is the essence of deep ecology. “We should fall in love with the Earth,” Sister True Dedication adds in the same podcast, then new possibilities of non-reductive action emerge. Looking deeply means continuous training in being rooted and grounded in the present moment. Thich Nhat Hanh stresses that our attitude of “interbeing” and reclaimed agency in the here-and-now form sustainable ways to save the planet. Strikingly similar views have been shared by Gary Snyder and Kenneth White since the 1960s. Their insights as poets and environmental activists can be appreciated for their innovative and often radical take on the issue of saving our planet. It could be argued that Snyder, as an engaged Buddhist, and White as an educator and creator of groups (clearly disassociated from any religious practice), have been laying down a strong foundation for the peaceful and sustainable existence of future generations for half a century.

As Norman Bissell recalls, White created the Jargon Group, “devoted to ‘cultural revolution’” (25), in Glasgow in the early 1960s, and in France, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, he created the Groupe Feuillage, then the group he called The Feathered Egg, “to indicate a potential in society that hadn’t yet found its full wings” (Bissell 25). And in 1989 he established the International Institute of Geopoetics. From the very beginning of his career as a poet, academic, and researcher, he has embraced Western and Far Eastern cultures, aiming at a creative intercultural dialogue. Even though his writing features hundreds of quotes from Buddhist or Taoist masters, White quite openly rejects religious discourse. In the introduction to *Le Plateau de l’albatros*, for instance, he states:

[O]ne could say that it [geopoetics] concerns a new mental cartography, a conception of life disengaged at last from ideologies, myths, religions etc., and the search for a language capable of expressing this other way of being in the world, but making it clear from the start that this is a question of a rapport with the earth (energies, rhythms, forms) not a subjugation to Nature. (qtd. in McManus 74)

In White’s writing this rapport is often associated with the affirmation of life, the joy of life force, which, as Thich Nhat Hanh stresses, is part and parcel of the process of working for our planet. In his view, appreciation of and finding joy in what we still have might give us energy needed in the struggle for protecting the planet in our neighborhoods (*Zen and the Art of Saving the Planet* 54, 77).

When we read White’s message in Jargon Paper 1, it is not difficult to see mental affinities between him and Thich Nhat Hanh: “[I]t is the animation to life with which we are concerned, and with those more-than-literary books that pull the doors of the mind off their hinges: releasing the spirit” (qtd. in Bissell 30). Interestingly, in his 1990 speech entitled “Earth Day and the War Against Imagination,” Snyder also addresses the issue of spirit: he provides a whole list of losses we are facing, and among soil loss, the rapid loss of biological diversity, loss of local cultures, skills and knowledges, he mentions “loss of heart and soul,” and he adds: “This is serious! To lose our life in nature is to lose freshness, diversity, surprise, the Other—with all its tiny lessons and its huge spaces” (*A Place in Space* 59). For White, the quality of aliveness and subtle poetic spirit needed in the process of changing the world is essential. In the already quoted Jargon Paper he writes: “[I]t is not for nothing (i.e. because they have ‘artistic leanings’) that the Taoist and Zen masters who have arrived at Nature (Cosmos-Chaos), are also poets. It is because they are men alive, and exalting in their aliveness” (qtd. in Bissell 30).

Obviously, one does not need to add that Thich Nhat Nanh’s and Snyder’s main shared point of reference (and reverence), Eihei Dōgen (1200–53), is also a poet. It takes poetic genius to compose passages in prose which read like poetry. The following one comes from Snyder’s essay on Dōgen’s “Mountains and Waters Sūtra.” To make matters more intertextual, the opening paragraph in Snyder’s poetic essay is also the opening paragraph in Dōgen’s sūtra:

The mountains and rivers of this moment are the actualization of the way of the ancient Buddhas. Each, abiding in its own phenomenal expression, realizes completeness. Because mountains and waters have been active since before the eon of emptiness, they are alive at this moment. Because they have been the self since before form arose, they are liberated and realized. (qtd. in Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild* 104)

For Snyder, the image of “mountains and rivers” and their movement (“The blue mountains are constantly walking”) is rhizomatically linked with the theme of liberation and self-realization (see Kocot, “A Celebration of the Wild” 101).

Kenneth White’s favourite literary persona, the “intellectual nomad,” walks along the path which leaves behind the “Motorway of Western Civilisation,” the “motorway” of “Platonic idealism, Aristotelian classification, Christianity, Renaissance humanism, Cartesianism, Hegelian historicism” (Fazzini 42), with their more or less implicit idea of progress. As White himself puts it, the intellectual nomad (a term used, in passing, by

Spengler in his *Decline of the West*, and whose scope White was to develop), “is engaged, outside the glitzy or glauzy compound of late modernity, in an area of complex co-ordinates. He is trying to move out of pathological psycho-history, along uncoded paths, into fresh existential, poetic space” (*The Wanderer and His Charts* vi). The in-betweenness, processuality and movement are of crucial importance here:

walking in the stillness
 halfway between the Old World and the New
 trying to move in deeper
 ever deeper
 into the white world
 neither old nor new. (White, *The Bird Path* 187)

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For White, walking in stillness means discovering a new world, the white world of interbeing; to enter this new territory means to leave behind the old and new worlds loosely associated with Europe and the Americas, the roots of Western civilization.

Snyder also openly dismisses Western civilization and its “ideals.” In an essay “Energy Is Eternal Delight” (1974), he writes:

For several centuries western civilisation has had a priapic drive for material accumulation, continual extensions of political and economic power, termed “progress.” In the Judeo-Christian worldview humans are seen as working out their ultimate destinies (paradise? perdition?) with planet earth as the stage for the drama—trees and animals mere props, nature as vast supply depot. (Snyder, *A Place in Space* 53)

For Snyder, the Western concept of “progress” is nothing more than political and economic power struggle and the cult of materialism. He sees the root cause of the problem in the Judeo-Christian ideologies which place emphasis on the vision of the afterlife, and dismiss the importance of the here and now, seeing it as a mere “prelude” to the future life. Is there any way out? Yes, Snyder is saying. The way out is in:

The longing for growth is not wrong. The nub of the problem now is how to flip over, as in jujitsu, the magnificent growth energy of modern civilisation into a nonacquisitive search for deeper knowledge of self and nature. Self-nature. Mother Nature. If people come to realize that there are many nonmaterial, nondestructive paths of growth—of the highest and most fascinating order—it would help dampen the common fear that a steady state economy would mean deadly stagnation. (Snyder, *A Place in Space* 53)

These words were written in 1974 (one year after the *Limits to Growth* report), and published in Snyder’s most famous book of poems, *Turtle Island*. In a way, they are a continuation of Snyder’s thought-provoking article called “Buddhist Anarchism” (1961), reprinted as “Buddhism and the Coming Revolution” in 1968. Here is what Snyder says: “[T]he mercy of the West has been social revolution; the mercy of the East has been individual insight into the basic self/void. We need both. They are both contained in the traditional three aspects of the Dharma path: wisdom (*prajña*), meditation (*dhyāna*), and morality (*śīla*)” (*Earth, House, Hold* 92). For Snyder, morality means practicing wisdom and meditation through personal example and responsible action for the benefit of “the true community (*sangha*) of ‘all beings’” (*Earth, House, Hold* 92; see Kocot, “Geopoetics and the Poetry of Consciousness” 181). In his “Earth Day” speech (1990), there is a meaningful shift in tone, with an emphasis on non-ethical attitudes and culturally justified irresponsibility: “There are socially and politically entrenched *attitudes* and *institutions* that reinforce our misuse of nature and our cruelty toward each other. Our major civilisations objectify and commodify the natural world” (*A Place in Space* 61). This is where Snyder’s emotional tone changes: “I could say that this is bad metaphysics, but it is worse than that: it is a failure of imagination. Failures of compassion and charity are failures of imagination” (Snyder, *A Place in Space* 61). The Western concept of “progress” is seen here as a negation of genuine progress, based on compassion and working for a common good.

One could argue that Snyder’s vision of a new society and new collective consciousness is gaining momentum. We can view it as part of a larger cultural shift—a transmodern revolution-revelation of quantum physics and quantum activism as proposed by Amit Goswami, Willis Harman’s Transcendental Monism, and Irena Ateljevic’s global relational consciousness, all of which bear striking resemblance to Buddhist teaching of totality, emptiness, and interdependent existence (Cook 3, 17; see Kocot, “Geopoetics and the Poetry of Consciousness” 179). The next section of my essay will explore these interconnections.

TRANSMODERN (R)EVOLUTION AND THE PATHLESS PATH

Both Snyder and White can be seen as two major figures involved in the transmodern turn. According to Rosa María Rodríguez Magda, one of the most recognized proponents of the new paradigm, we can define transmodernity as a synthesis of modernity and postmodernity, even

though some critics see it as a form of counterreaction to modernism or postmodernism (Rodríguez Magda; see Kocot, “Geopoetics and the Poetry of Consciousness” 178–79). Paul C. Vitz offers a list of implications associated with transmodernity (they are further explored in an interdisciplinary book entitled *The Self: Beyond the Postmodern Crisis*, edited by and Vitz and Susan M. Felch, featuring contributions by experts in the fields of literature, biology, theology, philosophy, psychology, and physics):

[A] spirit of hopefulness; a desire for wisdom; a concern with religions and transcendent spiritual themes; a rediscovery of the importance of truth, beauty, goodness and harmony; a concern with simplicity and the quest for a mature and balanced understanding of experience. It is not so much a spirit of new theories or ideologies, but an integration of existing valid intellectual approaches, including those from a premodern tradition. (113–14)

All these aspects of transmodernity are in full operation not only in White’s geopoetics, but also Thich Nhat Hanh’s and Snyder’s practices of engaged Buddhism.

For Vitz, “transmodern” means that “many of the valid modern and postmodern ideas are kept but they are transformed by being placed in a new understanding or context, and they may be transcended by the addition of an explicit transcendent framework,” which, he adds, “may be clearly religious, or possibly spiritual in a general sense, or possibly idealistic” (qtd. in *The Self: Beyond the Postmodern Crisis* 205). It should be noted, however, that a religious framework does not necessarily mean that it should be viewed as “explicitly transcendent.” On the contrary, by referring to Far Eastern philosophy, we emphasize the importance of our grounded presence in the here and the now. This idea will be further developed in the latter part of this essay.

In his discussion of the transmodern paradigm in *Global Mind Change: The Promise of the 21st Century* (1988), Willis Harman, a philosopher, social scientist, and futurist, stresses the importance of consciousness, experience, intuition, causality, and interconnectedness (see Kocot, “Geopoetics and the Poetry of Consciousness” 179). This emphasis on interconnectedness and relational consciousness is shared by many contemporary scholars, including the physicists Frijtof Capra, Irena Ateljevic, and Amit Goswami. For example, Capra states that “the new [scientific] paradigm may be called a holistic world view, seeing the world as an integrated whole rather than a dissociated collection of parts” (6). Similarly, Ateljevic argues that we are witnessing a peculiar process: human consciousness is evolving

towards a new state, a “global relational consciousness [that] goes beyond the Western ideology and tries to connect the human race to a new shared story” (203). In her view, this implies

a call to move from the current geopolitics—and its assumption that the environment is a giant battleground where we all fight for our survival—to biosphere politics, or the premise of the Earth as a living organism made up of interdependent relationships on which we all can only survive by stewarding the larger communities of which we are part. (212)

Ateljevic stresses the importance of the shift in our perception; instead of a fear-based fight for survival against other beings, we can learn to notice vast, net-like dimensional planes of interdependence. This move inevitably involves “a change of sensibility towards mutuality, interconnectedness and empathy towards the other and the environment” (Aliaga-Lavrijsen and Yebra-Pertusa 8). As Capra observes, “[d]eep ecological awareness recognizes the fundamental interdependence of all phenomena and the fact that, as individuals and societies, we are all embedded in (and ultimately dependent on) the cyclical processes of nature” (6). Similarly, for Amit Goswami, a theoretical quantum physicist, the new era of transmodernity begins with a quantum leap in our attitudes: “[F]rom human over nature to human within nature, from reason over feeling to reason integrated with feeling, from simple hierarchies to tangled hierarchies, from ego separateness to the integration of the ego and quantum consciousness/God” (47). As he argues, when we take this leap, “then we are truly back on track for the emergence of a new age of ethical living” (Goswami 46–47). Goswami endorses Harman’s contention that transmodernity involves a shift in metaphysical assumptions from what he calls Materialistic Monism—“matter giving rise to mind” (Harman 30)—to Transcendental Monism—“mind giving rise to matter” (Harman 30). Harman stresses “value emphases” within our modern society: “[H]umans in harmony with nature, humans in harmony with one another, individual self-realisation, an ecology of cultures” (137). For Goswami, this shift in prevailing metaphysical assumptions is possible thanks to what he calls “quantum activism”: “[O]rdinary activism is based on the idea of changing the world so that you don’t have to change. By contrast, spiritual teachers tell us constantly that we should concentrate on our own transformation and leave the world alone” (12). This last observation does not apply to all spiritual teachers. As I have already mentioned, Thich Nhat Hanh’s engaged Buddhist teaching clearly promotes working for society. It seems that in order to introduce “a middle path of quantum activism” Goswami relies too much on

dualistic thinking, but, quite surprisingly, the end result of the mechanism he describes resembles the practice of many engaged Buddhists (or any non-proselytizing spiritual practitioners, for that matter):

You acknowledge the importance of your own transformation, and you travel the transformational path earnestly, the difficulties of quantum leaping and nonlocal exploration notwithstanding; but you don't say that it is transformation or bust. You also pay attention to the holomovement of consciousness that is evolving in the world around you and help it along. (Goswami12)

There is no doubt that Goswami's scientific language foregrounds the complexity of the whole process, and that might, at least to some extent, eclipse his main message: that our inner growth affects those around us, even if we do not acknowledge the existence of this natural interdependence.

The question remains of how literature can contribute to the construction and materialization of this new cultural paradigm. Snyder's and White's revolutionary writing may offer an answer, more often than not triggered by radical geopoetic insights promoting transnational, intercultural dialogue. As both Snyder and White draw heavily on Far Eastern philosophy (Taoism and different schools of Buddhism) and literature, especially from China and Japan, it is not surprising that the philosophy of non-duality (which might be loosely associated with transmodernity) should inform their writing (poems, essays, travel books). This is why in my reading of Snyder's and White's work I make references to two anthologies of essays: *Buddhism and Ecology: The Interconnection of Dharma and Deeds* and *Deep Ecology and World Religions: New Essays on Sacred Ground*. In my view, the way they address critical issues of our time adds an important perspective on the transmodern turn.

Snyder's and White's vision of (deep) ecology, of the oneness of all living creatures, and of interconnectedness is inextricably linked with the Buddhist concept of Emptiness (*Śūnyatā*), as well as the Taoist concepts of the Way, *wu-wei* and interdependent becoming. What informs Snyder's and White's writing equally strongly is the idea that the "Way" cannot be followed. This can be seen in Snyder's translation of the opening line of the *Tao Te Ching* in *The Practice of the Wild*: "The way that can be followed ('wayed') is not the constant way" (161) or, as he puts it in his own words, "[a] path that can be followed is not a *spiritual* path" (161). In line with this, the "pathless path" in the title of this section refers to the practice of going beyond the prevailing modes of discourse. Going "*an-arche*," which means "without pattern," will be linked here with revolutionary, transmodern, transdisciplinary and transcultural practices in Snyder's and White's work.

Snyder is clearly interested in using Buddhist philosophy to practice his civil disobedience and create a (universal and/or bioregional) community (*saṅga*) based on his philosophy of the Wild, as well as on the Hua Yen Buddhist philosophy of interconnectedness and interbeing. White is at one with Snyder and all those who practice deep ecology or, as White calls it, mind-ecology. By modifying the expression, White foregrounds the fact that ecology begins with the right view of the self which in turn translates into the right attitude to the world. Because our vision of the self and the surrounding world is predicated on the perspective we take, the importance of the issue of interdependent being/existence cannot and should not be underestimated.

TRANSMODERN ANOTHERNESS, TRANSMODERN SEEING

In his book *Literature, Nature, and Other: Ecofeminist Critiques* (1995), Patrick D. Murphy asks: “What if instead of alienation we posited relation as the primary mode of human-human and human-nature interaction without conflating difference, particularity and other specificities? What if we worked from a concept of relational difference and *anotherness* rather than Otherness?” (35). Murphy clearly sees the same vision, and the same need, in Snyder, who “argues for each of us to move from objectifying detachment from the other to subjectivity-sharing engagement with the other as another” (115). Such a view of anotherness, as Barnhill observes, deconstructs a rigid dichotomy of self and other, and this is what makes it similar to Buddhism and ecological thought (“Great Earth Saṅga” 202). He refers to Bert Almon who says that in Snyder’s poetry “animals and plants appear as autonomous presences” (Almon 121). Barnhill comments that perhaps “it would be better to argue that for Snyder animals and plants have their own *integrity*—not in being autonomous but by being *integrated* in the interdependent web as ‘others’” (“Great Earth Saṅga” 203). By writing “web,” he means Indra’s net.

Snyder’s vision of our fellow creatures includes plants and even mountains and rocks, which he considers as part of a larger community. In one of his “Little Songs for Gaia” he speaks of the great earth *saṅga*:

As the crickets’ soft autumn hum
is to us,
so are we to the trees

as are they

to the rocks and the hills. (Snyder, *Axe Handles* 50)

The inspiration for this poem came from Lew Welch who once asked Snyder whether he thought the rocks were paying attention to the trees. Snyder said he had no idea, to which Welch replied that the trees were “just passing through” (qtd. in Barnhill, “Great Earth Saṅga” 195). Snyder gives this narrative account on the audio tape titled tellingly *This Is Our Body*. Snyder seems to suggest that we (human beings, animals, rocks and hills) are just passing through: we are in constant movement, we evolve together, and we inter-are, whether we are aware of it or not. One should not be surprised by the idea of rocks and hills as constantly moving; for Snyder, the insight of geology is linked here with Eihei Dōgen’s view expressed in his “Mountains and Waters Sūtra”: we-rivers never stop and we-mountains never cease (see Snyder, *Mountains and Rivers without End* 140–41). The typography of the poem, the empty spaces between the lines, seem to evoke the Buddhist concept of *Śūnyatā* (the Great Void) understood as dependent co-arising, and emptiness of the separate self.

It is easy to see the mental affinities between Snyder and White, even if we look at how they tackle the issue of small insights and grand visions of unifying emptiness. Let us have a look at White’s vision of geopoetics, which goes beyond deep ecology or a literary school. As White puts it, we should see it as “a major movement involving the very foundations of human life on earth” (“Inaugural Text”). These “foundations” may suggest that we are entering the sphere of philosophy—to be precise, ontology and epistemology—but in order to discover the depth of White’s vision, we need to add the art of poetry:

In the fundamental geopoetic field come together poets and thinkers of all times and of all countries. To quote only a few examples, in the West, one can think of Heraclitus (“man is separated from what is closest to him”), Hölderlin (“man lives poetically on the earth”), or Wallace Stevens (“the poems of heaven and hell have been written, it remains to write the poem of the earth”). In the East, there is the Taoist T’chuan-tzu, the man of the ancient pool, Matsuo Bashō, and beautiful world-meditations such as one can find in the *Hua Yen Sūtra*. (“Inaugural Text”)

By taking a closer look at White’s text, we can discover whole maps of associations between poets-thinkers, with an emphasis placed on those for whom nature becomes a major a source of inspiration, on those who are able to discover the organic nature of our relationship with the Earth. White is certainly drawn to Western and Eastern (Chinese, Indian, Japanese) aesthetics and the philosophy of non-duality, and to texts exploring the complex dynamics of the One and the Many. In the passage quoted above, he refers to T’chuan-tzu, Matsuo Bashō (the Japanese master of *haiku*,

haibun and *renga*), and, indirectly, to the metaphor of Indra’s net in the *Hua Yen Sūtra*.

White clearly indicates that one of the most important elements in his geopoetic vision is establishing a sensitive contact with the earth, in other words, “grounding ourselves” in the here and now: “geopoetics is concerned with ‘worlding’ (and ‘wording’ is contained in ‘worlding’). In my semantics, ‘world’ emerges from a contact between the human mind and the things, the lines, the rhythms of the earth” (qtd. in McManus 183). White juxtaposes this subtle contact with what he calls “a pseudo-culture.” In the next section, we will see how White’s practice of communication between the self and the world and Snyder’s relational holism connect with the concept of Indra’s net.

INDRA’S NET AS OUR OWN?

In an essay tellingly entitled “Nets of Beads, Webs of Cells,” Snyder refers to Thich Nhat Hanh’s teaching and emphasizes two things: the notion of the view, and practice. His argument might offer an important perspective on the issue of saving the planet and on the problem of burnout experienced by many activists:

In the course of our practice we will not transform reality, but we may transform ourselves. Guilt and self-blame are not the fruit of practice, but we might hope that a *larger view* is. The larger view is one that can acknowledge the simultaneous pain and beauty of this complexly interrelated world. This is what the image of Indra’s net is for. (*A Place in Space* 70)

In “Four Changes with a Postscript” Snyder offers a poetic summation of his practice:

My Teacher once said to me,
—become one with the knot itself,
‘til it dissolves away.
—sweep the garden.
—any size. (*A Place in Space* 46)

The knot is the primary *kōan*, or theme one needs to confront, and, in accordance with Zen teaching, one does that by becoming one with it until it disappears, or appears only an illusion. Later in the essay, Snyder defines the garden and the sweeping: “[N]o transformation without our feet on the ground. Stewardship means, for most of us, find your place on the

planet, dig in, and take responsibility from there” (46). By writing “—any size,” Snyder emphasizes that each action, each gesture, however small, matters, as each *is/becomes* part of the net of being.

Similarly, for White, discovering the vibrant reality of Indra’s net begins first and foremost when poetry, thought and science come together, in a climate of reciprocal inspiration, when “all kinds of specific disciplines can converge, once they are ready to leave over-restricted frameworks and enter into global (cosmological, cosmopoetic) space” (“Inaugural Text”). In the poem “Walking the Coast,” White decides to offer a grand scale image of how this dynamic operates. The poem’s typography seems to evoke either the perceived “jaggedness” of our understanding of what this “cosmopoetic space” might look like, or the continuous and clearly non-linear process of our grounding/self-realization in the world of nature-culture.

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believing

that the biological

aim of art

is to project around us

the images

the proofs

the manifestations

of a power of synthesis

at one with life

and maintaining life

against solitude

and fragmentation

the cold aggressiveness

of the space-time world (White, *Open World* 137)

We also find many (short) poems in which White decides to focus on the particular, on the “part of a part,” on emptiness, whiteness, birds’ cries, and moving, mind-bending, heart-opening silences. The processuality of self-realization involves coming into subtle contact with what *is* in the here-and-now, as only this way one can come into contact with self-nature (within us), or Self-Nature (without us), as we see here:

This pool of water

holding rock and sky

traversed by the wing-flash of birds

is more my original face

than even the face of Buddha.

(White, *Open World* 204)

The image of the pool of water "holding," embracing rock and sky is seen as a manifestation of the speaking persona's "original face" (a subtle reference to one of the classic kōans on one's face before one is born), juxtaposed with the face of the Awakened One (Buddha). It is a poem about a landscape-mindscape "in which you no longer feel the need to talk about Buddha or whatever at all, you just live it in and for itself" (White, *Handbook* 13).

To conclude this essay, I would like to connect the philosophical and existential message of Thich Nhat Hanh's, Gary Snyder's, and Kenneth White's writing the transmodern message of interbeing, of coming into contact with self-nature, or Self-Nature, with a passage on Indra's net from Francis H. Cook's *Hua-yen Buddhism*: "When in a rare moment I manage painfully to rise above a petty individualism by knowing my true nature, I perceive that I dwell in the wondrous net of Indra, in this incredible network of interdependence" (122). But Cook immediately adds that it is not just that "we are all in it" together. "We all *are* it, rising or falling as one living body" (Cook 122). Despite the differences in their poetic expression, what Thich Nhat Hanh, Snyder, and White have in common is the belief that the message of Indra's net for us as individuals is that through our own self-realization and transformation, we affect everyone and everything on this planet, precisely because we inter-are. That is why, in order to overcome the current ecological crisis, we need to transform ourselves first. The way out is in.

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Past Conditional Subjectivities: Enacting Relationships with the Non-Human in the Work of Ana Mendieta

ABSTRACT

Inspired by what literary scholar Lisa Lowe calls “the past conditional temporality”—or the “what could have been”—this paper examines how the work of 20th-century Cuban American performance artist Ana Mendieta challenges modernist ontologies that separate the human from the non-human, simultaneously calling on older ways of being and demonstrating that they never disappeared. Many argue that the ecological crises of the Anthropocene are in large part due to the proliferation of modernist worldviews that set humans apart from the non-human world. The rise of European rationalist philosophies in the early modern period played a central role in the proliferation of instrumentalist relationships between humans and the non-human world.

This paper explores how Mendieta’s *Siluetas* and *Rupestrian Sculptures* series (from the 1970s and 1980s) resist the logic of European capitalism and colonialism, revealing that the relationships that rationalism sought to subdue have always existed, will continue to exist, and can proliferate. Symbolic communication is a key means of mediating and actualizing relationships between subjects, and so, if a non-instrumental relationship is possible between the human and non-human, visual art ought to be a possible means of enactment. Through Mendieta’s work, this paper considers the mechanisms by which this is possible. By considering meaning-making as a basis for life, the co-constitution of human/non-human subjectivities, and the inherent permeability of the category of the individual, this paper highlights counter-modernist visual art practices that are of special urgency in the age of the Anthropocene.

Keywords: visual art, animacy, ontology, modernism, non-human.

INTRODUCTION: ECOLOGICAL CRISES AND PAST CONDITIONAL TEMPORALITY

For many ecologists, philosophers, and political scientists, at the root of the ecological crises of the Anthropocene is a pervasive ideology that views the non-human world as subordinate to the human world. The history of this ideology is long and complex, encompassing Biblical traditions, the philosophy of Aristotle, and more, but the mechanistic philosophies that developed during the early modern era in Europe represent a significant milestone. During this time, dualities between the human and non-human, nature and culture, and the body and land became more entrenched in philosophy, law, and art. These dualities support an ethic of instrumentalization, with which any entities outside of the human (and many humans themselves) become means for the accumulation of wealth and power, the pursuit of endless progress, and the satisfaction of material want, resulting in ravenous extraction, pollution, deforestation, desertification, and mass extinction. The ecologists Jean-Louis Martin, Virginie Maris, and Daniel S. Simberloff write that within the contemporary context “although humans are ascribed an intrinsic value, everything else is ascribed only an instrumental value relative to its contribution to the pursuit of human ends” (6107). This “human chauvinism,” they write, “has led to an exploitative attitude toward nature and the present ecological crisis” (6107). From an eco-feminist perspective, sociologist Marie Mies and ecologist Vandana Shiva write that “the capitalist patriarchal world system” is “built upon and maintains itself through the colonization of women, of ‘foreign’ peoples and their lands; and of nature, which it is gradually destroying” (2). Mies and Shiva link this exploitative system to “modernization,” “development,” “progress,” and “reductionist modern science” that emerged in the sixteenth century (2–3).

In this paper, and aided by theories of language, semiotics, and embodiment, I consider the ways in which the work of Cuban American artist Ana Mendieta (1948–85) enacts relationships with the non-human world that challenge the very nature of these dualisms of the Enlightenment project. Born in Cuba just a few years before the beginning of that country’s revolution, Mendieta and her sister were exiled to Iowa without their parents during their youth. Mendieta’s work engages with themes of belonging and place, and she has become a central figure in late-twentieth century body art and feminist art. Though her practice spans many themes and subject matters, her *Siluetas* (1973–80) and *Rupestrian Sculptures* (1981) series are of special interest in considering how the artist enacts non-dominating relationships with

the non-human world that counter the extractive ideology of endless progress.

This inquiry is inspired by what Lisa Lowe, a scholar of literature, race, and colonialism, calls “the *past conditional temporality* of the ‘what could have been’” (*Intimacies* 40). Such a temporality, Lowe argues in *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, is “a space of productive attention to the scene of loss” (40–41). She elaborates elsewhere that by using this term, she intends

to suggest that it is possible to understand the historical past not as fixed or settled, not as inaugurating a single temporality into which our present falls, but as a set of multiple contingent possibilities, all present, yet none inevitable. These are connections that could have been, and are thus, not yet. A past conditional temporality suggests that there may be other possibilities that remain, still unvanquished, which we might bring forth and manifest. It suggests that we struggle for alternative means to realize what might be when we examine what might have been. (“Other Humanities” 99)

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As a methodological approach for this paper, the goal is not to create a revisionist history or even a speculative history. Instead, my goal is to better understand the present condition, and its ideologies, norms, and relations, as historically conditioned rather than natural or inevitable. In turn, I will identify and analyze visual art practices that operate in antagonism with the historical junctures that led to the present condition, and I will provide insights not only into what might have been but also into what still might be.

In her book *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*, feminist scholar Silvia Federici provides a basis for thinking about some of these junctures within the modern European tradition. In an attempt to understand the development of capitalism, she connects the then-emerging philosophies that aided its expansion with the suppression of animist views and practices during the witch hunts of the early modern period. She explains that even during the Middle Ages, a magical view of the world still prevailed in Europe. “At the basis of magic,” she explains, “was an animistic conception of nature that did not admit to any separation between matter and spirit, and thus imagined the cosmos as a *living organism*, populated by occult forces, where every element was in ‘sympathetic’ relation with the rest” (141–42). Federici argues that, contrary to popular belief, the target of the witch hunts were not “socially recognized crimes, but previously accepted practices,” such as healing and carrying reproductive knowledge (170).

Magic and sympathetic cosmologies were in direct conflict with the emergence of capitalism, which necessitated disciplined workers and an alienation of land from the body. “Magic,” Federici explains, “is premised on the belief that the world is animated, unpredictable, and that there is a force in all things” (173), and “this anarchic, molecular conception of the diffusion of power in the world was anathema” to the new capitalist class (174). “The capitalist organization of work,” she continues, had to “refuse the unpredictability implicit in the practice of magic, and the possibility of establishing a privileged relation with the natural elements” and the world had to be ‘disenchanted’ in order to be dominated” (174). In the service of capitalist disciplining, rationalist and mechanical philosophy emerged, which Federici argues, “contributed to increasing ruling-class control over the natural world” (139–40). The results of the destruction of a worldview defined by sympathetic and organic relations are all around us, but as Federici shows, this is not a natural outcome but a historically conditioned one.

The legal, social, and economic forces responsible for the abstraction and instrumentalization of the non-human world are much broader and deeper than those analyzed here and by Federici, but the early modern era is not an arbitrary basis for this investigation. “The idea of dominion over the earth existed in Greek philosophy and Christian religion” (3), feminist philosopher and historian Carolyn Merchant reminds us in her book *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*. Nonetheless, she continues, during the so-called Scientific Revolution, “the dominion metaphor spread beyond the religious sphere and assumed ascendancy in the social and political spheres as well” (3). It is for this same reason that in their quote above Mies and Shiva identify the sixteenth century as a critical moment for this history.

In her book *The Colonial Lives of Property: Law, Land and Racial Regimes of Ownership*, legal scholar Brenna Bhandar details how the modern British political philosophy of abstraction—abstraction of land and of bodies—has been used in settler colonial contexts to construct and perpetuate certain types of subjectivities and identities. She writes, for example, that “the ideology of use . . . casts both land and its native inhabitants as in need of improvement” and that “the logics of abstraction . . . underlie increasingly commodified visions of land and human life from the seventeenth century onward” (26). Importantly for my study, Bhandar concludes that “the commodity logic of abstraction obliterates preexisting relations to the land, and preexisting conceptualizations of land as something other than a commodity” (98). The form of property law that follows from these philosophies, she continues, “renders invisible (and severely constrains) the ways in

which people live, act, (re)produce the conditions of their existence, and relate to one another in ways not confined to commodity relations of ownership and exchange” (98–99).

Bhandar concludes her book by suggesting that a “radically different political imaginary of property” is needed to undo or dismantle “racial regimes of ownership” (193). For her, this requires three broad types of activities, movements, and transformations: understanding, studying, and reviving “the ontologies of property relations that have been suppressed by colonial techniques of dispossession and appropriation”; imagining “what radically alternate ways of holding and relating to land might look like”; and considering “the kinds of transformation of the self and our relations with one another that are a precondition for wider social and political transformations” (193). These distinct-yet-related calls for action offer a toolkit for thinking through liberatory practices. My present investigation of visual art is centered on Bhandar’s call to reimagine the relationship with land as a radical liberatory practice, extending this call, however, to a broader focus on the non-human world. For many, nurturing and reciprocal relations with the non-human have always been present and paramount. But for others, this is an opening to consider past conditional subjectivities: what could have been and what still can be.

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TOWARD A VISUAL GRAMMAR OF ANIMACY

The connection between language and animacy is central to this project because it illuminates the ways in which language can shape one’s thinking about the external world: specifically, how relationships between human and non-human are mediated through linguistic means, including both alienating and reciprocal relations. Potawatomi ecologist and thinker Robin Wall Kimmerer provides insights on the role of language, and representations of the world more broadly, in upending the duality between human and non-human. Writing about the unhealthy relationship between many modern societies and the non-human world, Kimmerer argues that a “grammar of animacy” is a necessary remedy for our global predicament. In the English language, she says: “You are either human or a thing” (*Braiding Sweetgrass* 56). The noun-heavy English language encourages its speakers to conceptualize the non-human world as mere objects to be exploited for their own use. But in verb-heavy languages such as Potawatomi and Anishinaabemowin, she explains, “to be a hill, to be a sandy beach, to be a Saturday, all are possible verbs in a world where everything is alive” (55). Kimmerer writes about the difficulty of trying to learn this aspect of Potawatomi

as an English speaker. The word *wikwegamaa*, for example, means “to be a bay”—that is, what is an object in English (“a bay”) is an ongoing action in Potawatomi. Exasperated and ready to give up, she eventually had the realization that “a bay is noun only if water is *dead*” (55). The language, she explains, is “a mirror for seeing the animacy of the world” (55). Kimmerer calls for the proliferation of language like this that acknowledges that the world is alive and that its constituent parts—not just humans—are subjects in their own right. Articulating the relationship between a grammar of animacy and liberatory practices, Kimmerer has argued that “the ecological compassion that resides in our indigenous languages is dangerous once again to the enterprise of domination” (“Speaking of Nature”).

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Also arguing for the relationship between language and land, in his book *Landmarks*, British writer Robert Macfarlane speaks about the danger posed by a loss of words about land in the Gaelic language in the Outer Hebrides of Scotland, and in that nation more broadly. In particular, he claims that “younger generations are losing a literacy of the land” (23). Macfarlane notes, however, that this is not unique to Gaelic and is occurring in English and other languages and dialects. “The nuances observed by specialized vocabularies,” he writes, “are evaporating from common usage burnt off by capital, apathy and urbanization” (23). Instead, in English for example, “generic units” like *field*, *hill*, *valley*, and *wood* have replaced more nuanced and meaningful language, creating what he calls a “blandscape.” Macfarlane links this blanding of language to the rise of rationalism, expressing common concerns as Federici and Bhandar. In fact, he says that “as we have enhanced our power to determine nature,” “the things around us do not talk back to us in the ways that they might” (25). The world has been made instrumental, and in doing so, it has lost a certain sense of vitality, which is reflected in, and perhaps enacted by, language. Macfarlane argues that language doesn’t just “register experience” but it also “produces it” (25). And for this reason, he believes, “language is fundamental to the possibility of re-wonderment” (25). Macfarlane’s glossary of disappearing landscape words includes the Gaelic term *sgombair*, which he defines as “old grass found around the edges of lochs after storms and used as bedding for cattle” (42). The absence of such a word doesn’t just make it difficult to talk about this kind of grass, it makes it difficult to conceive of, it makes it difficult to distinguish from any other kind of grass. This absence, in essence, removes texture from the world. Language, then, can serve as a means of re-establishing, nurturing, or defending the bonds between the body and the world outside it.

Writing about the change from imagining the world as a living organism to imagining it as a machine in the early modern period in Europe, Merchant argues that “descriptive statements about the world can presuppose the normative; they are then ethic-laden” and therefore, “because language contains a culture within itself, when language changes, a culture is also changing in important ways” (4). While Merchant is looking at historical changes that have already occurred, reading her and Federici’s historical analyses alongside the methodological tools offered by Lowe and Bhandar and the linguistic arguments of Kimmerer and Macfarlane, provides a path for thinking about visual art practices that can help radically reimagine relationships with the land and the non-human world. While Kimmerer and Macfarlane write about spoken language, other forms of communication and symbolic meaning, such as visual art, shape our conceptions of the world. With this in mind, this investigation asks whether there is then a visual grammar of animacy. In considering this possibility, I ask what aesthetic and narrative techniques visual artists employ to demonstrate that the world is alive and full of non-human subjects. Ana Mendieta offers particularly strong examples of work that seek to establish bonds between herself and the non-human world. Of the power of her work, she has said that it is “the way I re-establish the bonds that unite me to the universe” (Mendieta and Clearwater 18) and “is a return to the maternal source through my earth/body sculptures, with which I become at one with the earth” (qtd. in Gambari 24). The relationships and dialogue between the human and non-human in these works suggest a more-than-human intersubjectivity and a world full of animacy.

MENDIETA’S IDENTIFICATION WITH NATURE

In her *Siluetas* and *Rupestrian Sculptures* series, Mendieta created work in which the boundaries between human and non-human are blurred by integrating her own body in landscapes or depicting other human bodies as emerging from cave walls. This can be seen as an attempt to break down the artificially imposed barrier between the self and the non-human world, a direct if unstated attack against the rationalist logic that has cleaved the two. In these works, the body (female bodies and Mendieta’s in particular) are depicted as both at home with and originating from the non-human world. In a draft artist statement from 1978, Mendieta wrote that she had been exploring the relationship between herself, the earth, and art for the past five years and that by using her body as a reference, she was “able to transcend [herself] in a voluntary submersion and total identification with nature” (qtd. in Viso, *Unseen Mendieta* 296).

By representing such an identification, this work counters the alienation of land from the body that is paramount to capitalist and colonial logic.

Mendieta's work has often been contrasted with much of the land art and earthworks that were being made around the time that she was working. Curator Olga M. Viso writes that Mendieta's art and writing "quietly subverted the monumental gestures of male land artists such as Robert Smithson and Michael Heizer" (Introduction 22). In fact, Mendieta herself accused Smithson of "brutalizing" nature with his work that poured tar and concrete on outdoor landscapes (qtd. in Viso, "The Memory of History" 68). Artists such as Smithson and Heizer can be seen as making work in the trajectory of rationalist and mechanical philosophy. They dig up, carve, and extract land in permanent or quasi-permanent ways that seem to shore up the boundaries between humans and land rather than tear them down. Their works seem to bask in the human domination of land. And Heizer in particular relies on hard lines and geometric shapes that make rationalism manifest, in contrast to the organic shapes of Mendieta. This work calls to mind the etchings by Georg Agricola used to illustrate his 1556 book *De re metallica*, which Merchant has called the first modern treatise on mining (34). In the book, Agricola makes several arguments against ancient moral restrictions towards mining, and these arguments are aided by etchings showing brawny European men making use of various landscapes by chopping wood, diverting water, and digging deep into the earth. The totality of Agricola's detailed etchings imply an ingenious and rational process of dominating land, not unlike a sixteenth-century companion to Heizer's *City*, a nearly 500-acre artwork in rural Nevada that was in-progress from 1970 until 2022. In contrast to these approaches, in a project proposal for Bard College, Mendieta wrote that the earthworks of the 1970s "used nature in its most literal sense" but that her "purpose and interest is rooted in nature's symbolical meaning," calling this work "preindustrial" (qtd. in Viso, "The Memory of History" 68).

Among Mendieta's most well-known works is the first of what would become the *Siluetas* series, created in the Zapotec archeological site Yagul while on a trip to Oaxaca, Mexico, in the summer of 1973. In the photograph, *Imagen de Yagul*, Mendieta lies stiffly in an ancient tomb with her arms outstretched by her side. The rocky walls of the tomb frame Mendieta who is obscured by white flowers that appear to grow out of her body or from between the crevices of her limbs. The site of the tomb and the still body evoke death, but this is disrupted by both the flowers and Mendieta herself. The height of the flowers suggest they have been growing for some time but Mendieta's body—which in actuality was of course living—is not desiccated, decaying, or corpse-like. The body and the flowers both emanate a sense of life.



Fig. 1. Ana Mendieta, *Imagen de Yagul*, 1973. Chromogenic print, 20 x 13 3/8 inches. Courtesy of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, purchase through a gift of Nancy and Steven Oliver. © The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, LLC.

In this work, Mendieta represents what she would later call a “total identification with nature.” The land, the flowers, and herself have molded into one and this is a stark contrast, and antidote perhaps, to works like Agricola’s, Heizer’s, and Smithson’s. While all four artists represent

a relationship between the human and the non-human, only Mendieta's is actively life affirming, symbiotic, and sympathetic. She works with the landscape rather than against it; she does not dominate or desecrate it. Her presence lasts only through the photo documentation. But more importantly than her light impact on the land is the presence of a dialogue, a process of semiosis or meaning creation, with the land. Mining creates something out of the land that is then alienated from it. Heizer's *City* remains in the landscape, so to speak, but it stands apart from it; it is a "triumph" over the landscape, and it doesn't seem that the sagebrush and desert shrubs, for example, that populate this area of the Mojave Desert are meant to provide some of the work's meaning. Mendieta's "preindustrial" *Imagen de Yagul*, however, is coextensive with the land. The entirety of its meaning is bound up in Mendieta's body and labor *and* the land. This work is an expression of Mendieta being at home with this land, which may be central to challenging the alienation of rationalism and abstraction. For Kimmerer, being at home is also integral to the grammar of animacy. She clarifies that she is not suggesting that we all learn Indigenous languages that harbor such a grammar. Instead, she says: "If we are to survive here, and our neighbors too, our work is to learn to speak the grammar of animacy, so that we might truly be at home" (*Braiding Sweetgrass* 58). Mendieta's work offers a path towards thinking about how to represent this at-homeness beyond the constraints of one's own spoken language.

DIALOGUE, SEMIOSIS, AND ANIMACY

The role of communication and meaning-making in Mendieta's work is explicitly expressed in a 1982 grant application for her *Rupestrian Sculptures*, a series of photo etchings of female figures carved into cave walls near Havana. In that statement, Mendieta wrote that "art must have begun as nature itself, in dialectical relationship between humans and the natural world from which we cannot be separated" (Mendieta and Clearwater 11). Here Mendieta calls direct attention to the organic and sympathetic relationship with the world that has been attacked by the logic of capitalism and rationalism, as articulated by Federici. Mendieta even calls these works "earth/body sculptures," both acknowledging and trying to transcend the linguistic and philosophical binary that attempts to enforce a sense of otherness from the non-human world. The phrase "earth/body" itself gestures toward the past conditional subjectivities, pointing to a subjectivity that transcends rationalism's ontological separation of the human body from the Earth and its non-human constituents. One work, *Guanaroca & Iyaré* (1981), named after two Taíno goddesses, is situated

at the entrance to a small cliff-side cave, framed by ferns, foliage, and roots. Two female figures are carved on the cave wall, with the cave itself appearing as both a place of rest and birth for these figures. It is both a domicile and a primordial pool; the figures here are also at home in the cave and a part of it in an ontological sense. Mendieta did make seemingly more lasting marks in *Guanaroca & Iyaré*, but they are nonetheless very different from Heizer's. Whatever arguments may be made in favor of or against making such alterations for an artwork, Mendieta's piece is not a total disruption of the land—it is not a conquering of the land—instead it represents a different kind of relationship with the non-human: this relationship in which Mendieta sees herself as a part of the land rather than apart from it. Because there is no vast ontological separation, this is a relationship that allows for exchange between the two parties.

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Fig. 2. Ana Mendieta, *Guanaroca & Iyaré*, 1981. Gelatin silver print, 7 1/4 x 9 5/8 inches. Courtesy of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. © ARS, NY.

The idea of communication, exchange, or what some call semiosis runs throughout Mendieta's work. In fact, she has described her work as an ongoing "dialogue between the landscape and the female body" (qtd. in Viso, *Unseen Mendieta* 109). This suggests that Mendieta didn't just see herself as working *in* the landscape but working *with* the landscape, perhaps

as equals. There is something anti-dualist about this perspective. Rather than treating the land as something separate from herself that she simply makes marks on, by viewing this relationship as a dialogue, she proposes that the boundaries between the human and non-human are not so strict, a nod to a past conditional subjectivity that retains its potentiality. When read alongside Mendieta, the subfield of biosemiotics provides insights on the significance of dialogue between the human and non-human in Mendieta's work. The linguist Thomas Sebeok argued that "semiosis is what distinguishes all that is animate from life-less" (qtd. in Kull et al. 2). Reflecting on this thesis, biologists Kalevi Kull, Claus Emmeche, and Jesper Hoffmeyer write that

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semiosis is the sign process—the fundamental process that carries meaning and in which meaning is created. It is the process—not at all simple—that mediates purpose and causality, living and dead aspects of nature, and makes it possible to see how to overcome a crude dualism of mind and matter. (2)

This connection between communication and life is seen in Mendieta's descriptions of her own work as well. She wrote about the dialogue in her work in a fellowship application, noting that "these obsessive acts of reasserting my ties with the earth are really a manifestation of my thirst for being. In essence my works are the reactivation of primeval beliefs at work within the human psyche" (qtd. in Viso, *Unseen Mendieta* 297). Mendieta, then, draws an intimate connection between dialogue and being, similar to the biosemioticians linking semiosis and life. Her works aren't just *representations* of a relationship between land and the human body; they are dialogues that enact this relationship. Through these dialogues, Mendieta makes meaning, which can be seen as a basis for life, a basis for animacy.

The philosopher and biologist Andreas Weber provides a framework for thinking about the performative nature of Mendieta's work. In his book *Enlivenment: Toward a Poetics for the Anthropocene*, Weber introduces the term "enlivenment," which he sees as an alternative to the rationalism that undergirds Enlightenment thinking, which he argues "is an ideology that focuses on dead matter" (12). He further writes that the primary assumptions of the Enlightenment are "that the world is understandable on rational grounds; that humans can change it (because we can understand it); and that we not only have the ability but also the right to change it in order to improve the human condition" (26). Because of the focus on inert matter, total knowing, and control, Weber concludes that "the Enlightenment project has no use for the notions of life, sentience, experience, subjectivity,

corporeal embodiment, creativity and agency, imagination and poesy” (28–29). Weber elaborates how this ideology has come to dictate the way some see reality, likening it to the BIOS (basic input/output system) of a computer, which “is inaccessible to the user interface but still determines how the operating system communicates with the hardware” (51). The implication of this is that if the ideology of the Enlightenment shapes the way people know the world, it will inevitably shape the way they interact with it. If dead matter is the foundation of Enlightenment thinking, then living processes become antithetical to it. “If our formal systems of thought about the biosphere describe it as nonliving,” Weber continues, “violence against aliveness will be the outcome” (57).

Against this ideology of inertness is enlivenment, a perspective that takes life and aliveness as “fundamental categories of thought and of practical action” (Weber 11–12). Weber’s project is relevant to understanding Mendieta’s work, not just because of his diagnosis of the problem of the Enlightenment, but because of his articulation of the ontological necessity of *doing* to *being* and because of the way in which he links symbolic meaning to intersubjectivity. Under Weber’s framework, counteracting the ideology of the Enlightenment requires establishing relations through participation and reciprocity. Weber is influenced by the field of biosemiotics, and because reality for him is not a “meaning-free or neutral real” but instead “a matrix of relations and their meanings,” we can begin to see that in his system art and poetics can play an important role in bringing about the relationships that define the experience of living (14, 43). Mendieta’s work very dramatically articulates the co-constitution of herself and the lands in which she works. Intersubjectivity is the core of this work; in *Imagen de Yagul*, the landscape and the artist’s body co-constitute one another. Dualism is an impossibility.

The linguist and queer theorist Mel Y. Chen provides another way of thinking about the affective dimension of symbolic representation, its political potency, and its significance for the relationship between humans and non-humans. Key to this line of thinking is the idea of an animacy hierarchy, which Chen explains is, for linguists, “the quality of liveness, sentience, or humanness of a noun or noun phrase that has grammatical, often syntactic, consequences” (24). The idea of an animacy hierarchy stems from the observation that in language, entities that are seen as more or less animate in that language are given different grammatical markings. One linguist, John Cherry, conducted a cross-language study and proposed the following as a general hierarchy of more to less animate entities (itself a reflection of cultural biases and prejudices): Humans > Animals > Inanimates > Incorporeals. But within each of these categories, there are sub-hierarchies, such that within Humans there are: adult >

nonadult; male/MASC gender > female/FEM gender; free > enslaved; and so on. Within Inanimates, for example, there are hierarchies such as motile/active > nonmotile/nonactive or natural > manmade (Chen 26–27). For Cherry, Chen explains, animacy “is a phenomenologically derived intuitive recognition of like kind on the basis of one’s own *embodiment*, *purposiveness*, and *activity*” (29). If this is the case, then an entity’s position on the hierarchy may influence one’s ability to relate to it. For example, the higher the entity is on the hierarchy (the closer it is to human), the more empathy and likeness it is afforded. “We can begin to see here,” Chen explains, “how racism, stereotyping, and a lack of empathy can conspire to construct deflated animacies for some humans (and, arguably, some nonhuman animals) in spite of biological equivalences” (26). By conceiving of or talking about humans as if they were lower on the hierarchy, one can deny them their animacy, humanness, and likeness.

However, Chen is not arguing for strict borders between locations on an animacy hierarchy. Some animacies, they write, are corrupt, but others are “particularly enlivened by a capacity to romp through, under, and over . . . hierarchical knowledges” (234). Ultimately, Chen calls for “an ethics of care and sensitivity that extends far from humans’ (or the Humans’) own borders” (237). “Thinking and feeling critically about animacy,” they continue, “encourages opening to the senses of the world, receptivity, vulnerability” (237). Such an ethic of care that crosses the animacy hierarchy is fundamentally oppositional to the rationalist philosophies that ushered in the age of humanism and the Anthropocene. It is in this way that we can see Mendieta’s work as blurring the lines between boundaries of the animacy hierarchy. In *Imagen de Yagul*, animacy would normally be granted to Mendieta’s body and in *Guanaroca & Iyaré* it would at least be symbolically granted to the goddess figures. In the European tradition, a lesser level of animacy would be granted to the flowers in *Imagen de Yagul*, while the cave walls and soil would likely be seen as inert (never mind the presence of bacteria, fungi, worms, and insects). Weber argues that embodiment is the common denominator of all life and that individuals creates themselves through relationships with the whole (35, 140). By disrupting the animacy hierarchy in these works, Mendieta enacts the reciprocal co-constitution that is essential to being and becoming and inherent to the past conditional subjectivity addressed here.

As if she were in direct conversation with Kimmerer, Macfarlane, Merchant, and Weber, Mendieta once wrote that “to establish his empire over nature it has been necessary for man to dominate other men and to treat part of humanity as objects. This has had a detrimental effect on both man and nature” (Mendieta 171). Mendieta’s works attempt to counter this domination through meaning-making across the dualistic

divide of rationalism. Boundaries between the human and non-human are essential to exploitative industrial progress—progress pursued often for the sake of progress alone—and thus Mendieta’s boundary crossing attempts to strike at this feature of domination. This is not a move toward a prehistoric, or even pre-industrial, past, but rather Mendieta offers an artistic contribution to a framework for a more collaborative and reciprocal organization of the world. This is an example of a visual grammar of animacy that is urgent in the age of the Anthropocene, when we must consider what subjectivities and relationships could have been and what they still may be. And indeed, there is no insurmountable divide between what could have been and what still can be. Though the present and the future are shaped by the past, they are not cut off from the past conditional. Mendieta’s visual grammar of animacy shows us a way of relating to the non-human world that might have been pervasive throughout the world—but at the same time, she enacts these very same subjectivities, demonstrating their continued possibility. It is work that doesn’t just tell us that the world is alive and that we live in sympathetic relationships with the non-human world; through its very expression it makes manifest this relationship.

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“Enlightenment Is a Shared Enterprise”: Tree Ecosystems and the Legacy of Modernity in Richard Powers’s *The Overstory*

ABSTRACT

In Richard Powers’s Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Overstory* (2018) the theme of the novel is the forest ecosystem, with a special emphasis placed on trees, upon whose developmental model the processes of (organic and industrial) growth are scrutinized in this novel. This article examines tree-human assemblages in detail to see how they exchange their material agency and how they relate to the e/Enlightenment project. The essay also explores Powers’s novel to examine how Buddhist values of spiritual enlightenment are contextualized within European Enlightenment and how decentred humanity finds its place among other non-human beings. Apart from fictitious characters from *The Overstory*, the article draws upon the research of real-life scientists who inspired the creation of Powers’s protagonists: Prof. Simard and Dr. Beresford-Kroeger, along with the work of anthropologist Anna Tsing. In addition, eco-solutions concerning the tree ecosystem (i.e. bio-planning and the seed banks) coming from the scientific field and the field of literature (Powers) are examined to see if today’s progressive ideas can function in the world of the—still, to a large extent, “regressive”—structures of modernity’s legacy. I conclude by arguing that the novel shows that the Enlightenment project is not compatible with the well-being and long-term survival of both humans and non-human beings.

Keywords: contemporary American environmental fiction, Richard Powers, ecology, modernity, Enlightenment, tree ecosystem, Buddhism.

“Trees stand at the heart of ecology, and they must come to stand at the heart of human politics.” (Powers 568)

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In his novel *The Overstory*, Richard Powers aptly observes that “Enlightenment is a shared enterprise” (504), meaning that one cannot achieve it by detachment and that pursuing this state has multiple textual and symbolic layers. Richard S. Cohen in *Beyond Enlightenment: Buddhism, Religion, Modernity* draws attention to the numerous possible interpretations of what he defines as “e/Enlightenment” (15), ranging from Sanskrit understanding, sagacity, and release, through the religious and political Reformation-grounded doctrine of redemption and deliverance to end with what is most commonly associated with the Western Enlightenment Project (“modernity, rationalism, science, secular emancipation” [15]). Bruno Latour in *We Have Never Been Modern* comes to the conclusion that “[y]es, we are indeed the heirs of the Enlightenment, whose asymmetrical rationality is just not broad enough for us” (142). What is more, Latour provocatively claims that “[m]odernity has never begun. There has never been a modern world,” and what may seem modern is nothing more than “a retrospective sentiment . . . a rereading of our history” (*We Have Never Been Modern* 47). Modernity has never launched because the split between the realms of humanity and the external world is, as Harman puts it, “groundless in the first place” (58). In the Preface to *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944–47), Horkheimer and Adorno rightly observe that “[i]f enlightenment does not assimilate reflection on this regressive moment, it seals its own fate” (xvi). However, when applied uncritically, caught in its own rationale, the legacy of Enlightenment will never enable “deindustrializing our relationship with the land, seas, and domestic animals; granting the biosphere unexploited and contiguous large-scale geographies” (Crist 29). In practice, modernity prefers constant re-branding instead of self-critical scrutiny. Its updated, current face is *ecomodernism*, which assumes proudly that “[a]s the world gets richer and more tech-savvy, it dematerializes, decarbonizes, and densifies, sparing land and species. As people get richer and better educated, they care more about the environment” (Pinker). From this ethnocentric perspective, applicable only to developed countries, *ecomodernism* defines environmental actions via paradox, as even more aggressive industrialization. In the light of such demagogueries, one might wonder whether the values of modernity can be, and above all, should be, repurposeable at all.

If one takes into account the interaction between people and the Earth, doubt arises as to whether one can truly identify environmental awareness as an expression of Enlightenment as put into scrutiny by Christophe Bonneuil in “Narratives of the Anthropocene.” Hornborg, for example,

questions our ability to “use the very same Reason that gave us modern technology” to criticize “the bankruptcy . . . of capitalist modernity” (63). This “Reason,” as Braidotti observes in *The Posthuman*, has not been attributed to all and everyone in the same way, and for centuries, it served as a ground for various systemic exclusions and discriminations. Critics of the Age of Humans believe that modernity developed on the basis of what they view as the wrong factual and ethical assumptions of anthropocentrism. Perceiving the close connection between modernity, progress and the Anthropocene, Boller argues that “the notion of progress and hence traditional, i.e. linear, temporality play an integral role in conceptions of the Anthropocene and its connected narratives” (17). Similarly, in “Narratives of the Anthropocene,” Christophe Bonneuil enumerates such moral fallacies with a clear-cut precision and without understatement:

Indeed, the stories that the elites of industrial modernity have told themselves—about nature as external and purposeless, about the world as resource, about human exemptionalism, about progress and freedom as an escape from nature’s determinations and limits, about technology as quasi-autonomous prime mover—have served as the cultural origins and conditions of the Anthropocene. (17)

“Can we live inside this regime of the human and still exceed it?” ponders the prominent American anthropologist Anna Tsing (19), noticing that our stand in the Anthropocene seems to be at best problematic. Hamilton, Bonneuil and Gemenne after Steffen argue that the term has evolved by adding to its scope a scientific “shared complex systems perspective on the Earth” (2) and a broader understanding of how the Age of Humans affects the ecosystem and how it alters the entire natural world (3). Disputable as its span or definition might be, the Anthropocene remains a fact, “[e]very cubic metre of air and water, and every hectare of land, now has a human imprint,” and nonhuman animals living in their natural (“wild”) habitat constitute at most 3 percent of the population (Hamilton after Smil 34). Taking this into consideration, it becomes possible for ecology to do without “asymmetrical rationality” and to become, as Morton advocates, “ecology without nature,” or rather Nature without “accumulation by extinction” (McBrien 134). Most scientists agree that the Anthropocene marks the era of the fusion of the social and the natural; as a result, “our future has become entangled with that of the earth’s geological evolution [but] then, contrary to the modernist faith, it can no longer be maintained that humans make their own history” (Hamilton 35). As Tsing (168) persuasively argues in her writing, people are not the sole makers of history

although they wish to claim the authorship and the primacy of the human “overstory.” She adds that history “is the record of many trajectories of world making, human and not human” (Tsing 168).

Powers’s Pulitzer-winning novel *The Overstory* (2018) focuses its attention on such trajectories, also called “assemblages” (inspired by Deleuze and deeply informed by New Materialisms) by posthuman theorists (i.e. Haraway, Bennett, Tsing and others), which can be defined as points of material, as well as symbolic exchange with fungi, trees, bacteria, and other organisms, etc. What makes these assemblages different from other human-tree couplings is their shared material foundations. In the vein of New Materialisms and Vitalism (argued by Braidotti), active matter interacts with all living and non-living entities; hence, for instance, when in a forest, human “contact with nature” is not merely symbolic. Acknowledging her indebtedness to Deleuze and Guattari, Bennett argues that the “vital materialist must admit that different materialities, composed of different sets of protobodies, will express different powers . . . There was never a time when human agency was anything other than an interfolding network of humanity and nonhumanity” (31). In the case of *The Overstory*, one needs to re-examine traditional concepts of “interactions” or “intersections” or even of non-human personhood. Due to exchanging materialities, humans and trees form a structure of Bennettian assemblages. During the Redwood protest that lasts almost two years, for example, seven main characters periodically live on the top of/with the trees, creating with them what Bennett would call “a material cluster of charged parts that have . . . affiliated, remaining in sufficient proximity and coordination to produce distinctive effects” (24). So high above the ground, protestors have to learn to move in a different way, sleep on the branches, and even carry out their physiological needs from a height. Their perspective from the tree-top literally alters them. They become one with other living beings there: birds, insects, microbes and fungi. Powers relates aforementioned assemblages of diverse materialities in detail: “[T]he stink of pores and rotting plants, of mosses creeping over all things, soil being made, even here, so many stories above the Earth” (405). In other words, people in *The Overstory* form “living, throbbing confederations” with trees (Bennett 23) in which “no one materiality or type has sufficient competence to determine consistently the trajectory or impact of the group. The effects generated by assemblage are, rather, emergent properties” (Bennett 24). These assemblages do not result from humans’ genetic similarities to trees, as argued by Dr. Westerford, or her husband’s argument about “nearly identical molecules, chlorophyll and hemoglobin” (Powers 180); rather, they arise out of a new structure that combines human materialities with those of the forest ecosystem,

which produces new and unpredictable effects. Above all, assemblages, as stressed by Bennett, draw attention to “limitations in human-centred theories” (24); indeed, when one locates oneself on par with “countless invisible creatures burrowing beneath the soil, crawling under the bark, crouching in the branches,” as protestors in *The Overstory* do, then human materiality becomes a small part of the particles that “the giant trees breathe in” (Powers 319).

Powers seems to argue that human civilization needs to develop in sync with other beings, not regardless or against them. *The Overstory* is organized around metaphors of growth, drawing on scientific fields, mostly biology (i.e. Simard and Beresford-Kroeger) and anthropology (Tsing). These metaphors, deeply intertwined with e/Enlightenment, appear to be potent in both environmental thought and in modernity. Powers's novel clearly suggests that the future of civilization depends on eco-solutions.

Structurally, *The Overstory's* chapters are named after tree parts, and the plot develops with several textual “understories” (i.e. “[t]he understory is shot through with saplings” [Powers 301]). In *The Overstory*, nonhuman characters (i.e. trees) become the subjects rather than the objects of the narrative. According to Tsing, when in the forest, a human loses the illusion of his or her own mission, assuming that the growth of the tree ecosystem needs people. Uninterrupted, it can go on without humans, so do forest understories. The best that one can do is to let go of control:

To walk attentively through a forest, even a damaged one, is to be caught by the abundance of life: ancient and new, underfoot and reaching into the light. But how does one tell the life of the forest? . . . How can I show landscape as the protagonist of an adventure in which humans are only one kind of participant? (Tsing 155)

Indeed, in Powers's novel, humans are participants as much as trees, and their mutual physical contact changes reality, leading to irreversible consequences for both parties because “they contribute to the overlapping tracks and traces that we grasp as history,” as Tsing puts it (168). Powers's novel produces textual seeds: aforementioned “[a]ssemblages, coalescence, change, and dissolve: this *is* the story” (Tsing 158). The textual world of *The Overstory* is saturated with what Jane Bennett calls in her book “vibrant matter”: the agentic matter common to microorganisms, plants, rocks and people. Again, as Tsing observes,

[m]aking worlds is not limited to humans . . . Without the ability to make workable living arrangements, species would die out. In the process, each organism changes everyone's world. Bacteria made our

oxygen atmosphere, and plants help maintain it. Plants live on land because fungi made soil by digesting rocks. As these examples suggest, world-making projects can overlap, allowing room for more than one species. (Tsing 22)

The tree ecosystem depicted in *The Overstory* involves all living and non-living entities from the smallest, a few-celled organisms, to species that form complex structures, the gravity of their contribution to life on the Earth not depending upon their size or a place in the human-made taxonomy.

Powers's human-tree assemblages analyzed in this article embrace plants and characters from different types of "soil," natural and social backgrounds, various generations, classes, and walks of life. Many of them come from immigrant families; some struggle with systemic and professional injustices, racism and other forms of prejudice, others live with social or physical disabilities. Nicholas Hoel is a third-generation descendant of immigrants from Norway whose life is entangled with the Hoel Chestnut, planted by his great-grandfather. After her father's suicide, induced partly by the withering tree, Mimi Ma (whose ancestors come from Shanghai, Persia, and Greece) is left with a mulberry that witnessed and prompted her father's death. Neelay Mehta, paralyzed in his childhood after the fall from the tree, runs his IT company *Sempervirens*, named after the Oregon *sequoia sempervirens*. The agitated young Mehta climbed the tree after standing up to the teacher who appropriated his notebook with coding ideas. Ironically, he was petrified that "[t]his disrespect of white people will cripple his father" (Powers 127) because for his Indian parent the very thought that his son "could talk back to an American authority and live" (128) was unimaginable. Adam Appich, a scholar in psychology, on the verge of the autistic spectrum, in his early years used to observe the nonhuman lives of insects and other beings on the maple. Dr. Patricia Westerford, a biologist and dendrologist, regardless of the critique of the conservative academic milieu, carries on her innovative research on plant communication. Ray Brinkman (married to Dorothy, an amateur actress, an environmental activist and co-organizer of the protest to save Old Sequoias), an intellectual property lawyer, wishes to advocate "a moral authority that lies beyond the human" (297). Brinkman intends to secure legal protection for other than human beings, including trees and other plants (315). Douglas Pavlicek, a veteran dedicated to reforestation, feels indebted to trees because during his military mission in Thailand (on the way to Vietnam), he survived only due to landing on upward-facing banyan tree roots. Last but not least, after her near-death experience, Olivia Vandergriff claims to understand the language of plants.

As shown above, *The Overstory* is a multi-plot narrative that explores human-tree material assemblages where “[p]eople and trees are in this together” (425). Such an assemblage requires methods that Dr. Westerford applies in her studies and Tsing defines as “the learning practices,” namely, “our combined forms of mindfulness, myths and tales, livelihood practices, archives, scientific reports, and experiments” (Tsing 159). In *The Overstory*, such practices are performed not only by researchers but also by ordinary people. Over the generations, the Hoel family developed a tradition of photographing their chestnut, documenting the tree’s development and its entanglement with their family history:

The generations of grudge, courage, forbearance, and surprise generosity: everything a human being might call the *story* happens outside his photos’ frame. Inside the frame, through hundreds of revolving seasons, there is only that solo tree, its fissured bark spiralling upward into the early middle age, growing at the speed of wood. (19)

Powers has fashioned the optics of his novel so as to convey a perspective “outside the frame” of the human-centred standpoint. Dr. Westerford claims: “*People aren’t the apex species they think they are. Other creatures—bigger, smaller, slower, faster, older, younger, more powerful—call the shots . . . Without them, nothing*” (356). Moreover, Powers’s book makes vivid that people tend to solely notice “things that look like us” (143), ignoring all other forms of life and their contribution: “*Creating the soil. Cycling water. Trading in nutrients. Making weather. Building atmosphere. Feeding and curing and sheltering more kinds of creatures than people know how to count*” (4). Humans participate in the exchange of the matter with living and non-livings forms. The aforementioned exchange between trees and other beings permeates Dr. Westerford’s entire research and her whole academic career. After publishing her post-doctoral findings on tree communication, Patricia Westerford’s research methods are questioned in conservative academic circles. It is not until many decades later that her pioneering inquiries are corroborated by other scientists and Dr. Westerford is rehabilitated, ironically becoming a celebrity expert on future eco-solutions (547).

The character of Patricia Westerford was inspired by two female scientists: Professor Suzanne W. Simard, a professor at the University of British Columbia’s Department of Forest and Conservation Sciences, and Dr. Diane Beresford-Kroeger, a botanist formerly with the University of Ottawa (Berry). In *The Hidden Life of Trees*, the German forester Peter Wohlleben popularized Simard’s ideas on tree communication via scent, chemical compounds and sound waves (13) and on tree co-operation

via the underground forest system of connected roots (11). Ironically, Simard's and Wohlleben's ecological awareness developed over the years against the grain of their "modern" background: Simard's family was involved in the lumber business, while Wohlleben as an inexperienced forester "knew about as much about the hidden life of trees as a butcher knows about the emotional life of animals" (xiii). It took him some time to realize that the "modern forestry industry produces lumber" (xiii) instead of protecting trees. Both of these researchers were at some stage implicated in industrialized processes, which made it possible for them to comprehend how these processes work and to criticize them more effectively on the academic level.

In *The Overstory*, such a critique is provided by Dr. Westerford in her speech that draws on Simard's research. Westerford recalls her struggle with allegedly scientifically unquestionable and unalterable preconceived notions and so-called "common sense," which operate as major weapons of the Enlightenment: "We found out that trees communicate, over the air and through their roots. Common sense hooted us down. We found out that trees take care of each other. Collective science dismissed the idea" (Powers 566). Drawing upon Simard's findings, Powers's novel makes at least four fundamental claims. First, the forest ecosystem is cognizant: "[B]rains down there . . . Root plasticity, solving problems and making decisions. Fungal synapses . . . Link enough trees together, and a forest grows *aware*" (566–67). Second, forests are able to alter the chemical composition of their underground layers and the leaves in reaction to external factors, e.g., people (530). Third, as an ecosystem, an extensive forest is more complicated than an undersized gathering of individual plants and beings: "Not fragments. Large forests live and breathe. They develop complex behaviors" (353). And finally, the ecosystem forms a multifaceted kinship: "*The biochemical behavior of individual trees may make sense only when we see them as members of a community*" (158). Powers's ideas about the social organization of the forest ecosystem—"no separate trees in a forest" (598)—remind one of the Actor-Network Theory (ANT), described by Latour in *Reassembling the Social*, that is a form of mediated "*traceable associations*" (108) which in *The Overstory* could be compared to tree communication enhanced by facilitators (i.e. fungi), expanding connections in many directions, by engaging more and more participants.

In other words, the forest depicted in *The Overstory* is a system linked "together underground by countless thousands of miles of living fungal threads" (Powers 178). In *Microcosmos*, Margulis and Sagan maintain that the evolution of life happened not by elimination or competition but as "[l]ife forms multiplied and complexified by co-opting others, not just by killing them" (29). Similarly, in *The Global Forest*, Beresford-Kroeger

argues that the forest ecosystem is “kept in place by fungi, algae, lichens, bacteria, viruses, and bacteriophages . . . The atmosphere links the forests into the heavens and the great oceans” (48–49). In *Finding the Mother Tree*, Simard argues for the need to recognize the agency of all beings, not only people: “I believe this kind of transformative thinking is what will save us,” she concludes.

Simard and Beresford-Kroeger’s scientific findings, synthesized by Powers in the character of Dr. Westerford, lead to the conclusion that the Anthropocene signifies a regression and is harmful to humans and nonhumans alike, as it tends to upset the equilibrium of the entire ecosystem. The idea of human/natural equilibrium suggests that the disappearance of any species damages other species as well. In *To Speak for the Trees*, Beresford-Kroeger predicts the end of biodiversity if clear-cutting continues unabated as it has until today (148). Her response to the question of eco-solutions is “bioplanning,” which she views as “the blueprint for all connectivity of life in nature” (*To Speak for the Trees* 149) and defends as follows: “A bioplan . . . will walk organic farming one step further to increase the biodiversity of native species of plants and animals” (*The Global Forest* 20). From this small scale, she comes up with “the global bioplan . . . to rebuild the natural world that will envelope the entire planet” (*To Speak for the Trees* 151). Well-motivated as it might be, an all-purpose and indeed quite abstract “bioplan” lacks specifics in the form of a detailed stage-description of how to implement it. Quite unexpectedly, Beresford-Kroeger’s *The Global Forest* encourages a perception of trees as financial assets. She advises: “The trees can be the cash crop for the farmer in a bioplan, whether his farm will be large or small” (*The Global Forest* 20). With the notion of monetizing the value of trees, Beresford-Kroeger enters high-risk territory, linking the world of business with ecological sustainability: “Within North America’s forests there are trees of extraordinary value. But nobody has had the thought to grow them as a financial cushion for sustainable living” (19). In this way, modern conceptualizing of environmental thought seems to be reducing the tree ecosystem to its financial dimension. With such arguments in mind, instead of challenging the tenets of Enlightenment, Beresford-Kroeger has ended up being caught in its very rhetoric. With regard to eco-solutions, Powers’s Dr. Westerford comes up with the idea of creating a Seed Bank (called the Global Seedbed Germination Vault, based upon the co-operation of four universities) for the forthcoming generations during the so-called “second growth” (Powers 408, 622), when the Earth’s biosphere will be reborn after its nearly complete collapse.

Before that happens, Powers’s characters still live in “the Age of Wood. Cheapest priceless stuff that ever has been” (231). *The Overstory*

plays upon the concept of growth with a double meaning: as an industrial expansion and an organic development. “Our civilization is snorting like a steer on growth hormones” (259), Douglas observes. This simile seems to imply that the current development gives the impression of being artificially and unethically inflated. In its escalation, rapid civilizational growth appears to resemble more a metastatic tumour than an evolutionary motion. Powers’s Dr. Westerford comments bitterly on the carcinomatous tendency in present-day human civilization: “The only thing that we know how to do is grow. Grow harder; grow faster. More than last year. Growth, all the way up to the cliff and over. No other possibility” (380). Over the years, the rhetoric of advancement has always been a part not only of the American Dream but has dominated Western thought, as Tsing admits: “[M]ost of us were raised on dreams of modernisation” (20). Tsing enumerates the undeniable benefits of such transformations (i.e. “political causes” and “justice”) till the point where, as she puts it, such thinking “stopped making sense” (24–25). Referring to the Redwood trees, pro-ecological protesters exclaim: “You’re cutting down the last American old growth” (Powers 305). The statement denotes that the clear-cutting of old trees kills growth (in both senses of the word) instead of enhancing it. The enhancement of growth means living in linkages with other beings. That is why environmentalists maintain: “NO TO THE SUICIDE ECONOMY YES TO REAL GROWTH” (430). Their slogan is supposed to advocate that “real growth” (vegetation), unlike its cost-effective counterpart (economy), deserves more and not less attention. At the centre of this claim lies the notion of life as opposed to self-extinction. One of the tree protectors, Olivia, argues that “[e]xponential growth inside a finite system, leads to collapse. But people don’t see it” (401). Ironically, the rhetoric of growth is resorted to as well by the defenders of the forest industry in Oregon (“This state supports timber: timber supports this state” [357]). With increasing commercial demand, the need for wood is thrice as much as it used to be in the previous generation (402), and its adherents assert: “You can’t stop growth! People need wood” (380). Paradoxically, in line with that, what the wood industry does is precisely stopping the growth of the trees. The subsequent statement follows the same polysemy: “Trees fall with spectacular crashes. But planting is silent and growth is invisible” (112). Powers (in the words of Dr. Westerford) argues rightly that trees grown on plantations do not exhibit the same capacities as those in the forest ecosystem: they do not live long enough to develop the extended fungi structures and there are not enough diverse creatures engaged in such creations (355). Organic growth obviously can be measured (even if not observed by the human eye) but its slowness does not meet the interest of economic indexes. Moreover, re-planting is not only silent but

also, in the case of industrial forestry, a pointless form of tree preservation. Such plantations are treated like battery farms for animals: single trees are planted at the artificially human-calculated distance without taking the ecosystem into consideration.

The alternative in Powers's novel is supported by Ray Brinkman who argues that many beings should have their personhood recognized, specifically advocating for plants' rights. Professor Van Dijk in his conversation with Appich observes that "[w]e're living at a time when claims are being made for a moral authority that lies beyond the human" (297). "Plant rights? Plant personhood?" (297), Adam wonders. With the above in mind, the lawyer intends to give legitimization and legal protection to other-than-human beings—"give rights to everything alive" (315)—questioning the ability to speak as a condition *sine qua non* for having a legal standing: "*It is no answer to say that streams and forests cannot have a standing because streams and forests cannot speak. Corporations cannot speak, either, nor can states, estates, infants, incompetents, municipalities, or universities. Lawyers speak for them*" (313).

With regard to the tree ecosystem, plant rights could make mass clearing of old trees much more problematic. At the heart of *The Overstory* lies what Tsing calls the difference between "disturbance" and "ruin." The perpetrators and beneficiaries of cutting the old Redwood trees attempt to portray their actions as "disturbance," that is, as "short-term damage [that] may be followed by exuberant regrowth," which to some extent might even "renew ecologies" (Tsing 160). However, as a matter of fact, felling the old Redwood trees of Oregon cannot be seen as anything but irreversible ruin. Pavlicek describes the forest after clear-cutting as follows: "A stumpy desolation spreads in front of him. . . . the thinnest artery of pretend life, a scrim hiding a bomb crater" (Powers 109). The maimed landscape brings back his war physical and psychological injuries. Motivated by altruism, Douglas volunteers to "[stick] seedlings in the ground, trying to roll back progress just a tiny bit" (255). Powers uses the expression "roll back progress" to reverse advancement in the sense of stopping the continuous damage. Sadly, Douglas's good intentions cause more harm than good since, due to his actions, the logging companies improve their media image and increase timber trade: "Every time you stick one in the ground, it lets them raise the annual allowable cut" (232). Pavlicek is confronted with the truth observed earlier by Wohlleben, that "[n]ational forest's job is to get the cut out, cheap" (109). Taking everything into account, Douglas's actions towards the future of the planet turn out to be a backsliding: "[P]utting in babies so they can kill grandfathers" (232).

Apart from Pavlicek, other characters in *The Overstory* also question their belief in the values of modernity. The Hoel family, once proud of their

chestnut tree, leased their land to multinational corporations. This way, “[t]he Iowa earth has been brought to its rationalized end” (25). Rationality is one of the most favoured concepts of Enlightenment that is supposed to “rationalize” any human abuses. Regardless of that or maybe because of that, the inheritor of the Hoel estate, Nicholas, gets involved in tree-protecting activism. Similarly, Neelay who developed apps written for fun and free-sharing into a serious business—“[p]lay becomes the engine of human growth” (345)—started to have doubts about his company’s rationale. The video-game-producing company set up by Neelay is “a brand-new industry with an unlimited growth curve” (239). Neelay’s associates explain it to him: “[P]eople want to grow. Expand their empires . . . There’s no other way to run a world” (514). In fact, the aforementioned observation remains true with regard to Neelay’s flagship product under the telling name, *Mastery*: a computer game perfectly encapsulating the Anthropocene mentality about creating the world only in order to conquer it. His strategy works perfectly until it “just stop[s] making sense”: an “unlimited growth curve” in *Mastery* means being able to “[m]ine mountains, cut down woods, lay sheet metal across meadows, put up stupid castles and warehouses . . . build shit until the place fills up . . . make another continent or introduce new weapons” (470). This strategy leads to no outcome: “There’s no endgame, just a stagnant pyramiding scheme. Endless, pointless prosperity” (512). In the pursuit for another extended version, what was lost is that “always going somewhere” sooner or later will become pointless (515). Seeking meaningful development, Neelay takes steps that are seen by his board members as regressive, which costs him losing the control of his own company.

As argued before, Powers in *The Overstory* plays with several layers of e/Enlightenment meanings, drawing upon the legacy of historical Western philosophical thought (*Aufklärung*) and the Buddhist highest form of being. The Enlightenment and the Buddhist objective operate upon similar-sounding but not only tantamount notions. In *Beyond Enlightenment: Buddhism, Religion, Modernity*, Richard S. Cohen (1) explains that the name Buddha comes from Sanskrit (*budh*, *bodhi*), and, to a large extent, the dispute over the right interpretation (the English preference of the word “enlightened” over the “awakened”) depends upon the decision of the first English translation (Neumann), later popularized by Max Müller (3). Cohen claims that Müller’s first choice was far from accidental: “Kant defined Enlightenment, Müller preached Kant, Müller translated “buddha” as “the enlightened” (8). Cohen later generalizes this observation with reference to Buddhism in the West: “For scholars, enlightenment is an Enlightenment phenomenon” (9). This assumption became possible because Enlightenment at its outset was perceived as an amalgam of

“simultaneous, coequal, perfection of rationality, of religiosity, of morality, of humanity” (Cohen 15). Following this logic, European Enlightenment appropriated Buddhist destination even though the notions have quite dissimilar foundations. Dale S. Wright in his study *What is Buddhist Enlightenment* quotes Buddha’s words from *The Large Sutra on Large Wisdom*: “Enlightenment is attained neither through a path nor a nonpath. Just enlightenment is the path and the path is enlightenment” (10).

The aforementioned path is a multi-staged process and a goal in itself and Powers’s characters embark on it or disembark at different points in their lives. None of them fully manages to reach this stage and be released from their worldly passions and obsessions. On entering the United States, Sin Hsuin, the father of Mimi Ma, wishing to render enlightenment in his basic English vocabulary and make it understandable to “this American woman official,” explains: “The True Thing mean: human beings, so small. And life, so very big” (Powers 36). Comparably to the earliest translators of Buddha’s words, Sin Hsuin conveys enlightenment in a manner relatable to the Western world. This simple ungrammatical sentence captures well the paradox of the (post)Anthropocene: giving up the fantasies of humans as the centre of the (modern) world and as the most essential species on Earth. Sin Hsuin’s daughter inherits the ancient scroll depicting “[a]depts who have passed through the four stages of Enlightenment and now live in pure, knowing joy” (33), which she keeps in her office and takes with her after being fired, and therefore freed from the corporate mentality. The four stages of the Buddhist enlightenment are Sotāpanna (Stream Enterer), Sakādāgami (Once Returner), Anāgāmi (Never Returner) and Arahant, which means Fully Enlightened (“Freeing Oneself from Suffering”). A Stream Enterer when leaving behind the Western *Aufklärung*, may become a Never Returner to the world of modernity values and their drives (i.e. Pavlicek) or Once Returner (i.e. Adam Appich who resumed his academic career and the life he had before). In *The Overstory*, becoming Arahant results from questioning the European Enlightenment project.

The third area of enlightenment in Powers’s novel is connected with technology and its idiom. The possibly ironic usage of IT jargon is employed in a popular 21st-century mass-marketed “Enlightenment” series for coders (i.e. *JavaScript Enlightenment*, *HTML Enlightenment*, etc.). This blatant reference to the project of modernity is supposed to underscore the rational dimension of coding but also elevate this activity to a nearly spiritual world-creating dimension. Coding as a god-like activity of the Genesis seems to be close to Neelay’s vision in *The Overstory*. However, after issuing *Mastery 8*, Neelay does not wish to replicate the same pattern of domination over the world in the ninth edition of his successful product. He admits: “*Mastery* is broken. A magic, money-printing

franchise needs to rethought” (513). The world-game intends to involve the active participation of the players; they would re-create life on Earth, get to know its mechanisms and comprehend its natural cycles, “growing *the world*, instead of yourself” (517). Following this idea, Neelay creates a code enabling people to question their *Mastery* with regard to the natural world and to learn about their assemblages. His business associates are sceptical about his idea: “Not more plants boss. You can’t make a game out of plants. Unless you give them bazookas” (515). Nonetheless, Neelay’s intended game is supposed to teach players “how to look” at the Earth’s multiplicity, how to understand other-than-human inhabitants. In the past, Neelay thought of evolution in terms of its development from its biological roots, through cultural constructs all the way to “another digital generation” (134). This time around, however, his game aims to fuse the evolutionary stages at all levels simultaneously: “New theories, new offspring, and more evolving species, all of them sharing a single goal: to find out how big life is, how connected, and what it would take for people to unsuicide. The Earth has become again the deepest, finest game, and the learners just its latest players” (600):

And the learners begin to turn all this data into sense.

They split and replicate, these master algorithms that Neelay lofts into the air. They’re just starting out, like simplest cells back in the Earth’s morning. But they’ve learned, in a few short decades, what it took molecules a billion years to learn to do. (608)

Just like in the case of *e/Enlightenment*, *The Overstory* employs both biological and digital idioms, fusing natural and technological discourses: Neelay believes that technology can mediate environmental thought to younger generation. His own company has an organic structure: “collective ecosystem—*Sempervirens*” (246) and his programing involves “branching” (119). For digitally-minded young people, the idiom of technology might help to understand ecological concepts better. When Neelay looks at the tree, he imagines “*the code that made this gigantic thing*” (246). Following the vein of translating nature via technology, Simard emphasizes that “forest was like the Internet too—the World Wide Web. But instead of computers linked by wires or radio waves, these trees were connected by mycorrhizal fungi.” Overall, the eco-strategies suggested by Simard and Powers’s Neelay seem to be close to the thought of N. Katherine Hayles elaborated in *How We Became Posthuman*, in which computer science and nature are not set in opposition but co-exist in a symbiotic interaction.

Neelay's Artificial Intelligence will evolve into different species, at the same time transforming data into sensual experiences by the means of algorithms: "[N]ew species, exchanging discoveries, as living code has exchanged itself from the beginning . . . They begin to link up, to fuse together, to merge their cells and form small communities" (Powers 614). The coder wants these species to become intermediaries between human and nonhuman worlds, being able "to translate between any human language and the language of green things" (617). In this way, the understanding of growth could be "mediated" to all beings so that they might grasp their differences. Out of all the eco-solutions presented in this article such as bio-planning or a seed bank, the idea of the digital simulation of "growing the world" seems most likely to succeed with regard to younger generations. It appears to have the widest, global range and it could allow to exercise several scenarios, showing that ecological solutions can be win-win options. On the other hand, it would be hard to come up with a tribute to technological advancement that is more "modern" in spirit than Artificial Intelligence and coded algorithms saving the planet.

For Patricia Westerford, enlightenment signifies writing a book entitled *Forest Salvation*: a "solitary act of sitting over the page and waiting for her hand to move may be as close as she'll ever get to the enlightenment of plants" (277). "The enlightenment of plants" cannot be achieved without stopping what protesters in *The Overstory* (all but Neelay and Patricia) describe as "harming trees." The question arises by what methods this goal can be achieved or what means can be justified. The narrative shows how the demonstration evolved from eco-activism into random bloodshed. There is a non-accidental semblance between the derivations of "the word *radical* . . . *Radix*. *Wrad*. *Root*. The plant's, the planet's brain" (410). The initially non-violent protest is carried out via social and traditional media campaigns using pro-ecological banners, chaining oneself to trees, blocking roads, doing sit-ins, and occupying the treetops. Gradually it escalates into trespassing and setting fire to tree-cutting machines. The protesters rationalize this escalation by arguing that in order to facilitate the clear-cutting of old trees, the US government turns a blind eye to the logging companies' deliberate arson practices. Literally fighting fire with fire, the tree protectors begin to set fire to loggers' equipment. In one such explosion, Olivia becomes mortally wounded but, fearing self-exposure, Adam refuses to help her. Many years later, Appich wonders: "Can an impending catastrophe justify small, pointed violence?" (539). This line of thinking shows clearly that from idealistic defenders of the old sequoias, the protestors imperceptibly turned into accidental but calculated perpetrators of violence. In a way,

they lost their innocence, like the protagonists of *Easy Rider* who “blew it,” failing to live up to their ideals. Buddhist enlightenment does not seem possible because Western Enlightenment (i.e. violent solutions) will always overpower its assumptions.

While he is not justifying eco-violence, the Anthropocene as described by Powers can be seen as an era that provides legal protection to humans at the expense of the lives of other beings. The law is seen as an instrument of securing the humanity’s economic growth. In other words, the law has been made by humans to protect humans. Powers argues: “The law must let every acre of living earth be turned into tarmac, if such is the desire of people” (588). In this vein, Hamilton in his article “Human Destiny in the Anthropocene” stresses that contemporary law’s existence depends upon “pretending that the Anthropocene is something for scientists alone to worry about” (37). In *The Overstory*, Adam Appich receives an unimaginable sentence of 140 years. In prison, he gets assaulted “senseless many times, not for being a terrorist, but . . . [f]or being a traitor to the race” (Powers 615). During the protest, environmentalists try in vain to refute the accusations of hating their own species and being regressive, but regardless of their intentions the narrative ends with trees being destroyed day after day: “Wilderness is gone. Forest has succumbed to chemically sustained silviculture. Four billion years of evolution, and that’s where the matter will end. Politically, practically, emotionally, intellectually: Humans are all that count, the final word. You cannot shut down human hunger. You cannot even slow it” (598).

In conclusion, Powers’s novel portrays characters aware that forests are living, communicating and organized beings, and that excessive tree-cutting can and should be regarded as “mass murder” (538). The tree ecosystem in *The Overstory* seems to be located at the very centre of the Anthropocene interest. Using wood as building material is inseparably intertwined with the ideals of modernity, whose foundations were laid with timber. In the examined novel, Powers draws upon multiple interpretations of what Cohen defines as e/Enlightenment: from the European project to the Buddhist concept and the IT appropriation of the notion. The present article has explored whether “enlightened” eco-solutions can be applied without “regressive” modern bias. When examining Powers’s *The Overstory* and studying the forest ecosystems and tree-human assemblages it becomes clear that the Enlightenment does not, and perhaps cannot, mean the well-being of both humans and nonhumans alike.

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Apocalypse . . . Eventually: Trans-Corporeality and Slow Horror in M. R. Carey's *The Girl with All the Gifts*

ABSTRACT

This article examines M. R. Carey's 2014 zombie apocalypse novel *The Girl with All the Gifts* through the ecofeminist concept of trans-corporeality as defined by Stacy Alaimo in *Bodily Natures*. Carey's heroine Melanie showcases how humans can re-conceptualize their relationship to a more-than-human, or natural, world that is both exterior to the self and always-already a part of the self through fungal agency. Indeed, the novel continuously engages in intimate human-environment interconnections that, in their horrific capacities, are meant to inspire readers to reflect upon their own enmeshment in a larger, material world. The novel's use of the real fungus *Ophiocordyceps* as the more-than-human agent that inspires the transformation of humans into zombies provides a vision for how humans can more ethically relate, in posthuman manners, to a more-than-human world. Finally, this article considers the novel as a depiction of slow horror, or a gradual descent into apocalypse.

Keywords: environment, horror, trans-corporeality, apocalypse, zombie, *The Girl with All the Gifts*.

MATTER OF TIME

M. R. Carey's zombie novel *The Girl with All the Gifts* hinges upon time: the longing for the time before the crisis; how much time it will take the characters to make it to safety; the diminishing time before the zombies—"hungries" infected with the fungus *Ophiocordyceps*—find and consume them; and the knowledge that, given time, all humans will be lost to *Ophiocordyceps*. Or, as Dr. Carolyn Caldwell notes of sporangia growing from a hungry-turned-mushroom-tree found in London:

Ophiocordyceps toppled our global civilisation in the space of three years . . . The only reason any pockets of uninfected humans were able to survive, was because the immature organism can only propagate—neotenuously—in biofluid . . . But the adult form . . . will take no prisoners. Each sporangium contains, at a rough estimate, from one to ten million spores. They will be airborne and light enough to travel tens or hundreds of miles from their place of origin . . . I estimate that what's left of Humanity 1.0 will close up shop within a month of one of these pods opening . . . It's only a matter of time. (Carey 288–89)

By the novel's close the "trigger event" occurs, initiated by the story's protagonist, Melanie, who is a child, hungry, and representative of Humans 2.0—a successful melding of human and fungus. Readers—Humans 1.0—are confronted with unease at the thought of our extinction while also relieved that children like Melanie will no longer be subject to capture, abuse, and murder by Caldwell, who is intent on finding a nonexistent cure. Ultimately, Humans 2.0 represent the possibility of a new future now that the more-than-human¹ world *must* be acknowledged as part of the self through intimate environment-human interactions.

Simultaneously, the novel underscores how human corporeality and selves are always-already composed of various agentic beings, such as parasites, bacteria, and viruses. These beings may lurk in our bodies unseen and unacknowledged, but they continuously exert their own agencies with and against our own. Carey's fungal plague *Ophiocordyceps* thus frighteningly, and accurately, reveals how human bodies are always-already caught up in networks of more-than-human relationships.² Or, as Stacy

¹ I refer to the nonhuman as the "more-than-human" for two reasons: 1) this term indicates environmental issues are *more* deserving of attention than humans typically think, and 2) this designation suggests nature both contains and exceeds the human—is "more than."

² This idea of networks points us both towards ecologies, or systems of interrelated parts, and to Jane Bennett's ideas of assemblages as discussed within her book *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Duke UP, 2010.

Alaimo argues in her book *Bodily Matters*, such meetings direct “attention to the materiality of the human and to the immediacy and potency of all that the ostensibly bounded, human subject would like to disavow . . . ‘the environment’ is not located somewhere out there, but is always the very substance of ourselves” (4). *Ophiocordyceps* reveals humans are never simply human, but are hybrid beings. There is no time before or after these interconnections; rather, they are ongoing. Children like Melanie, who are both human and fungus, suggest we understand ourselves as composite. The novel offers horror by forcing humans to consider their bodies as unbounded, and hope in the recognition that interconnection with a host of beings brings ecological insight. Arguably, to avoid the apocalyptic destruction of Humans 1.0 in the novel, where once the horror begins it is already too late, we must engage in such rethinking before time is up—both for ourselves and our planet.

I read *The Girl with All the Gifts* through an ecological lens focused on the melding of human and more-than-human. While the first meeting of fungus and humans is apocalyptic, Humans 2.0—the offspring of hungries, or Humans 1.0 infected by *Ophiocordyceps*—offer a vision of how humans can relate to the more-than-human world, one both exterior to the self and always-already a part of the self. In Melanie and children like her, *Ophiocordyceps* enters an advanced stage in which human and fungus live harmoniously and coextensively. Melanie is consequently a figure for Alaimo’s trans-corporeality as discussed in *Bodily Natures*, in which the movement of matter between exterior environment and the interiors of human bodies demonstrates “a recognition not just that everything is interconnected but that humans are the very stuff of the material, emergent world” (20). As an ecological form of humanity, Humans 2.0 allow readers to consider how “an unraveling of the human” (Alaimo 3) is an ethical, posthuman action. Finally, I consider how the novel engages in what I term “slow horror,” a gradual descent into humanity’s apocalyptic destruction—while simultaneously presenting a hopeful future.

TRANS-CORPOREAL FUNGAL AGENCY

The novel’s storyline follows a child named Melanie, who is heroine and zombie simultaneously. Twenty years before the novel’s present, the Breakdown occurred, in which the fungus *Ophiocordyceps* leapt the species barrier to infect humans. This disease, spread through blood or saliva, turns humans into flesh-eating entities known as “hungries.” In the present, the remaining human characters are concerned with how to avoid, stop, or reverse the hungry pathogen. This search is the reason that Melanie and her

classmates, all Humans 2.0, are locked in a military base, the purpose of which is focused around Caldwell, who studies the children's capacity to learn and then selects subjects for dissection to find a cure. The children are educated in an elementary school classroom, most notably by Miss Justineau, who Melanie loves and admires. Melanie, the most brilliant of the children, is eventually selected for dissection—but Caldwell is unable to carry out this task before Justineau intervenes and the base is overrun by hungries.

Once the base is destroyed, Melanie, Justineau, Caldwell, and two soldiers named Sergeant Parks and Private Gallagher make their way across a hostile landscape to Beacon, a haven in southern England. Upon entering London, Melanie discovers she is a second generation hungry, *Ophiocordyceps*' secrets are revealed, and Melanie decides humanity's fate by releasing a forest's worth of the fungus' spores from hungries-turned-fruited-trees. This release aligns Melanie with the mythical Pandora, the "girl with all the gifts" who, as Miss Justineau taught the class, "open[ed] up the box and [let] all the terrible things out" (11). Infection will gradually overtake the globe, eliminating Humans 1.0 and making room for Humans 2.0, entities both human and fungus, culture and nature, overtly more-than through their fungal lineage. Justineau is the only surviving human in this world, preserved by Melanie in the mobile research station Rosalind Franklin to educate Humans 2.0. This education will ensure Humans 2.0 are neither mindless like the hungries nor focused solely on the self, like Humans 1.0; instead, they will be mindful of their relationship with an exterior world.

Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality focuses on such intimate human and more-than-human interconnections and their potentials by interrogating the false premise "that people are separate from nature, the environment, and other material substances and forces" (16). In the West, the human subject is traditionally viewed as distinct and unique, separated from nature by culture. Nature, meanwhile, is rendered null, a thing rather than a vibrant ecosphere composed of lively beings. This mindset leads corporations in capitalist economies to frack, mine, destroy Native lands, and spray pesticides with abandon. Therefore, Alaimo proposes that humans understand themselves as trans-corporeal beings, for viewing "human corporeality as trans-corporeality, in which the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world" (2) aids recognition of the value of the more-than-human. Or, as Alaimo notes, "ethical and political possibilities emerge" from understanding humans as trans-corporeal:

[I]hinking across bodies may catalyze the recognition that the environment, which is too often imagined as inert, empty space or as a resource for human use, is, in fact, a world of fleshy beings with their own needs, claims, and actions. By emphasizing the movement across

bodies, trans-corporeality reveals the interchanges and interconnections between various bodily natures. But by underscoring that *trans* indicates movement across different sites, trans-corporeality also opens up a mobile space that acknowledges the often unpredictable and unwanted actions of human bodies, nonhuman creatures, ecological systems, chemical agents, and other actors (2).

Trans-corporeality reveals that humans are always-already enmeshed in the more-than-human, even in ways out-of-sight and thus out-of-mind. Carey's *Ophiocordyceps* is in part horrific because it makes these trans-corporeal interconnections visceral and stark, eliminating the possibility—especially once the spores become airborne—for humans to imagine themselves as disconnected from their environments. Notably, *Ophiocordyceps* is not malicious, but merely seeks its own propagation; it is one of the “fleshy beings with their own needs, claims, and actions” that Alaimo identifies. Reading Carey and Alaimo together can aid us in approaching our own selves trans-corporeally to consider the various agencies at continuous work within, across, and around us. Indeed, hungries are horrific because they retain the semblance of the human while behaving solely like a fungus, mercilessly seeking *Ophiocordyceps*' propagation through biting and consuming humans. Humans 2.0, by contrast, behave like fungus and human intertwined, mediated and enhanced by one another.

Trans-corporeality also highlights the novel's use of fungal agency, wherein *Ophiocordyceps* is an “other actor” that inspires “unpredictable and unwanted actions” as it enters human bodies and transforms them. Kylie Crane's “fungal thinking” proves useful: “Fungi are out ‘there,’ and in ‘here.’ They are doing their work in numerous places—all the time and out of time, and on physical scales large and minute” (239). Fungi are an exterior and, more unsettlingly, an interior material reality. Merlin Sheldrake, a fungi-focused biologist, concurs, adding that fungi are present in our bodies through food and air, highlighting “our total dependence on fungi—as regenerators, recyclers, and networkers that stitch worlds together”; thus, humans “dance to their tune more often than we realize” (19). Fungi, already part of the human self, reveal the falsities of human borders and highlight trans-corporeality. Crane continues: “We are not singular, not ourselves, neither in our present presence, nor in our historical becoming . . . Fungi, like viruses, help us to remember our shared being, across difference” (246).³

³ Crane's idea is also reminiscent of Val Plumwood's notion of continuity as explored in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. Per Plumwood, continuity expresses a spectrum of relationality between beings, while steering us away from total assimilation, which is a colonial effort of incorporation into the (human) self. Thus, difference is celebrated in continuity, as are interconnections.

Ophiocordyceps is thus an astute way to demonstrate fungal agency and highlight humans' trans-corporeal entanglements. In hybrids like Melanie, human and fungal corporealities and agencies meld into newness together, each affecting and affected in turn, ultimately (re)producing Humans 2.0. Crane's and Sheldrake's work tells us fungi are trans-corporeal, and that humans do not, and cannot, exist without them; Carey's novel illustrates this truth, both for characters and readers.

Thus, while trans-corporeality and fungal agency re-instill value in the more-than-human, they also highlight how the more-than-human contains "dangerous, often imperceptible material agencies"—like cancer-causing pesticides, fracking runoff that contaminates entire watersheds, or a fungus that alters humanity. The realization that we are trans-corporeally in dialogue with an exterior world "may provoke denial, delusions of transcendence, or the desire for a magical fix" (Alaimo 146). *The Girl with All the Gifts* depicts this mindset when Caldwell studies the brain tissues of a hybrid child and discovers "the extent (close to a hundred per cent) to which her own labours [for a cure] over these past seven years have been a waste of time . . . what she's found is so bleak and absolute" (372). In short, Caldwell discovers that there is no "magical fix," no cure for *Ophiocordyceps* infection; there is only eventual submission to it, either by Humans 1.0 becoming a meal for the hungries or turning into hungries themselves. No human agency can counteract the greater, and more precise, agency of the fungus; instead, it creates something entirely new: Humans 2.0. Caldwell must accept, as Alaimo notes, that trans-corporeality "foster[s] a posthuman environmentalism of co-constituted creatures" (146). Posthuman indeed, for with no cure and the release of airborne *Ophiocordyceps* by Melanie at the novel's end, Humans 1.0 will experience complete extinction.

THE UNRAVELED HUMAN

Again, fungal agency and trans-corporeality are often unnoted because their actions are mostly imperceptible; however, Carey renders them visceral through images of infection. For instance, after Sergeant Parks is bitten and infected, his human aspects are eliminated: "His hands circle each other, searching for a meaning that evades them. After a while he goes very still, until the sound of a bird singing on a wire between the houses makes him sit bolt upright . . . His jaw starts to open and close, the hunger reflex kicking in" (Carey 400). As *Ophiocordyceps* winds through his body, Parks loses the ability to transform thought into words. Eventually, the fungus rewires him as it suffuses his body: he is activated by sound, the

hungry feeding mechanism—signified in the working of his jaws—seeking fungal propagation the only action left. Parks’s mental self is eliminated by the fungus as his physical self imperfectly melds with it and becomes its tool. Had Melanie not shot Parks, he would become like the hungries encountered earlier in the novel, in which “[g]rey [fungal] threads have broken the leathery surface of their skin in a network of fine lines, crossing and recrossing like veins. The whites of the eyes are grey too, and if the hungry’s mouth is open you can see a fuzz of grey on the tongue” (178). Fungal intimacy reigns here, and to terrifying effect. As trans-corporeality enmeshes the human in networks of more-than-human intimacy, *Ophiocordyceps* is represented across human skin “in a network of fine lines.” The fungus mirrors trans-corporeal actions, weaving in and out of the skin through “threads” and “fuzz.” The fungal agency of *Ophiocoryceps* subsequently leads to “an unraveling of the human” (Alaimo 3), depicted in Parks’s inability to speak and fungal growths on hungry bodies, which obscure characteristics of humanity. Thus, potential trans-corporeal dangers are also highlighted, suggesting how *Ophiocordyceps* propagation unravels the human self.

Yet, given the evolutionary advantages with which Humans 2.0—the children of hungries—are endowed, the unraveled human is also a positive figure. Children like Melanie are faster, stronger, and smarter than regular humans. They contain enhanced senses and stamina, lack the need for water or excretion, last long periods without food, and are capable of considerable ethical action. For instance, once Melanie realizes she is a hungry, she makes a concerted effort to ensure she will never bite her human companions in case her hunger drive takes over. She saves their lives multiple times, once putting herself between Parks, who previously treated her with violence, and a pack of oncoming hungries. She willingly shares knowledge—such as how buses functioned pre-Breakdown with Gallagher, who was born after society’s collapse—and accumulates knowledge to pass on to those who would benefit from it, as she does when listening to Caldwell explain how *Ophiocordyceps* led to children like Melanie. And, at the novel’s end, she wrestles greatly with whether to release the fungal spores from the hungries-turned-mushroom-trees; ultimately, she determines that “[i]f [Humans 1.0] keep shooting [the hungry kids] and cutting them into pieces and throwing them into pits, nobody will be left to make the new world. [Humans] will keep killing each other, and you’ll . . . kill the hungries wherever you find them, and in the end the world will be empty” (Carey 399). While Melanie recognizes transforming Humans 1.0 into hungries “means they’ll all die, which is really sad,” she also insists, “the children [Humans 2.0] will grow up” to remake a new, better world (399). Melanie, although a child, is so enhanced by the melding of human and

fungus that she can diagnose a situation and determine which actions will bring about the best outcome.

While at the start of the novel Melanie identifies as human, her knowledge and acceptance of the fungus's role in her creation leads Melanie to advocate for trans-corporeality in her choice to prioritize Humans 2.0. This choice relies upon an ethics of the posthuman. Or, as Alaimo defines it in her reading of *Darwin's Radio* by Greg Bear, this kind of ethics involves recognizing

in-habitation, in which what is supposed to be outside the delineation of the human is always already inside. This stuff of matter generates, composes, transforms, and decomposes: it is both the very stuff of (human) corporeality and the stuff that eviscerates the very notion of the human. By thrusting us into an evolutionary narrative, where there are no guarantees, that humans will endure as a species, Bear enacts a powerful posthuman environmental ethics, in which human bodies . . . are inextricably interconnected with material worlds. (25)

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We could easily replace “Bear” with “Carey,” for *The Girl with All the Gifts* presents this same “posthuman environmental ethics” in Melanie. Her body is typified by “a kind of in-habitation” of *Ophiocordyceps*, wherein she represents the human and an “eviscerat[ion of] the very notion of the human.” Melanie is therefore part of “an evolutionary narrative” that presents the dawn of a posthuman world. This narrative may be horrific in the extinction of humans, but is also hopeful in that a form of humanity will live on, particularly through Humans 2.0 like Melanie who grow up with an education that instills a deep appreciation for human artistry. The novel blatantly frames Melanie's choice to eradicate Humans 1.0 as the most ethical option, both for (a type of) human and more-than-human survival.

POSTHUMANITY

Prior scholarship on both the novel and 2016 film adaptation also interpret Humans 2.0 as posthuman figures. For instance, Ruzbeh Babae et al. argue that the ending leaves the characters in a “posthuman state” (54); Andreu Domingo contends that the audience “identif[ies] with the living dead . . . In this case, the infected being is presented as posthuman and as hope” (451); similarly, Ösgür Yaren writes Melanie “embodies the hope of a posthuman life on earth” (79); Irina M. Erman's reading through Foucault suggests Melanie's rigorous self-discipline—particularly her ability to control her need to feed around humans—“points to a reconfiguration of the monster

from subhuman to posthuman” (608); Lauren Ellis Christie finds that *Humans 2.0* are “posthuman” and “crucial to the overall understanding of the novel as a scathing depiction of the cruelty of mankind, and abuse of science over nature” (42); and, via transhumanism, Kimberly Hurd Hale and Erin A. Dolgoy assert that the novel depicts a “posthuman future [that] provides a challenge to dominant transhumanist narratives about the nature of [self-guided and technological] human evolution,” and explores “the status of posthumans’ natural and civil rights and their capacity for moral agency, a prerequisite of justice” (344–45).

Clearly, any reading of *The Girl with All the Gifts* should consider posthumanism, but I add a focus on reading the text through trans-corporeality with a concentration on fungal materiality. For example, the posthuman is rendered in images of mushroom-trees in the second half of the novel. These new, abject entities appear as the survivors enter London, and are narrated from Gallagher’s perspective:

[The hungry’s] chest has broken wide open, forced open from within by. . . . A white column, at least six feet high, flaring at the top into a sort of flat round pillow thing with fluted edges—and with bulbous growths on its sides like blisters. The texture of the column is rough and uneven, but the blisters are shiny . . .

“This . . . is the fruiting body of the hungry pathogen. And these pods are its sporangia. Each one is a spore factory, full of seeds . . . Break one of these open and you’ll be having an intimate encounter with *Ophiocordyceps*,” [says Caldwell]. (250–51)

Trans-corporeality suffuses this scene, in which an image of layered multitudes—human, hungry, tree, mushroom, sporangia, urban environment—encapsulate enmeshment into environmental networks. This environment is not only a part of the self, but transforms the self into the soil and root system from which a fruiting fungus-tree grows. The zombie figure, already monstrous as a distorted human mirror, here showcases intense bodily horror, a decades-long takeover by a fungus that finally matures and sprouts. Readers are reminded that their bodies are not sealed or fully under human control; bodies change and grow—and spurt growths—in ways beyond human agency. The delineation between human-turned-hungry and fungus-tree collapses; neither can exist without the other. Nevertheless, the image of the fungus-tree dominates the scene, rendering both human self and body null in a manner that gestures toward a posthuman world ruled by fungal agency.

Therefore, *Humans 2.0* are posthuman because they illustrate trans-corporeal interconnections, and in so doing offer ethical reconsiderations

focused on the treatment of the more-than-human. For example, humans are incredibly unethical beings in the novel, represented in Caldwell's dissections and inability to see the children as anything but fungal hosts. Per Yaren,

we spurn the overzealous attempts of the scientist, and her means (cruel experiments on the hybrid children) to save humanity . . . they should be saved from being dissected by the scientist, even though the only cure to save the human race from absolute extinction is dependent on the vaccine to be produced through their sacrifice. (79–80)

Yaren's commentary encapsulates how the novel leads to a posthuman consciousness, where readers are encouraged to consider how our ending may have a positive influence on the more-than-human. Indeed, in tormenting the children, Caldwell focuses on the more-than-human "parasite," not the host: "Subject number twenty-two, whose name was Liam if you accept the idea of giving these things a name, continues to stare at her . . . It doesn't mean he's alive . . . It's [just] the parasite" (Carey 38). That Caldwell understands herself as fighting against the fungus—she refers to *Ophiocordyceps* as "her nemesis, her mighty opposite" (352)—underscores human mistreatment of the more-than-human and an inability to understand how humans are always-already trans-corporeal. The brilliance of Carey's storytelling lies in his ability to make readers root for a posthuman world in which Humans 1.0 are eliminated because it is a more *ethical* world. This more ethical world is based in an acceptance and embrace of the fungal agency and materiality of *Ophiocordyceps*, again re-centering readers not on the human aspects of the posthuman, but on the more-than-human.

Posthuman ethics centered on more-than-human fungal agency is also represented in how Humans 2.0 are birthed. Per Caldwell, Humans 2.0 are, at first glance, engendered through heterosexual reproduction: "We thought that was impossible—that hungries couldn't have a sex drive. But once I'd seen the survival of other human drives and emotions—mother love, and loneliness—it didn't seem impossible at all" (378). While Caldwell's phrasing—"a sex drive"—leaves space for queer desire and coupling as an option between hungries, biologically it would take one individual with female reproductive parts and a second with male reproductive parts to birth a child. However, in the conception of Humans 2.0, a third component is necessary: the ungendered figure of *Ophiocordyceps*. The fungus's prominent role in the creation of Humans 2.0 turns this fungus into a third parent, queering the processes by which posthumans are conceived. The novel's ethics and trans-corporeality are

then reliant upon a kind of queerness, or the actions of an other-than-heterosexual and more-than-human fungal entity. Hungry sex is then a kind of human and fungal intercourse, resulting in beings who evolve with *Ophiocordyceps*. As Hale and Dolgoy note, Humans 2.0 exist not in a parasitic but in a “symbiotic” relationship with the fungus, and “represent something evolutionarily new: the end of human beings as they have thus far been understood and a beginning of something humanlike but adapted to the fungus-saturated environment” (346). Humans 2.0 can trace their lineage equally to both humans and fungus in a collapse of the culture and nature dualism; this leads to the existence of a new world, inhabited by figures who, while capable of human qualities, are inherently tied to the more-than-human world because they cannot exist or be understood without *Ophiocordyceps*.

Ultimately, humanity’s future is based in an evolutionary narrative, dependent upon Melanie acting as the trigger event that releases *Ophiocordyceps*’ spores. She uses the turrets on the Rosalind Franklin research station to set a forest of hungry-mushroom-trees on fire, resulting in “a [grey] mist so fine it’s like someone laid a lace curtain across the world” (Carey 397). While Hale and Dolgoy understand this as “a challenge to dominant transhumanist narratives about the nature of human evolution” (344), I contend that Melanie’s actions highlight human trans-corporeal reliance upon an exterior world. She rebirths the world, ending Humans 1.0 and enabling the hungry populace to reproduce so that children like her become “the *next* people. The ones who will make everything okay again” (Carey 399). Melanie exists as a kind of goddess in the text as she changes and reshapes reality; she is a new Pandora who is driven to “open up the box [given to her by Zeus] and [let] all the terrible things out” (11). Per the Greek myth, Pandora needed to open the box to give humans their humanity and awareness of good and evil. Melanie, similarly, needs to open the box—release *Ophiocordyceps*—to instantiate the development of Humanity 2.0, unraveled humans who embrace their trans-corporeal dialogue with an exterior world, and who remind readers that our enmeshment in the more-than-human is not something we can afford to ignore.

SLOW HORROR

While Humans 2.0 are part of the novel’s present, their evolutionary narrative occurs across great lengths of time. Their newness is marked by both destruction and education, particularly from the perspective of Justineau, the only human to survive Melanie’s release of *Ophiocordyceps*. Justineau, preserved inside Rosalind Franklin, mourns the fate of Humans

1.0 but accepts her role as teacher and caretaker of Humans 2.0: “She has a marker pen in her hand. Rosie herself will be her whiteboard . . . She draws on the side of the tank a capital *A* and a lowercase *a*. Greek myths and quadratic equations will come later” (403). Here, Carey plays with the idea of an ending: the reader closes the book just as Melanie has closed the book on Humans 1.0, with the story of Humans 2.0 waiting to be written. Melanie also recreates the classroom originally presided over by Justineau at the base, assembling Humans 2.0 to learn about the world, legacy, and mistakes of Humans 1.0. Thus, “Melanie indeed destroys *Homo sapiens*, but she maintains their legacy” through a liberal arts education of “language, myth, art, and love” (Hale and Dolgoy 358). The narrative of Humans 2.0 begins in full at the novel’s close, although its roots—fungal and otherwise—are in decades prior to the Breakdown, and in the yet-to-be-realized future.

Subsequently, *The Girl with All the Gifts* is also an example of slow horror, a horror that builds incrementally, that is not sudden but slow and lingering, suffusing an entire circumstance with dread. Perhaps due to my working-class Appalachian roots,⁴ I see slow horror mirroring Rob Nixon’s slow violence. Violence, Nixon tells us, is understood as swift and explosively visual; by contrast, slow violence “occurs gradually and out of sight,” and is “a violence of delayed destruction . . . dispersed across time and space” (2). It is “incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales,” represented in the often unrecognized “long dyings” that characterize “casualties, both human and ecological[,] that result from war’s toxic aftermaths or climate change” (2–3). Like slow violence, slow horror “occurs gradually and [often] out of sight” and “is dispersed across time and space,” making it difficult to track and yet always affecting lived experience. An example of this horror is the current climate crisis, caused by centuries of fossil fuel use and extraction that will affect our future in horrifying ways.

In storytelling, this horror extends before the events of a narrative and continues afterward, even if by the narrative’s close the horror changes. There is no escape from slow horror: it is ongoing, where all individuals involved—like characters and readers—are anxiously on edge. Slow horror is always present, ebbing and flowing in waves. It is also unending; there is no safe haven, no exorcising priest, no escape from the forest back to civilization. Slow horror claims everything, especially space and time, revealing the underlying fissures and monsters we live with daily and ignore, like the inevitability of death or the trans-corporeality

⁴ In the US, Appalachia is characterized by the Appalachian Mountain Range, which extends from the Northeast into Alabama. This region is fracked and mined extensively.

of our bodies. Slow horror means we cannot imagine horror over *there* and occurring only to others, or as something that happens suddenly and then dissipates in a return to normalcy. Instead, slow horror reveals that horror is everywhere and ongoing, always and already, as inescapable as the material realities of our existences.

In Carey's novel, slow horror is represented in the gradual descent into an apocalypse where, rather than going out with a bang, humans feebly attempt to preserve themselves before ending with a whimper, thus enabling Humans 2.0 to flourish. This evolutionary change occurs not in the swift blitz of Melanie setting the forest alight, but long before and after this event. Indeed, slow horror is represented in the time it takes for *Ophiocordyceps* to infect most of the human population in the Breakdown, for hungries to reproduce and human and fungal bodies to trans-corporeally meld, for what remains of Humans 1.0 to struggle fruitlessly for decades to find a cure, and for how long it will take for the spores of *Ophiocordyceps* Melanie releases to infect the remaining humans. This slow horror spans near-extinction, destruction, trans-corporeal and evolutionary change, and queer fungal entanglements. Arguably, this slow horror is both human- and fungi-centered, particularly in how *Ophiocordyceps* infects and then meshes with the human body to reveal trans-corporeality. As Elana Gomel notes, the story's horror does not end with the final page: "it is the future that is the source of contagion. When Melanie the zombie protagonist releases the fungal spores that will infect the last remaining 'true' humans, she symbolically kills the past and ushers in the brave new world of posthuman monsters" (227). Perhaps what makes this slow horror and "brave new world of posthuman monsters" so arresting is that the readers' alignment with Melanie, and the novel's revealing of human atrocities, makes us both celebrate and pull away from this non-ending to Melanie's story—and our own human-centered world.

This non-ending also reads as an apocalyptic (Christian) rebirth, a troubling notion when some biblical thought casts nature as solely for human use. We could say that the novel depicts the elimination of humanity as much easier than engaging in the difficulties of changing our actions and societies to be more ecologically sustainable. Slow horror, then, is substituted for hard work. However, I contend that while Humans 1.0 are eliminated, ecological devastation is not, even as trans-corporeality becomes a central aspect of life for Humans 2.0. Indeed, Humans 2.0 are now left to deal with the detritus of global society and the effects of climate change, to preserve the art and lessons of the past, and to navigate an unknown future. The slate is not wiped clean; the players have merely evolved. Humans 2.0 combine the culture of their predecessors with trans-corporeality in their fungal ties to a vibrant, exterior world. Care of the

self becomes care of the planet—and vice versa—because neither can be separated or dichotomously opposed to the other any longer. In *The Girl with All the Gifts*, Humans 2.0 present readers with a vision predicated upon ecological hope—even if this hope is ultimately embodied in the horror of our own slow extinction.

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ECOTOPIA AND ECO-FUTURISM

Elizabeth Watson

Ecotopia

Based on Ernest Callenbach's *Ecotopia*
Adapted by Elizabeth Watson

SYNOPSIS OF THE FIRST EPISODE

The story takes place in the mid-2040s, twenty years after Washington State, Oregon and Northern California have seceded from the USA and founded an independent republic based on steady-state ecological principles (striving for equilibrium rather than growth), and recycling sewage waste as fertilizer, replacing car traffic with light-rail and creating a bioregional pattern of interconnected towns of various sizes (including San Francisco, where the action takes place). The densification of town centers has emptied the suburbs and left large swathes of pasture, farmland and wilderness in between. Energy in Ecotopia is largely solar and wind-based, renewable materials have largely replaced non-biodegradable plastics, the work week has been reduced to twenty hours, and businesses allow workers to join as investors. There have been no diplomatic relations or trade between the two countries but now for the first time, the USA is sending a journalist to Ecotopia, William Weston from the New York Times. The primary goal of the first episode is to introduce Weston, since his perspective is the lens through which we, the spectators, will discover Ecotopia.

We open on a satellite view of the United States' East coast—significant portions of it have changed shape due to rising sea levels. There are floating trash islands in the sea, dead farmlands, and large sea walls surrounding Manhattan. Skyscrapers stick out through a thick layer of smog. Below, the sidewalks are full of people on their way to work. They are wearing masks, each with a screen on the mouth. Younger commuters have emojis or videos playing on their screens.

In Weston's New York, people wear carbon fiber smart masks designed to protect from dangerous air pollution and all buildings have sophisticated

air filtration and air locks. When I wrote these episodes in 2017–18, I could not have anticipated the importance masks would later come to have. However, in my episodes, they show how separate the American people have become from the natural world. It also shows the level of intrusion people are willing to put up with rather than challenge the status quo. The citizens would rather permanently wear masks and invest in air locks than address the air quality problems. Weston continues to wear his mask into Ecotopia, where it is not necessary to do so, and there the mask represents his resistance to joining in the Ecotopian way of life. Therefore the moment he decides to take off his mask becomes a significant turning point in his assignment and his willingness to adapt to another way of living.

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What the first episode shows us is a US which is certainly dystopian, but not unbelievable so. I wanted it to seem like a likely (albeit undesirable) near future. Manhattan is partly underwater. Air quality has deteriorated. Beggars have increased and now beg for things like clean water or better face masks. Children wear bullet proof vests to school, personalizing but also normalizing them with stickers and badges. Restaurants advertise clean and fresh greens—rare and expensive!—to accompany portions of ration. Climate refugees number in the millions and come from other countries and other parts of the US, especially the South and Southwest.

If this project were to be produced into a full series, I would include storylines from Weston’s loved ones who remain in the US such as his ex-wife, kids, and editor. Thus, the first episode also has the dual purpose of introducing these characters and their world to the viewer. By developing these storylines, it would give the viewer a chance to “live” in both versions of the future. Further as a storytelling device, it provides opportunity for conflict and drawing interesting parallels between the two countries.

Throughout the first episode, there are scenes from Ecotopia spliced throughout. These scenes are short, without dialogue and almost-too vivid. The scenes show a man of Weston’s age and build leaving his home near the forest’s edge and joining with his hunting group. The group while in pursuit of its prey encounters a wild boar and manages to kill it. They celebrate the kill, and their near miss with death, with a bonfire party. While Weston’s world is one of existing in the world but endeavoring to remain apart from it, the scenes from the Ecotopian hunting party are about physical connection and living as part of an eco-system.

The stark visual contrast between these scenes and the rest of the episode set in New York should be jarring and even a bit frightening. These scenes serve to add to the apprehension and fear Weston feels about this unknown country and his assignment in it. But they should also build the viewers’ anticipation to see inside and to know more about Ecotopia.

After Weston celebrates gaining permission to enter Ecotopia, as the first American to do so since the regions' secession from the US, he informs his family of his imminent departure and makes the journey to the border which is located just outside of Reno, Nevada. The first episode closes on a rather bleak shot of the border. This is also the opening shot of the second episode.

EPISODE 2: THE NEW WORLD

For purposes of brevity, several short scenes at the beginning of this episode have been omitted, including a scene in which the protagonist, William Weston, arrives at the Ecotopian border and another when he buys his train ticket to San Francisco at the Ecotopian train station at Lake Tahoe. The whole episode has been shortened and several sections omitted or reduced.

EXT¹ LAKE TAHOE TRAIN STATION PLATFORM; AFTERNOON

Weston reaches the platform as the last passengers are just ambling off, happily chatting. Weston jumps on the train rather awkwardly with all of his luggage. The train looks like "a wingless airplane."

INT TRAIN; AFTERNOON

Inside the train is much more like a cozy lounge than public transportation. There are no seats. People are seated on leather poofs on the ground. The floor is a warm wood with thick spongy carpets placed in the center of the compartments which are separated by knee-high partitions. There are houseplants hanging from the ceilings. Passengers quietly chat, snack, and play card games in little circles. An old man is taking a nap. Weston looks around awkwardly for a place to put his suitcases. Another passenger breaks away from a seated group and approaches him.

PAULLETTE: Hey, you look like you could use some help.

She takes one of the suitcases and lifts it up.

PAULLETTE: Whoa, what do you have in here? Rocks?

WESTON: Cameras and video equipment mostly.

PAULLETTE: *(Looks over her shoulder as she approaches a side panel next to the door)* Really? Are you a filmmaker?

WESTON: A journalist, actually.

PAULLETTE: Cool *(pushes a sleek button and the panel slides up with a whoosh and there is a large storage compartment. She places the heavy suitcase inside with ease)*

WESTON: For the New York Times.

PAULLETTE: *(Pauses as she reaches for the other bag)* Oh really? So you're the American? *(She looks him up and down)*

¹ "EXT" and "INT" stand for "exterior" and "interior" shots, respectively.

WESTON: You know me?

PAULLETTE: Oh your visit was a big debate on the public airwaves. (*She puts his second suitcase in and the panel closes*) I'm Paulette. It's a pleasure to meet you. (*They shake hands*)

WESTON: William Weston. The pleasure is mine.

PAULLETTE: Come join us and regale us of stories from the mothership. *They approach a seated group. There are three other people all seated in various postures of ease. Paulette lithely folds to the ground while Weston stiffly plops. His clothes aren't suited, and he's not used to sitting on the ground.*

JEB: What stray have you picked up this time?

PAULLETTE: Guys, this is William Weston, the New York Times reporter. *Jeb and the others immediately show keen interest.*

PAULLETTE: William, this is Jeb, Rowan, and Denise.

WESTON: Nice to meet you.

Jeb takes a drag on a joint and offers it.

WESTON: Thanks but . . . (*he indicates his face mask*)

JEB: Oh. You could take it off?

WESTON: I'd rather not. (*eyes the windows*)

JEB: Not that it matters, but the train is basically hermetically sealed, since we are traveling so fast.

WESTON: I'm comfortable like this. Thanks.

ROWAN: You don't look it. (*as he takes a hit*)

PAULLETTE: Leave him alone.

Beat, Weston takes in his surroundings as does the camera, while the others quietly chat and smoke

WESTON: It's so quiet.

PAULLETTE: Yeah, it's operated on magnetic suspension. Check it out. (*She holds up her glass of water and it doesn't move or shake at all*) Smooth as buttah!

ROWAN: Turns out those white coats over at Boeing had more than airplanes in their imagination. It's just they had never needed to try anything different until Independence.

WESTON: Boeing still exists?

JEB: Of course, just not in the same way as before. The Survivalists demanded not only diversification but decentralisation of company ownership as well. The brain power and facilities were there, so they used it to build this train system.

WESTON: But who foots the bill? It must've cost a fortune.

Laughter. Weston looks a bit annoyed and confused.

ROWAN: Honestly. The cost of constructing one road bed for a highway from San Francisco to Seattle is equal to just one of these babies for the same distance.

PAULLETTE: Not to mention the total social cost per person per mile is significantly less than any air travel under a 1,000 miles.

WESTON: Social cost?

Laughter

JEB: You've got a lot to learn.

ROWAN: It's a shift in the way of thinking about things.

JEB: Less of a shift and more of an excavation

ROWAN: Don't be pedantic. Will,—

WESTON: William.

ROWAN: In the US, you're taught and you learn the price of something is connected to its worth, right?

WESTON: The worth being what people are willing to pay for it.

ROWAN: Right and the cost is how much money and resources the company used to produce this thing.

WESTON: Yeah, definitely.

ROWAN: Well what elements are factored into the cost?

WESTON: The price of materials, labor, shipping and transportation, etc.

ROWAN: What about disposal?

WESTON: Disposal of what?

ROWAN: The product itself, and the by-products created during production.

WESTON: I suppose the cost of disposal of the by-products would be factored into the cost of the product, but the disposal of the actual product is on the individual? The society?

ROWAN: Well that's what social costs are. In fact in the pre-independence economy, the one under which you still operate, the costs of disposal of both byproducts and individual products, not to mention packaging, both fall on the state which of course is financed by the individuals.

WESTON: I guess that's true.

ROWAN: Many of these products won't recycle themselves. Barely anything we create, except our shit and ourselves will disappear on its own. Money and resources and energy have to be allocated to safely and effectively vanish waste and pollution.

JEB: So when you factor all of these costs, suddenly your system isn't so affordable.

The scene continues with the passengers explaining things to Weston and pointing things out.

EXT TRAIN JOURNEY; AFTERNOON

Camera exits the train through the window and follows along beside it before going over the Donner Pass, pass a train stop with skiers waiting on the platform. Down the slopes to the valley floor which approaches San Francisco. The valley is full of fields, forests, a few dilapidated farm houses, lush farmland,

orchards. There are barely discernible roads glimpsed through overgrown trees and brush. There are no streetlights, no power lines.

An overwhelming abundance of nature and little to no signs of the human industry which normally surrounds a large urban center.

INT TRAIN; AFTERNOON

PAULETTE: Social costs also include things like infrastructure utilisation, waste management, emission remuneration. You'll hear that term a lot—

TRAIN ANNOUNCEMENT: We are approaching San Francisco. This is our final stop. Please gather your belongings and make your way off the train. We thank you for travelling with Ecotopian Railways. Enjoy your visit and have a nice day.

THE TRAIN STOPS. THE PASSENGERS GATHER THEIR THINGS. WESTON AND THE PASSENGERS SAY THEIR GOODBYES.

PAULETTE: Here. This is for you. *(She hands him an envelope)*

WESTON: Thank you.

PAULETTE: *(Gives him a hug)* Go with the goddess.

Weston watches her walk away, she looks back with a gleam in her eye. He opens the envelope. It reads.

Welcome to Ecotopia, William. I hope your journey here has been smooth and pleasant. I've enclosed a map for you to find your way to your hotel where I'll meet you at 3:00.

Your personal tour guide,

Alan Miner

Ecotopia Foreign Minister

INT TRAIN STATION SAN FRANCISCO / INT GOVERNMENT OFFICE

The screen is split, half is Weston examining the map, arranging his bags and taking out his camera to walk through the bustling train station. The train arrives underground and the occupants make their way up to the surface. The atmosphere is dimly lit by sky lights above. He moves toward the exit. There is the sound of crowds speaking, laughter, running water, on one side is a waterfall, vegetation grows up the walls.

EXT STREETS OF SAN FRAN; AFTERNOON

The whiteout clears and the camera shows market street. The once wide and traffic packed street which sweeps down to the harbour has been narrowed to just two lanes. The rest of the considerable space is filled with trees, gardens, a bubbling creek with delightful waterfalls (brought up from the culverts below), children and their parents, street artists, workers, food trucks, and kiosks.

The first sounds we hear while Weston takes in his surroundings are laughter, classical music, and birdsong.

We see a trio of strings playing classical music with a small group who have gathered to listen. Children playing tag and adults joining in as well. People

reading on benches while waiting for the electric bus. Women chatting and harvesting some herbs from a small raised garden bed near the bus stop.

The clothing is much more bizarre than anything we've seen thus far. Full of colours, natural fabrics and unusual silhouettes including full body wetsuit-like outfits in bright colours.

Weston walks toward the bus stop.

Now we see at the kiosk, a colorful assortment of fruit, candy, nuts, cigarettes, hookahs, cannabis, newspapers. The trolley comes and people step off and a few step on, it is completely open on all sides with bench seats which are facing out so people can just step off. It seems to have some sort of covering that can be lowered in case of bad weather.

Weston walks past the trolley stop and passes a long wooden table full of people eating and talking.

There's a person napping in a hammock strung between two trees.

There's a school, where children are outside building a wooden structure. A teacher comes out with a large pitcher of iced tea. She raises it up and calls to the students and they run toward her unfolding collapsible cups from their back pockets.

Weston stops next to a creek which flows through all of this. He stoops down to see the silver reflection of fish through the shadow and leaf speckled water. He turns his head and sees a woman splashing water on her face. They lock eyes, and it becomes somewhat sexual. She playfully splashes water in his direction.

Weston jumps away as if he's been burned. Confused the woman walks away, we can see a bit of disappointment in her eyes. Weston frantically wipes the droplets of water from his coat.

Next, he walks toward a street corner, but since it is so lush, it's hard to distinguish it as such. He's looking at his map and searching for a street sign when the hunting group, and the hunter, Bert, and his son, from the first episode arrive in a boisterous group. Weston looks up at them, taking in their hunting clothes and the slung up remainder of the boar held on a stick between them. He stares. The hunter walks up to him and points behind him at the almost concealed street sign. Weston turns, sees it, turns back to say thank you, and the hunter smears blood from the kill in two parallel lines down his face. Weston is shocked and glares as they walk away. He frantically wipes the blood from his face.

Once he's composed himself he consults his map and then continues down the intersecting street. He walks past two jugglers amusing another group of children and a man pushing a food cart selling ice cream and sorbet.

There is a clearing in the tree canopy, and he looks up. The skyscrapers are linked together by lace-like walkways 15–20 stories up in the air. People are crossing them in various degrees of hurry.

The camera lingers behind him, and we can see him as a lone vessel dressed in a dark grey suit jacket and pants, pulling his hard-shell black suitcases behind

him. He looks like a spot of black in a vibrant patchwork of life and color surrounding him.

He gets smaller until the song (which will start partway through the scene) finishes.

INT HOTEL LOBBY: AFTERNOON

A CLOSE UP ON ALAN'S FACE.

ALAN: Howdy! Didya find it alright? It's a bit difficult for foreigners sometimes. Not quite as you expected it, huh? I'm Alan and you are right on time. (*Weston looks befuddled*) Sorry, Alan Miner, foreign minister for the Country of Ecotopia, at your service. (*shakes his hand and does a funny salute*) I have to say it's quite exciting to be speaking with an American here at home. It's about time we reopened communication in my opinion. Plenty of us disagree, but the sins of the father and all that, plus it just makes sense. We share a continent after all. A border even.

During the above paragraph he has walked to the front desk, Weston follows, and he signals to the receptionist to hand him a key, Weston signs for it after showing his passport.

ALAN (CONT): Sorry, I didn't meet you at the train station. I had a video call with India, and anyway I thought you'd might like to take in some of the city on your own. Unfiltered by the likes of me. (*Laughs heartily*) Let's drop off your stuff so we can go for a stroll.

Alan hands Weston the key, Weston starts to head off toward the elevators, Alan follows him, Weston looks surprised. Alan keeps chattering.

INT ELEVATOR; AFTERNOON

In the elevator, we hear the elevator music, from Weston's perspective we see the animated face of Alan chattering away, we hear the ding of the elevator arriving and the doors opening.

ALAN: You know you don't have to wear that here. (*Nodding at his face mask*) We closely monitor the air quality and depending on the wind speed and direction, most of the time we don't need those. We've got standard air filters in all of our buildings and some strategic farming and plant fixtures throughout the city and harbour. There were only one or two days last year that citizens were advised to have one of those. It's amazing how fast the earth heals herself, you just gotta stop hurting her. (*Alan gently touches his arm and Weston jumps*) Why don't you leave that here?

They've reached Weston's room. Weston looks around, looks in the mirror, his hand moves to his face mask and hovers for a second, then he loses courage and drops his hand.

WESTON: Alright, where are we off to?

EXT SAN FRANCISCO STREETS: LATE AFTERNOON

Alan and Weston are back on the streets, slowly walking while Alan talks, and they observe the surroundings.

ALAN: How was your trip?

WESTON: How long after independence did the administration begin disassembling the highways and roads?

ALAN: Whoa, right down to business I see. Let's just relax a bit. Get to know each other, take in the sights. There's no rush.

WESTON: Sorry, hazard of the job. *(They walk a bit, Weston's attention is caught by two people walking by in bird suits)* Have you always lived in San Francisco?

ALAN: No, I'm from Bolinas, originally, but I moved here after independence, there was so much work to do. It was better to be near it all. I still have a room at my old place in Bolinas, nice retreat outside of the city.

WESTON: It's not really the kind of place you need to retreat from, it's so quiet and green.

ALAN: You really are a city boy. Noise pollution is a hot topic at local council meetings here.

WESTON: Were you part of the revolution?

ALAN: Proud card carrying survivalist. Bolinas was ground zero for a lot of the early head-to-heads of the independence effort.

WESTON: I remember. What was that like?

ALAN: Is this your first time in San Francisco?

WESTON: I visited once before secession.

ALAN: Before independence. You're in Ecotopia now, you should call it Independence.

WESTON: Independence. *(Beat)* It's changed a lot.

ALAN: We all have. I love this city now. I love living here.

They pause to let a group of school children who are playing football make a play in the middle of the street.

WESTON: Where's your place?

ALAN: Just over there *(points to the Transamerica Pyramid)*

WESTON: *(looks but doesn't immediately understand)* Where?

ALAN: The Transamerica Pyramid building.

WESTON: You live there?

ALAN: Well yes.

WESTON: But that's an office building.

ALAN: They've been repurposed.

WESTON: They?

ALAN: Yes, all these metal monsters. Now they house families, communities, and work cooperatives. It makes sense. Why would all the best real-estate go

to offices anyway? Before independence, these behemoths were empty more than half of the time. Think about it. Nights, weekends, holidays, we paid to keep the lights on and the doors guarded. These glowing beacons on the altar of work and profit. And why? So a handful of wealthy men could show off to each other while thousands upon thousands of people gave their lives behind a desk working a job which most of the time held no significance. Plus you've gotta calculate the hours spent in traffic to get those workers far enough away from these altars that they could afford to live and still eat in the few hours they had before they went to sleep and woke up to do it all again. *(He pauses)* These buildings, this city, is alive now. It's built for the people who live here, not the money that's made here. Or the cars that drive here. *(Pause)* Sorry, I get carried away sometimes.

WESTON: No, go on. It's interesting. You make it sound like life and death.

ALAN: Well, isn't it? I know it's a completely new way of thinking. It requires some adjustments, but well, *(gestures around him)* it seems to work.

A big peal of laughter from a group of adults sitting in a circle, talking and snacking

WESTON: Speaking of work, why isn't anyone at work?

ALAN: How do you know they're not?

Weston gestures to the game of tag being played by a group of adults

ALAN: *(chuckles)* The work week is much more loosely structured than what you are accustomed to. All Ecotopian businesses are cooperatively owned, so the employees decide their schedule.

WESTON: But how do these cooperative-run businesses manage? I mean don't the employees lack experience, isn't it difficult to keep everyone on task?

ALAN: You're acting like they're a bunch of imbeciles. What we've found is the hierarchy of most big businesses pre-independence was all smoke and mirrors. Those managers were mostly puffed up puppets being controlled by the CEO or executive board. They were all pretty useless. Once you give the workers your trust and a stake in the company, they rise to the task and usually far exceed expectations.

WESTON: But how do they keep productivity up?

ALAN: Well, productivity changes when you aren't working to make one person as rich as possible. In our stable state economy, everyone is working to keep the standard of living they already have. On average, an employed Ecotopian adult works 20 hours a week. Of course, if your company has a big deadline, then you might work as much as 50 hours in a week, but then everyone in your team would. Everyone pulls together to get the job done. *(Gesturing to the game of tag)* Many places found frequent and stimulating

work breaks have improved employee productivity by so much the work week could easily be shortened to as little as 15 hours.

WESTON: *(Looks skeptical)*

ALAN: You'll see.

They keep walking and turn a corner. There's a dark windowless building. Quite imposing.

WESTON: Do people live there? *(Points at the ominous building)*

ALAN: No, that's the Pentagon.

WESTON: *(Eyebrows raise)*

ALAN: Well, that's what people call it.

WESTON: So what is it?

ALAN: That's where they coordinate the war games.

WESTON: War games?

ALAN: *(Changes the subject)* Where are you from?

WESTON: NYC, born and raised.

ALAN: What was that like?

WESTON: You know, the usual.

ALAN: No, I don't. Tell me.

Stops walking and makes direct eye contact.

WESTON: Parents divorced when I was young. My mom raised me mostly, saw my dad at Christmas, birthdays, and odd weekends in between.

ALAN: Who did your mom live with?

WESTON: Me and my sister.

ALAN: She had no one to help her?

WESTON: Her mom would come in from Pennsylvania for three week stretches when she could.

ALAN: That must've been difficult for her.

WESTON: I don't know. I guess it was.

ALAN: Who do you live with now?

WESTON: No one, I mean my kids when it's my week.

ALAN: Oh. Don't you get lonely?

WESTON: No, I like being alone.

ALAN: It can be nice. How many kids do you have?

WESTON: Two.

ALAN: What a gift.

We see Weston and Alan's silhouettes against the brilliant colours of the sunset.

WESTON: Oh shit, we better get back to the hotel. What time is curfew here?

ALAN: Curfew?

WESTON: When does the sun set?

ALAN: Oh I don't know, 45 minutes or so.

WESTON: Ok, so I'll head back to the hotel. *(Turns away from Alan to leave)*

ALAN: (*grabs his arm*) Why? You'll miss happy hour.

WESTON: Nightfall curfew? Don't you have nighttime travel restrictions?

ALAN: Nightfall, as you call it, is when the party starts. Come on, let me show you.

WESTON: I don't know.

ALAN: William, you've reported from war zones, I think you can handle this.

WESTON: Yeah . . . yeah. Where to?

ALAN: Right this way.

The camera pans over their heads and to the sunset sky. A cool song starts that is electro and acoustic with a heavy base and drumbeat.

EXT. GOLDEN GATE PARK

Many people are lighting bonfires and candles, turning on garden string lights. Games of sports are ending and drinks and food are being prepared and passed around. Weston and Alan enter the frame.

The music which started during the transition becomes more complex. Close up on Weston's face who looks amazed, but his eyes keep flickering to the setting sun. He takes out his camera and begins shooting the party.

WESTON: Is there a special festival on?

ALAN: No.

WESTON: It looks like they're setting up for a party.

ALAN: For us it's just a Tuesday evening.

WESTON: (*smirks*) Right.

ALAN: I'm going to get a drink. Do you want one?

WESTON: I need to get some shots while the light's good, you go ahead. *Alan leaves and approaches a group of people who are setting up a slack line and opening beers. They all greet him in a chorus of "Alan!" as he nears. Weston continues filming around him. The music (from earlier) gets louder and accelerates, and we watch him taking in and filming the action around him. He walks through groups of people who are preparing for the evening. As he walks, we notice the Ecotopians noticing him, some of them smile invitingly, some wave at his camera, some nod and then whisper behind his back. A few jocks chant: U-S-A, U-S-A, as he passes. The backing track music is joined by drumming in the park. The two complement each other. The light has become even dimmer, and the scene becomes permeated with the glow of firelight rather than the glow of the sunset.*

Weston, whose face earlier was completely immersed in the act of capturing his unique surroundings, becomes increasingly more agitated. His eyes flick to the sky and to the people around him. He begins to put his camera up, and is hastily backing away from the crowd of people. When someone puts his hand on his back, Weston immediately jumps in fear and steps away, turning toward the person who touched him.

WESTON: Get your hands off me!

HUNTER: Whoa, whoa. (*hands up in the air*) Didn't mean to sneak up on you. Was gonna offer you a drink.

WESTON: (*slowing down his breathing*) Sorry. I'm just a little jumpy.

HUNTER: My bad. You have to let me get you a drink.

WESTON: Sorry, I can't. (*starts to walk away*) Hey, you're that guy from earlier, the one who smeared blood on my face.

HUNTER: Yeahhhhh. I am. I wanted to apologise. I didn't realise who you were. Here, that's a sign of camaraderie and good luck. It was a successful hunt and by marking another member of the community, we spread the luck, and it's a kind of invitation too. To join us on the next hunt. Anyway, I wanted to offer you a drink, like a peace offering, but maybe another time.

WESTON: (*looks the hunter up and down*) What's your name?

HUNTER: Bert.

WESTON: William.

BERT: Right this way, Will.

Weston and Bert approach a group who are having a jam session. People are playing guitars, drums, and various other instruments. Some people sing, some people dance. It's a relaxed and convivial environment.

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Cassie approaches Weston.

CASSIE: Does that thing stop you from dancing? (*gestures to face mask*)

WESTON: It definitely does not.

CASSIE: Well then (*she offers her hand and does a bow, like a courtier*)

Weston takes her hand, and she drags him to the dance area which is more like a dance pit.

CASSIE: So what do Americans think of us?

WESTON: What?

CASSIE: Americans? What do they think of us, of all of this?

WESTON: Oh, a lot of different things.

CASSIE: Like what?

WESTON: Nothing too flattering.

CASSIE: What's the most ridiculous rumour?

Weston keeps dancing and thinks.

CASSIE: Come on, don't be shy.

WESTON: It's pretty bad. Silly, really.

CASSIE: Come on. I could do with a laugh.

WESTON: Well, when I was a teenager, we all thought Ecotopians had mutated from exposure to radiation, you know after Puget Sound.

CASSIE: That doesn't sound silly.

WESTON: All the men had one eye and oozing sores. (*Cassie laughs*) And the women were supposed to have two, you know . . . (*flicks his eyes down to her crotch*)

CASSIE: Two what? (*Playing dumb*)

WESTON: Two . . . you know . . . it's juvenile.

CASSIE: I don't get it.

WESTON: Two vaginas!

CASSIE: (*Cracks up and they keep dancing*)

The two dance, and it gets more and more sexual. As we watch, the screen splits and we see the shadowy figures watching too, but they don't talk. After a bit, the Cassie grabs his hand and leads him off into the shadows. At this point the screen goes full size to Weston and the girl again. She pushes him down onto a kind of grassy mound and starts kissing his neck.

CASSIE: (*between kisses*) The air is perfectly safe you know.

WESTON: I don't trust it.

CASSIE: (*Still kissing his neck*) You want to inspect me for mutations?

WESTON: What?

CASSIE: For science? And objective journalism.

WESTON: Abso-fucking-lutely.

CASSIE: (*Laughs*)

Then Cassie takes his hands and guides them all over her body, she does so while making intense eye contact with him. We can see her and his arousal. She keeps taking tiny inhales of breath, and his pupils dilate, his breath picks up. With her hand on his hand she puts it under her shirt, she's not wearing a bra. She moans and begins kissing his ear, her hands in his hair now. Eventually, she guides his hand into her waistband, and lets him go to work. She is clearly enjoying herself.

CASSIE: So, what's the conclusion?

WESTON: No mutations.

CASSIE: Satisfied?

WESTON: (*he smiles*) Not quite.

CASSIE: Well, I can't say I am either.

WESTON: Oh really?

CASSIE: Kiss me.

Her hands were around his neck at this point, and she's moved them to the side of his face mask release. His eyes are wide with both arousal and fear.

WESTON: (*Through heavy breathing*) Alright.

Cassie releases the mask, the camera has been slowly zooming on their faces and now it is just his mouth as she lowers the mask, his breathing stops as if he's holding his breath and then the music which has been backtracking this whole scene stops, he gasps an inhale.

BLACK

 **Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet**
 **Christian Arnsperger**
University of Lausanne

“Did You See Last Night’s Episode of *Ecotopia*?”: How a TV Series Could Help Move Climate Action Forward *A Conversation with Elizabeth Watson*

Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet & Christian Arnsperger: You initially started to work on this screenplay as a Master’s student in the English Department at the University of Lausanne. Can you say something about the original impetus for this project and why you thought *Ecotopia* would make a good TV series?

Elizabeth Watson: My original impetus came in response to a question that was posed during a class I took on “Climate Crisis and Societal Change”—the question of “Why are there so few utopian representations of the future?” As a fan of dystopian books, films and TV shows, it struck me that I had never been exposed to, nor engaged by, a utopian story. In the same class, I was introduced to Callenbach’s *Ecotopia*, and I immediately wondered if it had already been made into a film or TV series. I found the society described in *Ecotopia* to be inspiring and well thought out, but it also seemed to be one that could act as a flexible setting in which to explore the implications of systemic change. How would changing the societal and economic system of a place look not only on the institutional level, but straight down to the interpersonal, familial and personal spheres? Could systemic change go as far as modifying our own relationship to our inner world and emotions? Could healing our relationship to nature completely change our relationship to ourselves and others?

It seemed to me that Callenbach was exploring this question along with others in his novel. His Ecotopian characters have a different way

of socializing compared to modern North Americans, and they live in a different climate when it comes to expressing emotions. In *Ecotopia*, rather than masking or “civilizing” emotions in public spaces, the characters accept and express them as part of nature. The man-made artifice of polite society which has thus far been closely related to a suppression of our “baser” instincts and emotions is no longer present in the citizens of *Ecotopia*. While at first glance, this could seem a regression, Callenbach saw it as a coming home, a coming home to ourselves. It’s expressed in the characters’ comfort with their bodies, their ease in expressing their emotions and in communicating openly. The environmental principles on which *Ecotopian* life is founded seem to be reflected in the characters and their behavior.

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If the novel were adapted into a TV series, there would be ample opportunities to show viewers what living sustainably or ecologically could mean beyond the mere “eco-gestures” that we hear so much about nowadays. Yes, society needs to fundamentally change in order to adapt to the demands of our changing climate, but what does that look like in terms of our day-to-day lives? Without an image of how people would live in this changed version of our future, it’s difficult for people to project themselves into that future. *Ecotopia* offers an inspiring image in which to project ourselves.

ASM & CA: *Ecotopia* is sometimes called a “utopian novel,” on the model of Samuel Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* (1888), but the word “utopian” inevitably has a pejorative connotation and gets associated with something either impossible to achieve or stifling and boringly static if it is achieved. But it appears that *Ecotopia* is not really a utopia at all, in that all of its solutions would be possible to implement if there were a will to do so, and that it is not trying to repress human nature to create a perfect society. Do you agree?

EW: On the one hand, *Ecotopia*’s utopian qualities are part of the appeal of adapting it. The book came out of a desire to offer different visions of our future outside of the apocalyptic and the dystopian. However, often utopias are suspect. We don’t believe in them since as members of an imperfect society, we don’t trust stories in which things are going too well. That’s why *Ecotopia* is compelling. The only utopian aspect of the society is the relationship to the environment. What Weston (the journalist who visits *Ecotopia* from the United States) witnesses—and the reader through him—is a society in development and one which, as John Michael Greer points out (in the dialogue in this issue of *Text Matters*), is very much a product of Callenbach’s own experiences and aspirations in the late 1960s. The way women are portrayed in the novel, the way race is dealt with, and other issues are very much a reflection of the author’s

background and context when writing *Ecotopia*. By the same token, these are also areas which could be updated to reflect the issues and questions that we are working on in the public sphere today.

In *Ecotopia*, after having reformed the new country around a new principle of environmental sustainability and a stable-state economy, the people are still working out what their society will be and how exactly it will operate. And it’s this aspect, this working out, that lends credibility, believability and interest to the novel. Readers or viewers don’t want to see a static end product, one of false perfection, because first of all, that would be boring. And secondly, it would be highly artificial. There is no society—whether utopian or not—for which there is an end product. Throughout human history there hasn’t been, nor will there ever be, stasis. Change is the only universal constant and we inherently know this, and thus are distrustful of any representations of a perfect “fixed” ideal. This inherent distrust of utopias is something that in my adaptation would be a central tension to play with. For example, in the first episode, Weston and the other American characters speak about the inhabitants of Ecotopia, formerly the residents of the Pacific Northwest, with distrust and even disgust. These characters’ fears reflect the fears of the viewer and build the anti-utopian tension before Weston even enters Ecotopia in the second episode. As he explores Ecotopia, the viewers share his reluctance to fully adapt to the local ways, and they will be constantly on their toes waiting for the other shoe to drop. In the second episode, I play on this paranoia by inserting surveillance scenes without it being clear who is doing the surveillance and why.

Callenbach also plays on the anti-utopian sentiments of his reader in his novel, especially with the inclusion of the War Games, as well as Weston’s possible kidnapping and possible brainwashing. In addition to adding conflict and drama, invoking this knee-jerk reflex when it comes to utopian stories provides an opportunity for people to question their reactions and their inherent distrust towards this kind of society.

ASM & CA: The film *Don’t Look Up* came out in 2021 to great acclaim, and although it accurately depicts the failures of the political class and the media to take planetary danger seriously, it is just one more addition to the countless apocalyptic films and scenarios that we have seen in recent years. Why have such end-of-the-world type warnings not helped us take meaningful steps towards reducing fossil fuel dependency and pivoting towards a more sustainable system?

EW: As the title of the film suggests, people don’t want to look too closely at the truth. I think that end-of-the-world warnings only provoke fear. Sure enough, some people’s response to fear is to fight but many

others' response is flight. Still others respond by freezing. Fear can elicit reactions but, especially when it is overwhelming, it can lead to a reaction of immobilization. It can make us feel powerless. Fear on its own can make our efforts feel futile.

Indeed there is evidence to suggest that fear causes immobilization. In his book *Don't Even Think About It*, George Marshall interviews George Loewenstein, a professor of psychology who studies fearful anticipation. While Loewenstein has found that signal events such as a major natural disaster can heighten concern about future climate events among those affected, he emphasizes that the primary response to threats like these and like climate change will always be to "mitigate the dread" the event causes, even if it means ignoring it (Marshall 113). There is a "narrow boundary between not believing that the problem is happening at all and being so afraid that you are immobilized" (113). Navigating this boundary is one of the reasons it's so difficult for climate action to garner enough support to make lasting change. We know about the problem, but we are overwhelmed by our dread.

I think the time for warnings has passed. We have been sufficiently warned. If you're paying attention to the world and world events, you know that we are in rather deep trouble. Pointing this out merely increases feelings of futility, rebelliousness and despair, none of which generate long-lasting motivation. The kind of sustained motivation we need for positive change, the kind we need in order to be able to make sacrifices, to withstand the discomfort of the unknown, the agony of change, the fear of loss, and to find the audacity to create a world completely different from the one of recent history and one which no one has ever seen or lived in before—that kind of sustained motivation can only come from hope and inspiration. It's hard to hope with only darkness as inspiration; light, even if only a glimpse of it, is required.

The other part of hope is faith. This is an ability that modernity has chipped away at. The insistence has grown in the modern mind that belief is the antithesis of rationality, but it doesn't have to be. Now more than ever, we need the ability to hold two conflicting things to be true at the same time: to rationally acknowledge our reality and at the same time believe that we can change it for the better. We need to be capable of seeing the system in which we live and all the ills it creates in a clear-eyed way, and yet still believe that as part of that system we can do better and create something different.

In her book *This Changes Everything*, Naomi Klein talks about how, in order to hope for a better and sustainable future, we need to believe new things about ourselves. The stories we tell about ourselves now are those of selfishness, greed and corruption. From television to neoclassical economics, these are the narratives which dominate our collective

consciousness (Klein 703). Klein argues that this image of humankind is partly what causes our climate inaction. We are overwhelmed by the problem of climate change and we see humankind as inherently incapable of solving it. She suggests we reframe the way we view the cause of our collective inaction (704): What if our inaction was not caused by carelessness and selfishness, but rather by caring too much? What if we cannot face climate action because we have not properly dealt with the fear of ecocide? Without a space and opportunity for us to talk about our fears and our pain, and to grieve the damage we have already done to the world, it feels impossible to act in time to avert the serious consequences to come (704). Klein acknowledges that we need a space to dialogue, to process and to heal. Through this we can hope to change the way we see ourselves and our place in the natural world (704). I think she’s right; we must acknowledge that the past has brought us to this point, but even though that is so, we can choose where to go next. We need to believe that we are capable of change—no matter how irrational that belief may seem to us today.

ASM & CA: One key theme of this special issue of *Text Matters* is the relationship between modernity and ecology. One of the things that has struck us over and over again is the automatic assumption many of us have that living more ecologically necessarily represents a regression into the past, a “giving up” of modern comforts and of modernity itself, which feels to many people like an impossible sacrifice because we are taught all our lives that modernity—defined as the context of progress, technology and late capitalism—is the culmination of human history. There are many deep ideological assumptions at play here that we cannot even go into. But if one contemplates *Ecotopia* and the society Callenbach depicts in this breakaway republic—a country committed to living sustainably, within steady-state food and economic systems, with competitive worker cooperatives, dense carless cities connected by magnetic high-speed trains, interactive televisions and a twenty-hour work week—does this feel to you like a going backward or a going forward?

EW: It definitely feels to me like a going forward. I think we have often associated technology with man-made objects or machines. For us, progress frequently lies in this domain of inventing more things that make our lives easier, or rather make us into more efficient workers. However, throughout human history there have been all kinds of inventions that have nothing to do with building something. The concept of a library is one. The idea of human rights and our obligation to protect them is another. These kinds of social progress are happening all the time. Parental leave, equal rights, equal pay, labor laws . . . we could actually view these as

technological breakthroughs since they make our lives easier, but for some reason we don't.

Furthermore, since the Industrial Revolution, we don't have any representations of technology in any other societal or economic system besides the one in which we are now. This is simply because technological innovation looked different in those earlier times. We have never seen technology and the modern conveniences that we currently enjoy in any other context besides that of late capitalism and exploitation. I think this leads people to think that our modern lives are intrinsically dependent on our current economic system. Without images and narratives of how technology could be incorporated in such a way that it serves our needs, desires and pleasures, it's difficult for people to imagine modern living in any other setting.

I think it could also have to do with our conception of time as linear rather than cyclical. We assume that as time progresses things necessarily get better, in a perpetual forward momentum. This means that the previous version of something is outdated and thus no longer relevant. Take the iPhone. Many people will throw away their iPhone when a newer version comes out because they see the older version as obsolete, and of course the Apple corporation capitalizes on that. However, this logic seems to be applied to all kinds of things, not just technological innovations. Often an older way of doing something is written off as too simple, too outdated or too inefficient, when in actuality it merely got replaced with something flashier and sexier. I think what a work like *Ecotopia* can show us is that we do not have to throw out the baby with the bathwater. Just because there is a faster or flashier way of doing things, doesn't mean it is better. Perhaps there are things in the past that are worth revisiting and could be improved upon with the knowledge and technology of the present.

ASM & CA: As a woman in her early thirties, how do you see the future in general, and the future of the United States and/or of Europe (where you live now, after having grown up in Texas) in particular?

EW: When I started my Master's thesis in my late twenties, learning and reading about climate change and climate denial sent me into a long depression. It felt like I was walking around with this crazy knowledge and was able to do nothing about it. It made everything feel pointless. It's from knowing that feeling of futility that I understand that we can't just tell people the facts as they are, but that we also must encourage them to hope anyway. When you feel like there is nothing you can do, then you grieve, you mourn, you fritter away, you distract yourself, but you don't act. It can be paralyzing. It certainly paralyzed me. For some, like Greta Thunberg and a few others, eco-anxiety led to a righteous indignation

which combined with her unnerving courage, led her to protest, and since it struck at a particularly good time in the larger news cycle, we paid attention. But that is the role of just a few: we can’t count on large numbers of people to pull themselves out of the darkness of dread and, without even a glimmer of hope, stand against a system that they don’t quite understand themselves.

So what is my vision of the future? It depends on the day. Sometimes the dread and despair return. It’s sometimes hard to hold on to hope in today’s news cycles. But when I can be hopeful, I hope to see more young people taking up the responsibility of political power—thanks to leaders like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in the United States. I would like to see people of my generation and younger get rid of the fossils who hold sway over us now and reshape the political world in line with their values while at the same time, non-politicians feel empowered as citizens. I hope people can remember that citizenship is not a passive state but an active and powerful one, and they can use that power to make positive changes. I also hope that our planet can hold on long enough for the ebbs and flows of human procrastination to move in the direction of healing rather than hurting. I hope to see a reckoning—ideally not a violent one, but a moment when people say, “Enough is enough” and then get to work deciding what it is they want to change.

It’s not my desire to have the future look exactly like the society in *Ecotopia*—though I wouldn’t hate it. It’s more about finding innovative and tailor-made solutions for each part of the globe. *Ecotopia* is not THE answer, it’s an answer. It’s a fictional world that has the possibility to inspire creation and change in our world. Just as *Star Trek* inspired real-world technological inventions, *Ecotopia* could inspire real-world social and ecological progress.

ASM & CA: How did you adapt and change Callenbach’s *Ecotopia*? In particular, how did you add more material to depict the current United States in an increasingly dystopian near-future world of climate degradation and growing economic disparities?

EW: It is important for the viewer to have two visions of North America: one that is painfully familiar and probable, and one that is completely different yet strangely familiar. In the narrative, both *Ecotopia* and the remaining United States are populated by relatable characters who are navigating similar problems. The juxtaposition of both societies—dystopian US and utopian *Ecotopia*—poses the question to the viewer: which future would you choose? The juxtaposition could act as a way of encouraging the viewers to put themselves in the shoes of the characters. In order for this to work, both settings need to be located in our near future. If the worlds seem to be

in the distant future, it can be easy for viewers to dismiss them as fantasy or science fiction. The key to using the juxtaposition as a narrative device to enhance empathy is to make the two worlds relatable enough that the viewer will necessarily imagine themselves living in either of them.

In addition, the two opposing settings allow each set of characters to articulate their hopes and fears about their futures in a way that could mirror our own hopes and fears. The settings provide a sounding board for our own worries and for our collective grief about the irrevocable changes we have already made to our planet.

ASM & CA: Another contemporary author who writes intensively about our “de-industrial” future, John Michael Greer, was also inspired by *Ecotopia* to imagine his own version of a sustainable breakaway republic in a novel titled *Retrotopia* (2016). In it, Greer also sets his world several decades in the future and uses the device of a skeptical visitor from the outside who learns about this low-tech and deindustrialized (to different degrees) future world. As a Callenbach adapter and fellow writer, what are your thoughts about *Retrotopia*?

EW: Greer really uses the technique of the skeptical visitor to good effect. The main character’s interaction with the deindustrialized region of a splintered United States has us questioning even our simple day-to-day transactions, like in the scene where he purchases shoes that aren’t mass produced. This questioning of the mundane is a strength of speculative utopias as a genre, and of Greer’s and Callenbach’s in particular. It’s almost as if you can get the reader to question their shoes—it’s a gateway to questioning the economy, politics, progress.

Another aspect of Greer’s work that many readers must connect to is the pure pleasure of doing things the “old-fashioned” way. Carr, the journalist who visits the breakaway republic, continually finds himself surprised by how enjoyable doing things by hand can be. For example, when he cannot access the news on their equivalent of the internet, Carr has to purchase a newspaper. Once having bought it, he finds himself spending an enjoyable moment at a café with a coffee, reading the news. Greer’s description of this experience is both familiar and uncommon to today’s reader. It almost provokes a longing for the way things used to be, at least for those who experienced them that way to begin with. This longing is a sentiment that many people have felt themselves, and in particular during the first Covid lockdown in 2020. Suddenly, we found ourselves with an abundance of time, and many people were able to reconnect with simpler pleasures such as making bread by hand or gardening. The slower pace had a heavy psychological toll for many, but many others remarked on how wonderful it felt to not have to rush around so much.

We tend to believe that when technology replaces something, that “something” must be obsolete—but Greer’s work has us reexamining that assumption. We, along with Carr, are asked to reassess how we define an assumed shared value such as efficiency. A question that is often posed in *Retrotopia* is by what output do you measure efficiency? Throughout the story, the reader is not only told the answer to this question, but more powerfully, Greer shows them through Carr’s thorough exploration of the new society. This is what I find so powerful about storytelling and in particular about utopian narratives. The reader is given access to another way of living, and this access includes not only details of the society but also the vision of what those details look like in the actions and interactions of the characters.

ASM & CA: Temporality is crucial in the design and manufacturing of a TV series. Do you think the specific vehicle of a series—as opposed to a one-shot film—makes it possible for viewers to be shown different aspects of ecological transition and slow-moving cultural and societal change, aspects that would be more difficult or even impossible to make visible through a movie? To put it differently, what aspects linked to the passage of narrative time led you to the intuition that making Callenbach’s *Ecotopia* into a series (with all the specific constraints involved) would be more adequate than trying to make it into a feature film?

EW: To me, TV series have a bigger impact than movies. When a TV series is popular, we wait for new episodes and new seasons to come out, we speculate about what will happen next. If released weekly, the series can be in our minds and conversations for months or even years. When I was working on my thesis, *Game of Thrones* was just about to enter the highly anticipated (and ultimately disappointing) final season. Everyone was talking about it, and every week after the newest episode was released, people were analyzing, debating and critiquing the episode. Even in Switzerland, a country which doesn’t cherish chit-chat, *Game of Thrones* was one of the most widely accepted and eagerly participated-in topics for small talk. I know if that was the case here, then it was doubly or triply the case in the much chattier United States. I thought, aside from sports, TV series are what people talk about around the watercooler. If that’s the case, why not get them talking about the environment and about climate action as easily and frequently through having these themes central to a series like *Ecotopia*?

If a TV series is successful, its characters can develop over time. Different plotlines and problems can be introduced and explored—giving series a responsiveness and adaptability that films lack. Since the pandemic, we saw shows that have included storylines about Covid-19 and how it affected lives. Many other series have incorporated current events into their

plots and either reflected the struggles the viewers themselves were going through or imagined different ways of living through the same experience. Series do not only respond to the moment; they can also have an effect on the moment. HBO's recent critical and popular success *Euphoria* has started just as many conversations about mental health and teen drug use as it has influenced fashion and makeup trends.

I think series can have a wider cultural impact than movies. A successful series on an accessible platform can reach a large and diverse range of demographics. There are many examples we could highlight, such as *Seinfeld*, *Friends*, or *The Office*. These shows are a touchstone for their generation, and they remain as part of our shared references.

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Elizabeth Watson (b. 1992) is a writer and high school English teacher. Born and raised in Texas, she holds a BA in psychology from Boston University and an MA in English from the University of Lausanne. She is interested in the power of storytelling to affect environmental change and to reconnect people to nature. Having discovered Ernest Callenbach's novel *Ecotopia* (1975) while studying at the University of Lausanne, she began adapting it for screen as part of her Master's thesis, which also examined the psychological mechanisms linked to climate change denial and fatalism. Since graduating, Watson has continued to work on the project and has written more episodes for the first season. As a child of the 1980s, she realized that in the twenty-first century a successful television series could reach a much larger audience than a novel, and that a fully fleshed-out and vividly imagined portrait of a sustainable near-future world could help people act more effectively towards creating such a world.

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Appositions: The Future in Solarpunk and Post-Apocalyptic Fiction

ABSTRACT

The essay discusses images of the future in solarpunk and post-apocalyptic fiction, focusing on their distinct approach to the narratives of progress, science, and individualism. The dystopian perspective of post-apocalyptic fiction is juxtaposed with the hopeful stance of solarpunk stories in order to outline the attempts to move beyond environmental pessimism and to imagine a liveable future. A reading of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), Erik M. Conway and Naomi Oreskes's *The Collapse of Western Civilization* (2014), and Omar El Akkad's *American War* (2017) provides an overview of early 21st-century dystopian motifs and visions, while the ideas and development of solarpunk fiction are discussed on the basis of three anthologies of short stories: *Sunvault: Stories of Solarpunk and Ecospeculation* (2017), *Glass and Gardens: Solarpunk Summers* (2018), and *Multispecies Cities: Solarpunk Urban Futures* (2021). The aim of the essay is to argue that apocalyptic and solarpunk fiction stand in a relationship of apposition to one another, representing dominant and emergent structures of feeling.

Keywords: solarpunk, post-apocalyptic fiction, future, dystopia, Anthropocene.

“[T]o imagine other forms of human existence is exactly the challenge that is posed by the climate crisis: for if there is any one thing that global warming has made perfectly clear it is that to think about the world only as it is amounts to a formula for collective suicide. We need, rather, to envision what it might be.”
(Ghosh 128)

In numerous critical accounts, the Anthropocene has been described as a period of disturbed and disturbing time when the conventional links between the past, the present, and the future have been thoroughly unsettled. Donna Haraway begins her *Staying with the Trouble* with the declaration that “all of us on Terra” live in mixed-up, “troubling and turbid times” (1); Dipesh Chakrabarty claims that the current crisis produces “a sense of the present that disconnects the future from the past by putting such a future beyond the grasp of historical sensibility” (197); and Amitav Ghosh states that the Anthropocene is marked by the reversal of the socio-temporal order of modernity, when “those at the margins are now the first to experience the future that awaits all of us” (62). Marked by the collapse of the hierarchies and concepts central to the modern project, such as the belief in science, progress, and the primacy of the individual, the Anthropocene is predominantly the time of climate crisis, which is, as Ghosh argues, “also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination” (9), manifested by the inability to imagine a non-dystopian future.

The challenge that climate crisis poses to the imagination is largely due to the fact that as a hyperobject, climate is “so vast in both temporal and spatial terms” (Morton, *Being* 125) and “massively distributed in time and space relative to humans” (Morton, *Hyperobjects* 1) that it cannot be fully grasped or apprehended. Similarly, the effects of climate change are so diverse and far into the future that they are hard to imagine, especially when they are presented through statistical data and scientific accounts: rendered in numbers, “climate change is real but doesn’t ‘feel real’ to a public whose senses are dulled by psychic numbing and who are prey to feelings of inefficacy” (Slovic 117). In the postscript to their book on *Information, Emotion, and Meaning in a World of Data*, Scott Slovic and Paul Slovic argue that in order to “trigger in audiences the impulse to act individually or collectively,” abstract information about climate change must be transformed “into viscerally, experientially meaningful discourse” by writers and artists who become “sensory translators” (219). Accordingly, how climate change is translated into fiction is important as it not only shapes the readers’ understanding of the present crisis but also determines their response to it, working to instigate change or to justify lack of action—as Bill McKibben states, global warming is “essentially a literary

problem” of finding the language capable of grasping and communicating what is happening (156).

This essay explores two literary attempts at communicating climate change, solarpunk and post-apocalyptic fiction, to discuss the images of the future they offer and their approach to the narratives of progress, science, and individualism. While not all post-apocalyptic stories are dystopian and not all solarpunk works are progressively utopian, I view the focus on the climate crisis and the lack of an image of a livable future in post-apocalyptic texts as reinforcing a sense of powerlessness in the audience, and approach solarpunk fiction as offering a more optimistic but realizable vision of the future. In other words, if post-apocalyptic fiction invites the readers “to think about the world only as it is,” solarpunk asks them “to envision what [the world] might be” (Ghosh 128), without, however, negating the reality of the present crisis. In what follows, I offer an overview of early 21st-century dystopian motifs by referring to some of the best known and most frequently discussed post-apocalyptic texts: Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006), Erik M. Conway and Naomi Oreskes’s *The Collapse of Western Civilization* (2014), and Omar El Akkad’s *American War* (2017). To illustrate the main features of the developing genre of solarpunk, I turn to selected texts from three anthologies: *Sunvault: Stories of Solarpunk and Ecospeculation* (2017), allegedly the first Anglophone collection of solarpunk short fiction, art, and poetry; *Glass and Gardens: Solarpunk Summers* (2018), an early self-conscious exploration of what “solarpunk” can mean against the tropes associated with dystopian fiction; and *Multispecies Cities: Solarpunk Urban Futures* (2021), a recent and theoretically informed example of the genre. By juxtaposing post-apocalyptic and solarpunk fiction I wish to describe the dominant ways of looking at climate change and argue for the emergence of a new structure of feeling reflected in stories that value empathy, community, social justice, and action over a sense of loss and grief for a dying planet.

The growing knowledge about climate change and the experience of its effects in recent decades have been accompanied by a rising number of texts offering dystopian visions of the collapse of the modern way of life. In story after story, global warming has been depicted as leading to the end of the world as we know it, with the climate apocalypse resulting in the breakdown of the institutions that hold the modern society together: the government, the police, medical care, economy, and science. The post-apocalyptic world is almost invariably imagined as a wasteland, where the abiding rules are the survival of the fittest and might is right, and where the existing social systems are replaced by pre-modern tribal structures, whose primitivism is manifested through cannibalism or other forms of radical violence. Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006) provides one of the best-known examples of such a vision of a dying civilization. The novel presents the story of

a father and his son journeying by foot to the sea in search of rescue, across a land devastated by an unidentified climate catastrophe. On their way, they pass remnants of the bygone world: abandoned cars and houses, covered with ash and littered with corpses; a deserted city with “[t]he mummied dead everywhere” (23); and farmhouses in a land “gullied and eroded and barren,” full of “bones of dead creatures sprawled in the washes” (189). This is a slowly disintegrating world, whose inhabitants are not survivors but the walking dead: as the protagonist’s wife states before she commits suicide, “We’re not survivors. We’re the walking dead in a horror film” (57). The images of decay and death, and the stories of cannibalism and human cruelty, vividly demonstrate the collapse of Western civilization, and although the novel ends with the boy continuing the journey after his father’s death, an overall sense of powerlessness and mourning predominates, throwing the possibility of a new beginning into doubt.

A similar image of a dying world appears in Omar El Akkad’s *American War* (2017), which points also to the circularity of historical processes by highlighting the repetition of apocalyptic events. The title uses the reference to the American Civil War (1861–65) over slavery to describe the Second American Civil War (2074–95) fought between the Union and the secessionist states, over the use of fossil fuels. The war breaks out because of Southern resistance to the Sustainable Future Act, which prohibits the use of fossil fuels in the United States in response to severe climate effects (23). As the narrator-historian states in the prologue to the novel, this is not a story about war but about ruin (6), documenting the damage to the land and the people, including forced migrations, refugee camps, and deaths that result from the business-as-usual attitude to ecological disaster. The novel depicts the refusal to change as the obstacle which makes it impossible to move forward and produces a sense of overwhelming powerlessness which prevents any progressive action. This sense of resignation is described in the book as a characteristic feature of the South, the region where “there is no future, only three kinds of past—the distant past of heritage, the near past of experience, and the past-in-waiting” (316), but it also illustrates the overall melancholia of contemporary post-apocalyptic fiction, whose focus on the present leaves hardly any space for imaging the future.

James Berger argues that apocalypse as revelation works to “clarify and illuminate the true nature of what has been brought to an end” (5). By depicting the catastrophic event, post-apocalyptic literature aims to take readers beyond their present, and, by doing so, help them to make sense of their world and time: “We project ourselves . . . past the End, so as to see the structure whole, a thing we cannot do from our spot of time in the middle” (Kermode 8). Post-apocalyptic fiction can have a didactic and/or reformatory effect as the images of human-made apocalypse may

make readers attend to and deal with the problems in their immediate environments, so that, as Claire Colebrook convincingly argues, “[a] new humanity [may be] constituted by the threat of its disappearance” (86).¹ This is the explicit aim of *The Collapse of Western Civilization: A View from the Future* (2014) by Erik M. Conway and Naomi Oreskes, who in the book “imagine a future historian looking back on a past that is our present and (possible) future” in order “to understand the present” and to answer the question “how we—the children of the Enlightenment—failed to act on robust information about climate change and knowledge of the damaging events that were about to unfold” (ix). Conway and Oreskes present the climate crisis from the perspective of a historian living in the 24th century, to draw attention to such 21st-century problems as “the frenzy of fossil fuels” (11) and to castigate “positivism and market fundamentalism” (35). Yet, although the book successfully explains the problems of our present, it fails to present an image of the future that might inspire change (Heise) and provide the basis for the development of a new humanity.²

The post-apocalyptic texts discussed above present the world as it is rather than as what it might be, even when their focus is the future. As Ursula Heise argues, referring to *The Road* and *The Collapse of Western Civilization*, among others, the preoccupation with uncovering the problems of the present and the failure to outline “a persuasive alternative” deprive contemporary dystopias of political power and take away their potential to unsettle the status quo. Heise points also to the popularity of the genre as responsible for weakening its critical impact through habituating the readers to its defamiliarizing effects: constructed on the basis of the same formula, the texts offer visions of apocalypse known from earlier science-fiction and work “to reconfirm well-established views of the present” instead of questioning them. Accordingly, rather than empowering them to make necessary changes, such books may numb the readers, creating a feeling of hopelessness, inefficacy, and apathy.

In contrast to these dystopias, solarpunk fiction tends to focus on the future, offering more optimistic scenarios of scientific and social progress. Made famous by a Tumblr community around 2014, solarpunk is “a movement in speculative fiction, art, fashion and activism that seeks to answer and embody the question ‘what does a sustainable civilization look like, and how can we get there?’” (Solarpunk Community).³ Solarpunk

¹ I have presented (and endorsed) this perspective on the function of post-apocalyptic fiction in “The End of the World and After” (2021).

² Ursula Heise writes that the book simply reinforces “present-day perspectives.”

³ One should also add companies to the list of areas affected by the movement; see Nicola K. Smith’s “What Is Solarpunk and Can It Help Save the Planet?” for a description of the impact of solarpunk on the technology industry.

combines environmental sustainability with social justice, with “solar” referring to new environment-friendly technologies, as well as “the idea of brightness and hope” (Ulibarri, Preface 1) and “punk” pointing to the importance of resistance, enthusiasm, and the desire for radical societal change that would enable a move toward societies that are anti-capitalist and de-urbanized, post-scarcity and post-hierarchy, based on compassion and acceptance (Solarpunk Community). Solarpunk is defined in opposition to cyberpunk and steampunk, which are linked with nihilism and “potentially quasi-reactionary tendencies” respectively,⁴ and bases its futurism on “ingenuity, generativity, independence, and community” (Flynn). Resistance and inventiveness play a key role in the movement: as Jennifer Hamilton claims, “[t]o be solarpunk . . . is to mount a resistance to the *mainstream* present by imagining an alternative future,” including the resistance to the dystopian mood of mainstream climate fiction. Accordingly, the Solarpunk Community begins its 2019 manifesto with the declaration that “[w]e are solarpunks because optimism has been taken away from us and we are trying to take it back,” and because “the only other options are denial or despair”; science fiction is enlisted in this rebellion against the dominant pacifying pessimism as “a form of activism” which helps present a future that is not merely alternative but primarily possible (Solarpunk Community).

In line with the declarations in *Solarpunk Manifesto*, solarpunk fiction is inclusive and activist, trying to reach out to readers and inspire them “to seek out solutions for social and environmental problems in their communities” (Wagner and Wieland 9) and on their own. The literary roots of solarpunk can be traced back to the second half of the 20th century and novels by Ursula K. Le Guin, Ernest Callenbach, Kim Stanley Robinson, Frank Herbert (Ulibarri, Preface 1; Dincher 8), and Octavia Butler, but the first anthologies that explicitly identified themselves as solarpunk appeared in the 2010s: *Solarpunk: Ecological and Fantastical Stories in a Sustainable World* (2018), presenting stories that were originally published in Brazil in 2012; *Sunvault: Stories of Solarpunk and Ecospeculation* (2017); and *Glass and Gardens: Solarpunk Summers* (2018). In an effort to decolonize literary production, the collections offer stories by writers from various parts of the world, often not very well-known or not professional, many describing themselves as activists engaged with environmental and social justice issues. The stories, poems, and art included in *Sunvault*, for

⁴ In contrast to steampunk and cyberpunk, solarpunk presents environment-friendly technologies that help avoid the damage associated with industrial modernity and stresses the importance of communal trust and a shared system of values, beliefs, and principles as the basis for building sustainable communities.

example, have been selected from two hundred submissions from across the world; the most recent anthology, *Multispecies Cities: Solarpunk Urban Futures* (2021), presents stories from the Asia-Pacific, which the editors targeted because the region's exposure to climate change and its history of past colonialism make it "fertile ground for asking deep questions about what our urban future will look like, how and where we will be living and whose company we will be keeping" (Rupprecht et al., Introduction 2). In various ways, solarpunk stories stand in opposition to dystopian and post-apocalyptic climate fiction, rejecting the focus on individual achievement, emphasizing the importance of hope and interaction with communities and the environment "rather than merely survival in a decaying world" (Wagner and Wieland 9), as well as focusing on the representation of "adaptation and compromise rather than destruction and conquest," and on empathy and cooperation rather than greed and competition (Ulibarri, Introduction 8).

The themes and plotlines of the solarpunk stories in the anthologies listed above coalesce around the significance of community, respect for difference, cultivation of heterogeneity, social justice, and the use of science for sustainable development. Many of these ideas can be traced back to Ernest Callenbach's *Ecotopia* (1975), particularly the emphasis on degrowth to achieve sustainability and the belief that resistance to a corrupt government may be successful.⁵ In Callenbach's book, Northern California, Oregon, and Washington break away from the United States to create Ecotopia, a country based on "stable-state" ecological systems that follows "cooperation- and biology-oriented policies" (87). The ultimate goal of Ecotopians is to live in balance with nature as part of the "web of living organisms" so as to ensure future survival (50). This future-oriented society follows the principles of equality, tolerance, and cooperation; its political system is based on transparency and citizens' participation; and important decisions are reached collectively, through a practice of "cooperative criticism" (48). *Ecotopia Emerging*, the 1981 prequel to *Ecotopia* that presents the events prior to the secession, illustrates the importance of collectives and grassroots activism by describing the beginnings of the Survivalist Party in a small group of ecological enthusiasts whose actions eventually lead to the creation of a new nation that puts into practice their ideals of sustainability. Importantly, these acts of civil disobedience, including the secession, are driven by the belief that a government should embody the ideals of the people and that the failure to

⁵ *Ecotopia* has been described as "the bible for ecological sustainability" and has been credited with inspiring the creation of the Green party in Germany and similar movements in other countries (see Margolin 7).

do that justifies rebellion: as they declare in their secession act, “A suicidal national government, a government that seems bent on devouring its people rather than nurturing them, forfeits our allegiance” (397). Equally importantly, what makes the creation of the new nation possible is the discovery of how to generate electricity from solar energy. The faith in the possibility to change political systems through collective action and the conviction that science can help build a sustainable society are central to solarpunk narratives, visible in their focus on the transformative potential of communities.

The shift of emphasis from individual to collective achievement is evident in T. X. Watson’s “The Boston Hearth Project,” which describes a successful rebellion in the name of the socially disadvantaged. Framed as a submission for an essay competition on “When have you worked well as part of a team?”, the text describes the takeover of the Hale Center, a smart building and first-class hotel for business people and politicians. The story takes place in early-21st-century Boston, where the rate of death of homeless people has been increasing because of erratic weather patterns caused by climate change and the closure of homeless facilities by the city authorities. To redress the negligence, a group of young activists decides to take control over the Hale Center and repurpose it into a homeless shelter. The takeover is orchestrated by Andie Freeman, the narrator of the story and a computer expert, and Juniper Berg, an “urban explorer” (17) who breaks into the building but whose actions are monitored and controlled from a distance by Andie working from zir⁶ wheelchair. This guerilla action involves no violence as the activists use the building’s advanced technology to disarm the police by raising the temperature high enough to make the officers take off their uniforms and abandon weapons. Andie and zir friends are gradually joined by a growing number of volunteers from the city and occupy the building for over a month until it is officially recognized as The Boston Hearth Homeless Shelter. Following their actions, the authorities of New York and Portland give building projects to activists out of the fear of hostile takeovers, thereby demonstrating that social inequalities can be redressed by collective action.

While “The Boston Hearth Project” describes communal resistance to social injustice exacerbated by climate change, “Midsummer Night’s Heist” depicts collective actions against another major problem of the early 21st century, namely forced migration and the rise of nationalistic, neo-fascist

⁶ The use of gender-neutral pronouns—such as “zir” instead of “him” or “her”—is common in solarpunk fiction and can be seen as fulfilling the claim that “solarpunk culture includes all cultures religions, abilities, sexes, genders and sexual identities” (Solarpunk Community).

movements. The story takes place in Milan, on the night before a far-right rally against the threat of “ethnic substitution” (118). The protagonists are members of *Commando Jugendstil*, “a gang of dreamers” (113) made of people of various ethnicities, abilities, and genders, who want to “empower more young folks like them and mobilize local communities for ever larger and more impactful actions” (113). In cooperation with other antiracist and antifascist groups, they organize a number of happenings in the whole city and redesign the square where the rally is to take place into a garden decorated with stained glass panels depicting events from the past to remind the inhabitants of the city’s multi-ethnic history. The banner that they hang from the Mayor’s balcony, with the message that “Milan Welcomes Everybody,” goes viral, mobilizing people all over the world. Importantly, the story is authored by *Commando Jugendstil*, a real-life collective of Italian solarpunk creators, and by *Tales from the EV Studio*, a group of emigrant Italian writers “who specialise in historical fantasy, archaneapunk and scriptwriting for comics” (132–33). Accordingly, “*Midsummer Night’s Heist*” stresses the role of both fictional and real collectives, as well as illustrates the activist and inclusive character of solarpunk communities.

Unlike dystopian climate fiction, in which science is usually put into the service of consumer capitalism, solarpunk stories present scientific discoveries as a necessary path into a sustainable future. The protagonists of “*The Boston Hearth Project*” are digital activists and computer experts and the team in “*Midsummer Night’s Heist*” includes a chemist, an engineer, a botanist, and a structural biologist. In solarpunk fiction, however, science and technological progress are presented as not only fostering activism, but also significantly extending human capabilities to make it possible to live on a damaged planet. “*Solar Child*” by Camille Meyers depicts the hot and toxic earth of the future, torn by the fight between the Revelationers, religious fanatics who see spreading desertification, coastal flooding, and rising infertility as God’s punishment to be patiently endured, and scientists who believe that climate change should be combated and that humanity must evolve through genetic modification in order to accommodate to the changed world. The protagonist of the story, Jamie, is a genetic engineer responsible for creating solarsaurus, providing living, solar-powered transportation, and a co-creator of Ella, the first photosapien. The story’s focus on the relationship between Jamie and Ella, whom she treats like a daughter, stresses the fact that assisted evolution requires knowledge and also “takes love” (193), and by depicting Jamie’s refusal to abandon Ella, rewrites the dominant narrative of rejecting one’s creation famously depicted and critiqued in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*.

Solarpunk fiction seems to adopt an overall optimistic, at times even techno-optimistic tone, yet this is balanced by stories that emphasize the

extent of the damage caused by anthropogenic climate change and present technological progress as restricted both by the limits of human ingenuity and by ethical rules. If “Solar Child” points to the ethical side of the relation between scientists and their creations, D. K. Mok’s “The Birdsong Fossil” presents the question of human responsibility for species extinction. The story is narrated by Doctor Yuzuki Alvarez, a climate-change refugee and an Ethnographic Bio-Roboticist who wants to replicate animal culture in robots—to create not a robot that looks like a bird but a bird that has the body of a robot (297). The world depicted in the story is plagued by catastrophic climate change, spreading pandemics, and mass extinctions, yet it is also marked by backlash against science and the closing down of research centres. After the institute where he works loses funding, Yuzuki secretly continues his research until a nuclear war breaks out that destroys the whole region. Years after the war, with the world slowly being rebuilt through small communities, his work is continued by other researchers who manage to bring back the robot animals that have been lost. Although the story finishes with a promise of rejuvenation, it also includes the recognition that “[t]he world would continue to change, and we would have to change with it. Species would come and go, and perhaps come again” (295). Rather than romanticizing the possibility of resurrection and the human power of creation, the ending points to the need to accept contingency and vulnerability, and to come to terms with the fact that humans are also a species that can come and go.

The belief in the power of science and the human ability to shape the world places solarpunk close to the concept of “the good Anthropocene,” as presented by Erle Ellis in “The Planet of no Return” (2012) and elaborated in *An Ecomodernist Manifesto* (2015). Arguing against the idea that there exist planetary boundaries that constrain human development, Ellis claims that the Anthropocene should not be seen “as a crisis, but as the beginning of a new geological epoch ripe with human-directed opportunity.” Accordingly, ecomodernists describe the good Anthropocene as a chance for engineering and transforming the planet in a process of modernization that would result in “radical decoupling of humans from nature” and lead “human societies toward vastly improved material well-being, public health, resource productivity, economic integration, shared infrastructure, and personal freedom” (Asafu-Adjaye et al. 24, 28). While they affirm that humanity must reduce its impact on the environment, ecomodernists reject the claim that humans should live in balance with nature to avoid economic and ecological collapse, thereby negating the reality of climate change and refusing to accept responsibility for its effects.

Unlike *The Ecomodernist Manifesto*, solarpunk fiction presents human societies and nature as interdependent and in need of harmony;

as the editors of the latest solarpunk anthology argue, “we can only truly understand the world if we look at the many ways humans and other life forms are entangled, in a way that cannot be easily separated” (Rupprecht et al., Introduction 3). If ecomodernists stress resilience, arguing for Earth’s ability to resist damage and recover swiftly, solarpunk texts point to the need to care for the planet through devising sustainable futures. Outlining the goals and strategies of solarpunk fiction, the editors of *Multispecies Cities* emphasize the importance of acknowledging close connections “with our more-than-human kin” (9) in order to “learn to negotiate, coexist, and flourish together” (4). As they claim, to adequately represent such multispecies entanglements and to narrate more-than-human tales, the old conventions of “progress-based narratives, stories of the individual, the lone hero, people against people” (7) have to be thoroughly revised. Accordingly, the texts in the collection focus on multiple encounters between humans and other species and attempt to narrate them from perspectives other than human, so as to bring forward the realization that people are not a separate species and that the stories of animals are just like the human ones.

Solarpunk claims to be “at once a vision of the future, a thoughtful provocation, a way of living and a set of achievable proposals to get there” (Solarpunk Community). This goal of combining ideas with practice is realized in *Multispecies Cities*, which is both a collection of stories and a research project supported by the Research Institute for Humanity and Nature, established in 2001 by the Government of Japan to promote “integrated cooperative research toward the solution of global environmental problems” and to create the field of global environmental studies (Research Institute). A part of the project is a survey that readers are invited to take before and after reading the book that includes such questions as whether they consider human and non-human life interdependent, whether they believe that climate change is primarily a social issue, and whether stories can change their beliefs and values and inspire them to action. By asking readers to help “understand how stories might contribute to building better futures for humans and nature alike” (Rupprecht et al., *Multispecies Cities* 325), the survey points to the importance of solarpunk writers as builders of a better future (Rupprecht et al., Introduction 10), whose task is to provoke their readers to action by helping them understand and feel climate change.

Ursula Heise finishes her critique of contemporary dystopian fiction with a call for new utopian visions that would resist pervasive social pessimism. In a similar manner, focusing on the problems with telling pessimistic stories about climate change, George Marshall ends his book on ignoring the climate crisis with the statement that we need

“narratives of cooperation” in which aggression, competition, blame, and denial are replaced by acceptance, compassion, and empathy (234–38). Solarpunk may be an answer to these requests since it “can be utopian, just optimistic, or concerned with the struggles *en route* to a better world, but never dystopian” (Solarpunk Community), although, as Andrew Dincher warns, it is still an evolving genre, whose development and influence cannot be fully predicted (8). Post-apocalyptic fiction and solarpunk start from the recognition that “[w]e are living in a world that is dying” (Hickel 17), but while the former dwells on the loss of the modern world and focuses on the traumatic and traumatizing present, the latter attempts to move beyond that loss, into a hopeful and inclusive future and a new modernity of multispecies kinship. Both are responses to the hyperobject of climate change, each offering a perspective on a different “slice of it,” but neither presenting it in its totality or telling the whole story. Accordingly, instead of opposing the pessimism of post-apocalyptic fiction to the hopefulness of solarpunk stories, it might be more productive to place them side by side, as dominant and emergent structures of feeling that stand in a relation of apposition,⁷ where they modify and build on each other, depositing successive layers of meaning and pointing to different futures, making it possible to both stay close to and move beyond our trouble.

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⁷ I build here on the definition of apposition in *The Collins English Dictionary* as: 1. a putting into juxtaposition, 2. a grammatical construction in which a word is placed after another to modify its meaning, 3. *biology* growth in the thickness of a cell wall by the deposition of successive layers of material.

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Affective Realities and Conceptual Contradictions of Patricia Piccinini's Art: Ecofeminist and Disability Studies Perspectives

ABSTRACT

The recent exhibition of Patricia Piccinini's art called *That's Us* (Toruń, CSW) largely represents the Australian artist's visions and fascinations known from earlier exhibitions. Questioning and erasing the borders between species, the affective realities of Piccinini's art are bound to the concepts of care, empathy and fragility, which refigure what is human and non-human and the relations between them by expanding the notion of mothering and fostering to include interspecies relations. Beginning with a discussion of the uncanny, abjection and monstrosity, this article aims to examine the complicated implications of interpreting Piccinini's art within the conceptual framework of ecofeminism, as well as in the context of disability aesthetics. In her explorations of different and alternative corporealities, Piccinini, among many other things, asks questions about ideologies of normativity and able-bodiedness, suggesting the possibility of going beyond them.

Keywords: Patricia Piccinini, ecofeminism, disability aesthetics, the uncanny.

INTRODUCTION

Patricia Piccinini is arguably one of the most controversial and thought-provoking artists today, working in a variety of materials and media. For almost two decades in her hyper- and surrealist sculptures and installations, the Australian artist has addressed many important problems centred around existential questions of “being and belonging” and exploring the narrative “realm where science fiction, environmentalism and feminism intersect” (Antonsen 112). In the 2012 exhibition *Fairy Tales, Monsters and the Genetic Imagination* organized in Frist Art Museum (Nashville, then Manitoba and Calgary), Piccinini’s work *The Long Awaited* symptomatically expressed contemporary art’s engagement with a new type of scientific imagination. Vacillating between horror and wonder—what the curator of the exhibition, Mark Scala, described as “repulsion and fascination” (Frist Art Museum)—the exhibition addressed the connections between humans, nature and science by exploring both the fears and hopes that people have about the future (Frist Art Museum). The recent exhibition of Piccinini’s art called *That’s Us* (Centre for Contemporary Art in Toruń, Poland, 29 October 2021–10 April 2022) presents the artist’s visions and fascinations known from her earlier exhibitions. Its very title announces a presence, recognition and proclamation of existence combined with self-awareness and pride. The familiarity it expresses in the first person pronoun represents the general approach Piccinini holds to her artistic objects/subjects—close, affectionate and responsive. *That’s Us* can also be interpreted as an announcement of an arrival of a guest that is both expected and familiar and strange and surprising—it demands a reaction, recognition and welcome. As such, from the very beginning, Piccinini’s art expects from its viewers participation, affective engagement and a responsibility for the kind of encounter one engages in. This affective immediacy is confronted with the complex conceptual and theoretical reflection contained in Piccinini’s sculptures and installations. As the artist proclaims: “My real interest is how the conceptual or ethical issues are transformed by emotional realities. I think that all of my work has that emotional dimension that shifts the apparent rational implications” (Interview by Laura Orgaz). While Piccinini’s art might be disturbing to some viewers because of its monstrous, uncanny and hyperrealistic representations, it also relies for its effect on the response to vulnerability, intimacy and affection by which affirmative and utopian extensions of inclusiveness are realized.

My aim in this article is to trace the significance of the juxtaposition of the contradictory affective realities¹ of Piccinini’s art and the conceptual

¹ In my discussion I rephrase Piccinini’s “emotional realities” to “affective realities” to emphasize the importance of affective response to the reality and materiality of bodies in disability art (as discussed by Siebers) and negotiating often contradictory conceptual

and theoretical frameworks to which it refers or which it constructs. Questioning and erasing the borders between species, Piccinini's artistic sensibilities are bound to the concepts of care, empathy and fragility, which refigure the notions of the human and the non-human and the relations between them by expanding the notion of mothering and fostering to include interspecies relations. Beginning with a discussion of the uncanny, abjection and monstrosity, in what follows, I will examine the complicated implications of interpreting Piccinini's art² within the conceptual framework of ecofeminism, as well as in the context of disability aesthetics. In her explorations of different and alternative corporealities, Piccinini, among many other things, asks questions about ideologies of normativity and able-bodiedness, suggesting a possibility of going beyond them, but remaining fully aware of the complexities and ambivalences of such transgressions.

MONSTROSITY AND THE UNCANNY FAMILIARITY

Patricia Piccinini's art is a futuristic project advocating the inclusion of otherness through maternal acceptance and affection—one that can be conceived of but is as such yet impossible. The simultaneous presence and impossibility of the project results from two contrastive drives that Piccinini's art evokes: one of intimacy and affection, and the other of estrangement and fear. They reflect to some extent what Piccinini calls a fascination with “the unseen or unwanted sides of anatomy” and inspiration drawn from the pathology museums, “where [she] could see the stuff that was so often hidden, the strange [sic] or different or dangerous,” which still “underlie[s]” her work today (Interview by Jane Messenger). Looking at Piccinini's creatures through the prism of freak shows or “pickled punks” exhibitions raises multiple ethical questions and mixed affective reactions. What certainly redefines the echoes of objectifying and unethical displays³ of non-standard anatomies is that Piccinini's figures are presented in full

interpretations across the divide between materialist and idealist aesthetics (Siebers, “The Art of Disability”).

² I will focus mostly on the exhibits presented in *That's Us* exhibition in Toruń, but I will also make references to works which were not shown there, such as *The Long Awaited* or *Bottom Feeder* and *Doubting Thomas*.

³ Freak shows seem to combine objectifying gaze with an interested stare, which, according to Garland-Thomson, “is an interrogative gesture that asks what's going on and demands the story” (*Staring* 3). The concept of staring is applied to Piccinini's art in Sara E. S. Orning's chapter on “Staging Humanimality” (98–99), yet some of Garland-Thomson's concepts seem to be only indirectly applicable to the staring dynamics involving Piccinini's hybrid creatures.

light, not in secret and secretive spaces; they are imagined as and presented as alive; they are not real and are produced mostly of artificial materials. Despite these important differences, the cultural memory of freak show exhibits and anatomy museums, combined with hyperrealism and the use of real human and animal hair and, sporadically, skin, produces some mixed responses involving fear and disgust. In psychoanalytic terms, as Rachel Adams argues, “encountering freaks, we contemplate the potential dissolution of our own corporeal and psychic boundaries, the terror and excitement of monstrous fusion with the surrounding world” (7).⁴ The refusal to acknowledge the established differences which freaks represent is, according to Adams, paired with a sense of “a horrifying loss” (7), which, however, might “inspire a more capacious understanding of the human” (7). In endowing the creatures with subjectivities and presenting them in affectionate and reciprocal relationships with others, the freak show legacy in Piccinini’s art also involves an affirmation of what is different, marginal and thus rebellious (cf. Adams 139–41).

Fear as one of the possible reactions to Piccinini’s art objects/subjects could be associated with the emotional response to irregularity and ambiguity described by Georges Canguilhem in his “Monstrosity and the Monstrous”: “It takes only a dashing of that trust, a morphological disparity, an appearance of species ambiguity for a radical fear to seize hold of us” (187). This “fear, and even panic terror,” as Canguilhem argues, is mixed with “curiosity or even fascination” (188). The feeling is partly interiorized and thus perceived as a threat from within (which Canguilhem contrasts with death):

Death is the permanent and unconditional threat of the organism’s decomposition; it is the limitation from outside, the negation of the living by the non-living. But monstrosity is the accidental and conditional threat of incompleteness or distortion in the formation of form; it is the limitation from inside, the negation of the living by the non-viable. (Canguilhem 188)

Part of the reaction to Piccinini’s art arises from the fear not so much *of* but *for* the creatures it represents, for their ability to survive and find nurture in another being. This double fear seems to rest upon a wish to withdraw because of the repulsion we might feel and a wish to help and care because of the creature’s incompleteness and thus apparent helplessness—a help-needing appearance. This aspect—as well as the death and existential anxiety associated with disabled bodies—will be discussed later on in relation to disability studies and aesthetics.

⁴ This aspect is closely related to existential anxiety mentioned later in the article in the context of critical disability studies.

The other aspect of the creatures' monstrosity is the uncanny combination of the strange and the familiar. The uncanny is evoked in Piccinini's art on several levels: firstly in the ambiguity and uncertainty as to the status of the presented beings. The creatures—which is the term Piccinini prefers, along with beings, to hybrids, chimeras or mutants which suggest something derogatory or incomplete (Interview by Rosi Braidotti)—possess visibly anthropomorphic features in their appearance or they are arranged in recognizably anthropomorphic relations with creatures identifiable as human or (semi)human. Yet, when viewed from an anthropocentric perspective, they seem either fragmented, immobilized or de/re-formed. The ontological uncertainty as to their status and their familiarity produce the uncanny effect described by Ernst Jentsch and deriving from the “doubts [over] whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object might not be in fact animate” (qtd. in Freud 226). Piccinini's creatures are obviously artificial, yet their hyperrealistic craftsmanship, meticulous imitation of skin and its texture, as well as the use of natural human hair, transgress the boundaries of our certainties, verging on the border of possibility. Like the dolls and wax figures described by Jentsch, they cause both fear and fascination (Freud 226). These reactions are accompanied by other aspects of the uncanny described by Freud—the feeling of recognition of something that has long been repressed (Freud 220, 241), hence a mixture of fear and longing for what is no longer there (for example, the naïve and spontaneous imagination typical of children). This is mostly expressed in the convincing and naturalistic replication of the imaginary that causes both wonder at and recognition of the fantastic and its embodiment. While Freud commented on the ability of literature (and art) to address the potential sphere of the uncanny without causing a disturbing experience if it refers to the sphere of the fantastic (in contrast to real life situations) (249–51), the direct confrontation with Piccinini's art, even though taking place in the gallery space, seems to transgress this “safe” sphere characteristic of fairy tales and fiction in general. The exhibition *Fairy Tales, Monsters and the Genetic Imagination*, for example, explored this liminal space in which the uncanny is partly domesticated through the fairy tale convention and the fantastic, yet as most of the exhibits transgressed the original patterns, they seemed to dangerously loom out of their fictional frames.

The final aspect of the uncanny that features in Piccinini's art is the recognition in her strange creatures of what is supposed to be very familiar to us: this involves the recognition both of the similarity of the creature's physiological features to humans and the intimate relationships that these creatures are arranged into with humans—as partners, children or parental figures. However, as Piccinini says in an interview, her aim is

not to anthropomorphize animals but rather to see human beings as one of the animal species: “It’s not about attributing human characteristics to animals as much as recognising our shared ‘animalness’”⁵ (Interview by Rosi Braidotti). The familiarity of the strange and the strangeness of the familiar are the attributes that lay the foundation for the inclusion of and partnership with the Other. This sense of connectedness and adjacency arising from Piccinini’s art opens a possibility for seeing humans and their relation to other creatures as kinship in Donna J. Haraway’s meaning of kin with its implication that “all earthlings are kin in the deepest sense. . . . All critters share a common ‘flesh,’ laterally, semiotically, and genealogically. Ancestors turn out to be very interesting strangers; kin are unfamiliar (outside what we thought was family or gens), uncanny, haunting, active” (“Anthropocene” 162). Piccinini’s art “stretches” and “recomposes” (Haraway, “Anthropocene” 162) the meaning of inter- and intra-species relationships, repositioning humans within them.

ABJECTIVE INTIMACIES

The hyperrealistic aesthetics of Piccinini’s art makes it both abject and grotesque. Growing appendices or offshoots, multiplying body parts, magnifying body openings and protuberances, putting things inside out—all of these are the attributes of the grotesque body whose function is both to disturb order and simultaneously celebrate it in the temporary suspension of rules (cf. Bakhtin 26). While this is certainly present in Piccinini’s art, its bodily transgressions seem to go beyond/aside the carnivalesque framework by confronting us with an abject or perhaps rather its naturalistic imitation. In an interview, Piccinini lists such materials used for making sculptures as “silicone, fibreglass, human and animal hair, ABS plastic, dental acrylic, traditional and high-tech plasters, stainless steel, automotive paint, plywood, Britannia metal, found objects and taxidermy animals” (Interview by The Condition Report). While most of these materials are artificial, the effect they produce is that of highly realistic human/transhuman flesh, strengthened by the use of natural human and animal hair. Abjection might result from the indefinite and composite nature of Piccinini’s creatures, but also from the creature’s nudity and similarity to humans. This is increased in sculptures such as *The Young*

⁵ This aspect was developed by Sara E. S. Orning in her article on humanimal hybridity in Piccinini’s art. Orning’s argument that “humanimal bodies offer an opportunity to recognize one’s own hidden animality that cannot be otherwise shown” (90) echoes Piccinini’s reflection, yet turning recognition into an almost illicit act (which in Piccinini’s art is rather open and liberating).

Family (2002) or *Nature's Little Helpers—Surrogate (for the northern hairy nosed wombat)* (2004), *Sphinx* (2012) or *Bottom Feeder* (2009), where, besides the naturalistic imitation of human flesh, one is confronted with fleshing out some of the taboos of the human body, by exposing lower bodily parts, openings, orifices, intimate parts, internal organs. Piccinini's anatomical reversals—such as the one in *Bottom Feeder* or *Sphinx*—in a sense are reminiscent of Hieronimus Bosch's fantastic combinations and grotesque topsy-turvyism. However, because of their hyperrealism and three-dimensionality, they evoke more extreme reactions that cannot be contained in the carnival spirit and can be mixed with disgust and—at least initially—repulsion. That is the case with Piccinini's sculpture called *Doubting Thomas* (2008), in which the wound inspired by the biblical motif is exposed as the major part of the creature's body. The sculpture presents a very spontaneous and intimate, but at the same time disgusting and arguably inconsiderate, interest expressed by a human boy in a transspecies creature's body/wound, its abjective opening and border-crossing (cf. Kristeva 4). The positive associations that the sculptures ultimately evoke⁶ demand from viewers negations and redefinitions of borders and classification, reassessing our prejudice, fear, repression of human and animal flesh. Some of these works explore the relation between mothers and children, presenting affectionate intimacies between them, yet still exposing the horrors of the maternal and incompletely formed bodies. What perhaps makes them different from the carnivalesque excess is, first of all, that they do not represent the temporary suspension of natural order, but rather posit a change that is there to stay: a need and necessity to redefine that order so as to include all those that do not match the norms, whether aesthetic, ethical or discriminatory/ableist.

MOTHERHOOD, EMBODIMENT, ETHICS OF PARTNERSHIP

Many of Piccinini's works comment on reproductive themes and feature mother figures and their young ones. What is particularly interesting about these works is that they present trans-species parenthood in what seems to

⁶ As Linda Marie Walker notes in her essay, Piccinini's creatures "are there (arrived, still, mute), come about, not to intensify our dread, but to increase our tolerance for what can come about . . . and touch upon the ordinary, basic, issues (surfaces) of being human, being communal, being loved and being loving and how we might 'feel' if each of these issues becomes at issue with itself" (49). Similarly, Anne M. Harris and Stacy Holman Jones write about Piccinini's art: "painting future (although never dystopic) scenes in which we are called toward empathy and understanding, rather than fear, isolation, and aversion" (49).

be a natural biological relationship. In the famous work *The Long Awaited* (2008), mentioned earlier, what is exposed is the affection that the two figures—a young boy and a grandmother-like unidentifiable creature—express for each other in their close embrace. A similar theme, which could be associated with reproductive rights and practices, reappears in *The Young Family* (2002), where a similarly old and wrinkled mother figure takes care of her offspring (which seem to belong to a different species). *The Young Family* and *Surrogate: Nature's Little Helpers* also raise questions of surrogate motherhood and the possibilities of care and affection that go beyond biological or genetic bonds.⁷ In all of these sculptures, the mother's body is doubly exposed to abjection—through fleshly representations of biological organs and the aging body that brings birth and death dangerously close to each other. The maternal body that is aged (*The Long Awaited*), exhausted (*The Young Family*) or deformed (*Surrogate*) embraces both the beauty and the horror of sacrifice. The “animalistic” representation of the maternal body emphasizes the biological nature of all motherhood. It brings together the abjective aspects attributed to the mother's body by Kristeva, representing the border between life and death and “horror and beauty” (155), leading to, as Braidotti puts it, a “blend of fascination and horror, which prompts an intense play of the imaginary, of fantasies and often nightmares” (82). Piccinini adds to this another transgression—that of cross-species mother-/parent-hood.

A slightly different example of embodiment and abjection is represented in two video installations spanning twenty years, shown in the *That's Us* exhibition: *The Breathing Room* (2000) and *The Awakening* (2020). Overwhelming in their size and proximity and imposing an uncomfortable intimacy, the projects seem to represent the change of perspective brought about by the biotechnological revolution described, among others, by Braidotti in *Nomadic Subjects*. In a sense both projects incarnate what Braidotti called “the biotechnological gaze,” which, according to her, “has penetrated into the very intimate structure of living matter, seeing the invisible, restructuring that which has no shape yet, freezing time out of the picture” (43). In both installations, viewers experience what could be seen as the end result of this type of penetrating biotechnological gaze. However, instead of objectifying the presented content, the projects immerse the viewers in the living and pulsating life that both horrifies and fascinates, but also acquires its own independent

⁷ In her essay, Haraway emphasizes that Piccinini's art exposes the difference between parenting and reproduction, with the former meaning care for generations whereas the latter just an act of populating the future with more copies of oneself (“Speculative Fabulations” 258).

existence and a form of agency.⁸ Visitors are confronted with a work of art that activates very strong affective responses and envelops them in the space that—due to its size and close distance—can potentially generate a sense of claustrophobia and oppression, on the one hand, and proximity and intimacy, on the other. The transgressive and liminal process involving constant and repetitive transformation, gestation and growth leaves the frame—both literally and metaphorically—of anthropomorphic aesthetics and order. The amplified body fragment or organ exists as a separate entity, yet its borders seem to spill over the screen (as they fill the whole available space in a close-up and as a result we cannot see exactly what we are looking at). Being too close or too large to categorize, the body/process shown in Piccinini's installations epitomizes the new materialist understanding of matter as “indeterminate, constantly forming and reforming in unexpected ways” (Coole and Frost 10). Piccinini's installations—not only the two discussed here but also *Seedling Dance* (2018) and *Metaflora* (2015)—can be interpreted as “choreographies of becoming” (Coole and Frost 10), which can be connected with a “decentered worldview that is no longer anthropocentric, hierarchical and detached, but ‘monist’ and open to the many interrelations and changes in the world we are part of” (Rosa et al. 5). In order to experience the process of mattering in Piccinini's installations, the initial affective responses by which the viewers try to make sense of what does not yield to interpretation need to be discarded or overcome. Difficult as it is, the process of taking a decision to stay and experience the installations involves to a large extent a decision to go beyond traditional expectations, which lead to confusion, uncertainty, abjection and repugnance, and notice a different layer at which experience is not seen in terms of dichotomies but contiguity and process.

In the combination of affective structures based on care and devotion, Piccinini confronts us with the questions of ethics of care and the type of relationship it suggests between human beings and the environment, as well as other species. What seems to dominate in the fostering projects mentioned earlier in this article is an ecofeminist implication of the affinity of women and nature, suggesting “a connection between the exploitation and degradation of the natural world and the subordination and oppression of women” (Mellor 1), and the extension of women's caring abilities also to the environment, by emphasizing “human

⁸ Piccinini's video installations *The Breathing Room* and *The Awakening* epitomize and enact Karen Barad's concept of posthumanist performativity (826–27) by erasing the limits of identity, confronting the visitor with enormous materiality, which possesses agency of its own, affecting and embracing whoever comes into contact with its continuous process of becoming.

embodiedness and ecological embeddedness” (Rigby 58). Although not all parenting figures in Piccinini’s art are female by implication (see, for example, the *Eagle Egg Man* series with male-like creatures incubating eagle eggs), the majority could be interpreted according to early trends within ecofeminism, equating women’s role in relation to nature with their nurturing abilities and defining it through the concept of care. Among its limitations, ethics of care, as Merchant suggests, “falls prey to an essentialist critique that women’s nature is to nurture” (8). Kate Rigby argues, referring to Val Plumwood’s observation, that ethics of care “also creates a distorted understanding of our relationship with non-human others, failing as it does to acknowledge their independent agency and the fact that their interests will not necessarily coincide with ours” (69). However, it seems that Piccinini critically explores these “care and nurture” implications to extend them to what Merchant calls the ethics of partnership, which refracts some of the early connections established by ecofeminism. Merchant proposes to use the concept of the ethics of partnership in order to recognize the importance of the relation, connection and interdependence between human and non-human communities and respect for cultural and bio-diversity (217). As Merchant explains, “[a] partnership ethic calls for a new balance in which both humans and nonhuman nature are equal partners, neither having the upper hand, yet cooperating with each other. Both humans and nature are active agents” (218). Partnership ethics includes both intimacy and care, as well as compassion and recognition of difference and variety: “[c]onstructing nature as a partner allows for the possibility of a personal or intimate (but not necessarily spiritual) relationship with nature and for feelings of compassion for nonhumans as well as for people who are sexually, racially, or culturally different” (8). All of these elements surface in Piccinini’s art, even where it depicts mother and child relations and affections. A more recent example of Piccinini’s art using the mother-carer motif but simultaneously presenting partnership messages is the video *We Travel Together* (2021) shown at the *That’s Us* exhibition. The video relies on the mother and care association for its effect, yet it also emphasizes affinity and togetherness, as well as agency. The title already implies a form of companionship and sharing of space and direction, which are closely related to the notion of partnership. The film presents an aboriginal woman, who encounters a small hybrid animal in a city and decides to return it to the wild. She attracts the animal by offering it some food and after catching it, carries it under her clothes away from the city. When she arrives in the forest, she lets the creature out to join other animals of the strange species. What is worth noting is that the act of releasing the animal resembles an act of giving birth. It represents

a symbolic union between the woman and the animal, in which the animal's rescue is connected with the pain of parting. Leaving the animal in the forest seems to demand from the woman an effort to suppress her wish of owning or being close to the animal. It demands the recognition of togetherness but also separateness and independence—coexistence but freedom, as if symbolically representing a transition between the concept of care and partnership, resulting in the possibility of a new conceptualization of nature as agentic, independent and equal.

VULNERABILITY, INCLUSIVENESS, ECO-ABILITY

As already mentioned, one of the important components of Piccinini's art is how it challenges viewers to re-consider the ways in which various norms operate in us as individuals and in social systems. In a conversation with Rosi Braidotti, Patricia Piccinini emphasizes the confrontation with the idea of normality we are supposed to experience when we see her works:

In many ways, I think that the figures in my work are metaphors for the disenfranchised or the excluded. The “beauty” or “ugliness” of these creatures depends very much on what notion of normality you believe in. The challenge to accept them, is the same challenge we feel to accept any thing—or anyone—who is different. Hopefully, in thinking about the world I present, the viewer will be able to think about the real world around them, and where that world draws the line between normal and strange, or desirable and unacceptable. (Interview by Rosi Braidotti)

Piccinini's art confronts us with transgressions or envisages them not so much to propose a solution to problems but to rethink the ethical positions that we may hold, by provoking certain affective reactions that impact the ideological or conceptual frames. For example, with the series entitled *Nature's Little Helpers*, Piccinini presents what she calls “‘assistant species’ designed to help preserve a number of Australian endangered species” (Interview by Laura Orgaz). While imbued with ethically desirable attitudes—of caring and being capable of sacrifice for the sake of extinct species, the sculpture provokes many questions concerning the responsibility for ecological catastrophes, the involvement of other species in preserving nature destroyed by humans, the subjectivity of the assistant species, the ethics of their mission or servitude. Therefore, it seems that the series juxtaposes our wish to repair and save with the reservations about the strategies of preserving endangered species and the use of biotechnologies

to achieve these ends.⁹ In this case the “emotional realities” redefine our assessments and beliefs. In other trans-species works, one can trace the elements of what Rosi Braidotti describes in her interview with Patricia Piccinini as “a veiled and non-violent critique of anthropocentrism.” The intimate, spontaneous and sincere relations between species: human or almost human and ostensibly non-anthropomorphic—redefine negative or mixed reactions, expanding the utopian connectedness between species. In such works as *The Comforter*, *The Welcome Guest* or *Still Life with Stem Cells*, stem cells and what from the anthropocentric perspective seems to be awkward, underdeveloped or faulty life forms are viewed and approached with warmth and affection, whereby they acquire subjectivity and validity, reiterating the premises of new materialism discussed in the previous section.

Representations of trans-species can be received as disturbing in implying the creatures’ vulnerability, inability to survive, incompleteness or disability. These affective responses are largely informed by the notion of pathology and aberrance around which the concept of normality is socially and culturally constructed. However, as in other artworks by Piccinini, they are situated in an affective context that questions prejudices and inhibitions, creating space for the inclusion of what goes beyond norms and expectations. In addition to the effects of the uncanny and the abject, many of Piccinini’s works featuring seemingly incomplete or genetically diverse beings rely for their transgressive effect on the aspects of what is called disability aesthetics. Tobin Siebers places disability aesthetics in the context of the materialist tendency that underlines the importance of “originary subject matter [of art]: the body and its affective sphere” (*Disability Aesthetics* 2). It derives from the assumption that, as Siebers explains, aesthetics relies on “the human body and its affective relation to other bodies as foundational to the appearance of the beautiful—and to such a powerful extent that aesthetics suppresses its underlying corporeality only with difficulty” (*Disability Aesthetics* 1). Siebers argues that “the disabled body and mind” have played “significant roles in the evolution of modern aesthetics” (*Disability Aesthetics* 2), because they have disrupted and questioned idealized and non-materialist aesthetic rules and conventions. In this sense, “disability represents the outer boundary

⁹ In her reading of Piccinini’s art through Deborah Bird Rose’s concept of ethics of decolonization, Donna J. Haraway exposes the problematic nature of surrogacy and help, naming Piccinini’s creatures “sf humanoids with dubious naturalcultural genealogies” (“Speculative Fabulations” 250). Haraway sees Piccinini’s art as aware of various forms of intervention and protection and their multiple consequences. In this perspective, nature’s little helpers are not seen as reassuring, as they may protect and also need protection, or can potentially threaten other creatures (“Speculative Fabulations” 250).

of the body diversely conceived, throwing off associations with defect, degeneration, and deviancy” (Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics* 135). Piccinini’s materialist affective aesthetics operates in a similar manner by exploring alternative corporealities and confronting us with counter-idealist images. The way Piccinini activates feelings of care and protectiveness in her art also impacts the affective attitudes to non-normative or disabled-like creatures. When read from the perspective of critical disability studies, *The Comforter* or *Still Life with Stem Cells*, as well as many other hybrid creatures, such as *The Builder* or *Loafers* (2018), firstly rely for their effect on corporeal materialism and its affective implications. They might be disturbing in how they bring about what Paul K. Longmore and David Goldenberg call “existential anxiety” (889), which can be associated with affective reactions to disabled bodies, linking death anxiety with implications of corporeal vulnerability and exposure to pain or harm (Dunn 61). However, Piccinini’s non-normative bodies invite explorations beyond these affective anxieties, by redefining aesthetic concepts.

When combined with elements of disability aesthetics, many ideas emerging from Piccinini’s art can be seen as analogous to the main premises of eco-ability, such as the preservation of bio-diversity, environmental responsibility, inclusiveness and care. These aspects surface mostly in the works commenting on preservation of endangered species or inter-species partnership (e.g., *We Travel Together*, *The Bond*, *Surrogate*, *Offspring*, *Progenitor* or *Eagle Egg Man* series). What is also reflected in Piccinini’s art, eco-ability makes two important points, arguing for “acknowledging and respecting interdependency among people, beings, and nature” (Schatz et al. xxii) and approaching the concept of normalcy as “a social construction that invites us to understand that we must value diversity, difference, and multiplicity” (Pellow xiii). It also comments on various positions into which people can enter in relation to nature and other creatures, which need to be negotiated and diversified by thinking in terms of relational communities rather than predefined ideological stances (Schatz et al. xxii-xxiii). In this broader intersectional context, some of the affective realities of Piccinini’s art representing mothering and anthropomorphic parental care might raise questions about the danger of seeing non-human nature as needing help and dependent on human “charitable gesture” and pity (cf. Lewis xiv–xv; Shapiro 14; Linton 11). However, Piccinini’s art needs to be considered in the multiplicity of complex affective realities that interact with each other to produce a variety of effects that do not yield to uniform reading. Each of these affective responses is negotiated with other reactions that often lead in different directions. Cognitive or existential anxiety, for instance, prepares the ground for rethinking our notions of normalcy and attitudes to what transgresses those notions. Likewise, without negotiating

the feeling of pity or charity, the awareness of one's role in relation to others would be incomplete. This is particularly important, and at the same time problematic, in relation to what Haraway, after Deborah Bird Rose, calls "decolonizing responsive attentiveness" ("Speculative Fabulations" 247), a practice Haraway attributes to Piccinini's art and her attempt to negotiate through art her "settler heritage" ("Speculative Fabulations" 247). "A duty to care" quoted from Piccinini in this context has both positive and negative implications, complicated by the positions which one occupies in this relationship.

CONCLUSION

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Although densely conceptualized and theorized both by critics and the artist herself, Patricia Piccinini's art evades coherent and totalizing readings. Its effect is based on the confrontation with, and negotiations of, both traditional and more radical conceptual frameworks, which are additionally refracted by the affective realities it generates. "Shift[ing] the apparent rational implications" (Piccinini, Interview by Laura Orgaz), these affective aspects engage the viewers in active responses and reactions, in which they need to confront cultural and natural expectations, inhibitions, fears or indifference.

The dynamic interaction between ethics and aesthetics elicits more questions than answers, about the nature of the co-existence, care and commitment that is needed to preserve the natural environment or to better create conditions in which nature will be able to sustain itself. The fragile difference between taking care and making other creatures/beings dependent on help points to many questions about the place of humans in relation to other creatures—both animate and non-animate. By expanding and training our imagination, Piccinini's art prepares a ground for more considerate and inclusive understanding of Others and redefinition of aesthetic expectations.

Like disability aesthetics, Piccinini's works argue for a different, more inclusive, innovative and positive sense of the beautiful. Piccinini's art, similarly to other "exceptional bod[ies]," "betokens something else, becomes revelatory, sustains narrative, exists socially in a realm of hyper-representation" (Garland-Thomson, "Introduction" 3). Rather than objectification, in whatever remains in Piccinini's art from the tradition of the freak show or anatomy museum, one discovers a multiplicity of perspectives, identities, forms and stories revealing complex connections between emotional responses and conceptualizations, inviting fascination and spontaneous curiosity.

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Sympoiesis, Autopoiesis and Immunity: How to Coexist with Nonhuman Others?

ABSTRACT

In this essay I will discuss Donna J. Haraway's notion of sympoiesis and examine different modes of cohabitation or hybridization with nonhuman others. Such concepts as sympoiesis, or holobiont, question the notion of the biological individual and also change our understanding of what it means to be human. As Richard Grusin pointed out, "we have never been human" because "the human has always coevolved, coexisted, or collaborated with the nonhuman—and that the human is characterized precisely by this indistinction from the nonhuman" (ix–x). We have never been human because we have always been dependent on other species living within or beyond our bodies. However, the question which still needs to be answered is whether all forms of coexistence are profitable and welcomed. How does one define the limit at which this co-existence is collaborative and productive ("posthuman"), and beyond which it becomes damaging and lethal (in other words, "posthumous," e.g., coming after life)? For this reason, the interrelations between different life forms should be discussed together with the concepts of contagion and immunity. The notion of immunity expresses an ambivalent character of life: on the one hand, it protects the organism against everything that is beyond its boundary; on the other hand, it helps to collaborate with other organisms and to create an ecosystem. In this sense, immunity can be thought as a field of negotiations between human and nonhuman beings.

Keywords: sympoiesis, autopoiesis, individual, holobiont, immunity, contagion.

SYMPOIESIS AS “MAKING-WITH”¹

Donna J. Haraway’s discursive interventions, from cyborgs to symbiotic creatures, deconstruct the myth of the organism as a natural wholeness. Instead, she persuasively demonstrates that every living being is a multiplicity, an assemblage, which might be arranged and rearranged in many different ways. In this respect, Haraway, without acknowledging it,² elaborates further Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s attempts to disarticulate the idea of an organism and open it to becoming and “unnatural participations” (Deleuze and Guattari 266–67). For Deleuze and Guattari, an organism is an assemblage-like construction, the body without organs, which demonstrates the disorganization of the organism and the denaturalization of nature. Deleuze and Guattari are interested in different modes of becoming, which is defined as expansion, propagation, occupation, contagion, peopling. It is a multiplicity, which is organized not by filiation, or heredity, but through epidemic, or contagion. Haraway also insists on the contingent and undetermined mode of every multiplicity, however, she stresses symbiotic cooperation and sympoietic entanglements.

In *Staying with the Trouble* (2016), Haraway defines her notion of sympoiesis as a specific practice of “making-with,” or “becoming-with.” Haraway is sympathetic to Lynn Margulis’s idea that life emerges through symbiosis and symbiogenesis which leads to the increasing complexity of life forms. In *Symbiotic Planet* (1998), Margulis proved that life originated from the interaction between different life forms, such as bacteria and archaea. By fusing with each other, bacteria and archaea invented a complex cell made of a nucleus and extranuclear organelles. As Haraway suggests, symbiosis is the basic law of life: “The core of Margulis’s view of life was that new *kinds* of cells, tissues, organs, and species evolve primarily through the long-lasting intimacy of strangers” (*Staying with the Trouble* 60). However, Haraway questions Margulis’s idea that these emerging life processes are autopoietic and argues that perhaps Margulis “would have chosen the term *sympoietic*, but the word and concept had not yet surfaced” (61). Haraway argues that nothing can really create itself, therefore, nothing is really autopoietic but needs other organisms and environments to become what it is.

Thus, Haraway asserts that organisms are never quite autonomous and “neither biology nor philosophy any longer supports the notion of independent organisms in environments. . . . Bounded (or neoliberal)

¹ This project has received funding from the Research Council of Lithuania (LMTLT), agreement No. S-MIP-21-36.

² We find a harsh critique of Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of becoming in the first chapter of Haraway’s *When Species Meet* (3–44). However, a more positive and careful approach is missing.

individualism amended by autopoiesis is not good enough figurally or scientifically; it misleads us down deadly paths” (33). Instead, she says, we have to adopt Karen Barad’s agential realism and intra-active complex systems of relations, where the elements of the system do not pre-exist the relations but are created precisely by them. Such a model of intra-active relationships is better than the model of autopoietic systems as

[a]utopoietic systems are hugely interesting . . . but they are not good models for living and dying worlds and their critters. Autopoietic systems are not closed, spherical, deterministic, or teleological, but they are not quite good enough models for the mortal SF world. Poiesis is symchthonic, sympoietic, always partnered all the way down, with no starting and subsequently interacting “units.” (33)

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Haraway suggests that a living being, before being closed onto itself, is always connected to other living beings and forms with them interspecies assemblages.

In other words, Haraway does not completely reject the theory of autopoiesis but insists that autopoiesis and sympoiesis are different aspects of systemic complexity and they rather enfold than oppose each other.³ At this point it is important to stress that Maturana and Varela, who elaborated the notion of autopoiesis in their book *Autopoiesis and Cognition: The Realization of the Living* (1980), do not assert that autopoietic systems are closed and devoid of interaction with other systems. A simple example of an autopoietic system is a unicellular organism which is capable of maintaining and recreating its organization despite the multiple chemical reactions taking place in it. Thus, the main characteristic of an autopoietic system is its self-organization, self-maintenance, and its constant self-reproduction within a boundary. However, a living being cannot survive without energy and nutrients and for this reason it is connected to the environment. The environment triggers an autopoietic system and engenders some changes in its structure. Maturana and Varela argue that every living system interacts with the environment through “structural coupling.” However, even after undergoing some structural changes, the model of organization of the system does not change. This is why autopoietic entities are said to be *closed* on the level of organization but *open* at the level of structure. In this

³ In *When Species Meet* Haraway claims that “Margulis and Sagan’s symbiogenesis is not really compatible with their theory of autopoiesis” (33). In a footnote she refers to Cary Wolfe’s reworking of autopoiesis, which takes into account second-order cybernetic thinkers such as Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela. The notion of autopoiesis is reworked in such a way that it combines openness and closure, called by Wolfe “openness from closure” (317, ft. 46). I will elaborate this point later.

context “organization” means the relations between the components of a system which allow it to be a member of a specific class (e.g., a bacterium, an animal, or a human brain). All living beings of the same class have a similar organization. The term “structure” means the actual relationships between physical components: a given organization can be embodied in different physical structures.

In other words, Maturana and Varela never stated that autopoietic systems are closed or bounded; by contrast, they argue that “[a]utopoietic systems may interact with each other under conditions that result in behavioral coupling” (119–20). The interacting organisms as dynamic systems trigger each other and thus become continuously changing structures but never lose their autopoietic character. In this respect, autopoietic systems are not neglected but rather complicated and they become the source of each other’s change and development. Haraway is saying the same thing when she adopts Margulis’s notion of the holobiont and re-invents it in the sense that the holobiont designates not the host plus the symbionts but rather means that “all of the players are symbionts to each other, in diverse kinds of relationalities and with varying degrees of openness to attachments and assemblages with other holobionts” (*Staying with the Trouble* 60). In this sense sympoiesis is always an allopoiesis, or heteropoiesis, an attempt to deal with otherness and cope with differences.

To assert her theory of sympoiesis as a “making-with,” Haraway refers to the works of biologists which give clear evidence that symbiosis has always been a dominant mode of existence. For example, in their famous article “A Symbiotic View of Life: We Have Never Been Individuals” (2012), Scott F. Gilbert, Jan Sapp, and Alfred I. Tauber argue that biological individuals are always inhabited by other forms of life, such as viruses or bacteria. After examining a biological individual according to anatomical, developmental, physiological, genetic, and immunological criteria, the authors come to the conclusion that all organisms are related to each other in an all-pervading symbiosis. Before Margulis’s work, symbiosis was seen as rare or exceptional; now symbiosis “is becoming a core principle of contemporary biology, and it is replacing an essentialist conception of ‘individuality’ with a conception congruent with the larger systems approach now pushing the life sciences in diverse directions” (Gilbert, Sapp and Tauber 326). For example, according to anatomical criteria a biological individual is regarded as a structured whole, but if we take a look into Margulis’s favorite critter *Mixotricha paradoxa*, which is “a beast with five genomes” (Margulis and Sagan 38–41), we find a chimeric individual made of host and persistent populations of symbionts.

If we examine a biological individual according to developmental criteria, we can see that development is closely related to interspecies

communication. Another famous example, researched by microbiologist Margaret McFall-Ngai, is the symbiosis between the Hawaiian bobtailed squid *Euprymna scolopes* and a bacteria called *Vibrio fischeri*. The newborn of the squid lacks a light organ, which is later developed in cooperation with the luminescent bacteria *Vibrio fischeri*, helping to camouflage the squid from predators swimming below (McFall-Ngai 61). These bacteria not only change the squid's appearance and protect it from predators but also initiate changes in the squid's gene expression, changing the development of its body and immune system. As McFall-Ngai points out, "[t]hese observations challenged what we thought we knew about organismal development, namely, that it was driven primarily by inherited genetic codes. In contrast, our research showed us that squid develop, in part, through relations with microbes, not exclusively through inherited genetic scripts" (61). These and many other examples provide evidence that animals cannot be considered individuals by anatomical, developmental, physiological, immunological, genetic, or evolutionary criteria. Their bodies must be understood as holobionts which developed through interspecies communication.

However, the notion of the holobiont not only changes our understanding of the biological individual but also the idea of what it means to be human. Seen from this perspective, the human body is not a bounded individual but a complex ecosystem, which is related to other organisms through the reciprocal process of symbiosis. For example, in defining anatomical individuality, Gilbert suggests that only about half the cells in our bodies contain a "human genome," and the other cells include about 160 different bacterial genomes (75). Thus, from the anatomical point of view, human bodies contain a plurality of bacterial ecosystems. From the genetic point of view, we are not individuals either, because while humans have about twenty-two thousand different genes, the bacteria in us provide eight million more genes. From the immunological point of view, humans are also far from individuals because our immune system allows countless microbes to become parts of our bodies. As Gilbert points out, "[w]ithout the proper microbial symbionts, important subsets of immune cells fail to form" (82). Thus, after discussing anatomical, genetic, developmental, physiological, immune, and evolutionary criteria, Gilbert comes to the conclusion that we are not individuals but holobionts: "The holobiont is powerful, in part, because it is not limited to nonhuman organisms. It also changes what it means to be a person" (75). This means that symbiosis is not a marginal or random case but an all-encompassing principle of life. "These major symbiotic webs rule the planet, and within these big symbioses are the smaller symbiotic webs of things we call organisms. . . . Symbiosis is the way of life on earth; we are all holobionts by birth" (84). But if we are all holobionts by birth, what do these modes of symbiosis and co-habitation mean for us and for other species?

Inspired by recent biological research, Haraway enthusiastically invites us to engage in interspecies communication which is understood as sympoiesis. In contrast to biological symbiosis and symbiogenesis which is simply found in the natural world, sympoiesis means an active “making-with” with other species, which is understood as a way to counter both anthropocentrism and the Anthropocene. Taking the spider *Pimoa ctbulhu* as a metaphor, and making a small change in spelling, from Cthulhu to chthulu, Haraway invents a new term—the Chthulucene—that should replace the Anthropocene:

[T]he Chthulucene is made up of ongoing multispecies stories and practices of becoming-with. . . . Unlike the dominant dramas of Anthropocene and Capitalocene discourse, human beings are not the only important actors in the Chthulucene, with all other beings able simply to react. The order is reknitted: human beings are with and of the earth, and the biotic and abiotic powers of this earth are the main story. (*Staying with the Trouble* 55)

Haraway invites us to create tentacular webs and make assemblages with other species. However, what I find problematic in this project is that these connections work only on the imaginary and speculative level, avoiding the real interaction with other species. The relationship with animal partners remains vaguely defined, and in some cases—like the poetic interaction with companions in *When Species Meet*—looks very problematic because it is still imbedded in the logic of anthropocentrism and asserts the supremacy of the human species.

How can we imagine interspecies communication beyond these beautiful speculative fictions? Even if the notion of symbiosis is now widely accepted in biology, sympoiesis, or “making-with,” between human and non-human species still needs to be accounted for and explained. How are these sympoietic collaborations enacted at different levels of organization? How can we define this tension between the need to keep the boundaries and the potential for change? Do these collaborators have intentions, expectations, and purposes? And if they do, can we name these intentions as a certain kind of cognition, as defined by Maturana and Varela? Haraway quite enigmatically states that “*Symbiosis* is not a synonym for ‘mutually beneficial’” (*Staying with the Trouble* 60). This implies that collaborations might also be damaging, poisoning, contagious. Having this ambivalence in mind, I suggest that the notion of sympoiesis should be discussed in relation to the question of immunity: are all connections and relations profitable to the host and its symbionts, or not? If they are, then everyone can enjoy interspecies collaboration; but if they are not, then

these connections might be deadly contagious and lead to destruction. In other words, to explain the interaction with otherness, we have to explain the functioning of the immune system.

IMMUNITY AND CONTAGION

The notion of immunity, as it was formulated in the middle of the 20th century, is based on the “self” and “nonself” dichotomy: the immune system tolerates the “self” and attacks the “other.” However, what remains to be explained is what defines the “self” and why the immune system is silent in relation to its own cells and tissues. What happens when a part of the so-called “self” changes and becomes a stranger to itself? Is the biological “self” identical with philosophical and psychological notions of individuality? As Alfred I. Tauber explains, the notion of selfhood not only was imported from philosophical discourse but quickly became an idiom which was explained as if it grew within the science of immunology (42). The notion of “self,” which comprises both the organismal self and the immunological self, was a very clear and recognizable model to think about our immunological identity. However, as immunology developed, some important questions had to be answered. First, the immunological “self” is never given all at once, but is developing throughout the organism’s life. Second, the immunological “self” is nonreactive or silent in relation to certain cells coming from other organisms, for example, in cases of organ transplantation or pregnancy. There is clear evidence that long after delivery the foetal cells are found in maternal bodies, creating a case of microchimerism (Shildrick 95–108). The question is why doesn’t the immune system attack the cells coming from other organisms? And third, why does the immunity system *react* to the organism in case of autoimmune diseases? Why does the immunity system treat the “self” as if it is the “other”? As Roberto Esposito points out, autoimmune diseases “express, by their very name, its most acute contradiction: rather than a failure, a block, or a flaw in the immune apparatus, they represent its reversal against itself” (162). Autoimmune diseases express an “overactive defense” of the body, when the body is using a defense which is disproportionate to the actual size of the intruder.

Esposito argues that the antinomies of the immune system could be interpreted not as an alleged pathology, but, on the contrary, as its normal functioning. “If the immune system works by opposing *everything* that it recognizes, this means that it has to attack even the ‘self’ whose recognition is the precondition of all other recognition: how could the immune system recognize the other without first knowing the self?” (164). Here we see

a certain antinomy: the immune system should recognize the “self” in order to recognize the “other”; however, this recognition is damaging because, after recognizing this, it starts to attack itself. As Esposito points out,

what needs explaining is not the fact that in some cases the immune system attacks its own parts, but the fact that this normally does not happen. This non-aggression is well known as being due to the phenomenon called “autotolerance,” or tolerance of self. What we want to draw attention to is how this leads to the reversal of a common perception: it is not autoimmunity, with all its lethal consequences, including death, that requires explanation, but rather its absence. (164)

The question to be answered here is what the primary and natural condition of the body is: is it the absence of autoimmunity (so-called “autotolerance”), or its necessary presence (“autoimmunitary attack”)? As Esposito points out, “[h]ere we arrive at the key point of the argument: the destructive rebellion against the self is not a temporary dysfunction, but the natural impulse of every immune system. In countering all that it ‘sees,’ it is naturally led to *first* attack its own self” (165).

These philosophical reconsiderations force us to rethink the ways in which our bodies are defined, and, more importantly, make us question the assumption that our bodies are always already given and identical to ourselves. If the body is constantly changing during its life, at which point can the body be considered as “proper,” and, moreover, how can we determine our immunological “self”? Commenting on recent biomedical research, Esposito comes to the conclusion that the immune system is not something definitive and identical to itself but is permanently changing and adapting to the environment. In this sense the immune system can be thought of not as a defensive mechanism but as a network of relationships, or, as Deleuze and Guattari would say, as an assemblage that creates temporal and non-hierarchical connections between heterogeneous elements. In this context the notion of immune tolerance could mean not only a lack of response but also a positive recognition of elements of the “nonself.” The discovery that immune tolerance can be *induced* artificially demonstrates that the immune system can be taught to recognize the cells of the other body and respond to them positively:

This means that tolerance is not a non-immunity, a kind of virtuous immuno-deficiency; if anything, it is a reverse immunity: that which reverses the effects within the same lexicon. But if so, if tolerance is the product of the immune system itself, it means that, far from having a single-response repertoire, that of rejecting other-than-self, it includes the other within itself, not only as its driving force but also as one of its effects. (167)

In other words, the body should be thought of as a chimeric multiplicity or as an assemblage where different molecular populations compete with each other and which never form a singular and stable “self.”

All these questions signal that the notion of immunity is undergoing a conceptual shift. Rather than being understood as a defensive reaction toward an external, contagious element, immunity is now conceived as a self-referential and self-contained network which keeps the balance in the organismal self. In other words, it is not a negative reaction toward a foreign element but a normal functioning that needs to be explained. Tauber traces this approach to immunologist Niels Jerne and his network theory: “Jerne argued that antibodies comprised a system of self-regulated interactions that resulted in a self-organized grid. This model, consisting of interlocking recognizing units, posited that each component reacts with other like constituents of the system to form a self-referential network” (60). In other words, immunity works as an autopoietic system which at the same time interacts with the environment and permanently redefines its internal organization. Haraway also discusses Jerne’s network theory in one of her earlier texts “The Biopolitics of Postmodern Bodies: Constitutions of Self in Immune System Discourse.” Haraway supports Jerne’s idea that the immune system is to be understood not as a protection of the individual “self” but as a changing network based on self-regulation and self-organization. Immunity as a network is capable of recognizing and mirroring the antigen in such a way that there is nothing external that the immune system had not already mirrored internally. “‘Self’ and ‘other’ lose their rationalistic oppositional quality and become subtle plays of partially mirrored readings and responses. The notion of the *internal image* is the key to the theory, and it entails the premise that every member of the immune system is capable of interacting with every other member” (Haraway, “The Biopolitics” 291). What is important for Haraway in this context is that the body is understood not as something given but as constantly changing: paraphrasing Simone de Beauvoir, she asserts that “one is not born an organism. Organisms are made; they are constructs of a world-changing kind” (279).

In a similar way, Tauber examines Jerne’s network theory as a major shift in immunity theorizing. As Tauber explains, Jerne proposes that the immune system is made of interlocking recognizing units so that each component reacts with the other within the system to form a self-referential network. In this model the antibody has two roles, active and passive:

So in addition to the active binding of antigen, Jerne suggested that antibody could also act as the target of another antibody by presenting

itself as an antigen through its so-called *idiotypic* domains. On this view, immunoglobulin behaves as both antibody (as originally regarded) and antigen to a corresponding antibody that reacts with its unique *idiotope*. (Tauber 60)

The immune system reacts to the external antigens only to the extent that these elements are recognized in the internal “library” of antibodies. “In other words, Jerne postulated that the amino acid sequences of immunoglobulins share structural homologies with all antigens to which the organism might respond—that is, ‘internal images’ represent that external universe” (60). The immune system performs a dialogue between antibodies which play two roles, as the “recognizer” and the “recognized,” but neither of them has any essential characteristics of “self” or “nonself.” Rather they are signifiers referring to other signifiers, and, in this sense, immunity can be understood as a self-referential structure of language. The “other” is something that simply disturbs that structure and activates a response.

Seen from this perspective, the immune system cannot be explained by “self” and “nonself” distinctions, because, strictly speaking, the immune network can recognize only itself. Every element is always already within the system, and what is external or “other” is either invisible or appears as “nonsense.” The distinction between “self” and “other” can be conceptualized only from the observer’s point of view, whereas the immune network is always immanent to itself and cannot reflect its outside. As Tauber points out, “Jerne’s network conception built on *self-recognition*, which then reconfigured “autoimmunity” (self-recognition) from aberrancy to the normative organizational rule of immune function” (62). Immune tolerance or silence does not need a special explanation because the immune system knows only itself. The originality of Jerne’s model lies in the fact that it denies the subject-object structure, which implies the observer’s perspective, and suggests that immunity is an immanent self-referential structure based on self-survey.

In other words, immunity as an information processing system can be theorized as a certain kind of cognition characteristic of autopoietic systems. Such cognition is not associated exclusively with human cognition but can be extended to other living beings. Thus Jerne’s network theory replaced the understanding that there is a certain agent (the “self”) processing information with an understanding of cognition without agency (59). As Tauber observes, “Jerne’s innovation offered a model of immune function independent of agency, and with that move, he highlighted the difference between the observer’s perspective and the network’s” (65). In this sense any living system—from cells and organisms

to ecosystems—functions as a self-organizing and self-referring cognitive network. Varela and Anspach compare immunity to an ecological system: “[T]he body is like Earth, a textured environment for diverse and highly interactive populations of individuals. The individuals in this case are the white blood cells or lymphocytes which constitute the immune system” (69). The lymphocytes are generating different molecular populations within the body, similar to living species which generate diversity within an ecosystem. Thus, the organism is a self-referential cognitive system functioning both on a molecular and planetary scale.

HYBRIDS AND CHIMERAS

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The idea that immunity functions as an ecosystem, and also the fact that immunity can be induced artificially makes it conceptually isomorphic to the practices of bioart. In this respect, bioart, by creating and constructing sympoietic modes of existence, such as hybridization, microchimerism, or co-habitation, opens new fields of knowledge. By examining various artworks, we can distinguish between different forms of sympoietic existence: for example, hybridization, which rests on the binary logic of two individuals, which merge together, or microchimerism, which works on the molecular level and dissolves the remnants of bounded individuality. Vinciane Despret distinguishes between hybrids and chimeras, or between what she calls “combinations” and “compositions”:

[H]ybridization remains a matter of a “combination,” thus of the reproduction of certain characteristics of the two “parent” species. Thinking in terms of hybridization forces the rest to give and to impose a binary system. . . . Metamorphoses, conversely, retranslate “combinations” into a system of “compositions,” a system that remains open to surprise and to the event: “other things” can arise that profoundly modify beings and their relations. (190)

In this respect “compositions” create aberrant chimeras which do not have official parents and a clearly defined line of descent. They are open to metamorphic events which can modify individuals and their relations. Despret refers to Margulis and Sagan’s research of bacteria which, they say, never stop trafficking their genes but never form a fully defined individual. Thus every organism is the result of symbiosis: “Co-optation, contagion, infections, incorporations, digestions, reciprocal inductions, becomings-with: the nature of human being, Haraway says, is at its most profound, at its most concrete, at its most biological, an interspecific relation—a process of co-opting strangers” (191). In this sense, ecological immunity could

reflect the ways in which human animals create new modes of hybridization by reshaping their immunological reactions.

Artistic practices could be seen as another attempt to think along the lines of ecological immunology. At this point, I would like to discuss some artistic examples which examine the interaction between human and nonhuman animals not in a speculative but in an actual physical way. The first example is the project “May the Horse Live in Me” (2011), created by Marion Laval-Jeantet and Benoît Mangin (Art Orienté Objet). The project started as a biomedical self-experiment which consisted of several procedures. Over the course of several months the artist allowed herself to be injected with horse immunoglobulins and thus progressively developed a tolerance to this foreign animal body. To achieve this, she had to exclude some most cytotoxic red blood cells, as well as lymphocytes and macrophages; however, she saved for transfusion all other cells, including immunoglobulin, which transfers information within the body (Hirszfeld 174–80). Having built up her immune tolerance, the artist Marion Laval-Jeantet was able to be injected with horse blood plasma during a ritualized performance at Galerija Kapelica in Ljubljana on February 2011.

The intention of this performance was that the horse immunoglobulins would by-pass the defensive mechanisms of the human immune system, enter the artist’s blood stream and interact with it. As I have argued elsewhere (Žukauskaitė 22–37), the performed horse blood plasma transfusion became the place of negotiations with otherness: on the one hand, the injected blood plasma was recognized by the artist’s immunity system; on the other hand, some new reactions and affections emerged in the artist’s body. As the artist herself points out, the first response to the transfusion was fever, which was going up and down, then sleep disorder, a very strong appetite, and panic attacks (Hirszfeld 174–80). Afterwards her blood sample was extracted, which became completely clotted in ten minutes, thus showing a symptom of strong inflammation. The blood sample, which was freeze-dried, can be seen as a synecdoche part of the performance, as a document of a new form of “becoming-with,” or the becoming-horse of the performer.

This immunological experiment was followed by other performative attempts to overcome bodily boundaries. As Laval-Jeantet points out, “[a]fter experiencing immune otherness through horse blood injection, we have become interested in eco-systemic otherness, including human and non-human animal microbiota as a new milieu within which to perform” (158). This interest in an eco-systemic exchange led to two new artistic projects which involved microscopic living matter as performance “actors”: “May the Rain Forest Live in Me” (or “May the Pygmy Live in Me”) and “Holy Coli, the Mice in Odor of Sanctity.” The first project “May the

Rain Forest Live in Me” (starting from 2015) was inspired by the scientific discovery that Yanomami people from a Brazilian rainforest have the richest and most diverse microbiota in the world, and, consequently, the most exceptional immune system. The artist decided to approach another tribe, Pygmy, known from her previous journeys, and imagined that after grafting the same microbiota as a Pygmy, she will experience fascinating changes in her mental states: “[C]ould I, in turn, also learn to feel the forest environment as my Pygmy friend does, thanks to the transplant of his internal ecosystem?” (Laval-Jeantet 159). As it turned out, the experience was quite exceptional: “It was followed by brutal colic, a violent eviction of this Indigenous world by my European internal ecosystem” (159). It seems that microbiotic multiplicity is not always a good thing and it might lead to lethal contagion; moreover, it might be one of the reasons why people in this geographical place die young.

However, in the second project “Holy Coli, The Mice in Odor of Sanctity” the transformation of the microbiota was more favorable for the host. The project aimed to transform the microbiota of a mouse with genetically modified *E. coli* that makes mouse faeces smell of violet. In this way the figure of the mouse is elevated to a certain holiness because it is an animal which is most often used in laboratory research to save humans. It was Haraway who noticed this sacred dimension of experimentation when describing the special case of the Oncomouse, a genetically modified mouse, which carries an activated oncogene and which was intentionally created to research breast cancer. In Haraway’s interpretation, the Oncomouse is both a scapegoat and a secular Christian figure which will be sacrificed to find a cure for breast cancer and possibly save many women—other mammal beings (Haraway, *Modest Witness* 79). “Holy Coli,” then, suggests that the smell of violet potentially changes the status of the laboratory animal and restores it to its own existence. The project also suggests that in some medical or biological situations human bodies and animal bodies are interchangeable, transgressing the boundaries of the insular biological individual.

Thus, both performances imply a certain “logic of contamination,” to use Jacques Derrida’s term, by establishing new experimental conditions. The performance “May the Horse Live in Me” and “May the Rain Forest Live in Me” created conditions in which the artist’s body and her immune system became the place of negotiations with other species. The artist was trying to induce a certain tolerance to the other species, or to other ethnic groups into her own body and in this sense invented a new level of immune (re)cognition. In a similar manner, the performance “Holy Coli” invented an experimental space where human and animal bodies become interchangeable. In both cases the immunity system is not a defensive

mechanism protecting the “self” from the contagious “other” but an ecological network expressing the relationships between the organism and the environment. Tauber argues that in the future biology should create a model of ecological immunity examining the ways in which human and nonhuman animals shape and create their environment. As Tauber points out,

[o]lder understandings of immune identity based on autonomous, insular animals in competition with others omit the crucial mechanisms of tolerance and that allow organisms to live as a holobiont. And to study such aggregates, eco-immunology shifts from the individual-based conceptions that have dominated the life sciences to considerations of the dialectical relationships that require tolerant mechanisms to mediate beneficial exchanges. (221)

Understood in this way, the notion of immunity takes its place within ecological sciences. Any organism—human or nonhuman—is an assemblage which is constantly changing according to its environment. Moreover, it can manipulate its environment in such a way as to create most profitable conditions.

CONCLUSION: BACK TO AUTOPOIESIS

Thus, the immune system works both in internal circuits (creating and maintaining the holobiont) and in external circuits (negotiating with the environment). In this respect, as Cary Wolfe observes, there is an isomorphism between the immunological paradigm and the theory of self-referential autopoietic systems (108). Contrary to the understanding that autopoietic systems are closed and solipsistic, as Haraway claims, autopoietic systems work in two different directions: on the one hand, they are closed on the level of organization and seek to maintain their integrity; on the other hand, they are connected to the environment which triggers some changes in their structure. Thus, autopoietic systems are organizationally closed but structurally open at the same time. As Evan Thompson points out: “That organization must remain invariant—otherwise the organism dies—but the only way autopoiesis can stay in place is through the incessant material flux of metabolism. In other words, the operational *closure* of autopoiesis demands that the organism be an *open system*” (85). The idea that a living being responds to the environment and can even affect it in a certain way, led to the conclusion that a living being is interrelated to its environment through a “structural coupling.” This insight challenges Darwin’s theory of adaptation because the organism is not simply adapting to the environment

but is also actively manipulating it. The idea that living beings can manipulate and change their environment allows Maturana and Varela to argue that self-organizing activity, expressed at different levels of life, is a mental activity: “Living systems are cognitive systems, and living as a process is a process of cognition. This statement is valid for all organisms, with and without a nervous system” (13). Living systems are cognitive systems in the sense that they change their environment. All living beings interact with their environment in a cognitive way and create preferable conditions for their own being.

This twofold functioning of the autopoietic system is similar to the functioning of the immune system: on the one hand, the immune system has to keep the organism’s “identity,” its internal organization; on the other hand, to remain what it is, it has to constantly negotiate its boundaries and connect to its environment. In this sense immunity necessarily involves a certain immune-knowledge, the investigation and cognition of other beings. However, to know these other beings, the immune system has to incorporate them, to introduce them in the form of an antigen which is recognized by a specific antibody. In this sense immunity is an open and changing network, incorporating and negotiating otherness. The fact that immunity can be induced artificially makes it conceptually isomorphic to the practices of bioart: bioart creates unique conditions which help to establish “structural couplings” with other species and in this way induces them into our environment. Thus, the artistic practices discussed above work in a similar way to the practices of vaccination: they introduce a certain part of a foreign element and force the performer to cope with it, to accept it as a part of its autopoietic system. Instead of explaining this interaction in terms of symbiosis we can interpret them as the interaction between different autopoietic systems, which maintain their integrity but are simultaneously open to structural changes.

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Echoes of Rituals of Initiation and Blood Sacrifice in *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad

ABSTRACT

In *Heart of Darkness*, the protagonist Kurtz, of whom we do not, in fact, see much, is shown as connected with a native “sorcerer,” a “witch-man,” who had “antelope horns” on his head. Antelopes, or goats, are typical sacrificial animals, and the protagonist of this novella is a European who perishes in the midst of tropical forests, in spite of the high hopes that accompany his decision to try his luck in an exotic environment. Kurtz has promising beginnings, but later he gradually degenerates, carrying out what may be called a reversal of the ritual of initiation, comparable to the inverted ritual, to use V. Propp’s term, in folklore. In this sense, he may be regarded as a counterpoint to Conrad himself whose life can easily be described as a modern and uncommonly successful enactment of the same ritual. Meanwhile, Kurtz’s, and to a lesser extent also Marlow’s, failure as initiates is inscribed in the failure of the European civilization to construct a European empire in Africa.

Keywords: ritual, initiation, sacrifice, Conrad, Kurtz, identity, folklore.

1

Let me start with some remarks concerning the phenomenon and ritual of initiation, so that some aspects of it can be singled out that may be used in an analysis of Joseph Conrad's remarkable life trajectory and also in an approach to one of his most important works, *Heart of Darkness*.

It is clear enough that an initiatory experience was of crucial importance for Conrad, a writer who managed to almost completely change both his way of life and his cultural identity. It is an experience that consists in dying to one mode of life and in becoming reborn to another. As Mircea Eliade asserts: "All the myths of re-birth or resurrection, or the symbols they imply, bear witness to the novice having entered a new mode of existence, inaccessible to those who have not gone through trials of initiation, who have not experienced death" (18).¹ The very title of Conrad's masterpiece *Heart of Darkness* may be reminiscent of the idea of a death-like, or near-death, experience, such as being devoured by a huge monster, as an important ingredient of the ritual of initiation. In his familiar circular interpretations of the Hero's Journey, Joseph Campbell refers to this experience as "the belly of the whale," an obvious allusion to the biblical story of Jonah:

[The threshold guardians] illustrate the fact that the devotee at the moment of entry into a temple undergoes a metamorphosis. His secular character remains without; he sheds it, as a snake its slough. Once inside he may be said to have died to time and returned to the World Womb, the World Navel, the Earthly Paradise. . . . Allegorically, then, the passage into a temple and the hero-dive through the jaws of the whale are identical adventures, both denoting in picture language, the life-centering, life-renewing act. (Campbell, *Hero* 92)

Darkness is naturally an important aspect of the belly of the whale experience. In the words of Joseph Campbell: "You enter the forest at the darkest point, where there is no path. Where there is a way or path, it is someone else's path. You are not on your own path. If you follow someone else's way, you are not going to realize your potential" (Campbell, *Hero* 5). Pathlessness then, a feeling of having become lost in darkness, and of utter confusion and disorientation, is a precondition for finding one's way, and also a guarantee that this will be one's own true way, that is, the one willed by God, or destiny. As we can see, the initiatory death is not normally a real death: Jonah, having been swallowed by a whale, eventually emerges hale and hearty. In some cases, the death may seem to be real, but it is

¹ All translations from Mircea Eliade from the original French into English are mine.

followed by some kind of resurrection, as evident in the Egyptian myth of Osiris, the god of fertility and afterlife, who could return to life, having been killed, by his brother Set, and even torn into pieces (see Campbell, *Hero* 92).

As for the change of one's identity, let me provide another quotation from Eliade concerning the initiation of adolescent boys among Aboriginal Australians: "Since an Australian tribe is divided into two 'intermarrying classes,' the class A is made responsible for the initiation of the young men belonging to the class B, and vice versa. So the novices are being initiated by their potential fathers in law" (28). Assuming that similar practices were also observed among other so-called primitive tribes, which is what Eliade suggests (see Eliade 28) by stating that the Australian initiatory customs represent an archaic form of the ritual, it is obvious that the novice, or rather the initiand, was not initiated by his closest adult kinsmen but rather by relative strangers, the purpose of which is clearly to avoid the harmful effects of inbreeding, so that his initiation has, so to speak, both a vertical and a horizontal dimension. By the vertical dimension, I mean being recruited into the group of one's hierarchically superior elders, and by the horizontal one I mean becoming accustomed to a different social group, different because less closely related and/or inhabiting a more distant area. This horizontal initiation may naturally be of great help in the initiate's later married life. It is also clear enough that both dimensions must sometimes be combined with each other: the tribesmen from the other intermarrying class, conducting the initiation, will also be socially superior in relation to the initiand. Naturally, there is also a temporal and historical dimension to the ritual of initiation, an attempt to recover what had happened *in illo tempore* (in those days), with its organizers often being concerned with recreating the mythical events happening in a dim and distant past, such as the mythical heroes' exploits that motivate and justify the ritual (see Eliade 30–33).

2

Another important and dynamic aspect of initiation, concerned particularly with myths and folktales echoing this ritual, is what Vladimir Propp used to call the inversion of the ritual, which, as I am going to show, can also be applied to an interpretation of the plot of *Heart of Darkness*:

Between the ritual and the wondertale there is one important difference. In the ritual it is the youth's eyes that are plastered with a sticky substance, in the wondertale the same happens to the hag, or other

similar characters. In other words, the myth or the wonder tale represents a precise inversion of the ritual. Why has such an inversion taken place?

The ritual was something terrible and dreadful for children and their mothers, but it was regarded as necessary, which is why the one who took part in it gained something that could be called the magic power over the animal, the ritual was thus characteristic of the primitive hunting. The moment, however, the weapons became more accomplished, and agriculture was introduced, the new system of social organization made the old cruel rituals appear unnecessary and accursed, they turn, as it were, against their own perpetrators. If, during the ritual, the youth was blinded by the creature that tortures him and threatens to devour him, the myth, liberated from the ritual, becomes a means of protest. Something similar takes place in the case of the motif of burning, in the ritual, the children are being “burned,” while in the wondertale, it is the children that burn the hag. (Propp, *Historical* C74)²

It follows, then, that the original master of the initiation (sometimes called the *guru*), ideally fulfilling the role of a stern but benevolent examiner, may undergo—especially in stories not necessarily closely related to the genuine ritual—a transformation into an enemy. Propp is referring, for example, to the early form of the fabulous fiery dragon, the classic enemy of the hero, having been originally a positive and helpful character (see Propp, *Historical* 309–10). Hence the ambiguity of Campbell’s devouring monster, which Campbell himself apparently has not noticed. In the popular Hansel and Gretel fairy tales, usually known in the Grimms’ version, it is the children who, metaphorically speaking, “devour” the monstrous witch, by shoving her into the oven, instead of letting themselves be eaten by her, which is what she clearly intends to do. It can easily be noticed that the concept of the inversion of the ritual destroys the relatively static and conservative scheme of the initiatory ritual and introduces an element of rebellion connected with the generation gap. It is a feature of the traditional fairy tale that it sides with the young and the underprivileged. In the words of Max Lüthi: “The blind, the disinherited, the youngest, the orphaned, the gone astray—such are the true heroes of the fairy tale because they are isolated and therefore better prepared for making essential connections” (61).³ This rebellious element does not, however, lead to revolutionary consequences; it is concerned with rejuvenating the existing system rather than abolishing it. The hero, in spite of his usually humble origin, may become a king but this does not betoken a political change of any kind.

² The translation of this passage from Polish into English is mine.

³ The translation of this quotation from Lüthi from the original German into English is mine.

At this point, it should be emphasized that Propp's conception of the inversion of the ritual refers not only to the initiation ritual but also to the sacrificial one:

Formerly it was customary to kill aged people, but the wondertale narrates how an old man was spared. During the time that this custom existed, a person who showed mercy to the old man would have been held up to ridicule, perhaps castigated, or even punished; in the wondertale, the person who shows mercy to the old man is depicted as a praiseworthy hero who acts wisely. Similarly, it was customary to sacrifice a virgin to the river whose flood ensured good crops. This would be done at the beginning of sowing and was supposed to facilitate the growth of the vegetation. But in the wondertale, the maiden is rescued from the monster by the hero. As long as the ritual existed, such a "liberator" would have been torn to pieces as the greatest of profaners. as one who jeopardized the well-being of the people, the crops. . . . But with the decay of the once sacred system, the custom in which the virgin went (sometimes willingly) to her death became needless and repugnant, and the role of the protagonist switched to the former profaner who interfered with the sacrifice. (Propp, *Theory* 107)

This ritual, involving human sacrifice, was widely practiced in Europe and in the Mediterranean in the Neolithic age to be later replaced with animal sacrifice, as is graphically represented in the well-known Biblical story of Abraham's unaccomplished sacrifice of his son Isaac, who is about to be killed when an alternative appears in the shape of a ram. In some versions of the story of Iphigenia, the daughter of Agamemnon, the king of Mycenae, the goddess Artemis substitutes her for a deer and thus saves her life, which is naturally analogous to the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac. This inversion is clearly of a less radical character than the previous one. If it were similarly radical, Abraham and Agamemnon would have been sacrificed instead of the sacrificial animal. Both inversions side firmly with the younger generation. Unfortunately, Propp does not say anything about the substitute animal that is eventually sacrificed, probably because this motif does not appear in folklore.

3

It seems possible to represent Joseph Conrad's life as a process of initiation understood in keeping with Eliade's formula of "entering a new mode of existence" (Eliade 18). The whole of Conrad's life is characterized by attempts, on the whole remarkably successful ones, to abandon one

way of life and embrace another. What I principally mean is his passage from the condition of a member of the Polish-Ukrainian landed gentry to that of a British sea captain. Did this shift signify a complete overhaul, or metamorphosis, of his personality? Did Conrad actually become an Englishman, forsaking his Polish identity? He himself addressed these questions and suggested that the correct answer was both yes and no: "My point of view, both on land and sea, is English, but it should not be concluded that I have become an Englishman. It is not so. *Homo duplex* (The double man) has, in my case, more than one meaning" (Conrad, *Listy* 223; Dąbrowska 181).⁴ The idea of "homo duplex" can be associated with the thought of Emile Durkheim:

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These two aspects of our psychic life thus oppose one another as the personal and impersonal. There is, within us, a being that represents everything to itself by relation to itself, from its own point of view, and that is concerned, in what it does, only with itself. But there is also another, within us, that knows things *sub specie aeternitatis*, as if it draws on another thought than our own, and that at the same time strives to achieve ends that go beyond it. The old formula *Homo duplex* is therefore verified by the facts, far from us being straightforward, our internal life has something of a double centre of gravity. On the one hand, there is our individuality, and more especially our body, that is its foundation, on the other, everything that within ourselves expresses something other than ourselves. (37)

Durkheim's conception may easily be confused with Freud's more famous distinction between "id," "ego" and "super-ego," but they are hardly the same. Freud's super-ego, while being the highest level of an individual's psyche, is based on such essentially negative notions as repression, prohibition and punishment, while for Durkheim the social side of *homo duplex* consists in the positive idea of overcoming, or "going beyond," the limitations of the individual side.

Naturally, we don't know whether Conrad spoke of a *homo duplex* in the strictly Durkheimian sense of this notion, even though he could have known the French sociologist's basic ideas before he wrote the above-mentioned letter. It would have been perhaps more sensible to assume that Conrad had in mind simply that he saw himself as being partly Polish and partly English without suggesting which aspect of his personality was superior or inferior (as in the distinction between ego and super-ego),

⁴ Dąbrowska claims that this passage is from a 1902 letter to Kazimierz Waliszewski, while in Najder's edition of Conrad's letters it is included in a letter to Kazimierz Waliszewski dated 5 December 1903. The translation of this passage from the Polish original is mine.

more individual, or more social. But such a solution seems too simple, especially in view of what Maria Dąbrowska says about the development of this writer's creative personality.

We have to reckon with some rather peculiar and contradictory statements by Conrad himself concerning his command of the English language. On the one hand, he remarked that "my faculty to write in English is as natural as any other aptitude with which I might have been born" (Hervouet 242),⁵ but, on the other hand, he could also state: "In writing, I wrestle painfully with that language which I feel I do not possess, but which possesses me—alas" (Hervouet 242). Dąbrowska has commented on this as follows:

On the basis of the above words, we may conclude that Conrad's attitude towards English was so profound as if this were his beloved mother tongue. This is because one's own for Conrad could only be something conquered. Neither the Polish language nor French, however much he loved both of them, could have the status of something conquered. (Dąbrowska 127)⁶

Conrad's *homo duplex* is, then, a rather paradoxical creature, reminiscent of a hermit crab, that can only properly inhabit and domesticate a space that is far away from one's home and from one's original environment, a foreign space that needs to be acquired and conquered. In other words, for him, only a home away from home can constitute a proper home, which, however, does not make him forget about his old home. As a result, he could think of himself as, apparently, a Pole and an Englishman in one, or rather a creature with a Polish heart but an English worldview. We could already see, in the first section of the present article, that such an attitude corresponds, to some extent, to the initiatory principle of "entering a new mode of existence," and the horizontal dimension of initiation, even though the formula of *homo duplex* allowed Conrad to emphasize both the element of change and that of continuity. This does not mean, however, that those two aspects of his personality, the Polish and the English, were perfectly harmonized with each other, which is what his partly contradictory statements bear witness to. This circumstance signals what might be called a disturbed process of initiation which can hardly be described as an accomplished passage from one mode of existence to another.

Dąbrowska also writes interestingly about the special affinity between Conrad and the English language: "I assume that something much more

⁵ This sentence originally comes from Conrad's text *Personal Record*. See *The Mirror of the Sea & A Personal Record*.

⁶ The translation of all quotations from Dąbrowska into English are mine.

fundamental took place here, that is, the fact of discovering a peculiar affinity between the non-intellectual part of Conrad's spirituality and the intricate English idiom sharing some characteristics with the babble and the murmur of the ocean's waves" (126). If we take Dąbrowska's rather puzzling perception at face value, it appears that the call of the sea, in Conrad's case, was also the call of the English language: it seems that the ocean spoke English (the language whose sound uncannily resembles that of the waves breaking on the shore) to the Polish seaman and demanded that he become an English writer. This may sound both mystical and mystifying but it corresponds to a radical and dialectic interpretation of initiation—not so much as a vertical movement to join the society of one's social betters, but rather as a horizontal movement beyond one's original environment which, however, manages to preserve, on a deeper level, the essential unity between one's old and new selves. In this case, we are dealing with the phenomenon of a man, who, while being a son of the Ukrainian steppes, becomes, as a British sailor, "a son of the waves."⁷ The similarity between those two environments, notwithstanding all the obvious differences, has long been noticed by Conradian scholars. As Witold Chwalewik remarks: "For a group of Polish early romantics (the so-called Polish-Ukrainian school) the wide spaces of Conrad's native countryside, the Podolian 'ocean of dry land' had become an image of infinity, charged with all kinds of intimations more usually associated with the sea" (32). The sea, then, is a new, acquired, version of the native steppe, just as the English language (and culture) becomes a new, acquired object of affection and identification that does not erase the old loyalty to the Polish language and culture. The two seem, in fact, almost to grow into one, hence Conrad's surprising statement that he felt as if he had been born into English.

The process of, as it were, growing into a foreign language is characteristically described by Conrad as adoption:

I have a strange and overpowering feeling that it had always been an inherent part of myself. English was for me neither a matter of choice nor adoption. The merest idea of choice had never entered my head. And as to adoption—well, yes, there was adoption; but it was I who was adopted by the genius of the language. (Joseph Conrad, *A Personal Record*)

Adoption is a good synonym of initiation understood as gaining admittance to a new society. Conrad here correctly points to his sentiment of being

⁷ This is of course an allusion to the official march of the Royal Navy, i.e. *Heart of Oak*, coming from around the year 1760, and containing the line: "For who are so free as the sons of the waves?"

adopted by an originally foreign factor. Here this factor is “the genius of the language” but a national (and in this case increasingly also international) language such as English is, like every other national language, an equivalent of the spirit of that nation.

4

There is also the question of another language in this configuration, namely French. The French language, of which Conrad had a near-native command, could not, apparently, fulfil the role of a new and initiatory object of affection because he acquired it almost in the same way as he learned his native Polish and still as a child. So it was indeed an object of affection, but on a par with Polish—that is, unsuitable as the expression of a new, painfully acquired initiatory identity. As a native speaker of two languages, he eventually opted for a third one, thus becoming, in a sense, a *homo triplex*.⁸ This might point to the function of English in Conrad's life, which does not emerge from the previous, dualistic considerations based on the opposition between Polish and English. According to Jean C. Cooper, “Plato says that two is a digit without meaning since it implies relationship, which introduces the third factor” (114). Duality, and the number two, are often indeed associated with conflict, the third factor is needed to introduce some equilibrium or stability. Aristotle apparently insisted that “[t]he Triad is the number of the whole, inasmuch as it contains a beginning, a middle and an end” (Cooper 114). As such, the English language can be thought of as the logical third element, the *tertium quid*, that makes sense of Conrad's being, as it were, divided between his two native languages of which French could be, after all, called pseudo-native because, unlike, for example, Chopin, Conrad had no family ties with France and only spent four years there. This triadic symbolism corresponds quite well to the three stages of Conrad's life: the first seventeen years spent in Ukraine and Poland (1857–74), then the four rather dramatic and unsuccessful years which he spent mainly in Southern France (1874–78), already serving as a sailor, and finally, the long period from 1878 to the writer's death in 1924, when he was first connected with the British navy and then—particularly after he abandoned his career at sea in 1894—with Britain itself.

It should be noted that Propp's conception of the inversion of the sacrificial ritual is also triadic in spirit. A full inversion would have

⁸ Conrad had also good working knowledge of German and Russian, but they were clearly not the languages close to his heart.

been binary and would have consisted in the sacrificial victim becoming a victimizer, the one who puts to death those who wanted to kill him or her as an act of live sacrifice. Instead, a compromise solution is found and it is the third factor, the substitute animal, that is killed. Eliade also conceives of initiation in a triadic manner. His reflections on the practice of subincision—particularly common among Aboriginal Australians—as part of the initiation point in the direction of the male initiate's imitating "the divine totality" on the level of which the features, even the basic biological characteristics, of the two genders coalesce into one (cf. Eliade 67–73). This does not mean of course that the initiate truly becomes a transgender, or mixed gender, person. The temporary assumption of the features of the opposite gender should rather be seen as an expression of the yearning for perfection consisting in overcoming binary differences of all kinds.

5

Conrad's "belly of the whale"—the lowest and most traumatic point of his life which could also mark a new beginning—might be identified as his mysterious and on the whole unfortunate love affair, during his stay in Marseilles, which culminated, in 1878, in his attempted suicide, by shooting himself in the heart, camouflaged as a duel,⁹ possibly also motivated by his reckless running into debt (Adamowicz-Pośpiech 99–112). It is largely as a result of these events that the young Conrad decided to become a British sailor. At this point, we should mention Conrad's most prominent "master of the initiation": his maternal uncle Tadeusz Bobrowski, who, in a sense, replaced the writer's parents, both of whom died when Conrad was still a child. The uncle supplied his nephew with money: in fact a steady flow of substantial sums, as Bobrowski was a practical man and quite rich. Moreover, he was extremely fond of his nephew, even though he could occasionally be very stern and censorious towards him, which, perhaps, we should not marvel at, considering that the young Conrad was not practical at all and often acted carelessly with money. Let me quote a passage from Bobrowski's letter (unfortunately, none of Conrad's letters to him have survived) concerning, among other things, the shooting incident:

You've spent the whole year idling around, you've run up debts, you deliberately shot yourself at the worst time of the year, whereas I have, tired and in a hurry, paid your debts at the worst exchange rate imaginable, spending around two thousand roubles. Moreover, I have increased your

⁹ In the classical biography of Conrad by Róża Jabłkowska, published in 1961, the author is still in two minds as to whether this was a suicide or a duel. See Jabłkowska (42).

allowance, taking your needs into account. All this is apparently too little for you. (Helsztyński 41)¹⁰

Here it seems that the master of the initiation is on the point of turning into the initiand's worst enemy, even though the latter's near-death experience (and it was indeed a very near-death experience) caused no lasting damage to the young man's health. The apparently growing rift between the uncle and the nephew was, however, soon healed, considering that Conrad mended his ways, and became more disciplined, purposeful and hard-working, which coincided with his joining the British merchant navy, initially as an ordinary sailor, later becoming a first officer and a captain.

No doubt his first years in the British navy were also a difficult time. Helsztyński writes of this period:

The spoiled young man transformed, partly of necessity and partly of his own will, into a physical worker dealing with ropes and sails, carrying heavy sacks on his own back, and what is more, enjoying the company of simple fellows and understanding the necessity of climbing all the rungs of a seaman's career including that of a physical worker. (42)

But it was apparently his African experience, in the Belgian Congo, at a much later stage of his career, in the year 1890, that had the strongest initiatory value in his life, hence the statement in one of his letters: "Before the expedition to Congo I was a mere animal" (Helsztyński 45).

6

Ivo Vidan (1927–2003), a Croatian Anglicist, singles out "stories with the theme of initiation" (20) in Conrad's output and mentions under this heading *The Nigger of the "Narcissus," Youth, The Secret Sharer, A Smile of Fortune, The Shadow-Line* and *The Arrow of Gold*. He refers to *Heart of Darkness*, together with some other novels and short stories, as narratives that "contain an outer setting within which a story is told by a narrator who is himself not the hero of the story" (Vidan 21). I am not going to deny that the former group of novels are indeed based on the theme of initiation, but the same theme is also clearly present in the second group. Vidan himself alludes to it by stating that "[i]n fact, the relationship between the narrator and the hero is often the source of tension, which in a way illuminates the moral core of the central anecdote, and reveals

¹⁰ All quotations from Helsztyński are translated from Polish into English by myself.

the human significance of the story” (21). This tension is analogous to the tension and the relationship between the initiate and the master of initiation, where Marlow plays the father-like role of the latter, as can be seen, if we continue with the above quotation:

The relationships of Marlow with Kurtz and with Jim are good examples of such a situation. Marlow is in an ambiguous way attracted by Kurtz, and during the whole of his story about his journey he suggests some kind of potential moral identity between himself and Kurtz. In the same way in *Lord Jim* Marlow is constantly aware of an inherent human possibility of collapse in a test. Jim’s case makes him realize that there is always a danger that under particular circumstances a man might fail to stand up and face the exigences of the moment. (Vidan 21–22)

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The case of Marlow and Lord Jim is apparently more obvious than that of Marlow and Kurtz. Marlow is to some extent Jim’s spiritual father who discreetly watches his progress and his being tested, even though, unlike in the classic initiatory event, he is not the one to organize the testing of the hero. The situation in *Heart of Darkness* is more difficult and the connection between Marlow and Kurtz is much more tenuous; yet the suggestion that there could be “some kind of potential moral identity” between them relates to what some might perceive as the ultimate purpose of initiation:

You have to feel that what you call yourself is just another name for your Master. A feeling of indivisible oneness must be established between the Guru’s consciousness and the disciple’s consciousness. You may say that what you have and what you are, you are giving to the Guru. But if you are living inside the Guru, then there is no giving and no taking. There is nothing to give and nothing to take. There is only the feeling of growing inside the Guru’s heart. (Sri Chinmoy)

This conception of initiation, conceived of as a process of going beyond the limits of one’s selfhood and merging with other minds or things, apparently clashes with the conception of initiation as individuation: “The integral relationship between initiation and individuation can be grasped through the essential logic of the entire process of evolution. From the standpoint of matter, the logic of transformation involves increasing heterogeneity, differentiation and complexity” (Raghavan).

Heart of Darkness is filled with intimations that can be associated with various aspects of initiation. The kind of darkness where no familiar path can be discerned, where no path at all can be found, may indeed be described as “the darkest point,” the heart of darkness. It is doubtful, however, whether the experience of that sombre place is conducive to

the realization of any character's potential in the novel. As for Kurtz, the initiatory near-death experience in a radically unfamiliar place turns out to be his death pure and simple, and one does not wish it otherwise seeing that his contact with the African "darkness" brought about his degeneration rather than regeneration. The name "Kurtz," that is "the short one," may be interpreted as an allusion to his regenerative cycle being cut short, midway through his perilous journey.

The novel begins with a vision of London as a sombre and gloomy place:

In the offing the sea and the sky were welded together without a joint. . . . A haze rested on the low shores that ran out to sea in vanishing flatness. The air was dark above Gravesend, and farther back still seemed condensed into a mournful gloom, brooding motionless over the biggest, and the greatest, town on earth. (47)

Gravesend is a strategic little town at the end of the estuary of the Thames where the Port of London meets the outer sea, a place where culture ends and nature begins. Conrad's vision of London brings together the sky, the sea and the city itself in one mournful and gloomy whole. London is referred to not only as the biggest, but also as the greatest, city in the world; it is the true centre, a place that deserves to be the centre, and yet it is overcast and covered with mist as if the forces of nature were inimical to it.

The topic of darkness and paradoxical light that harmonizes with darkness is also strongly emphasized in the following sentence:

And at last, in its curved and imperceptible fall, the sun sank low, and from glowing white changed to a dull red without rays and without heat, as if about to go out suddenly, stricken to death by the touch of that gloom brooding over a crowd of men. . . . And farther west on the upper reaches the place of the monstrous town was still marked ominously on the sky, a brooding gloom in sunshine, a lurid glare under the stars. (*Heart of Darkness* 48–49)

The "monstrous town" of London may be an echo of Milton's infernal "dungeon horrible" (see *Paradise Lost* 1, 61) (213), and it may also be associated with Campbell's monstrous whale, but actually what we get is a tribute to the greatness of London and of England, which may be interpreted as an ardent expression of Conrad's "acquired" English patriotism:

The tidal current runs to and fro in its unceasing service, crowded with memories of men and ships it had borne to the rest of home or to the battles of the sea. It had known and served all the men of whom the

nation is proud, from Sir Francis Drake to Sir John Franklin, knights all, titled and untitled—the great knights-errant of the sea. It had borne all the ships whose names are like jewels flashing in the night of time, from the Golden Hind returning with her round flanks full of treasure, to be visited by the Queen's Highness and thus pass out of the gigantic tale, to the Erebus and Terror, bound on other conquests—and that never returned. (*Heart of Darkness* 48–49)

Sir Francis Drake, a highly successful sailor, one of the first who circumnavigated the globe, stands for the glory of early colonial England, while Sir John Franklin symbolizes the tragic, but still heroic, side of geographical exploration, leading the ill-fated expedition intended to conquer the North-West passage in 1845, which ended in the loss of the two ships: the Erebus and Terror, and of the men aboard them. Thus the estuary of the Thames is shown as a birth canal that produces both triumphant and tragic heroes. Conrad, as a *homo duplex* (a double man), represents England, his alternative and acquired motherland as a *terra duplex* (a double country).

A similar dialectic is evident in another passage dedicated to England, this time from *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*:

At night the headlands retreated, the bays advanced into one unbroken line of gloom. The lights of the earth mingled with the lights of heaven; and above the tossing lanterns of a trawling fleet a great lighthouse shone steadily, like an enormous riding light burning above a vessel of fabulous dimensions. Below its steady glow, the coast, stretching away straight and black, resembled the high side of an indestructible craft riding motionless upon the immortal and unresting sea. The dark land lay alone in the midst of waters, like a mighty ship bestarred with vigilant lights—a ship carrying the burden of millions of lives—a ship freighted with dross and with jewels, with gold and with steel. She towered up immense and strong, guarding priceless traditions and untold suffering, sheltering glorious memories and base forgetfulness, ignoble virtues and splendid transgressions. A great ship! For ages had the ocean battered in vain her enduring sides; she was there when the world was vaster and darker, when the sea was great and mysterious, and ready to surrender the prize of fame to audacious men. A ship mother of fleets and nations! The great flagship of the race; stronger than the storms! and anchored in the open sea. (121)

This is apparently a piece of almost jingoistic rhetoric, but the triumphant vision of England as “the great flagship of the race”¹¹ is carefully qualified

¹¹ The word “race” probably refers here to the Anglo-Saxon race, or rather the totality of English speaking nations, not the Germanic, or Nordic, race, as someone might perhaps think.

by a series of rather negative terms: “the dark land” contrasted with “a great lighthouse,” “untold suffering” contrasted with “priceless traditions,” “dross” contrasted with “jewels,” “base forgetfulness” contrasted with “glorious memories.” Finally, we have a rather strange phrase: “ignoble virtues and splendid transgressions,” where we would rather expect splendid virtues and ignoble transgressions. It seems as though Conrad wanted in this way to emphasize the strangeness of this mixture of the base and the sublime that he found, as a foreigner, in England.

7

Heart of Darkness naturally presents a much more skeptical vision of England, or rather Britain, as it was when the ancient Romans first arrived there more than twenty centuries ago, a vision that begins with Marlow's words: “And this also has been one of the dark places of the earth” (49). And this is how he describes the parlous conditions awaiting the new conquerors:

Imagine him here—the very end of the world, a sea the colour of lead, a sky the colour of smoke, a kind of ship about as rigid as a concertina—and going up this river with stores, or orders, or what you like. Sandbanks, marshes, forests, savages,—precious little to eat fit for a civilized man, nothing but Thames water to drink. No Falernian wine here, no going ashore. Here and there a military camp lost in a wilderness, like a needle in a bundle of hay—cold, fog, tempests, disease, exile, and death—death skulking in the air, in the water, in the bush. They must have been dying like flies here. Oh, yes—he did it. Did it very well, too, no doubt, and without thinking much about it either, except afterwards to brag of what he had gone through in his time, perhaps. They were men enough to face the darkness. (50–51)

In the Roman parallel, we seem to first encounter the distant temporal perspective to which Eliade refers in his description of initiation, as an act of “recovering the mythical sacred time” (Eliade 31). But, in this description, the sacred time, the *in illo tempore*, is the time of the forefathers, mythical heroes, or even gods thought of as forefathers, avatars and progenitors of the actual fathers and masters of initiation. The new time is reinvigorated, as it were, owing to this connection with the ideal past. But in *Heart of Darkness*, the forefathers of the English are not shown as great heroes or masters of initiation; rather, they appear either as initiands, in need of acculturation, of being raised from the barbarous condition to a state of civilization, or as creatures of darkness, spreading death, as part and parcel of ancient Britain

seen as a devouring monster. Here, then, is a Conradian variety of Propp's inversion of the ritual, where, as we may remember, the beneficial and lordly masters of initiation become transformed into forces of darkness. It was usual in the 19th century to compare the British Empire with the ancient Roman Empire (see Brunt 267) so that the British could appear worthy successors to the Romans. The idea was particularly attractive in view of the fact that the Romans were seen as an extinct nation that died out together with their empire. The pretensions of the Italians to the name of the new Romans were often dismissed by pointing to the inability of the Italians, for many centuries, to unite Italy, let alone construct anything that could resemble the old Roman Empire. Conrad may have taken this idea seriously but he also noticed its less flattering and ironical aspect. The existence of Roman Britain meant that the proud successors were once servants and slaves, or at best disciples, to their precursors. Naturally, Conrad could not predict that the British Empire, in comparison with the Roman one, would prove a rather ephemeral phenomenon.

How should we, in this context, assess the statement with which Marlow summarizes what can be called the matter of the Empire, which is the central motif in *Heart of Darkness*?:

The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea—something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to[.] (51–52)

The first sentence in the above quotation is, from the modern point of view, politically correct and it gets often quoted as a negative assessment of European colonialism. But what follows is not so correct at all. Marlow, and presumably Conrad, whose porte-parole Marlow seems to be, allude to some idea that can “redeem” colonialism and empire building. It is perhaps characteristic of Conrad that we are left in the dark as to what this idea may actually be. What we are told is that it is “unselfish” and connected with a “sacrifice.” The idea in question could of course be the conception of “the White Man’s burden,” meaning the colonialists’ (real or alleged) civilizing mission.¹² This idea may be thought of as playing the role of the *tertium quid*, that is of something that makes it possible, at least theoretically, to overcome the violent contradictions inherent in the idea of initiation.

¹² Incidentally, Rudyard Kipling’s well-known poem entitled “The White Man’s Burden,” which launched, defined and tried to defend the whole idea, was published almost simultaneously with the first instalment of *Heart of Darkness*, in February 1899.

Lillian Feder in her article “Marlow’s Descent into Hell” convincingly compares *Heart of Darkness* to selected aspects of Virgil’s *Aeneid*, in particular to the motif of Aeneas’ descent into the Underworld. She also suggests that Marlow’s, and Conrad’s, “unselfish idea” should be connected with the heroism needed to construct an empire: “Implicit in Marlow’s remarks is the theme of the *Aeneid*, for Virgil is concerned with this ‘idea,’ the heroic goal as justification for Rome’s plunder and cruelty; moreover, Conrad, like Virgil, sees the tragic limitations of those dedicated to the heroic ideal” (282). Though she does not make it explicit, Feder appears to refer here to the famous words that Anchises, the father of Aeneas, directs to his son when the latter finds him in the underworld:

*Tu regere imperio populos, Romane, memento; // hae tibi erunt artes;
pacisque imponere morem, // parcere subiectis, et debellare superbos.*
(P. Vergilius Maro VI, 851–53)

Roman, be this thy care—these thy arts—to bear dominion over the nations and to impose the law of peace, to spare the humbled and to war down the proud! (Virgil VI.1151–54) (translated by John Jackson 108)

Peace can indeed be regarded as a positive fruit of empire building, something that may even be worth dying for. The problem, however, is that this peace is an imposed one, achieved by means of the so-called pacification, which usually involves a military campaign “to war down the proud.”

Aeneas’ visit to the Underworld is in itself a good example of the use of the motif of initiation in literature. The hero has to carry out a number of difficult and dangerous tasks before he can see the land of the dead and, even more importantly, return safely from it, which is an achievement reserved only for the greatest of the heroes of Greek and Roman mythology. As a result of this adventure, he gains some special and precious knowledge accessible only to initiates. This fact is recognized by Feder, who says: “In Virgil’s poem, Aeneas’ descent is part of his initiation for the role of leader of the Roman people” (281). What she does not recognize, however, is that Conrad’s equivalents of Aeneas and his father Anchises—that is, Kurtz and Marlow—have their roles reversed in relation to Virgil, and that it is an ironic reversal, assuming of course that it is possible to talk about Marlow as if he were Kurtz’s father. Aeneas is looking for his father in the underworld while in *Heart of Darkness* it is rather Marlow who is looking for Kurtz. Anchises has a prophetic message for Aeneas and the message concerns the glorious future of the Roman state while Kurtz’s message,

if it can be called a message, is entirely egocentric¹³ and its only prophetic aspect is a vision of horror. Kurtz's competence as someone entitled to bear a message of some importance is connected with his "belly of the whale" experience of utter darkness, also within himself, and his being a child of Europe, with Europe standing for the New Rome: "The original Kurtz had been educated partly in England, and—as he was good enough to say himself—his sympathies were in the right place. His mother was half-English, his father was half-French. All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz" (*Heart of Darkness* 108).

There is a similarity between Anchises' vision of the Roman Empire and Kurtz's private empire on the Congo, both are based on war and manslaughter, and Anchises does not try to hide it, while connecting it with the notion of glory, significantly absent in Conrad: "There stands he shall drive his car in victory to the Capitol heights—triumphant over Corinth, glorious from slaughtered Achaea" (Virgil 108).

Marlow leaves Kurtz behind, just as Aeneas left Anchises, who does not have to die, as he is already dead, even though very eloquent, and returns to Europe. It is perhaps prophetic on the part of Conrad that he treats Europe, at least in relation to Africa, as a whole, in spite of the fact that Europe in his times was hopelessly divided and on the brink of a war that, in effect, put an end to Europe's domination on the global scale. Marlow hardly returns as a conquering hero: to save some appearances he has to lie to Kurtz's fiancée, his "Intended," that Kurtz pronounced her name before he died. By lying, Marlow, in a sense, loses face, loses his integrity or individuality, which the initiation, in its ideal sense, was supposed to strengthen and consolidate. The ritual is indeed inverted, though not quite in the Proppian sense of the word, and even though it can be naturally claimed that Marlow gained something from his African experience and his encounter with Kurtz.

The overall impression of selfishness triumphing over selflessness is confirmed by the following description of an exploring society:

This devoted band called itself the Eldorado Exploring Expedition, and I believe they were sworn to secrecy. Their talk, however, was the talk of sordid buccaneers: it was reckless without hardihood, greedy without audacity, and cruel without courage; there was not an atom of foresight or of serious intention in the whole batch of them, and they did not seem aware these things are wanted for the work of the world. To tear treasure out of the bowels of the land was their desire, with no more moral purpose

¹³ I mean particularly the statement: "You should have heard him say, 'My ivory.' Oh, yes, I heard him. 'My Intended, my ivory, my station, my river, my—' everything belonged to him" (108).

at the back of it than there is in burglars breaking into a safe. Who paid the expenses of the noble enterprise I don't know; but the uncle of our manager was leader of that lot. (*Heart of Darkness* 82–83)

This is certainly a description of the theoretically superior and idealistic Europeans, who have turned, like Kurtz himself, into monsters whose vices are also monstrous in the sense that, unlike ordinary vices, they are devoid of at least partly redeeming qualities. It might be possible to think that Conrad's belief in "the idea" was based on the distinction that he, and also presumably Marlow, made between British colonialism, intent on introducing a Pax Britannica, modelled on Pax Romana, on the one hand, and Belgian and Dutch colonialism, on the other. He got to know the Dutch and Belgian colonies quite well and definitely did not like what he saw there. So the Netherlandic colonialism, based on naked materialism, would be the dark side of the more idealistic, though certainly not angelic, British colonialism. However, this line of thinking is contradicted by Conrad's insistence that Kurtz is a child of Europe as a whole, not just a small part of it.

Let us now look more closely at the character of Kurtz, who represents this Belgian colonialism, without being himself, strictly speaking, Belgian. His way of thinking in many ways archaic and ritualistic:

He began with the argument that we whites, from the point of development we had arrived at, "must necessarily appear to them [savages] in the nature of supernatural beings—we approach them with the might as of a deity," and so on, and so on. "By the simple exercise of our will we can exert a power for good practically unbounded," &c., &c. (*Heart of Darkness* 109)

Kurtz then sketches out a possible theoretical basis for Marlow's "idea," and this is an idea of a vast, collective initiation understood, first of all, as a vertical movement for the successful initiates to join up with the gods, or rather with the white fathers acting as an intermediary between the natural and supernatural world. Viewing the natives as children, and thus in need of being brought up, or civilized, also appears in Kipling's poem "The White Man's Burden":

Your new-caught sullen peoples,

Half devil and half child. (323)

The whites, in the same poem, are entreated to abandon childish ways themselves, since sticking to them would indeed be highly inappropriate for the masters of initiation:

Take up the White Man's burden—

Have done with childish days— (324)

It is, however, Kurtz who can occasionally display childish behaviour:

Sometimes he was contemptibly childish. He desired to have kings meet him at railway-stations on his return from some ghastly Nowhere, where he intended to accomplish great things. "You show them you have in you something that is really profitable, and then there will be no limits to the recognition of your ability," he would say. "Of course you must take care of the motives—right motives—always." (*Heart of Darkness* 133)

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It is easy to identify this form of childishness as an echo of a typical initiatory pattern, described in detail in Campbell's books. Kurtz imagines himself as returning home having accomplished a mission involving a near-death experience and having been given what Campbell calls "the ultimate boon," here referred to as "something that is really profitable," which, in some cases, may be the head of your enemy: "At once the hero Maui took hold of the giant Mahu-ika's head and cut it off, then he possessed himself of the treasure of the flame which he bestowed upon the world" (Campbell, *Hero* 184–85). What makes Kurtz's childishness contemptible is the fact that instead of being a monster slayer or a monster tamer, which is what he no doubt is in his own eyes, he has become a monster himself, a monster who is in need of being slain as a sacrifice. What is presented here seems to be a really radical inversion of the ritual. Not only do the masters of initiation turn into monsters, as in the classical Proppian scheme, but so does the initiate himself, even though at the beginning of his career he had all the features of an ingenu. As such, the natural question should be: who is the hero in this kind of situation, the one who successfully accomplishes the initiatory journey?

There is no such hero in *Heart of Darkness* unless we give this title to Marlow, whose success, as we saw above, can also be put into doubt. He is not a particularly heroic character, but he gives us his account of the trip to Congo and he manages to return from there—that is, from hell, just like Dante returning from his Inferno in *The Divine Comedy* and Aeneas returning from the Underworld. It is interesting to see how he is represented as a quasi-supernatural, semi-divine figure and compared to Buddha:

"Mind," he began again, lifting one arm from the elbow, the palm of the hand outwards, so that, with his legs folded before him, he had the pose of a Buddha preaching in European clothes and without a lotus flower— (*Heart of Darkness* 51)

Marlow ceased, and sat apart, indistinct and silent, in the pose of a meditating Buddha. (145)

He is treated, then, as a figure standing for wisdom, which is clearly a privilege for an initiate. His evocation of temporal depth with the help of his Roman parallel is certainly a prerogative of a master of initiation. Marlow is also an English gentleman who, unlike the crude egoist Kurtz, shows quite a lot of consideration for the feelings of others, as can be seen in his dealings with Kurtz's "Intended" after Kurtz's death, even though this gentlemanly quality is achieved at the cost of an outright lie. On the other hand, it should not escape our attention that the force that fulfils the basic heroic role, of getting rid of the monster, that is of Kurtz, in the first place, is Africa and the Black Africans, however undifferentiated and unindividualized they may be in this novel.

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To conclude, *Heart of Darkness* is a text that shows many affinities with the world of ancient myths and rituals, and some of these affinities are curiously adumbrated in the writer's biography. It was one of Dąbrowska's important intuitions to suggest that Conrad, in spite of certain appearances, was a religious writer in a broad sense of the word: "It is amazing that this great painter of visible reality . . . does not ascribe, in fact, any importance to that reality in our life. In this sense, this sceptic, probably religiously indifferent, was one of the deepest romantics and metaphysicians of literature" (Dąbrowska 74–75). The present essay is an attempt to show that the metaphysical dimension of Conrad's work is indeed important. It may be sought, of course, in some transformed version of Christian religious ideas. But I would argue that it initially connected with a more fundamental level of religious thinking, belonging primarily to the world of pagan beliefs and rituals. We should not forget that Conrad was exposed to animistic and magical thinking, for example during his time in the Malay Archipelago, but this is a matter of secondary importance, considering that ancient rituals, and their various patterns and aspects, are deeply engrained in the European mind. What Conrad managed to achieve, both as a man and in his creation of certain literary characters, was the feat of reconciling the initiation thought of as individuation, maturation, and becoming one's own master, with the initiation understood as spiritual unification with the master of initiation, or with some general "unselfish idea" that may have its metaphysical "redemptive" aspect. The character of Kurtz may be regarded as a study

of the consequences which inevitably follow, though certainly not always with the same severity, if you limit yourself only to the former conception of initiation. Kurtz's attempt to achieve mastery, being divorced, unlike Conrad's initiation, from any ambition to broaden his sympathy and understanding, leads eventually to his becoming a slave of his primordial instincts, an object of sacrifice, instead of an initiate, while the ritual initiation becomes here, in many senses, inverted.

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Narrating Wonder in Mark Anthony Jarman's Stories

ABSTRACT

Mark Anthony Jarman's characters are often down and out, and often wandering and wondering. Using theories of wonder, this essay argues that wonder plays a key role in many of Jarman's stories—stories that are marked not by narrative or psychological closure, but by a sense of wonder as characters muse on their lot in life. After briefly considering Jarman's role within Canadian literature, including his innovative approaches to the short story form, and his odd status as an influential yet often ignored writer, the essay moves to a discussion of the various ways that wonder is at play in his works, both as a verb and a state. Jarman's characters are frequently in doubt, and the act of wondering takes us into their drifting, self-reflecting minds. However, there is also the sense of wonder as the miraculous. Jarman's narrators find optimism in the world around them, thanks to flashes of the beauty of the unlikely. Wonder, thus, has a crucial structural function.

Keywords: wonder, Mark Anthony Jarman, short stories, Canadian literature, optimism.

NARRATING WONDER IN MARK ANTHONY JARMAN'S STORIES¹

Confronting something wonderful or marvellous, not to say miraculous, is shocking because it rips us out of the usual and the quotidian. As philosopher William Desmond argues, wonder gives rise to three modalities: “idiocy of astonishment,” perplexity, and the curiosity we experience when faced with something that “takes us beyond ourselves” (314), by tearing a hole in the fabric of the usual. Wonder exists only in communion with an individual, as an intense personal reaction to what we alone have encountered. A rainbow, setting sun, symphony or guitar solo that stuns one person may leave another cold. In Stephen Greenblatt’s view, wonder refers to an object’s “power . . . to stop the viewer in his tracks, to convey an arresting sense of uniqueness, to evoke an exalted attention” (20). Mark Anthony Jarman’s writing often has that power.

Jarman’s prose is powered by linguistic fireworks. Consider the opening of “Cowboys Inc.,” the lead-off story to *Dancing Nightly in the Tavern*, his first collection (1984): “Drunk sheets of light, the ancient Volvo angle-parked in the Interstate rest area” (1). The sentence lacks a main verb, and we have to orient ourselves in a literary world where expectations are raised and then dashed as we try to find our way into the story. The phrase “Drunk sheets” leads not into *of lightning* but, puzzlingly, into “of light.” We have to wait to find out what is going on in this brave new Canadian literary world. Jarman’s opening sentence starts off with reeling (with its *drunkenness*) and ends with stasis (“angle-parked”; “rest area”). Motion and stasis battle each other in what appears to be little more than a description of a parked Swedish vehicle. What is astonishing is Jarman’s ability to recast the quotidian in poetic shades of the wondrous.

“Johnny Cash in the Viper Room (Cowboy Asylum)” (2020), from Jarman’s most recent collection, begins: “For centuries I waited inside, waited out those fierce Irish immigrants on their black Blasket rocks surrounded by waves and weird red-legged birds and Viking raiders on the horizon” (27). The narrator’s claim that he has waited for “centuries” is exaggeration, sailing close to what we might extravagantly tell a tardy lunch date; but then the sentence comes alive through alliteration (*black Blasket; waves and weird*), before the temporal element returns, now in the guise of history. When Jarman refers to Vikings “on the horizon,” he is evoking the visitors who trod Ireland’s Blasket Islands ten centuries ago. A link is thus established between this recent visitor to Ireland and

¹ The author would like to thank two anonymous reviewers for their careful and useful feedback. Also, thank you to Don Sparling for commenting on a previous draft of this essay.

previous invaders. Moreover, Jarman seems to be throwing a metafictional jab at how stories are supposed to begin. Who starts a story with waiting?

As I have tried to show through the examples from the previous two paragraphs, Jarman's prose is striking, and he is an outlier within Canadian literature. Though the focus of this paper is on the role of wonder in Jarman's works, the first section considers his role on the stage of Canadian literature, particularly as an unconventional writer of short stories. Paradoxically, Jarman is praised and regarded as influential, yet he remains under-studied in academia and a stranger to the leading Canadian literary prizes, not least, it seems, because his short stories defy categories. The penultimate section examines wonder in Jarman, exploring the many shades of the verb "to wonder" and how characters' wondering takes us into their drifting, doubtful minds. Finally, I look at the possibility of the miraculous and argue it sometimes plays a key structural role in Jarman's plot-poor stories.

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DISPENSING WITH CONVENTIONS: JARMAN WITHIN CANADIAN LITERATURE

The Google Books preview of Jarman's 1998 short story collection *New Orleans is Sinking* labels it "poetry," which is wrong in fact but right in spirit. Jarman's stories do not easily lend themselves to paraphrases or neat plot summaries. The focus in his stories is language, not event. Steven W. Beattie writes that, like poetry, Jarman's stories have a "compression," a "linguistic concision" buttressed by "rhythms and euphony and careful repetition of sounds" ("True North" 12). Jarman's plots are stripped down, with "just enough plausible action to jump start the engine of his verbal inventiveness" (Glover 105). This paucity of plot arguably feeds into the characters' openness to wonder, since "we are most receptive to wonder when there is not too much else going on" (Tallis 6). The typical Jarman protagonist is confused, often on the road. He wanders in search of something nebulous, constantly thinking about his path in life and the many mistakes he has made upon that path, but never reaching a goal. Fellow short story writer Tamas Dobozsy argues that Jarman's "stories do not end but stop," thereby "troubling the taut construction expected of the genre" (324). For example, the final line of "Pompeii Book of the Dead," the final story in *Knife Party at the Hotel Europa*, reads: "Though I can't actually dance, but you know, um, just a suggestion" (210). The resounding "um" foregrounds indecision, afterthoughts, contemplation, and hesitation, not narrative closure.

Jarman unsettles the short story form by not furnishing clear endings—a strategy that is particularly striking because short stories are

“essentially ‘end-oriented’” (Lodge 225). In a review of *Knife Party*, Lee D. Thompson is temporarily troubled when describing the form of Jarman’s collection, because the various stories, with their “strange, wandering, quite aimless narrative,” seem to be a novel of sorts (bringing to mind how Alice Munro’s *Lives of Girls and Women* was marketed both as a short story collection and a novel). Readers and critics alike generally prefer clear categories, which is why, argues Alex Good, Jarman’s “unorthodox, experimental approach to style and form” “make him challenging, even off-putting, for the general reader” (Review).² In a less positive assessment of *Knife Party*, James Grainger acknowledges Jarman’s style and agrees that it is “of higher literary calibre than” the fiction that garners leading prizes in Canadian literature circles, but argues that his “non-linear structure and stylistic tropes” are not revolutionary outside CanLit contexts. When it comes to Jarman, playing the find-the-Canadian-influence game or searching for any clear literary predecessors would be difficult. Barry Hannah, “the virtuoso” author of *Airships*, “wild-man bard of Mississippi,” and former teacher of Jarman, is an obvious one (Cumyn). Elsewhere, Jarman has referred to music: “I feel like Joy Division and Hank Williams were as much an influence on me as William Faulkner was” (Interview 9). Though Jarman’s works include many local Canadian references—from hockey players to Canadian bands—he is hard to slot into any specifically Canadian tradition in terms of style.

Claire Omhovère points out that Jarman, though “influential,” is “conspicuously absent from studies concerned with the centripetal forces at work in the historical, thematic, or generic transformations of CanLit” (77). Indeed, the obsession with themes and thematic criticism that followed the publication of Margaret Atwood’s *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* in 1972 continues (Gadpaille). In that seminal work, Atwood argues that the “multi-faceted and adaptable idea” of survival is the main theme in Canadian literature, since “Canadians are forever taking the national pulse like doctors at a sickbed: the aim is not to see whether the patient will live well but simply whether he will live at all” (48). A critical tradition of looking for themes (especially that of survival) developed in Canadian literary circles. In John Metcalf’s view, “Thematic Criticism dominated” to the extent that academic and popular reviewers alike allegedly “had nothing whatever to say about style or language” and avoided evaluating, saying whether a work was worth reading (*The Canadian* 161).

² Elsewhere, Good calls Jarman “Canada’s most exciting and original artist in the short-story form” (“Fables” 157), specifically, while lamenting his omission from an anthology of Canadian writing that obsesses over identity, instead of troubling readers with “difficult aesthetic judgements” or “critical tools and imagination” (159).

Though Atwood wrote *Survival* some fifty years ago, primarily to show that Canadian literature actually exists, the critical tradition has contributed to the exclusion or omission or diminishment of Jarman's stories which "are so difficult to circumscribe in terms of plot or mimetic intent that they can hardly be invoked to cast light on current societal debates" (Omhovère 77). John Metcalf laments that from the start "academe ignored him and placidly munched away on" more conventional or naturalistic authors (*Dancing* xi). To be fair, it is fatuous to argue that Jarman is utterly ignored yet cryptically influential. It might be best to say that he is condemned to being a writer's writer. Other authors engage most heartily with Jarman's work—Tamas Dobozy, Douglas Glover, and John Metcalf have, like Alexander MacLeod, been impressed by Jarman's "restless language play" and "searing sentences" (440).

In the Introduction to the republication of *Dancing Nightly in the Tavern*, Jarman's first collection, John Metcalf says: "His characters want something but don't know what" (ix). "Jesus Made Seattle Under Protest" (1984) has a character thinking: "I want, I don't know, something" (87). Similarly, in 2002's *Ireland's Eye*, which is part family history and part travelogue, Jarman writes: "Uncertainty is my meat. No idea what I'm looking for, but I'll know it when I don't find it" (ch. 10, "Blood Pudding"). The wanderer's hopeless journey presents a series of exclusions, not a real chance to fulfil a desire or reach a goal. Jarman's narrators are far from omniscient, and rarely are they entirely in tune with themselves or the basics of the world around them. Like the reader wrestling with Jarman's defamiliarizing sentences, Jarman's narrators struggle to orient themselves in their own lives. One narrator asks: "Why do very tiny events make me question organized religion or the actual width of a wonky life?" ("Song" 48); another: "Why do I have no faith in my own life [?]" ("Hospital Island" 68). Aware of self-delusion, aware of his libido, a lothario questions his habit of self-mythologizing: "Why do I feel my pursuit of her is not base, but is high-minded, a noble romantic quest?" ("Exempt" 138). He can recognize traditions and tropes, imagine himself a heroic knight in a literary tradition, but that veneer of nobility hardly masks his true womanizing intentions.

Almost all of Jarman's stories are told in the first person, "as monologues in the point of view of characters under stress" (Glover 105). These masculine narrators experience tribulations ranging from everyday concerns about lust and love, money and divorce, to more extreme and existential problems. For example, in "Cougar," a despairing, suicidal man goes into the woods to cut down a Christmas tree and "a sleek cougar nearly takes [his] head off" (111). "Burn Man on a Texas Porch"—which English novelist A. S. Byatt calls perhaps "the greatest short story ever

written”—introduces us to a man whose camper van explodes while he is on vacation, leaving him with a “face like a TV jammed on the wrong channel” (“Burn Man” 37). Claire Omhovère, perhaps thinking primarily of “Burn Man,” calls Jarman’s characters “flamboyant losers” (89). Steven W. Beattie calls them “outcasts and roughnecks” (“Appreciation” 21). Crucial to this essay is the following: despite their dour circumstances, Jarman’s narrators retain a subdued hope. As one claims, “I am an optimist; I believe in so many possible worlds”—though he concedes “yet really there is no evidence” (“Assiniboia” 163). In other words, it is easier to find cause for despair than for optimism. Elsewhere, in “Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World,” a death-cloaked story in which the narrator journeys to California to bury his father, Jarman provides natural evidence or a reason for optimism: “In the ravine behind our old house, birds keeps saying whatever it is, riotous and dark against the white bark, stammering over and over in their bird boroughs, alive and drunk despite the odds of a northern winter” (121). Like many Jarman characters, these birds are inebriated but fully alive, despite challenges and perils.

WONDER IN JARMAN

Jarman’s narrators are often in doubt, and a search for “I wonder” in his *oeuvre* yields some dozen instances in *Salvage King, Ya!*, his sole novel, while *Knife Party* yields another two dozen. This frequency is by no means extraordinary, since the phrase is of course common enough to appear regularly in any first-person narration as a near synonym for “I asked” or “I wanted to know.” But Jarman does not use wonder as a mere tag or convenient alternative to “I said” or “I think”: he exploits wonder’s full range of meanings. Such is the case when a narrator ponders the legal status of his Rome hotel’s Croatian cleaning woman: “I wonder if Irena lives and works in Italy legally, but can’t bring myself to ask” (“Exempt” 140). Here wonder means “to feel some doubt or curiosity (how, whether, why, etc.); to be desirous to know or learn” (“wonder”). The solution could be easily found were it not for the politeness that restrains the narrator. There is a tension between a desire to know and what social conventions allow us to ask. One should not make such enquiries in polite society.

Most often Jarman uses the verb wonder to give the reader insight into a narrator’s association-prone, perplexed mind, as he tries to make sense of the world, pin down possibilities or reflect on matters that are beyond his ken. For example, when one narrator sees a sign in Rome that reads “WELCOME TO AN ANTI-FASCIST CITY” and is “accompanied by a hammer and sickle,” he says, “I wonder if the Soviet hammer and

sickle looks odd to [his companion's] American eyes" ("Pompeii" 179). Again, he does not ask because he is shackled by a sense of decorum. He refrains from asking his North American friend, just as he refrained from asking the Croatian chambermaid, resulting in a narrative dead-end akin to a character appearing on the scene in a novel and then disappearing, or to a conversational road not taken.

For many of Jarman's characters, however, wondering about a specific question sets off a train of associative, drifting thoughts. More daydreamers than philosophers, Jarman's heroes meander from curiosity to musings about what might be possible. When reflecting on sunny Italy, the narrator thinks of a former girlfriend: "Natasha would thrive here; she is heliotropic, worships the sun, loved Spanish Morocco and Northern Africa. I wonder if her hair is still long?" ("Troubled" 123). The juxtaposed sentences seem disjointed. One moment the narrator is in Africa, the next he is reminiscing about hairstyles. This drifting juxtaposition mirrors how thoughts come to us, namely, in mysterious ways and waves. Jarman evokes the past (Natasha "loved Spanish Morocco"), drifts into the present ("I wonder . . ."), and resolves to change his daydreaming in the future: "Someday I'll stop bringing her up, her spectre, that triangle I didn't want to be part of" ("Troubled" 123). The lines are also funny because errant thoughts cannot be willed into or out of existence. Jarman's jilted hero is unlikely to forget the woman who left him for another man—"There was no warning and I was a TV left at the curb" is how he describes being dumped ("Dark Brain" 22). Voice, diction and logic come crashing together. The "someday" does not imply an imminent future, there is slight a pun in *bringing up* her memory (i.e. memories generally come unbidden), and this particular spectre appears unsummoned. Jarman also gives us a punchline: the hero has no moral qualms about love triangles, as long as he himself is the new man (he had left his wife for Natasha).

In another passage in *Knife Party*, wonder indicates a slide into self-reflection. As the narrator lounges at his Rome hotel, he sees some workers "passing by . . . with buckets of rocks and earth," and says: "They must think me a rich tourist, that I am lazy, that I am lucky" ("Exempt" 135). Here we realize that the visiting Canadian is in fact rich compared to the workers, and he is at leisure, lazing about with a beer at the ready. But the slide from "rich" to "lazy" to "lucky" is a significant one, since the third adjective implies fortune or happiness (it is no coincidence that "happy" and "lucky" are homophones in some languages—German: "glücklich"; Slovenian: "srečen"). The verb appears again, as he moves from moaning and groaning about his life—"they must think me . . . lucky" (with the implied counter *but I know that I am not*)—to reflecting on his lot in life: "Am I lucky, I wonder" ("Exempt" 135). The lack of a question mark makes

the line delightfully ambiguous. We can read the sentence as a genuine question: *I wonder if I am lucky?* And we can also read it as an exclamation or appreciation of his lot: *I wonder at the fact that I am lucky.*

MIRACLES AND WONDER

The various shades of the verb wonder fit the categories that philosopher William Desmond provides for the “plurivocal” noun wonder (312)—“astonishment, perplexity and curiosity” (313)—and this brings us to a crucial point in this essay and its argument that wonder plays a key role in Jarman. As I have tried to show at the outset, the wonder Jarman’s narrators sense is transferred to the reader through his flamboyant language. Until now, the examples have been drawn primarily from *Knife Party*, a collection of loosely linked stories. Drawing all of the examples from the mindset of a single narrator would be skewing the data, because, of course, it could be a matter of a single character given to musing. On the other hand, picking examples from a variety of Jarman texts could function as a back-handed compliment. It might suggest that Jarman’s stories follow a single pattern, which is not the case.

In “My White Planet,” about workers trapped and isolated in a northern radar station, the narrator and his colleagues encounter a truly wondrous sight. The men find a girl washed up on the shores of the frigid coast: “The freezing girl is alive but unconscious, and our ungenerous God has delivered a delirious female to our ice garden where we look at each other in wonder, wondering about things, about our farmgirl concubine” (“My White Planet” 27). There are firm echoes of the ur-garden or prelapsarian garden as “ungenerous God” gives the men company (disturbingly called “girl” and “concubine” in the same sentence), and there are shades of miraculous survival and delivery through the icy waters. For our purposes, however, the sentence’s shift from the noun wonder to the verb wondering is crucial. The external event causes internal confusion and perplexing thoughts—and the catch-all term “things” is a fine instance of underlexicalization, of using a vague word that is semantically opaque. The men do not know what to make of this seemingly miraculous feminine appearance. Indeed, “things” could refer to wonderment at the world’s mysteries, or to dark thoughts for these men who lack female company.

Even in a world that does not generally believe in miracles, the semantic proximity between wonder and miracle remains. As Yujin Nagasawa points out, miracle has vestiges of “the Latin *miraculum*, which denotes an object of wonder and amazement” (2). In the various stories in *Knife Party*, “miracle” appears eight times. At the beginning of “The

Dark Brain of Prayer,” we learn that a cancer-stricken woman is “hoping to find a homeopathic alternative to surgery, hoping for a miracle inside her body” (11). Jarman establishes homeopathy as the modern equivalent of a prayer of intercession—that is, of asking for a supernatural intervention. The term “miracle” functions like a leitmotif through “The Dark Brain of Prayer,” appearing again and again, albeit in different guises. The second time the word appears, it is within a traditionally religious sense. Natasha brings the narrator a gift, a Mexican charm: “*Milagritos*, they are called, little miracles. At a shrine you pin them to a statue of a saint or the Virgin, one of the many Mexican Virgins, and pray for help” (“Dark Brain” 11). Jarman shifts from the secular-but-not-scientific (homeopathy), to the religious-but-not-taken-seriously (“In Rome a woman sips her drink and says of my weightless metal charms, ‘Yes, we are adept at mixing the pagan with the Catholic’” [“Dark Brain” 11]). Jarman’s narrator then trivializes the weight of “miracle” by using the same word to describe a “stalwart fridge” that has given up the ghost—“The noisy creature dies, but comes back to life on the day of the new fridge’s arranged delivery” (“Dark Brain” 15). “Is it a miracle, another *milagrato*?” he asks, sacrilegiously wondering whether someday pilgrims will “bow and pray and pin charms at this new shrine, this fridge by the roadside” (“Dark Brain” 15). He employs a mocking tone towards the imagined fridge-pilgrims.

Jarman’s narrators frequently adopt the “voice of beleaguered cool” as a “rhetorical position” (Glover 106). However, as the reader soon comes to realize in “The Dark Brain of Prayer,” this rhetorical position is a linguistic carapace. Using the foreign term “*milagrato*” adds emotional distance while allowing him nevertheless to verbalize thoughts too intimate for public declamation (like swearing in a foreign language); the pilgrims’ charms may appear “weightless” but they have enormous spiritual or emotional import. Though the narrator does not directly claim that he believes in or prays for a miracle, the possibility of the miraculous hovers over the story, transmitted through dead or discarded appliances. He describes himself as a “TV left at the curb” by Natasha (“Dark Brain” 22)—just like the departed and no-longer-needed fridge that suddenly and miraculously springs back to life. Even though Jarman’s world is predominantly secular, it is imbued with the religious sense of miracle (and his works are replete with references to his Catholic upbringing, especially “Catholic guilt”).

As philosophers, theologians and scientists remind us (Losonczy and Deckard xii), a shift from the supernatural or magical to a more scientific view of the world has entailed a shift in how we understand the miraculous. Whereas “[i]n antiquity the spectacular in nature,” including natural disasters, was regarded as *miraculous* (Parsons 84), modern science

and the scientific mindset has helped us to dismiss the supernatural. For centuries, the intellectual trend has been towards rationalization and disenchantment. In times of global warming and the Anthropocene, we no longer consider natural disasters as solely heaven-sent. And yet, we can still wonder at natural glories such as a rainbow or stunning sunset, even if we learned in primary school science class how that rainbow came to be—this is wondering in the sense of “to be struck with surprise or astonishment, to marvel” (“wonder, v.”), of the sort we might feel if we believed we were witnessing or hearing about a miracle. Philosopher David Hume, famously opposed to the possibility of miracles, accounted for their popularity by saying that mankind has a “strong propensity . . . to the extraordinary and the marvellous” (89). In Nagasawa’s gloss, “[p]eople tend to believe in extraordinary events such as miracles because they have a passion for events that inspire wonder” (72). This receptivity to wonder cannot disappear; it can merely be displaced. Thus defined, wonders will never cease.

Wonder appears to be etymologically linked to the word *Wunde*, that is, *wound*, implying that we are struck by an event that is beyond our “system of established and expected meanings” (Parson 85). William Desmond highlights the proximity between wonder and *miracle* by pointing out that they each are “something extraordinary or even supernatural” (313). Jarman’s characters often experience what Desmond calls an “idiocy of astonishment” (314) that rescues them from the solipsism of the single wanderer. Again and again his characters are surprised, astonished and perplexed by wonder. As shall be seen, they find optimism in the world around them, thanks to flashes of beauty or of that which is unlikely. The shot of enthusiasm or optimism is more epiphany than obvious causality.

Wonder in Jarman, thus, occasionally has a crucial structural function that takes the place of plot twists and turns or causality. In “Butterfly on a Mountain,” a narrator looks in wonder at the streets of Rome and asks, hopefully: “Is this cornucopia world possible?” (40) The central image in that story, however, is of an unlikely butterfly that ended up on a ski hill in Canada: “How did the tiny creature survive, map its way to such a cold altitude, flying in snow about the treeline?” (34) This is by no means a miracle, but it stokes a wonder that inspires the otherwise dour narrator—much like the birds in “Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World,” who remain “alive and drunk despite the odds of a northern winter” (121). The wondrous appearance of the birds and the butterfly rejuvenate the narrator of each story.

If the typical Jarman narrator is down on his luck, no character is lower down than “Burn Man” of “Burn Man on a Texas Porch,” Jarman’s best-known story. In Douglas Glover’s extended close reading, the tale

is about a man who “has lost his identity, his identity has become the flames” (108). After literally losing his face, the narrator recalls: “I began to refer to myself in third person, as a double: Burn Man enters the Jubilee burn unit. Burn Man enters the saline painful sea” (29). When told by well-meaning medical staff that he is “not dealing with this well” (29) and that he has “to learn to deal with [his] anger” (39), Burn Man reflects: “I am dealing with my anger, I’m dealing with my anger by hating people” (39). The entire story is on a downward, spite-fuelled trajectory. In fact, the former government bureaucrat with the disfigured face deals with (as in “trades in”) his new physique by working as a masked man. He recalls an amazing tale he once heard from a golf partner, about finding “a man in full scuba gear lying on the burnt forest floor”—“he must have been diving somewhere and a water bomber scooped him right out of the ocean and dumped startled scuba man onto the forest fire” (40). After hearing the same tale three times from different sources, Burn Man becomes sceptical about “the same false true stories” (40). And yet, in the final paragraph of a story that has focused on disfigurement, violence, drugs, hatred and lost loves, Burn Man suddenly turns upbeat, astonished: “Ours really is an amazing world” (44). Suddenly, the wondrous story of the scuba diver seems possible. The final line reads: “And a famous scuba diver rockets like a lost dark god into smoking stands of Douglas fir, into black chimneys burning” (44). The scuba diver becomes a spark of the divine re-entering the world.

CONCLUSION

Plato splendidly said that wonder “is where philosophy begins” (155d), for wonder inspires curiosity and an urge to find answers. Jarman’s characters are not philosophers or scientists; they do not move towards knowledge or cognition by turning a mystery into a solvable puzzle. They do not participate in the wonder-killing process that occurs as we age. Rather, they retain a smidgen of the child’s “fascination” as they stare “at a fire or a pussy-cat, gape-mouthed and even, perhaps, drooling” (Tallis 9). In William Desmond’s view, the child is open to being astonished, but as cognition develops, this openness rescinds or fades (319). Jarman’s characters are left wondering, pondering. In the one-two-three steps of Desmond’s “modalities” of wonder (“astonishment, perplexity and curiosity”), they dither between astonishment and perplexity. “The Dark Brain of Prayer,” another story from *Knife Party*, foregrounds perplexity in the face of the wondrous. The narrator says: “These are moments my reptilian brain becomes confused as to what is real and what is a vivid

dream, what you can talk about or keep to yourself, what is prayer and what is miracle" (30). Jarman's characters often remain in a state of childlike ignorance. They do not come to resolution, they do not generally achieve their inchoate aims, progress or develop, but they remain delightfully open to wonder and amazement, which gives them the strength to keep going, with or against the odds.

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The Butterfly Effect: Creating and Recreating the Story of Madame Butterfly, on Paper and on Stage

ABSTRACT

The consequences of the partially coerced opening of Japan to the Western world in the second half of the 19th century went far beyond economic and political goals and considerations. The previously secluded land almost instantly became a source of artistic inspiration and endless fascination. *Japonisme*, the term by which the latest craze became known in France, was no passing fad. For many decades, Western artists, most of whom had never set foot in Japan, derived profound inspiration from all facets of the mysterious culture which unfolded in the period. Thus, with scant information and a lack of accurate records being available, common gossip and unfounded rumor filled in the blanks of official reports and naval tales, connecting the dots between the real and the imagined.

In this paper, I succinctly examine the story of Madame Butterfly, cutting across time, genre and borders in the works of John Luther Long, David Belasco, Giacomo Puccini and Claude-Michel Schönberg/Alain Boublil. I contextualize the selected narratives within their socio-political frameworks, but also consider the ramifications of the past and present-day adaptations from the 21st-century perspective, in the light of current struggles for (adequate) representation. Lastly, I examine the production of *Miss Saigon* (2019–22) at the Music Theatre of Łódź, Poland to compare how the staging of such a musical in a predominantly racially homogenous country affects the perception of Orientalist works. As such this section is a case study based on personal interviews conducted by the author with the producers and cast members.

Keywords: Orientalism, post-colonialism, *Madame Butterfly*, *Miss Saigon*, theatre, musical.

THE BUTTERFLY FORMULA

The tragic tale of an Asian woman and her transient relationship with a Western officer popularized at the turn of the 20th century remains one of the flagship examples of Orientalist narratives, one which has been told and retold over time. The story, which was first published in 1887 by a French novelist and naval officer Pierre Loti in the form of an autobiographical journal under the title *Madame Chrysanthème*,¹ was later revisited by an American writer and lawyer John Luther Long. His novella *Madame Butterfly* (1898) was in turn adapted for the stage by David Belasco in 1900 and subsequently became one of Puccini's greatest operas—*Madama Butterfly* (1904). Contemporary instances of the said narrative include the mega-musical *Miss Saigon* (1989) by Claude-Michel Schönberg, with lyrics by Alain Boublil and Richard Maltby Jr., and a post-colonial play *M. Butterfly* (1988) by David Henry Hwang, both of which were revived on Broadway in the mid-2010s.

The Butterfly formula is quite simple: a Western officer stationing in Asia marries a young local girl, whom he later abandons. While Loti's narrative ends with the officer's departure (and his disbelief at Chrysanthème's indifference to his leaving), the subsequent versions commencing with Long's novella bring certain plot twists to the story: Madame (and Madama) Butterfly/Miss Saigon is devastated by her husband's departure and awaits his return, rejecting marriage proposals from an influential suitor. The officer, however, remarries in the Western world and only then learns of a son that he too abandoned. He subsequently decides to bring the child with him to his homeland and leave the woman behind (again). While the reasons and intentions of the characters change, the basic framework of the plot remains.

THE FIRST AMERICAN BUTTERFLY

John Luther Long's inspirations for the novella go beyond Loti's *Madame Chrysanthème*. While—unlike Loti—Long never traveled to Asia, his sister lived in a Methodist Mission in Nagasaki between 1892 and 1897. Her recounting of a tragic tale about a Japanese geisha whose European husband abandoned her and their unborn child explains the changes Long made to

¹ According to Reed, Loti's story was also "registered by the artist Mortimer Menpes, who published an etching titled *My Lady Chrysanthemum* to illustrate his own account of his travels in Japan" in 1888 (1). The tale was then adapted for the opera under the same title by André Messager to a libretto by Georges Hartmann and Alexandre André in 1893, which, however, was a moderate success.

Loti's story, particularly the transgression from Loti's wife indifference to his leaving, happily counting the money she made on the temporary marriage, to Long's faithful Cho-Cho-San awaiting her husband's return. Also, encouraged by his Methodist-missionary sister, Long is supposed to have "wanted to shock his American readers," so that "the reader might develop some kind of moral empathy with the girls who were exploited by the custom" ("The Making").

Despite Long's assumed good intentions, his depiction of Japan is distinctively a product of Orientalist epistemology, drawing from the binary opposition between the Orient and the Occident and the powerful Other that the Orient provides (Said 1–2). According to Yoshihara, *Madame Butterfly* is "one of the quintessential Orientalist narratives" which exemplifies "the gendered dynamics of East-West relations founded upon unequal power relations" (975). These dynamics are reflected in Long's story both in the third-person narration and in the dialogue. When Pinkerton refers to his posting in Nagasaki as "banishment to the Asiatic station," Sayre, a fellow American naval officer (who was previously stationed in Japan) encourages him to marry a local "for lack of other amusement" (Long 3). Pinkerton follows the advice and "[w]ith the aid of a marriage-broker, . . . [finds] both a wife and a house in which to keep her" (Long 8).

These opening lines set the tone for the narrative and expose the underlying mechanisms of racial and sexist discrimination based on imbalanced power relations. Having been entirely excluded from the decision-making process, during which she was temporarily purchased without her knowledge or consent, Cho-Cho-San unwittingly becomes an exotic commodity and a part of the package deal that came with a house where she would be "kept" by her American husband (until he decides otherwise). Moreover, when Adelaide, Pinkerton's American wife encounters Cho-Cho-San, she exclaims with unconcealed excitement: "How very charming—how lovely—you are, dear! Will you kiss me, you pretty—plaything!" and adds lightheartedly: "I quite forgive our men for falling in love with you" (Long 142). Her reaction not only reinforces the notion that Butterfly was merely a toy (or a pleasant time-passer) for Pinkerton, but it also exposes the idea of the understated yet clear binary opposition of *us* versus *them*. While "our men" refer to all white men, "you" directed at Butterfly signifies all Japanese women. As such, Cho-Cho-San, who is both Othered and objectified, may be seen as an allegory for all temporary Japanese wives of the time.

Although Long underscores Pinkerton's cruelty and lack of empathy towards his wife, her ignorance, naivety and lack of wit are often a source of comedy in the novella: "Firs' I pray his large American God—that huge

God amighty—but tha’ ’s no use. He don’ know me where I live” (Long 61). Then again, Pinkerton’s intellect and wit are visibly underscored, particularly in opposition to his wife: “Perhaps she was logical (for she reasoned as he had taught her—she had never reasoned before)” (Long 41). Comments regarding her intellectual inferiority prevail throughout the text, producing a flagship example of Orientalist narration. The narrator recounts various instances of her failure to comprehend the reality of her situation: “She did not understand, as often she did not,” and to belittle her intellectual capacity uses derogative phrases such as “her active little brain” or “her little, unused, frivolous mind” (Long 11, 42, 132).²

Long’s portrayal of Butterfly demonstrates that Orientalism, in addition to its racist component, is also intrinsically misogynistic, and as such demonstrates intersectional³ multi-layered discrimination. According to Wen, “Eastern women as both the ‘weaker,’ feminine sex, and members of the East, naturally fall victim to the Orientalist stereotyping. They are frequently the fantasized ideal Asian woman who, submissive and vulnerable, . . . hence can be easily dominated by the masculine power of the Western man” (45). Pinkerton takes great pleasure in Cho-Cho-San’s blind obedience and unyielding trustfulness, playing jokes on her naivety. First, he teaches her to call him Mr. B. F. (Benjamin Franklin) Pikkerton,⁴ and then just before abandoning her, he promises to return “when the robins nested again” (Long 3), a direct reference to a popular waltz song by Frank Howard:

When the Robins nest again,
 . . .
 Then my bonnie blue eyed lad,
 If my heart is true ‘til then,
 Has promised he’ll return to me,
 when the Robins nest again.

² Of course, such “orientalized construction of the European”—or Western—“*other* is typical of the time and place” and *Madame Butterfly* is not a unique “traveling story” of the period to draw on the racial power imbalances and white male fantasies regarding women of color (Hutcheon 155). Prosper Mérimée’s novella *Carmen* (1845) would be yet another work whose storyline is based on similar power relations, exotic fantasies, racist perceptions and misogynistic storylines, resulting from an encounter with an alien culture.

³ First introduced by a civil rights activist and legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, and couched in critical race theory *intersectionality* serves as both a tool for observing and analyzing power disparities and as a means to address points of contact of different forms of such imbalances among certain disadvantaged groups.

⁴ Although clearly intended as a joke, as no other character refers to him by this name, in the libretto of the first two versions of Puccini’s opera, Pinkerton’s full name is Sir Francis Blummy Pinkerton. However, Puccini reverts to Benjamin Franklin Pinkerton in his final version of the score.

In his own way, Pinkerton reveals his intentions from the start. However, Cho-Cho-San, to his great amusement, takes all his words literally (looking for robins' nests) and uncritically (waiting for his return).

However, Pinkerton is not the only character to objectify her. When the lieutenant abandons her, yet again, without Cho-Cho-San's consent or knowledge, her next marriage is being arranged by a *nakodo*. According to Long, "[t]he rule of decorum for such an occasion simply decreed that she should be blind and deaf concerning what went on" (8). Such a distorted portrayal of Japanese culture is not only sexist, but also offers a literary representation of the polarized relationship between the West and the East founded upon the antithesis of the civilized and savage (Wen 44). These binary oppositions are clearly visible in Pinkerton's attitude to Cho-Cho-San's relatives whom he refers to as "an appalling horde . . . at the wedding" as they came "with lanterns and banners" to the ceremony (Long 1). Long even dichotomizes the baby's traits into Eastern and Western characteristics: "He was as good as a Japanese baby, and as good-looking as an American one" (6).

Cho-Cho-San idolizes Pinkerton and adapts to his Western ways. First, the house they move into is partially Americanized: "Some clever Japanese artisans then made the paper walls of the pretty house eye-proof, and, with their own adaptations of American hardware, the openings cunningly lockable" (Long 1). Then, she cuts ties with her Japanese relatives and refuses to speak her native tongue: "'Listen! No one shall speak anything but United States' languages in these house! Now!'" (Long 4).

Pinkerton does not appreciate her efforts; instead, he calls her "an American refinement of a Japanese product, an American improvement in a Japanese invention," displaying his colonialist "desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite" (Long 3; Bhabha 86). This *mimicry*, a term coined by Bhabha, occurs when "the colonized Other mimics elements of dominant, colonial identity" (Felluga 179). However, "such mimicry at once mirrors elements of colonial authority and also threatens that authority because it is always adopted with a difference" creating an "area between mimicry and mockery" which in turn, according to Bhabha, compromises the colonial authority and disrupts its mission to control the Other (Felluga 179; Bhabha 86).

Butterfly's attempts at imitating alien culture not only fail, but also underscore her Otherness, especially in terms of language: "'But tha' 's ezag' why I am not! Wha' 's use lie? It is not inside me that sawry. Me? I'm mos' bes' happy female woman in Japan mebbly in that whole worl'. What you thing?'" (Long 3). For Long (and later for Belasco), Butterfly's

mimicry serves as a source of comic relief. Yet while intended as funny to the 19th-century audiences, “the twenty-first-century reader must be horrified by the pseudo-pidgin-English of *Butterfly*, which sounds like a 1930’s Hollywood script-writer’s version of what was then accepted as African-American speech” (“The Making”).

MADAME AND MADAMA. THE EARLY 20TH-CENTURY ADAPTATIONS

David Belasco, an actor, producer, director, and playwright, was one of the most influential personas in the history of American theatre. At the turn of the century, Belasco was operating one of the utmost lucrative and modern theaters in the world, having pioneered a variety of revolutionary lighting methods, and the latest staging capabilities. Pioneering stage naturalism, his productions were known for their meticulously detailed sets and props. While the artistic merit of Belasco’s shows may be questioned, his productions, delivered with undisputable flourish, were a lavish commercial success. His 1900 adaptation of Long’s story for the stage⁵ was a milestone in immortalizing *Madame Butterfly*.

Belasco’s changes to Long’s story include a few minor details such as the reduction to a single place of action. Unlike in the novella, to avoid multiple locations, and thus additional stage design and props, *Butterfly* does not venture out of the house in the play. The consul and Adelaide visit her at home instead. Belasco also added a vigil scene which was “[t]he most celebrated feature of this production” (Sheppard 154). Sheppard describes it as an “(allegedly) fourteen-minute nonverbal section in which lighting and music [written by William Furst] realized the passing of *Butterfly*’s night of anticipation” (154).

Belasco’s *Madame Butterfly. A Tragedy of Japan* is contained in a single act that takes place over the course of twenty-four hours. The main tension revolves around *Butterfly* and Yamadori, whom she repeatedly rejects. The play starts two years after Pinkerton’s departure, hence the focus of the story shifts almost entirely to *Butterfly*. Such a representation not only underscores the emotional charge of the work, but by eradicating entirely the brief time Pinkerton spent in Nagasaki with Cho-Cho-San, he is cleansed of all his early sins, including the toxic relationship with his

⁵ It remains unclear what John Luther Long’s role in creating the stage adaptation of the novella was. The play incorporates many of the original lines, which implies cooperation between the two authors, and even in one copy of the script both authors are given equal credit. Jenkins, however claims that “[c]ontrary to numerous reports, Belasco wrote the stage version without Long’s assistance.”

Japanese wife or his comments regarding her relatives. In fact, Belasco's lieutenant is much less of a villain than his counterpart in the novella. He even admits he considered returning to Nagasaki, but reasoned that Butterfly would be "ringing . . . gold coins to make sure they're good," a clear reference to Loti's *Madame Chrysanthème* (Belasco 28). Belasco also indicates that Pinkerton, witnessing Cho-Cho-San's suicide, finally admits some responsibility as the play closes with his cry "Oh! Cho-Cho-San!" and Butterfly's last words before she dies: "Too bad those robins did'n' nes' again" (32).

Belasco's tragic ending and his de-villainizing of Pinkerton are the most significant alterations to the *Madame Butterfly* narrative, as they change the characters' intentions and the overall reception of the story. Although all the Orientalist tropes examined before remain (including Cho-Cho-San's pidgin English and distorted portrayals of Japanese culture), the blame for the heartbreaking story of a naïve Japanese girl is shifted towards a tragic love triangle. These changes are even more significant, as they were incorporated in the subsequent reincarnations of the *Madame Butterfly* narratives, first by Giacomo Puccini, and later by the creators of the musical *Miss Saigon*.

Puccini witnessed the production of Belasco's *Madame Butterfly* in London in 1900. His operatic version of the story, *Madama Butterfly*, with a libretto by Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa, opened to poor reviews in 1904 at La Scala in Milan, but its revised version, which premiered the same year in Brescia, not only received critical acclaim, but was a popular success. Jenkins claims that "[t]he libretto of *Madama Butterfly* is one of those rare instances in operatic history where the text is actually an improvement over its sources. . . . Coupled with Puccini's emotionally charged musical score, *Madama Butterfly* produces an effect at once intimate and overwhelming, a haunting portrayal of the dangers of misguided love."

Puccini, in his opera, tried to convey the spirit of Japan, or in his own words, he had hoped to create "true Japan, not Iris" (qtd. in Sheppard 9). He even sought advice from Mrs. Oyama, the wife of the Japanese ambassador to Italy. Hence various music themes incorporate original Japanese melodies (including the Japanese National Anthem). However, Puccini removes the original Japanese songs from their native context, and rather than drawing parallels between their meanings and the storyline, he integrates them as he pleases. This, along with the previously discussed storyline of the *Butterfly* narrative, makes Puccini an incognizant perpetrator of the Orientalist discourse, carrying its weight and unfading popularity into the 21st century.

AND SUDDENLY—A SONG! BUTTERFLY'S MUSICAL REINCARANTION

Miss Saigon premiered in London's West End in 1989 and made its first Broadway appearance two years later. Claude-Michel Schönberg, the musical's composer, claims that the primary source and inspiration for the musical was a photograph he saw in 1975, that of a Vietnamese woman and her daughter taken at the Tan Son Nhut Air Base:

What we felt for this girl and her mother has always moved us deeply. . . . This Vietnamese woman, her face frozen in pain, knew that finding the child's father marked the end of her life with her daughter and that this moment at the departure gate was the end. This silent scream is the most potent condemnation of the horror of that war—of all wars. (qtd. in "Point of Inspiration")

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Although Schönberg and Alain Boublil never mention *Madame Butterfly*, the inspiration from Long and/or Puccini is evident: Kim, an orphaned seventeen-year-old South Vietnamese girl works as a prostitute in one of the Saigon bars frequented by American soldiers, where she falls in love with an American GI, Chris. Their romance is short-lived as Saigon falls shortly after their marriage ceremony, and the American soldiers are evacuated, leaving the Vietnamese civilians behind. Pregnant and alone under Ho Chi Minh's reign, Kim keeps her son, Tam, a secret. When her suitor Thuy, a Viet Minh general threatens to kill the boy, Kim shoots him and escapes to Thailand, where Chris and his new American wife, Ellen, find them. Chris and Ellen decide to leave Tam and Kim behind in Bangkok, and provide for them there. Yet again, the Asian female protagonist, who has been awaiting her husband's return, learns of his marriage by accident, when Ellen comes to see him in his hotel room in Bangkok. When Chris and Ellen come to reason with her the next day, they become the witnesses to her suicide:

CHRIS: KIM!
 KIM!
 What have you done Kim? Why?

KIM: THE GODS HAVE GUIDED YOU TO YOUR
SON

CHRIS: Please don't die!

KIM: HOLD ME ONE MORE TIME—
 HOW IN ONE NIGHT HAVE WE COME . . . SO FAR?

[Kim dies in Chris's arms]

CHRIS: No!

CURTAIN

(Schönberg et al., Finale Act Two)

The librettists, Boublil and Richard Maltby Jr., were clearly inspired by Puccini's, rather than Long's or Loti's, writings, or even Belasco's play. They draw on the characters created for the opera, crystalizing their intentions and expanding their psychological depth. Kim's demise and her progressing mental breakdown were visibly forefronted in the musical. The *nakodo*, whose role was elevated by Belasco, becomes a central figure in the musical—a pimp, rather than a matchmaker, the Engineer (a former brothel manager in Saigon) concocts a plan to reunite Kim with her former lover for his own gains. Cho-Cho-San, a naïve young girl living off her dreams of a true love that materialized in the form of Pinkerton, becomes Kim, a girl caught in an impossible love triangle, whose fantasies mix with reality. The lieutenant, now an American GI, is as much of a victim of the war as she is: "In this musical, the Pinkerton character, Chris, appears guiltless, a victim of geopolitical history just as much as the left-behind exotic woman. His futile efforts to find his lost love and the memory of the war left him with a serious case of PTSD" (Sheppard 46). Chris finds love again with Ellen, but never forgets Kim, hence he finds himself in a stalemate between the two women whom he apparently loves. Kim's ultimate sacrifice is her suicide as she refuses to live without Chris but at the same time hopes for a better future for their son. In short, the musical reincarnation of the Butterfly formula is "a white male fantasy borrowed from Puccini's opera *Madama Butterfly*: sexy Asian woman falls for heroic white man; he uses, then abandons her; distraught, she kills herself" (Zia 113).

The musical, which "aimed to show the desperation and ugliness of war," is, according to Sheppard, the "most popular, controversial, and discussed version of the Madame Butterfly narrative" (384). The production has been accused of racism, sexism, and perpetuating colonialist discourse. During *Miss Saigon*'s West-End run, Jonathan Pryce wore yellowface for the role of the Engineer: "Welsh-born actor Jonathan Pryce . . . did not make a convincing Vietnamese, as the original libretto called for. This was remedied by declaring the pimp to be Eurasian, and applying heavy makeup to eye prosthetics to create an epicanthic 'slant' to Pryce's Caucasian eyes" (Zia 113). When the New York premiere was announced, the use of yellowface inspired protest and sparked outrage. Despite that, *Miss Saigon* opened on Broadway, and although great effort was made to cast a woman of color for the role of Kim, Jonathan Pryce retained his part.

Later, "Asian Americans [took] up the issue of the play's offensive content", and "periodically protested it since" on the claim that the "production perpetuates an unwelcome view of Asians" (Zia 112; Paulson). As such, Hisama criticizes the musical for "re-presenting the complexities of the Vietnam War as merely a 'cross-cultural' love story" which "assuages the United States' guilt about the Vietnam War while also

reproducing age-old Western stereotypes about Asians and about women, already familiar from Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* . . . and Rodgers and Hammerstein's *South Pacific* . . . but updating and reinforcing them for the new millennium" (18). The creators, however, rebut the criticism. "I don't think anywhere in that that we were exploiting any element of Vietnam or Bangkok for show-business reasons," Maltby, the co-lyricist and director of the American production asserts, and adds: "The biggest show-business number is 'The American Dream,' which is about America" (qtd. in Tran).

The 2014 London revival that opened on Broadway two years later "underwent revisions guided by a directorial approach to bring an authentic focus to the human cost of the Vietnam War" (Gans).⁶ The good intentions yet again went sour, as the revival sparked even more criticism and initiated the *Don't Buy Miss Saigon* faction, a grassroots civic movement, which became an open-sourced critique of the musical, whose aim was to a boycott the production:

What is especially problematic is that *Miss Saigon* is the longest running and most enduring pop culture representation of Vietnamese people in the Western world—and to a certain extent and by extension of racism, it presents a narrow lens through which all Asians are viewed. . . . *Miss Saigon* is . . . a big budget ode to colonialism that romanticizes war and human trafficking. (*Don't Buy*)

Ramos too criticizes the revival: "[i]n 1989 and 1991, *Miss Saigon* was seen through a different scope, being one of the few musicals, films and TV series providing representation for Asians and Asian Americans. In 2019, when there's a craving for authentic representation and inclusion, those optics are vastly different." He adds that while "[i]t's an epically tragic musical with riveting, soul-stirring music," it "is not enough to make up for its tone-deaf narrative swaddled in white guilt."

Despite the controversial storyline, once yellowface was replaced for racially and ethnically appropriate casting, many artists applauded the opportunity the musical has provided for actors of Asian origin. Lea Salonga, who won a Tony Award for her role of Kim, countered the *Don't Buy Miss Saigon* protests. She argues: "The minute that any production of that show comes up Asian actors are going to be employed. If they're equity actors, they're going to get equity weeks. It means that they get health insurance" (qtd. in Pablo). Joe Llana,

⁶ Interestingly, Playbill's entry concerning the revival entitled "How This *Miss Saigon* Honors the Vietnamese Perspective" is gone, and instead the website now displays, quite ironically, a caption: "We couldn't find what you were looking for but THE SHOW MUST GO ON! Try looking for something else."

a Filipino-American actor, claims it was *Miss Saigon* that inspired him to pursue a career in theatre; however, he also addresses certain issues he has had with the production:

Do I love that two of our most popular Asian characters in musical theatre are a Vietnamese pimp and a Vietnamese whore? . . . No! I remember auditioning for the London production of *Miss Saigon*, and there were some parts of me that had real issues. The Engineer is a self-hating Asian, and I hate it. I hated auditioning for that part. But those are the parts that we have. (qtd. in Tran)

Hence, what the Asian-American community appreciates most when it comes to *Miss Saigon* is the opportunity for a part in one of America's most popular art forms, simply for the lack of other prospects. Others, however, according to Sheppard, "have asked why any Asian or Asian American actor would clamor to participate in this work . . . given its plot and general representation" (Sheppard 45).

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ACROSS TIME AND SPACE. *MISS SAIGON* AT THE MUSIC THEATRE OF ŁÓDŹ

Miss Saigon premiered in Poland on 9 December 2000 in the Roma Musical Theatre in Warsaw. The revived version opened on 8 June 2019 at the Music Theatre of Łódź; it was the only revival of the mega-musical outside of the West End (2014–16) in Europe until its Austrian premiere in Vienna on 3 December 2021. The apparent lack of interest in the musical by other companies may be attributed to a myriad of factors: economic (e.g., a costly license agreement, a sizeable ensemble and orchestra), cultural (ethnicity, diversity), social (reliability), historical and contextual, among others. These considerations, however, did not deter the Music Theatre of Łódź from pursuing the title, despite a rather distant historical context and an unfamiliar subject matter. What is more, neither of the Polish adaptations sparked protests or outrage; on the contrary—both received rave reviews and public acclaim.

It seems, therefore, that the reception of Orientalist performances in a racially homogeneous society devoid of a racist colonial past and imperialist experience lacks postcolonial perspectives, such as those which resurfaced during *Miss Saigon*'s revivals in the US and England. Even at the marketing level, it is clear that the production was never a potential problem for the producers in Łódź. According to Anna Korzon-Wnukowska,⁷ the

⁷ All interviews in this sections were conducted by the author.

head of the theatre's marketing department, "promoting *Miss Saigon* wasn't problematic; Asians and their culture are perceived positively here, unlike, for example, Roma communities, people of Turkish origin or African-Americans." This not only shows that the issue of Orientalism or sexism was beyond the theatre's considerations; it also indicates that the means of depicting different cultures is nowhere as important for the institution as the audience's perception of a particular minority. The focus of potential concern is entirely on the white Polish audiences, who are not Othered by the Orientalist performance, and for whom "issues of religion or the approach to historical truth are much more important than racial issues," claims Korzon-Wnukowska.

Since the Łódź cast is almost entirely white, the actors wear slanted-eye makeup and wigs to portray Vietnamese characters on stage. Interestingly, in accordance with the license agreement, the lead roles "such as Kim or Thuy had to be cast with actors resembling Asians," but not necessarily of Asian origin (Korzon-Wnukowska). However, most of the interviewees agree that all-white casts in productions such as *Miss Saigon* are problematic. Maciej Pawlak, the actor and singer who plays the lead role of Chris in the production, admits: "for ethical reasons, I oppose blackface and yellowface." But Krzysztof Wawrzyniak, the assistant director of the play, claims that "*Miss Saigon* with an ethnically appropriate cast in Poland is a pipe dream" as "there are very few professional musical performers in Poland, let alone actors of color, who meet three basic criteria of the genre (singing, dancing, and acting)." "As a result," he says, "whether it comes to ethnicity or even physical traits, we must rely on costumes, wigs, and make-up." Jakub Szydłowski, the artistic director at the Music Theatre of Łódź, confirms that when it comes to mega-musicals and other well-known shows, casting concerns extend beyond racial or ethnic issues. Katarzyna Łaska, the first Polish Kim in the Warsaw production and Gigi in the Łódź revival, also mentioned the lack of qualified actors of color, but shared an entirely different perspective: "Back in 2000, we did not think about diversity standards at all. And I still consider playing an Asian no different than playing a princess, or a witch. I'm not a princess, and I'm not Asian. But I'm an actress and it is my job to become different characters on stage."

Łaska goes on to explain that the attitudes towards Orientalist narratives differ in Poland since "unlike in the USA, where black and Asian performers have been discriminated against for years, there was no slavery or colonial history here, thus yellowface and blackface are perceived differently in Poland." In fact, the argument of the lack of Polish colonial past has resurfaced across all interviews. According to Pawlak, "such performances are perceived differently in Poland than in

the so-called colonizing countries. The great majority of Poles (as well as performers and producers) are completely ignorant of this problem.” Similarly, Wawrzyniak and Szydłowski believe that various ideas of cultural appropriation fluctuate according to the nation’s colonial position. When it comes to the audiences’ perspective, Korzon-Wnukowska asserts that the reception of the performance remains unaffected by post-colonial experiences. And since the Polish musical scene lacks actors of color, Szydłowski underscores that the only other option would be eradicating such musicals from the Polish stage: “If we don’t produce ethnically sensitive musicals with white casts in Poland, we won’t be able to stage them at all. There would be no *Miss Saigon*, *Aida*, or *West Side Story*, what good would that be?” he wonders.

Pawlak’s perspective, on the other hand, is quite different: “I believe that, given the nearly unrestricted availability of such performances online, it would be appropriate to postpone certain musicals until ethnically appropriate cast can be found. Musical is all about emotions, music and experience. There are plenty of performances that provide just that without the bonus of moral disgust”. However, he notes that if staged, such productions should be approached with considerable care and attention to detail by presenting the world as faithfully as possible without resorting to measures considered controversial and harmful or, better yet, the producers could depart entirely from the convention imposed by the license agreement and create fantastic and abstract worlds instead: “The task of white directors and screenwriters is to capture the timelessness of the story, eradicating its racial or ethnical aspects, so that it can be told anywhere by anyone” (Pawlak).

While Szydłowski does not entirely concur with Pawlak, he too believes that the director “must find a method to convey the message while ensuring that his adaptation is tasteful and respectful.” “If I was directing *Miss Saigon* now,” he continues, “I would change the context. We don’t need to pretend we’re Asians, we can concentrate on the core of the story—the conflict, the war.” Katarzyna Łaska similarly believes that the setting is unimportant, but to her, the focus of the musical is on the “beautiful love story, which could happen anywhere. It is a love story, not a story about the Vietnam War.” Wawrzyniak also puts the message above the setting and context. According to him, “such musicals center around topics that are very important, global and timeless, and we need to look at them from different perspectives. It’s the director’s job to find a good angle to present the story.” Curiously, these comments demonstrate a growing awareness, at least on the conceptual level, of the issue of “whitewashing,” but they in no way address the sexist components of the musical.

THE BUTTERFLY EFFECT

From a cultural perspective, the discussed Butterfly narratives are products of their times and circumstances, and as such—proponents of the Orientalist discourse. In terms of *Madame Chrysanthème* and *Madame/Madama Butterfly*, those would be the times of colonial imperialism in which racism, sexism, and a misguided obsession with the Orient dominated the Western world. Butterfly's unique story and the timing of its productions were emblematic of America's strength in developing its own Orientalism at a time when the East-West geopolitics were rapidly changing: "[T]he Spanish-American and Filipino-American wars followed by the U.S. conquest of the Philippines, along with the Open Door Policy vis-à-vis China" (Yoshihara 975). Also, the war "between Russia and Japan aroused interest in Japanese songs, not necessarily treating on war themes, but Japanese in subject and atmosphere" which in turn may have ignited Puccini's fascination with the story (Harris 12). The turn of the twenty-first century "also witnessed an attempt . . . to offer commemorative works that retell major historical moments from an Asian American perspective" (Sheppard 401). While the perspective in *Miss Saigon* is still very much white, the musical was a direct response to the unceasing pop-cultural interest in the Vietnam War.

The initial success of all the Butterfly narratives can be partly attributed to the unique socio-political conditions and historical contexts in which they emerged. But now, in the era of the #MeToo movement, and the growing awareness of diversity standards, they are called out for preserving racial stereotypes and hierarchies, as well as perpetuating sexism and depicting an Orientalist caricature of Asian culture. The Broadway revival of *Miss Saigon* lasted less than a year having closed with poor box-office takings and less-than-flattering reviews, while the performances of the touring company met with several protests. The Polish production, on the other hand, was an award-winning, critically acclaimed box office hit that has run at full audience capacity (an average of 86% per performance) with 35,073 tickets sold over 48 shows between June 2019 and March 2022 (Rogozńska). The musical ended its run in Łódź on 23 April 2022 after fifty-three performances.

Hutcheon asserts that "adapting across cultures is not simply a matter of translating words" (149), and while other instances of the Butterfly narrative such as Belasco's play, Puccini's opera or potential rewritings may be indigenized, it must be noted that the producers of the mega-musicals which are governed by licenses need to adhere to stringent guidelines and have little leeway for change and no room for transculturation in the staging process. However, the shift in reception of Orientalist works, on the other

hand, seems inevitable. The context within which a story is received changes in time, and as Hutcheon suggests, “[a]n adaptation, like the work it adapts, is always framed in a context—a time and a place, a society and a culture; it does not exist in a vacuum. Fashions, not to mention value systems, are context-dependent” (142). The gradual changes in perception of colonial works and their contemporary adaptations, ignited by critics as such as Edward Said and various social movements, resulted in open criticism of *Madame/Madama Butterfly*’s and *Miss Saigon*’s subject matter and its Orientalist, racist and sexist representations. The shift brought about postcolonial responses to the narrative (Hwang’s *M. Butterfly*) and contributed to the debate on cultural appropriation and cast diversity in theaters. When such a Butterfly effect will occur and how (or whether) productions of ethnically sensitive musicals in Poland will be staged in the future remains to be seen.

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Museum Project:
14 Henrietta St. Museum,
Paula Meehan, Dragana Jurišić
and the Irish Housing Crisis

ABSTRACT

The aim of the article is to compare three (re)creative activities within one interdisciplinary project: a public space (14 Henrietta St. Museum in Dublin), poetry (Paula Meehan's cycle of sonnets in *Museum* of 2019) and photography (Dragana Jurišić's photos in the same book). They are all examined in the light of the current housing crisis in Ireland, which followed the collapse of the Celtic Tiger in 2008. The *Museum* project not only comments on the crisis and the changing social relations in Ireland but also challenges the perception of history and private/public memory. In the article, the components of the project are situated against biographical and historical backgrounds, and within the framework of new museology, memory studies, and the functions of photography and poetry.

Keywords: Paula Meehan, Dragana Jurišić, 14 Henrietta St. Museum, Irish housing crisis, memory, museum.

The 2008 crisis entailed, in the British Isles, a collapse of the spectacular miracle of European economy: the Celtic Tiger. Unlike the rest of the crisis-ridden countries, Ireland tackled the disaster quite efficiently by implementing a governmental adjustment programme, followed by austerity measures, to prevent the country's bankruptcy. Already in 2012 economic growth was noted, achieving, in 2015, a dramatic increase with employment and exports growing, and unemployment and interest rates falling rapidly ("Macroeconomic Imbalances"). On the other hand, poverty, social exclusion, public and private debt, as well as emigration and youth unemployment were challenging "any benign interpretation of how Ireland has succeeded in addressing the consequences of the economic crash" (Healy 255). The backlash of the real estate bubble and the construction market boom which had triggered the recession made a long-term impact: Ireland became immersed in a dire housing crisis. The number of dwellings built shrunk from 100 000 at the height of the boom to less than 10 000 in 2014 (Fitzgerald 8). This particular aspect of the Irish bust was responsible for the emigration of many inhabitants, artists included (Jurišić qtd. in Jurišić and Meehan 61).¹

The Irish housing crisis is by no means an isolated phenomenon. A relatively recent research area of housing studies, still facing theoretical challenges, has been attempting to examine current tendencies in the subject. As David Clapham notes in *The SAGE Handbook of Housing Studies*,

An issue which has come to the fore in recent years [in the context of housing] . . . is the embeddedness of housing in the global and national economies. This has created a situation of volatility in housing markets and a need for households to manage risk. There is an ongoing debate . . . about the cause of the boom and bust cycles in many national housing markets. Some analysts situate their analysis in a neo-liberal assessment of changes in the "fundamentals" of housing demand and supply. Behavioural economists focus on consumer behaviour and "irrational exuberance" in creating booms. Yet others focus on the globalisation of finance markets brought about by their deregulation and internationalisation. The result has been massive flows of capital across space and in some instances risky investment that, when it has gone "bad" . . . , has had deleterious impacts on housing markets and national economies. (486)

If housing studies specialists find it hard to define where the gist of the crisis really lies, pinpointing the Irish housing problem seems even harder.

¹ For the sake of this article, I have attributed page numbers to the unpagged *Museum* by Jurišić and Meehan.

The Irish population has not increased drastically in the last decade. Yet the combination of the economic recession, artificial market mechanisms (e.g., the above-mentioned real estate bubble) and the lack of public housing system or efficient housing policy (mentioned below, in the course of this article) must have resulted in a housing breakdown.² In my modest opinion as a frequent tourist to Ireland and a non-specialist in housing studies, there is hardly any explanation for Dublin—which cannot rival Paris, Rome, Vienna or many other capitals in terms of interests, multiculturalism, aesthetics, or other appealing factors—to have such expensive accommodation, even taking into account fluctuations in its job market.

Thus, instead of investigating the reasons behind the crisis, the purpose of this article is to approach it as the background for a fruitful collaboration between three forms of cultural and artistic expression which not only reflect on urban development and social change in Ireland, but also, on a deeper level, transform the perception of history, as well as collective and individual memory. The three media mentioned above (a cultural institution, poetry and photography) constitute an interdisciplinary project entitled *Museum*. Its point of departure was 14 Henrietta Street Museum in Dublin.³ Shortly afterwards, Dublin City Council invited two artists to join the project. The first, poet-activist Paula Meehan, composed a cycle of sonnets; the second, photographer Dragana Jurišić, created a series of images inspired by the museum and by Meehan's sonnets.

At first sight, the building at 14 Henrietta St. in Dublin exemplifies a species of anti-museum, with the house commemorating itself, a process which starts with its very name resembling an average address. The dwelling was not inhabited by anyone famous or conventionally worthy of tribute (such as a writer, an artist, or a prominent politician), although the eighteenth-century resident list includes a few names of the city executive. Searching for more interesting historical facts we come across Kevin Barry's involvement in the Henrietta Street fights during the War of Independence ("History of the House").⁴ The tenement at no. 14 would hardly even qualify as a museum of specific interiors: dilapidated outside,

² See e.g., Michelle Norris and Patrick Shiels: "[A] combination of macroeconomic conditions and inflationary fiscal policies is largely to blame for diminishing levels of housing affordability as these fuelled house prices, partly by encouraging growth in second homes" (paraphrased in Clapham 383).

³ In the course of this article, I will refer to it mostly as the "Henrietta Museum" to facilitate the reading process.

⁴ Kevin Barry is now regarded as one of the more important figures, or rather martyrs, of the Republican movement. He was an IRA soldier executed at the age of 18 for a successful ambush on a British army transport. His case received international attention before the execution.

as well as, for the most part, inside, the edifice looks as if it had not been particularly renovated, though its website claims that conservation works lasted ten years and the result was awarded a prize (“14 Henrietta St. Museum”). When I visited it in July 2019 in order to attend the launch of the *Museum* book authored by Meehan and Jurišić, I walked through virtually empty rooms, wondering where the exhibition really began. The difficulty in accepting this sort of public space may stem from the fact that tenement houses—referred to on the museum’s website as a thing of the past—remain vital for many a European urbanite outside Ireland, for instance in France and Italy. My native city of Łódź also abounds in such dwellings. Originally designed, just as their Dublin counterparts were, for wealthier citizens, most of them gradually lost their standing to end up as a shelter for those on the so-called social margins, while some are being renovated and moved upscale again.

Dublin City Council initiated the purchase process in 2000, and having completed the restoration, opened the museum in 2018 (“14 Henrietta St. Museum”). The idea of commemorating a characteristic Dublin domicile was thus developed in the era of economic prosperity but implemented only after Ireland rose from the ashes of the crisis. Carrying out revitalization work in times of acute recession must have been a challenge, and, as such, attests to the determination of the city authorities. The Henrietta House can therefore be regarded as a symbol of endurance within turbulence. It also epitomizes the tendency to archive the unorthodox cultural resources of Ireland (such as the oral tradition⁵) and contributes to a deeper insight into its history.

Dubliners are likely to consider this specific museum both peculiar and relevant, since it addresses a niche in their notion of the past. As Mary Shine Thompson observes in “Paula Meehan’s Dublins: Landscape, Community and Poetic Identity,” the history of lower-class tenants of Georgian housing “did not fit the pastoral, pious template of national identity of the early twentieth century” and in essence “has been elided in much public discourse” (54). Although plebeian Dublin was already immortalized at the formation stage of the Irish state (e.g., in Sean O’Casey’s trilogy), the prevalent political and cultural scene of the independence movement leadership was dominated by the upper middle class and by the aristocracy. Hence, the Henrietta Museum as an act of restitution or rehabilitation, of restoring the hitherto ignored social strata to their proper place as the very actors of events, alters the awareness of Irish history in its entirety.

⁵ The Henrietta Museum also gathers private memories of Dublin tenants. The dúchas.ie project, part of which is devoted to oral tradition, may serve as yet another example of this tendency.

Another function of this project is to revise the etymology and definition of the term “museum.” The Greek *μουσείο* stands for the “temple of the muses.” At the first glance, neither the Henrietta Museum nor most of Jurišić’s photographs explore those linguistic origins. The etymology conspicuously inspired, however, the form and contents of Meehan’s cycle of sonnets: nine out of eleven have been dedicated to different muses. The choice of such elevated poetic diction may seem contentious when set against the derelict working-class abode. Yet Meehan’s work is renowned for equating the sacred with the profane; and indeed, at the very beginning of the *Museum* cycle the poet warns the reader: “What you find here might not be what you seek” (“Invocation” in Jurišić and Meehan 31). Her sonnets are consistent with two discernible trends in contemporary Irish literature: one of antiquity employed as a metaphor for contemporaneity, and the other of the sonnet form interpreted as dystopian. The sonnet in Ireland can operate, on a conscious or subconscious level, as a postcolonial protest against the Elizabethan masters of the genre, some of whom (Edmund Spenser, Walter Raleigh) zealously participated in the conquest of Ireland.⁶ Meehan in the *Museum* project seems to opt for this exact genre in the name of historical truth and social justice.

Traditionally, the idea of a museum connotes the protection of a collection of artistic, historical, cultural or scientific value. Yet the term “value” is tainted with subjectivity, and so is the term “history” in the case of the Henrietta house. History as a conventional (and patriarchal) register of wars and large-scale conflicts does not pertain to this particular past. In the English language, inside the word “history” but often at its opposite semantic extreme lies the term “story”⁷: the tale of social life, quotidian and private, hence frequently narrated by women, made responsible for that “ordinary” existence. These aspects are involved in the English-language morphological transformation of the original term into “herstory” advocated for decades since the second wave of feminism. In this context, Dublin City Council’s inviting of two *female* artists to join the project has been a momentous decision, and their incentive potentially reaches beyond political correctness. On the other hand, one can notice a problematic—and probably unwelcome—stereotype at work in the very choice: the Henrietta Museum memorializes home, and home is run by women.

New museology attempts to undermine the timeworn museum concept governed by power relations. Its objective is to forge a bond between the museum and the community, where “the concept of

⁶ For details, see e.g., Oona Frawley’s *Irish Pastoral: Nostalgia in Twentieth-Century Irish Literature*.

⁷ No trace of this etymology can be found in the Greek original (*ιστορία*).

community [is associated] with radical democracy and resistance to the dominant culture” (Witcomb 79). Such acts of “giving voice to the powerless,” i.e. the community, should result in “a process of self-discovery and empowerment” (79). The approach has been criticized by, for instance, Tony Bennett, who believed that a museum should “actually produce the very notion of community and culture” (qtd. in Witcomb 80). The Henrietta Museum advances both of these attitudes. By reproducing the recordings of Dublin tenants’ memories it literally “gives voice” to the community who authentically used to live in “resistance to the dominant culture.” On the other hand, the Museum endorses notions of community and culture that visitors can relate to: most of the younger guests discover an unknown facet of the city life which once revolved around tenement houses, while older visitors have a chance to take a fresh look at the world they remember. Given that memory was a decisive factor for Meehan and Jurišić in joining the project, the two artists can also be deemed to have become “emissaries” of new museology.

Paula Meehan, one of the best Irish poets and an activist proud of her working-class origins, was raised in the tenements of underprivileged Dublin districts. As a child she witnessed evictions; in adolescence, she would often move houses and change schools, an experience which she perceives in terms of homelessness.⁸ The poet engages in movements for civil rights, including rights for women and the homeless, as well as the right to education. She visits prisons, takes up issues of ecology and politics, and personally holds leftist or even socialist views. “She has been called a ‘citizen poet’ and a ‘poet of solidarity’” (Hayden) and believes that “[i]n an ironic and strange way . . . the artist can sometimes be more powerful as an activist by following the muse” (Meehan qtd. in Hayden).⁹

Among her reasons for participating in the project, Meehan enumerates the Henrietta tenants’ stories of “survival and courage” which “deserve to be enshrined” (Jurišić and Meehan 61), where the verb “enshrine” dignifies everyday narratives and alludes to antiquity. The poet also postulates that “a museum is a dead space unless it speaks to the now” (61). In an early interview, she expressed a similar opinion in relation to memory: “Remembering for its own sake wouldn’t interest me, but memory as agent for changing the present appeals to me greatly. But you have to go back before you go forward” (O’Halloran and Maloy 13). She deems poetry to be an “archive in itself but also a measuring stick for future change”

⁸ Both evictions and homelessness were also the share of the Henrietta house tenants.

⁹ Part of the biographical information used in this paragraph comes from Hayden’s article.

(Allen Randolph 268), a “tool for excavation” (O’Halloran and Maloy 13) which “by transforming that past / change[s] the future of it” (Meehan, *Dharmakaya* 13). Understood in this way, poetry for Meehan performs a function akin to that of the museum.¹⁰

In the *Museum* book commentary which lists the poet’s incentives, Meehan observes that at present Dublin is undergoing a “crisis of homelessness” while the Henrietta house “is all about making homes” (Jurišić and Meehan 61). During the 2019 book launch, the poet voiced respect for the 1930s housing project discernible from the Henrietta Museum windows (and represented in Jurišić’s photographs, 54–55). This building complex was erected in result of the 1932 housing act, passed with the goal of a tenfold increase in the number of Dublin council flats. More recently, the aggressive times of the Celtic Tiger sent real estate prices and rental costs skyrocketing instead of lowering them, which should have been an expected outcome of the construction boom. In the post-Tiger crisis, the situation has been worsening ever since: the homeless statistics are growing. One of the reasons for this state of affairs is the lack of public housing system and efficient housing policy. Many citizens cannot afford private rents, and if they can, there is a shortage of private flats to rent (“About Homelessness”).

Meehan’s own biography converges at some points with that of the Henrietta house. The poet spent her childhood in a tenement adjacent to the street belonging to the landowner Luke Gardiner (1745–98). The Gardiner estate was designed in the Georgian style for the upper middle classes, yet in the nineteenth century the “dwellings became tenements, housing multiple families in poor conditions” (Shine Thompson 53). The Henrietta tenement faced an analogous fate: built in the 1740s in the Georgian style by Gardiner’s ancestor, the even more active Luke Gardiner the elder (1690–1755), it endured comparable pauperization.

Furthermore, both of these Dublin neighbourhoods bore imprints of Republicanism and exploitation. We have already mentioned Kevin Barry in the Henrietta Street context. Meehan’s tenement was located on Seán McDermott Street, named after one of the Easter Rising leaders; close by, another Republican and Labour leader, James Larkin, would deliver his speeches (Shine Thompson 53). The vicinity also accommodated the red-light district Monto and the infamous Magdalene laundries (O’Loughlin). In Meehan’s childhood years it became strictly a working-class area, “a byword for poverty, social dysfunction, crime and lack of opportunity

¹⁰ It must be added, however, that Meehan is also aware of the implications of the technological age, where the poet’s role as “the professional memory of the tribe” has been transferred on machines as instruments of storage (Allen Randolph 268).

for generations,” as well as an epicentre of gang wars (Leahy). Currently, the demolished tenements have been “replaced with public housing or private developments” (O’Loughlin); in December 2020, the Irish Minister for Finance launched a progress report at the new housing project on Seán McDermott Street (Leahy).

Obviously, the new housing projects can be assessed in a positive and a negative light. On the one hand, their developers make fortunes: stories combining rampant capitalism with social, religious and/or environmental exploitation are not exceptional. Dublin offers ample material in this respect, galvanizing Meehan’s work.¹¹ Shameful examples include the High Park laundry purchased by a developer for an astronomical price from a convent: the premises revealed a mass grave of the institution’s female “employees” (Mullaly). On the other hand, newspaper headlines announce that “the state can learn from its failures in tackling social disadvantage and deprivation” by gradually but visibly developing better living conditions (Leahy).

Simultaneously, however, the vibrant, though destitute, world of inner city Dublin, which has also informed Meehan’s work, is being relegated to the past. Identifying with the Henrietta tenants as “us / who gave shelter in broken down Georgian tenements, / . . . to the demented ones, / those who came in rags and miasmas of foul odour, / in delirium tremens, the worn out old spunkers, / . . . the meths drinkers, / the dipsos, the alcos, the put down no hoppers,” Meehan writes from personal experience (“Our Lady of the Apocalypse” in Jurišić and Meehan 39). The tenants’ material indigence, however, coexisted with emotional bounty which the poet celebrates. Families supported one another, shared scarce resources and displayed a wealth of oral traditions:

The tenement houses were porous to a child—you could wander in and out of other peoples’ rooms, sometimes find yourself getting fed at dinnertime in a completely different family. I had a direct plumb line into a very vital and lively oral culture. Story telling, songs, the actual language of the people themselves, the pure Dublin accent. (Meehan qtd. in Allen Randolph 240)

Such stories proliferate in Meehan’s poetry and her *Museum* sonnet cycle. They also constitute a vital element of the Henrietta Museum’s policy of exhibiting traces of everyday existence against the background of the audio recordings documenting Dublin tenants’ memories.

The other artist collaborating on the *Museum* project, photographer Dragana Jurišić, emigrated from the former Yugoslavia to Dublin over

¹¹ See e.g., one of her most famous poems analyzed by ecocritics, “Death of a Field” in *Painting Rain* (2009).

twenty years ago. She recalls the fire which consumed the lifetime's work of her photographer father in their Yugoslavian flat: "On that day I became one of those 'refugees' with no photographs, with no past" (Jurišić's website). That moment marked the beginning of her own passion for photography, a medium which "helped provide a semblance of control over an otherwise unpredictable world" (ibid.). As Susan Sontag observed in her classic study on photography, "[p]eople robbed of their past seem to make the most fervent picture takers . . . [especially when] the break with the past has been particularly traumatic" (7). In one of Jurišić's projects, *YU: The Lost Country (2011–2013)*, the author admits that "Yugoslavs vanished, like the citizens of Atlantis, into the realm of imaginary places and people" (Jurišić's website). All that loss—of home, country, identity—prepared the artist to question and negotiate the meaning of "home" under the pressure of constant insecurity. Instead of geography, the notion is correlated with inner feeling; asked about Ireland, the artist replies: "If a permanent exile has a home, so yes, this is home" (Interview).¹²

Like Meehan, Jurišić was attracted to the *Museum* project by her own working-class origins and her belief in the power of the medium (photography, in this case) over memory. Her preceding projects hinged on kindred themes. In 2015, the artist carried out the *Mnemosyne's Daughters* project composed of a hundred female nudes, with the intention of subverting the objectifying male gaze on the female body. Instead of traditional muse sittings, the project participants performed actively as protagonists of the work of art: they were able to decide which of the nine muses they were going to represent, and assumed poses of their own choice. Jurišić's current project, *Something from There*,¹³ engages asylum seekers caught in the open prison system of the Irish Direct Provision.¹⁴ Invited to the Henrietta Museum to join a poetry workshop with Paula Meehan and to watch an early twentieth-century documentary, the refugees were deeply moved by both, as Jurišić stated in interview (Interview). Following *YU* and *Museum*, *Something from There* is yet another of her projects which responds to housing precarity, as well as to national and psychological instability in the face of the crisis.

What image of home is thus generated by Jurišić's partly blurred photographs in the *Museum* book? At first sight, they react to the

¹² The information in the next paragraph comes from the same conversation with Jurišić which I conducted on 5 March 2021.

¹³ *Something from There*, National Gallery Ireland, until April 2021. The catalogue of the exhibition contains the asylum seekers' stories about objects they brought from home.

¹⁴ The system providing asylum seekers in Ireland with accommodation but not with work permits. The conditions of life in these centres have been criticized by human rights organizations.

sentimental memory of a lost childhood (for instance, the photograph of a rocking horse, Jurišić and Meehan 9) and register the absence of the inhabitants (the photos of half-open doors and the view from behind curtains, 1, 4–5, 60). On the other hand, they invoke the tenants' spirits by representing the authors' silhouettes and hands. It is not only "old houses" and "words" that "harbour ghosts" ("Invocation" in Jurišić and Meehan); the ectoplasmic multiplied images produced by Jurišić serve a similar purpose. The artist claims that she believes in the magic of photography, especially analogue photography "created out of nothing" (Interview), and follows Roland Barthes in his definition: instead of being "a 'copy' of reality" photography is "an emanation of *past reality*: a *magic*, not an art" (Barthes 88).

Among Jurišić's object photography, the *Museum* publication depicts unretouched images of its two authors. Dressed in casual clothing, Jurišić and Meehan appear in the desolate interiors of the Henrietta tenement as if they were recounting or explaining something (Jurišić and Meehan 43, 2–3). At times they touch the walls (18–19) trying out the tangibility of the past, or listening in. Touching memory, the contact with "the energy of the people imbued in the walls" (Jurišić, Interview), may trigger dramatic results, as suggested by multiplied images of the artist who started by palpating the walls and ended up lying on the floor (Jurišić and Meehan 58–59).

One of the characteristic features of these phantom portraits is motion. They contrast with the double "interior portraits" devised for promotional purposes (O'Sullivan, "Standing Portrait"), where the formally dressed authors, their hair styled and wearing full makeup, pose *motionless* in the museum. The conservative style of the surroundings also appears in another photo in the series (O'Sullivan, "Seated Portrait"), faintly alluding to the golden age of Flemish painting. The protagonists assume poses reminiscent of the Old Masters, with the interior details echoing either the symbolic painting code (the piano) or the stale museum atmosphere which fetters the heroines' convictions (anticlerical Meehan is sitting right under the picture of the Pope). The immobility, abundance of details and artificiality of these portraits may imply that the artists endorse the "animated" world of the lower-class tenants rather than the discreet charm of the bourgeoisie manufactured for the sake of mass media.

Another connotation evident in the photographs of the artists' hands is Meehan's concept of art as craft (in the sense of "making" and of "vehicle"), both in ancient and modern contexts.¹⁵ The poet admires the Georgian craft of the Henrietta Museum just as she used to admire

¹⁵ Applied for instance in relation to Icarus' flight (e.g., in *Painting Rain* 73).

Minoan frescoes in Crete. The Dublin sample of Georgian style modelled on antiquity¹⁶ provided her with yet another stimulus to join the project (Jurišić and Meehan 61). Generally in Meehan's work, "the restrained formal virtuosity of the Georgian architecture" can be noticed in the art of the sonnet, as Shine Thompson remarks (59) in reference to another sonnet cycle by Meehan. In *Museum*, the sonnets are additionally set against Jurišić's photographs of the walls, and on a closer inspection, one can notice that coincidental patterns on the decrepit walls recall archaeological findings. The background of the "Invocation," for instance, could feign one of Knossos unrestored frescoes. For both artists then, the Henrietta tenement bears traces of "ancient cartographies / still scribed in the walls" (Jurišić and Meehan 37).

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Habitually, one of the tasks of poetry and photography has been to encapsulate the moment. Even Sontag, who otherwise denied photography's power to emulate reality, conceded that "[t]he force of a photograph is that it keeps open to scrutiny instants which the normal flow of time immediately replaces" (87). In a similar context, Jurišić points to the kinship of photography and poetry: they both fill a "field of paper" and "frame the moment of time in a limited space" (Interview). In the absence of the original dwellers of the Henrietta tenement, the photographs of the artists and their hands in motion make them almost "inhabit" the space, and thus "materialize" Barthesian magic. The *Museum* project also seizes the moment by projecting agency onto another person and into a different time period. Among Meehan's protagonists one can find, for instance, a victim of domestic violence, who requests: "You, who write the histories, / write her in, write her up, write her down, before she blurs" (Jurišić and Meehan 35). Poetry delivers testimony of an urgent social problem, where the poet takes over the voice of a former inhabitant. In this particular sonnet, the victim's memory is literally facing extinction, and the State is deemed responsible for this vanishing act, as if Meehan wanted us to realize that, in fact, the legal systems of numerous countries fail to address the scope and gravity of domestic violence in an effective way. The process of the victim's "blurring" in the *Museum* progresses in a threefold way: it is (1) referred to in the poem, (2) conveyed through the sonnet's background photograph by Jurišić, and (3) takes place in the very museum, where the victim's original writing on the wall keeps perishing. This intensified process brings up the plight of all unprotected victims who dare report acts of violence to the police, and often afterwards go "missing," falling prey to revenge and secret killings. Writing in the name

¹⁶ Although, in my opinion, the Anglo-Irish tenement version of the Georgian style, with unrefined brick façades, imitates antiquity really remotely.

of the victim, Meehan dedicates her poem to Clio, the muse of history, and entitles it “Her Dignity: A Restoration.” The text becomes a revision of the neglected, female version of history: herstory. It also represents the redress of poetry, to use Seamus Heaney’s phrase, and sides with the defeated. This tendency can be detected in the whole cycle; another sonnet, “The Acoustic,” highlights those who “were much like us: they lived, they died on the margin” (29). Meehan’s stance coincides, therefore, with the Henrietta Museum’s mission: it propounds equality beyond social and political division.

In the *Museum* cycle, Meehan traces this egalitarian view back to the Middle Ages with its *danse macabre*, especially in the sonnet dedicated to the muse of dance (“Step We Gaily, On We Go” 31). The same poem comments on the remembrance culture in Ireland. Three years before, the author published a poem on a similar subject, under the telling title “The Commemorations Take Our Minds Off the Now,” where she wrote: “I commemorate / the poor going round and round the bend” (*Geomantic* 58). Such an attitude, characteristic for her whole *oeuvre*, truly matches the new museology idea of “giving voice to the powerless” in “resistance to the dominant culture” (Witcomb 79). Together with *Geomantic*, the *Museum* sonnet cycle assumes a vantage point which enables this sort of democratic vista: a cosmic perspective. It levels the sacred with the profane, as in the prayer “Our Lady of the Apocalypse” which rescues those on society’s margins from oblivion by honouring them in the sublime art of religious poetry and of the sonnet.

Presiding over Meehan’s contribution to *Museum* is Mnemosyne, mother of the muses, and the whole project can be contemplated in connection with memory studies. Discussing the commemorations of the Great Hunger, Mary Daly indicates that in the urban society of contemporary Ireland the memory of this event “is no longer part of a long-standing tradition; rather it now has to be made intelligible to people who find it distant to their everyday lives” (qtd. in Pine 9). The same could be said of the memory of Dublin tenements and the consequent role of the *Museum* project. Applying the once-fashionable distinction between dead history and live memory, advocated by Maurice Halbwachs (Erl 6), one can also argue that the Henrietta Museum performs the function of the latter, for instance by reproducing audio recordings of its former tenants. Simultaneously, remembrance culture, as Emilie Pine suggests in *The Politics of Irish Memory*, policies a boundary between the present and the traumas of the past: “[I]n order to observe past sufferings, audiences must do so from a position of relative security in the present” (11). This secure position can reveal either nostalgia, where the past becomes “a sepia-toned lost era,” or anti-nostalgia, focused on the future as the

antithesis of the painful past (11). There seems to be, however, a slight gap in Pine's theoretical framework: a little earlier in the book, the author defines nostalgia as "feed[ing] a yearning for the stability which is absent from a present that is perceived to be fast-paced and hence unstable" (8). The "relative security in the present" is thus *relative* indeed. Meehan emphasizes the current lack of stability in Ireland (the housing crisis) yet her sonnet cycle has a clearly anti-nostalgic character in the traditional meaning of the word: it is not sentimental. Photography, in turn, "actively promote[s]" nostalgia as the "elegiac art," in Sontag's opinion (20), and some of Jurišić's photographs can be classified as nostalgic (e.g., those of the Henrietta children's toys, or of the 1930s housing complex); but the rest is, again, anti-nostalgic (e.g., hazy photos of the artists in motion). At the same time, in their remembrance pattern, Meehan and Jurišić would fit Pine's categories to an extent: they opt in and out of nostalgia (yearning for the past because it was rich in personal experience, and not yearning for it because it was insecure).

All three elements of the *Museum* project complement one another as diverse media which facilitate, channel or (re-)create the past. According to Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney, one of the functions of media is to provide frameworks of remembering "through which memories come into the public arena and *become* collective" (2, emphasis in the original). The ensuing cultural memory is thus an *active* process of "remembrance and forgetting" with various perspectives on the past, where "'remembering' is better seen as . . . performative rather than as reproductive" (2). One can detect such a process of cultural memory formation in the *Museum* project, where each medium confronts the past differently, even if their historical point of reference appears to be the same. The project's chronology of creative activities (1. museum, 2. poetry, 3. photography) furthermore communicates the mechanism of remediation (Bolter and Grusin), where each respective medium not only performs as "transparent" of its contents, but also reveals its operative procedures:

On the one hand, the recycling of existent media is a way of strengthening the new medium's claim to immediacy, of offering an "experience of the real." On the other hand, remediation is an act of hypermediacy that, by multiplying media, potentially reminds the viewer of the presence of a medium and thus generates an "experience of the medium." (Bolter and Grusin 70f. qtd. in Erll and Rigney 3–4)

The first part of this assertion, however, does not seem to fully apply to our context, unless we understand the adjective "new" as "new to the *Museum* project." Chronologically speaking, poetry is the oldest of the three

media involved in the project. That it also aspires to offer an “experience of the real” (Erll and Rigney 4) is doubtful: on the contrary, its reader remains constantly aware of its imaginary and linguistic superstructures. Visual and auditory arts (and the Henrietta Museum combines the two) have always claimed a more immediate reaction from their audience than literature, whose arbitrary medium of language may act as a decelerating or even obfuscating intermediary between the instrument and the effect, despite poetry’s origins in oral and music traditions.

The *Museum* project can also be read as a palimpsest. The Henrietta Museum itself can be interpreted as such, with its conservation process aiming, on the one hand, to remove “the accumulation of layers of paint obscuring the detail over the centuries” (Charles Duggan in “14 Henrietta Street—Making a Museum” 3:15) and, on the other, to demonstrate and juxtapose these several layers of human existence by, for instance, leaving “the original wallpaper in its very worn condition” next to the new “recreated wallpaper,” as in Mrs. Dowling’s flat (Grainne Shaffrey in “14 Henrietta Street—Making a Museum” 9:40). The museum website also functions as another palimpsestic layer to the networked project, allowing the Henrietta house to be visited from viewers’ homes. With regard to the *Museum* publication, on some of its pages one can find photographs of museum walls serving as the background for the poems. Ultimately, the project, or its parts, has become available in book form. As Katarzyna Bazarnik has commented, the book in such a case becomes an exhibition place; this conspicuous trend in contemporary art book publication may result from an easy access to the medium.¹⁷ Initially, however, the purchase of the *Museum* book was limited to the Henrietta Museum premises. While the museum has been operating remarkably well on the informative and leisure levels,¹⁸ its two subsequent “media partners”—poetry and photography—found themselves beyond mainstream market circulation, which for a certain time span created a situation of inequity.

Last but not least, one might wonder whether the *Museum* project can work as an act of intervention in the present-day life of the Irish capital, or perhaps, as an act of restorative memory understood as “a compromise between truth recovery and creation of the past for the sake of the present and the future” (Drong 246), memory which “envisages either individual or communal redemption or restitution if those may lead to reconciliation” (284). By “reintegrating” the depreciated groups into the fabric of society, it also touches upon the

¹⁷ My conversation with Prof. Katarzyna Bazarnik, 27 Nov 2019.

¹⁸ See the number of nominations to Irish and European awards in tourism and museology (in the Museum website).

ethics of new museology and revisionist history. Ultimately, the project may accomplish the objective Paula Meehan formulated for “memory as agent for changing the present” (qtd. in O’Halloran and Maloy 13). According to Yuri Lotman, memory generates “a conceptualized reality which the mind transfers into the past,” and similarly, culture reads past “texts” that “interact with contemporary mechanisms” to generate an image of the past “which, like an equal partner in a dialogue, affects the present” (272). If memory and culture are forms of dialogue, then the *Museum* project represents a comparably active approach, inviting Dublin inhabitants and authorities, Irish citizens and foreign tourists to engage with the present through the past.

Essentially, such activities must transform individual and communal awareness in order to be effective. One can only hope that this process will not be disrupted by another crisis. As Seán Ó Riain observed in 2015, “the only feature of Ireland’s economic history more striking than its ability to recover from a series of crises is to just as quickly move from each recovery into a new form of crisis. Can Ireland break out of this cycle of boom and bust for the first time in its history?” (219). Now that more powerful crises (the pandemic and the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine) have swept across the world, activities related to culture and memory seem to find themselves again on the social margins and they will, possibly, have to be reiterated at the beginning of each new crisis. Nevertheless, the process of memory negotiations in Ireland may be gradually but steadily penetrating the mentality of post-Celtic Tiger society.

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Monet at a Glance: A Dynamic, Ekphrastic Encounter in Michèle Roberts's "On the Beach at Trouville"

ABSTRACT

The essay analyzes Michèle Roberts's 2012 story "On the Beach at Trouville" as an ekphrasis of Claude Monet's early Impressionist painting, *The Beach at Trouville*. It first approaches the narrative through W. J. T. Mitchell's model in which ekphrasis is understood as staging "a war of signs," only to conclude that the dynamics between the painting and the story is too complex to be satisfactorily explained in these terms. As a result, the essay moves on to read the story as an "ekphrastic encounter" and uses Norman Bryson's concept of the glance to account for what happens between Roberts's text and Monet's image. Bryson discusses the glance in opposition to the totalizing, immobile and disembodied gaze and understands it both as a way of looking and painting. The essay reveals how the glance can be used to explain important dimensions of Roberts's ekphrastic project: its depiction of Monet's picture as a semiotic system of arbitrary signs, its emphasis on the durational, performative aspect of painting, its insistence on the contingent nature of interpretation, and, finally, its attempts to mimic Monet's Impressionist style. All these features, the essay argues, allow Roberts to transform her story into a dynamic scene of intermedial dialogue where word and image enter a relation of what Stephen Scobie describes as "reciprocal supplementarity."

Keywords: ekphrasis, Michèle Roberts, Claude Monet, Impressionism, "the glance."

Monet's *The Beach at Trouville* (1870, National Gallery, London) is often cited as one of the most stunning examples of Impressionist *plein-air* painting (Gedo 102). The picture belongs to a series of breezy, memorable beach scenes completed by the artist in the summer of 1870 during a particularly productive sojourn at the fashionable seaside resort. The stay, which lasted about eight weeks and saw Monet complete as many as eleven paintings, was more than a holiday; it also doubled as a honeymoon after Monet's marriage, on 28 June, to Camille Doncieux, his model, mistress for the past five years, and the mother of his three-year-old son, Jean. In August, the newlyweds were joined by Monet's friend and mentor Eugène Boudin, and his wife. From then on, the two men often worked side by side, an experience which Boudin would remember with nostalgia till late in his life: "I can still see you with poor Camille in the Hotel Tivoli . . . I have even kept a drawing I made that shows you on the beach. Little Jean is playing in the sand and his papa is sitting on the ground, sketchbook in his hand" (qtd. in Gedo 102).

According to Mary Mathews Gedo, Monet's biographer and art critic, the Trouville paintings fall into two broad categories. Most are "representations of the beachfront promenade," which depict "fashionable vacationers strolling or seated on the beach" and the "elegant hotels that catered to them" (101). The second, smaller group are essentially "pictures of Camille at the water's edge" (101). What distinguishes the two groups is not merely the presence or absence of the figure of Monet's wife. The beachfront compositions are more finished and more realistic, their controlled execution indicating that "they may not have been completed in a single session" (102). The paintings presenting Camille, on the other hand, are more sketchlike, raw, unfinished. Executed with thick, bold brushstrokes that testify to the rapidity of their production, they resort to blurs and smudges when rendering details of clothing or facial expression, instead capturing nuances of light and shadow, sea and sand, and the ever-changing sky. They function in a manner akin to family snapshots, as informal recordings of fleeting private moments.

One of the best-known of these snapshots, *The Beach at Trouville*, depicts Camille Monet in the company of a black-clad female reader, whom some critics identify as Madame Boudin while others describe as a "nurse or older companion" (Nochlin 165). Monet's young son, Jean, is nowhere in the painting, his presence on the beach signalled only by "the deftly painted adumbration of little slippers drying on the empty chair" (Nochlin 165). For Linda Nochlin, the scene evokes the leisurely days of summer and the aura of chic sophistication that characterized Trouville and similar seaside resorts. She describes the beach as "the site of peaceful pleasures" and comments on "the tranquillity and sedateness of the

protagonist” (167). Other commentators, however, argue that the scene produces mixed feelings in the viewer: for all its light and breeziness, there is something threatening about it. Susannah Patton describes the scene as both “breezy” and “ominous” (102). Jonathan Jones sees it as depicting “a moment of joy” but draws attention to all the elements suggesting that the scene is “not quite right”: “the uncertain day, the patchy sky, [and] the almost empty beach” which provide the background for the two figures, whose faces he describes as “masks of paint.” And, indeed, clouds gathering on the horizon, grains of sand pockmarking the surface, shadows obscuring Camille’s face, and the funereal blackness of her companion’s dress all add up to produce a sense of uneasiness and disquiet. A number of art critics link the ambiguous atmosphere of the painting to feelings of insecurity and frustration that Monet was experiencing at the time of its creation. His two submissions for the 1870 Salon had been rejected. His financial situation was dire, and he could not expect much support from his family, who did not approve of his unconventional lifestyle. The death of his beloved aunt just nine days after his wedding, and the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian war around the time he took his family to Trouville did little to ease his mind. Eventually, leaving behind unpaid debts and the threat of conscription, he fled France and soon settled in London (Gedo 100–01).

Part of Michèle Roberts’s 2012 collection titled *Mud*, “On the Beach at Trouville” captures the ambivalent mood of Monet’s scene by re-imagining it as what Patricia Duncker summarizes as “a meeting of Pleasure and Death” (53). Like most of the pieces in the collection, the narrative engages in a sustained process of creative recycling whereby pre-existing sources are shaped into new stories and opened up to new readings. Some of these rewritings use characters borrowed from well-known literary texts (including *Beowulf*, *Tristan and Isolde*, *Jane Eyre*, *Madame Bovary* and *Nana*); others feature actual historical figures (such as George Sand, Alfred de Musset or Colette). All of them can be interpreted as instances of feminist re-vision as defined in Adrienne Rich’s 1979 seminal essay. These stories, as I have argued elsewhere, serve a political purpose as they set out “to subvert the myths, remedy the silences and expose the ideological biases of their source texts” (Goszczyńska 94). “On the Beach at Trouville” may be the most daring of these rewritings as it builds upon several different sources, the most important of which is a painting rather than a text. As a result, re-vision also involves here an act of “intersemiotic translation” (Jakobson 114), allowing Roberts to transpose Monet’s scene from the nonverbal sign system of painting into the verbal system of literature. Associating the female figures visible in the picture with Freudian drives (Duncker’s Pleasure and Death, or Eros and Thanatos), the author refuses

to read *The Beach at Trouville* along the lines suggested by art critics as a projection of the painter's troubled inner life (Gedo 109). Instead, she ascribes its ambiguous mood to the emotions of the two women. In an ekphrastic evocation that flies in the face of historical record, Roberts identifies Camille's companion as Thérèse Martin, soon to become an enclosed Carmelite nun better known as Thérèse of Lisieux or Thérèse of the Child Jesus, whom the Catholic church recognizes as a saint.¹ Although historical sources, most notably the nun's autobiography, testify to the fact that she did indeed visit Trouville on a number of occasions, the encounter that the author stages would have been impossible. In the story, Thérèse is fourteen whereas her historical counterpart was not even born till 1872, almost two and a half years after the Monets took their honeymoon and *The Beach at Trouville* was painted.

Inscribing Thérèse into her story, Roberts also places her inside Monet's painting, turning her into an element of what she herself defines as "a composition of light and darkness" ("Oh You Storyteller" 71). Within this composition, Camille and Thérèse constitute "separate ends of the monochromatic scale" (226),² clearly distinguishable not only through their contrasting appearances but also through their clashing philosophies of life. It is what happens between these two women that is really at stake in Roberts's story. As the essay will argue, Camille and Thérèse's meeting can be read not only as a confrontation between the forces of Eros and Thanatos but also as a meditation on what David Kennedy describes as "the idea of ekphrasis as an encounter" (22). Using Norman Bryson concept of the glance, I intend to show how Roberts transforms her story into a dynamic scene of intermedial dialogue where word and image enter a mutually enriching relationship.

¹ Interestingly, this is not the first time that Roberts has taken liberties with the biography of Saint Thérèse. In her sixth novel, *Daughters of the House* (1992), she has similarly woven details of the nun's life into a fictional narrative set against the backdrop of the First World War. On this earlier occasion, the events recorded in the biography have also been shifted in time (some seventy years into the future rather than sixteen into the past) and then distorted to fit Roberts's fictional project. In both of these narratives, Roberts has drawn upon the saint's autobiography, *Story of a Soul*, a one-time Catholic bestseller which Roberts has elsewhere described as "a text piling hysteria upon mysticism [which] would have fascinated Freud" (*Food, Sex and God* 195). Alongside Monet's painting and biographical accounts of his and Camille's life, the narrative functions as an intertext in the story, supplanting some of its imagery and providing the necessary biographical detail.

A forthcoming article by Silvia García Hernández, whose abstract (but not full text) is already available online, looks like a very promising exploration of the dynamics between Roberts's short story and Thérèse Martin's autobiography. As such, it should offer a welcome complement to the analysis presented in this essay.

² Unless indicated otherwise, all the references in this essay are made to Roberts's "On the Beach at Trouville."

For Jerzy Jarniewicz, ekphrasis typically begins with “an attempt to supplement visual works with what language has to offer” (26). This is clearly evident in Roberts’s story where the pictorial contrast between Camille, dressed in white, and the demure figure of her black-clad companion is extended into a verbal description of their clashing personalities. As a result, the story does not only recreate Monet’s picture by describing Camille’s clothes—the “layers of [white] muslin” she is wearing, her “creamy petticoats” and a hat “adorned with red, blue, purple anemones” (219)—or by referring to “the light worshipping her knees” (218–19). It also supplements these visual images with passages of interior monologue that no longer focus on what is externally visible and instead venture into Camille’s mind in order to give us an insight into her thoughts. These passages endow Monet’s wife with a passionate, voracious appetite for life, a quality she shares with a considerable number of Roberts’s female characters who see “sex and food . . . as legitimate pleasures” (Burgass 95) and are eager to experience the world through all their senses (Falcus 19). This is most evident in the scene in which Camille poses for her husband on the beach, and her thoughts are filled with plans for how she will spend the rest of her day. The images are vivid, detailed and sensuous: first, a lunch of *moules à la marinière*, “scented with wine, garlic, parsley and seawater,” whose “gleaming blue and black shells” she intends to “tear open . . . with her fingers” and enjoy along with a glass of “cold Muscadet,” then, back in their “shuttered room,” sex with Monet, presented in equally graphic detail, in a single sentence that goes on for seven lines and begins with the image of “a dazzle of white sheets” and concludes with that of “the long white lace curtains” (219). With her *joie de vivre*, Camille clearly connotes light, life and love, which is further underscored when she is described as “the young bride . . . [on] her honeymoon” (219) and her pregnancy is suggested through a comment on her “rounded stomach” (220), through a comparison Monet draws between her and “Piero della Francesca’s image of the pregnant Madonna, pointing at the slit of her gown, the swell of the baby dancing inside” (220), and Camille’s own memories of the religious scenes of Annunciation where “God sends his angel to announce to Mary he’s chosen her to become the baby’s mother” (218). If Camille represents the forces of Eros, Thérèse is clearly associated with Thanatos. Building, perhaps, on critical comments that describe the black-clad woman in Monet’s picture as a “dissonant note in the dynamic” of the painting (Brown 24), the story depicts the girl’s internal world as equally dark and gloomy. Thérèse’s mind is filled with thoughts of dead and absent mother figures: her mother who died of cancer, and her elder sisters who left the family home to enter the Lisieux convent. Despite her young age, Thérèse is deeply unhappy, but her misery is also self-inflicted. Guided

by one of her sisters, the girl prevents herself from enjoying the holiday through gestures of self-mortification. Like Blesilla in *Impossible Saints*, she embraces suffering and deprivation, accepting "the message that denial and transcendence of the body are the way to God," a message which, as Sarah Falcus argues, Roberts's texts strongly oppose (58).

Commenting on existing models of ekphrasis, critics point to the confrontational and gendered language that these models often employ. It is sufficient to quote two of the most influential theorists of the genre, W. J. T. Mitchell and James Heffernan, to understand what is meant. In *Iconology* (1986), Mitchell describes how the dynamics between literature and the visual arts is traditionally defined as "a war of signs" (47) and refers to Leonardo da Vinci's notion of the *paragone* (47) to account for our "compulsion to conceive of the relation between words and images in political terms, as a struggle for territory, a contest of rival ideologies" (43). Heffernan adds weight to Mitchell's observations by recognizing ekphrasis as having its source in an equally antagonistic impulse. He also draws attention to the gendered character of many ekphrastic encounters, which, in his own words, are frequently understood as "the expression of a duel between male and female gazes, the voice of male speech striving to control a female image that is both alluring and threatening, of male narrative striving to overcome the fixating impact of beauty poised in space" (1). The same line of thought underpins Mitchell's *Picture Theory* (1994), which includes his influential essay "Ekphrasis and the Other." Here, Mitchell considers "the treatment of the ekphrastic image as a female other" to be "commonplace" and points to the sexualized diction of much of ekphrastic poetry with its overtones of "pornographic language and masturbatory fantasy" (168). He also draws attention to the triangular character of the ekphrastic relationship where "the female image" that serves as "an object of visual pleasure and fascination" is described not only "from a masculine perspective" but "often to an audience understood to be masculine as well" (168).

At first glance (and the word is used deliberately here), Roberts's story might be interpreted as an example of such a paragonal contest, an attempt to speak over a silent image, to master it, to fill it with a desired meaning. The gender dynamics surely departs from the one outlined by Mitchell, but it could still be placed within the antagonistic model that stages ekphrasis as the battle of the sexes, the variation being that it is now the female writer who wrestles with the male painter as she attempts to appropriate his work. Certainly, in Roberts's version, the ambiguous emotions that Monet's picture evokes are not linked in any way to the painter's personal problems; instead, as the narrative grants insight into the minds of Monet's silent female figure, the ambivalent mood seems to

stem from their conflicting psychologies as, it needs to be added, they are imagined by the female author. This is important, because the two women in Roberts's story bear recognizable traits of other female characters we come across in her work, their clashing personalities bringing to mind, for instance, those of Leonie and Thérèse in *Daughters of the House*. The themes—absent mothers, the joys of food and sex, the traps of religion—also seem representative of Roberts's writing. Moreover, in order to infuse the narrative with these “personal” motifs, the writer takes considerable liberties with historical material. Not only does she introduce into the painting a historical figure who clearly should not be there, but she also rewrites Camille Monet's biography. By alluding to her pregnancy, the story ignores the fact that Camille and Monet's son, Jean, was three when the events of the story take place, and he was right there, on the beach, when the painting was executed. His small shoes can be seen drying on the empty chair between the two women, and he must be playing somewhere near, under his mother's watchful gaze, just outside the picture's frame (Brown 24). Even though, in contrast to literature, the visual arts are traditionally understood as spatial and atemporal (and thus incapable of “telling” a story), many commentators believe that paintings often try to overcome narrative limitations by selecting and representing what Lessing's *Laocoön* famously describes as “the pregnant moment”: “a single moment of an action . . . which best allows us to infer what has gone before and what follows” (qtd. in Gombrich 294).³ Art critics discern such an embryonic narrative impulse in Monet's picture, where the child's shoes and the mother's observant eyes hint at a larger story (Brown 24, Nochlin 165). The child, however, already absent from *The Beach at Trouville*, disappears completely in Roberts's story, and Camille, rather than keeping a watchful eye on him, is represented as a “daydreamer” (220), a figure “dissolved in her own reverie” (223). As a result, the “background narrative” (Brown 24) that Monet's painting seems to be hinting at is effectively erased and substituted with a new story, a story whose characters, themes and motifs clearly belong within the writer's *oeuvre*.

Rather than conclude that Roberts's ekphrastic story is simply an appropriation that is best read as another battle within the war of *paragone*, I wish to argue that this particular scenario does not really do justice to the dynamic intermedial encounter that is staged in Roberts's narrative. As shown by recent critical studies of ekphrasis, especially ones written by women and/or devoted to female authors, ekphrastic relations are

³ Stephen Scobie describes the “pregnant moment” as “a kind of synecdoche” where “the part is made to stand for the whole, the one isolated moment for the complete length of the story” (24).

often more complex than the paragonal model would allow (cf. Fisher 2–3, Loizeaux, Hedley 24, Kennedy 6–9). While many critics believe that Mitchell's and Heffernan's ideas have been useful in moving discussions of the relationship between word and image beyond the cheerfully utopian models of reciprocity as envisaged, for instance, in the tradition of viewing literature and painting as sister arts (Loizeaux 14), they insist that it would be equally unreasonable to expect that all ekphrastic responses can be subsumed under the heading of rivalry, competition and antagonism (just as, one is tempted to add, not all instances of literary indebtedness can be accounted for by referring to the equally confrontational and similarly gendered model of "anxiety of influence" envisioned by Harold Bloom). The motives behind ekphrasis can be varied and, consequently, as Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux has argued, we need "to broaden the range of relations we see at play in ekphrasis and to recognize the intertwined and various nature of the ekphrastic response" (16). In order to do so, we should create more flexible accounts of ekphrasis, embracing, as argued by David Kennedy, "the idea of ekphrasis as an encounter" (22) where image and word enter into a dynamic relation that is both contingent (6) and mutually transformative (32).

One such account, I believe, can be built around the concept of the glance to be found in Norman Bryson's *Vision and Painting* (1983) and developed in Mieke Bal's *Reading Rembrandt* (1991). Although I am wary of suggesting that the glance should provide a new master trope in the theory of ekphrasis or that it can successfully explain all sorts of ekphrastic relationships, it may provide a welcome alternative to the model based on the paragonal struggle. As I intend to show in the latter part of the essay, the concept can be applied productively to Roberts's story.

Bryson defines the glance in opposition to the gaze, whose emergence he links with Renaissance and post-Renaissance painting as premised on the idea of the "immobile eye" that encapsulates first Albertian and then post-Albertian rules of fixed-point perspective (102–12). As Bal explains further, the gaze is "the look that ahistoricizes and disembodies itself and objectifies" as it "takes hold of the contemplated object" (142). As an alternative to the gaze, Bryson proposes the glance, a way of seeing that he associates with Chinese landscape painting and characterizes as mobile, random, disorderly and potentially subversive. Bryson identifies the glance as a manner of looking, but also as a method of painting that encourages the viewer to "shift our perspective from the *image* . . . to the *painting*, to the carved sheet of pigment, to the stroke of the brush on canvas" (131). As a consequence of the shift, as Bal elucidates, the viewer is forced to recognize "that what one sees is a representation, not an objective reality, not the 'real thing'" (142).

From its opening scene, which pictures the moment when Thérèse comes across Camille and her husband on the beach, Roberts's story emphasizes the qualities of Monet's painting that Bryson associates with the glance. As the girl approaches the pair, the painting process is already under way, and the image on the canvas that she is confronted with resists the totalizing look of the gaze: the picture is "not whole," it does not tell "a coherent story," it "keeps breaking up into bits" (213). This quality is linked with the painter's way of perceiving the world as his look is referred to as a "slippery glance" and its mobility is underscored by describing how it "*travels* along Thérèse's bare arm" (214, emphasis mine). The energy of the glance, however, is reflected in the painting itself, which refuses to be reduced to an unproblematic mimetic representation by calling attention to its technique and form, to itself as what Murray Krieger describes as "a thing of pigment and canvas" (12). As a result, what Thérèse first notices is not a realistic image but "splashes of white" and "thick wide brushstrokes." The "white oil paint" surprises her with its physicality: she views it as "all material" and associates it with "paintflesh" (213). She understands the painting as a system of arbitrary signs to be interpreted where "a curling run of white denotes a frill" and "two white triangles suggest turned-down collar tips" (214). The choice of the verbs—"to refer to," "to denote," "to mean," "to suggest" (213–14)—marks the painting as a semiotic code akin to a language system. This effect is enhanced through other linguistic means. Looking at "a curving shape of whiteness, greyness, creaminess," Thérèse realizes that she "*can* call [it] the sky, the beach" just like "white smudges *can* denote a glove, a book" (213–14; emphases mine). Similarly, a blue, geometrical representation of a parasol makes her think: "A blue star?" (213). What the repeated use of the modal verb "can" and the question indicate is the possibility of different interpretations, suggesting that painting is not "an art of natural signs" (Krieger 9) and that its meaning cannot be conceived of as fixed and stable. On the contrary, it is fluid, contingent, to be actively constructed in an interaction between the painting and the viewer.

Bryson begins his discussion of the glance by drawing attention to "the disavowal of deictic reference" on which, he argues, "Western painting [of the gaze] is predicated" (89). What he means by this is the tendency in European visual art to erase the circumstances of its production in such a way that "the viewer can no longer work out by what route the image on canvas has been reached" (94). As a result, painting is not understood as a process in time nor as a practice of the body but treated as if it existed "outside the mobility of duration, in an eternal moment of disclosed presence" (94). It is this propensity to suppress deixis that allows Western paintings to create the effect of being "frozen in time," placing them in

"a transcendent temporality of the Gaze" (93). What the glance does is to destabilize the fixed, immobile image by restoring deixis and thus emphasizing not only the durational temporality of both painting and viewing but also the dimension of painting as a "physical practice" (94). As Bryson explains, the glance "does not seek to bracket out the process of viewing, nor in its own technique does it exclude the traces of the body of labour" (94).

Roberts's story abounds in deictic reference. Its very title, "On the Beach at Trouville," is one such expression, placing the narrative within a specific, recognizable location. Ekphrastic passages that are scattered through the story also contain repeated references to elapsing time, creating a sense of Monet's work as a sequence of activities that begin around "mid-morning" (224) and culminate some time after "midday" (220). Through such comments, the story emphasizes the origin of the painting in a process and as a process. As we see Monet dabbing paint onto the canvas, wiping his brushes, cursing, steadying the easel and attempting to shield the picture from sand and wind (222), the story foregrounds the performative aspect of painting and celebrates the glance, reconnecting the artwork to the body of its painter and placing its origin within a spatial and temporal context. By referring to wind that "hurls itself inland" and "scoops up sand" (214), the story also accounts for the presence of sand in the texture of Monet's painting, calling attention to its *plein-air* aspect.

If painting is depicted as an active process, so is perception. In Roberts's story, Monet's picture is not observed in the anonymous context of a museum nor from the perspective of a disembodied third-person narrator. Most of the ekphrastic passages are embedded in interior monologues of its three principal characters as they observe each other, and the process through which the painting comes into being. What matters for the reading of the narrative as a dramatization of the glance is that the impressions which these characters have in connection with the scene (depicted in the painting and narrativized in the story) vary—not only from one character to another but also in time. At some point in the text, for instance, Monet sees Camille and Thérèse as "sitting together as calmly as old friends," resting in each other's presence, as "the light knots them together in a white net of secret thoughts" (223). These words suggest a sense of bonding and intimacy between the two women, which Camille clearly feels as she invites Thérèse to lunch (223). A moment later, however, the sky darkens, clouds gather over the horizon, and the woman experiences a change of heart. As Thérèse blurts out her refusal, Camille suddenly finds her presence "threatening" and compares her to "a black tide flooding in" (224). For Bryson, "vision as it unfolds before the participants in the scene is the corporeal, spasmodic vibrancy of flux"

(95), and, in Roberts's text, viewing, like painting, is a dynamic process, and since it depends on the operations of the glance, it is fickle, contingent and subject to change.

An interesting aspect of "On the Beach at Trouville" is its capacity to highlight the restless energy of the glance by imitating the techniques observed in Monet's painting. As a consequence, Thérèse's early designation of the painting as incoherent and "breaking up into bits" (213) can be read as metafictional and applied to the story itself. Bryson associates the glance with "dispersal" (122), and its operations can be detected in the fragmentary narrative, which disintegrates into seven distinct, individually titled sections. Even though these "vignettes" are placed in a near-perfect alphabetical arrangement ("Abstract," "Autobiography," "Annunciation," "Blue," "Clouds," "Darkness" and "Dreams"), the sense of order they create is illusory as the material they contain fails to offer a coherent story. On the contrary, as we move from one to another, chronology and linearity are repeatedly disrupted, and we come across events that are shuffled out of order. This effect of narrative dispersal is enhanced further through the use of focalization: the sections abound in long passages of interior monologue, coming from all three characters, in which their impressions of the present, memories of the past and plans for the future are all fused together. Since these are also combined with comments from the heterodiegetic narrator, certain fragments of the text cannot easily be attributed to a specific point of view or a particular moment in time. To give just one example, at the end of the opening section, Thérèse is shown as leaving the Monets even as they urge her to stay (214). Several pages on, however, she is shown sitting next to Camille. It is never made clear how these two scenes belong together. Should we conclude that Thérèse returns to the Monets? Or does the scene of her departure actually constitute the ending of the story, with all the events that are described later to be understood as an instance of analepsis? Or are they, perhaps, taken from two alternative narratives that are never meant to cohere?

The painterly style is also reproduced in the story in several other ways. Most crucially, perhaps, this is achieved by combining the slim, almost flimsy, narrative with abundant visual descriptions, introduced not only in frequent, extensive ekphrastic passages but also in lengthy stretches of interior monologue, which also abound in visual detail that renders nuances of colour, texture, and the effects of light and shade. Some of these passages are quite static as in the opening section where no active "main" verb is used: "White shapes. Splashes of white in the foreground, thick wide brushstrokes of white oil paint. A shape of white put into the world, a shape that wasn't there before" (213). In other passages, however,

verbs seem to take centre stage as the language tries to imitate the quick, hasty brushstrokes of Impressionism as it renders the visual detail:

On the beach the sky whips with white and grey clouds. Wind races off the sea, buffets Monet as he paints rapidly. The skirts of his jacket flap. Sand whirls around his easel. Its legs rock. He curses, puts out a hand. Stabs his brush in blue, dances it onto the canvas. Dabs darker blue on the parasol rim and ribs, Camille's cuffs, a couple of folds on her dress. (222)

The use of short sentences, the dominance of monosyllabic words, the elision of the conjunction "and" in coordinate clauses ("He curses, puts out a hand"), the absence of subordinate clauses, and the dropping of the subject pronoun "he" ("Stabs . . ." and then "Dabs . . ."), and the presence of strong, kinetic, almost aggressive, verbs (in particular, "to whip" and "to stab") creates the effect of rapidity that characterizes *plein-air* painting. The sense of rhythmic, dynamic activity is also rendered through syntactic repetitions and reinforced through patterns of alliteration ("whips with white," "brush in blue," "rim and ribs," "Camille's cuffs"), assonance ("cuffs" and "a couple," "dabs" and "darker" or "rims and ribs") and consonance ("buffets," "paints" and "skirts" or "Camille's" and "folds" intertwined with "cuffs" and "dress"). A particularly elaborate example of such an orchestration of rhythm and sound can be found in the following passage: "The light pools in her lap. The light laps her. The light lies in her lap like a lover. Her husband buries his face in her lap" (218). Language is used like a brush here, foregrounding Roberts's painterly aesthetic. As a result, while the story does not ignore the differences between literature and painting, it draws attention to similarities between the two arts: first, it shows that painting functions as a semiotic code akin to language; second, it emphasizes the visual potential of verbal representations.

Roberts's decision to centre "On the Beach at Trouville" around a historically impossible encounter also allows us to identify it as driven by the glance. By flaunting the fictionality of her narrative, the writer clearly relinquishes all claims to authority and reveals her ekphrastic project as subjective, provisional and contestable. Thus, while it can be argued that Roberts undermines earlier readings of Monet's painting (extracted by art critics from the image of the little shoes or from the painter's biography), it also reveals all interpretation, including her own, as provisional and constructed. Offering a blatantly counterfactual narrative, she locates meaning not in the painting itself, but in the interaction between the viewer and the painting. One is reminded here of how Wolfgang Iser explains the process by which the reader interacts with the text to create its meaning. Iser writes: "Two people gazing at the night sky may both be looking at

the same collection of stars, but one will see the image of a plough, and the other will make out a dipper. The ‘stars’ in a literary text are fixed; the lines that join them are variable” (287). Iser’s words refer to how we interpret literary texts, not paintings, but his visual metaphor also takes for granted the constructed nature of vision, allowing us to infer that his insights can also be applied to visual arts. Indeed, in the essay, Iser quotes extensively from Gombrich’s *Art and Illusion*, to argue that meaning (or what he calls “the gestalt”) “is not given by the text itself; it arises from the meeting between the individual mind of the reader with its own particular history of experience, its own consciousness, its own outlook” (289). If we substitute “the painting” for “the text” and “the viewer” for “the reader,” we may conclude that our encounters with artworks, ekphrastic or otherwise, will also fill them with new meanings, and that these meanings, to quote from Iser, “must inevitably be colored by our own characteristic selection process” (289).⁴ Unsurprisingly, then, when Roberts casts her ekphrastic glance at Monet, the narrative that emerges will be a corollary of what occurs *between* the painting and the writer.

This quality of in-betweenness is often emphasized in Roberts’s story. The opening section starts by describing the white and the black shape on Monet’s canvas but soon turns its attention to “a curving shape of whiteness, greyness, creaminess” (213–14) that can be found “in between these forms” (213). The manoeuvre is repeated in the ending of the story, where a final glimpse at the painting also shifts from the two female figures to what can be seen between them: “separate ends of the monochromatic scale and in between them blue and blue-grey and dark blue and indigo” (226). While the fact that what is observed there changes from “creaminess” and “whiteness” to various shades of blue exemplifies once again the fickleness of the glance as an interpretational apparatus, Roberts’s repeated focusing of attention on this liminal space signals her interest in such spheres of indeterminacy, transition, and emergence, suspended between potentiality and actuality, between promise and fulfilment, between life and death.

Both Camille and Thérèse are ostensibly located in such in-between spaces. While the story offers a proleptic glimpse of the day when Thérèse

⁴ Iser speaks of “gaps” inside the text that the reader must fill in (285). Similar ideas, in reference to visual arts, have been made by Stephen Scobie, who has taken Jacques Derrida’s notion of the supplement to explain how language “moves to supplement the gaps created and prepared for it by painting” (25). John Berger, on the other hand, associates this sense of incompleteness in a painting with Impressionism as a movement where visual detail “has been more or less sacrificed to the optical precision of . . . colours and tones” (426). As a result, the viewer is forced to rely on his or her memory to fill in what is missing: “The precision triggers your visual memory, while the vagueness welcomes and accommodates your memory when it comes” (427).

"will walk from the public section of the convent chapel" and then disappear "into a dark, tiled vault" to embrace her "death-in-life" existence as an enclosed Carmelite nun (225), the present-tense narration locates its "here and now" in the interim period where the girl is granted "two more years of daylight" (225). Similarly, while Camille imagines herself as standing at the beginning of her new, married life, the story foreshadows her premature death, in 1847, by referring to how she is suddenly frightened of Thérèse, whom she imagines as "a ghost [who] has come to warn of approaching death" (224). For as long as they stay on the beach, poised in front of Monet's canvas, however, their lives seem ripe with possibility. Camille is full of hope as she looks towards her imagined future happiness: "A child. A house, a garden with fruit trees, kitchen shelves laden with copper pans and jars of apricot jam" (224). And Thérèse, for all her attempts at self-mortification, cannot quite stifle her impulse to respond to the sensuality of the surrounding world, to the "shock of cold water" and the "strokes of hot sun" (217). Just before she joins the Monets, she removes her boots and her stockings, "allows herself" to put her bare feet in the sea, takes off her "tight little black jacket" and "rolls up the sleeves of her blouse" as "the air caresses her bare arms" (217). For the duration of the story, the dark future is forestalled. The threatening storm may not arrive. To underline this idea of Roberts's story as a liminal space, the narrative employs strategies whose purpose is to refuse closure. The arrangement of the text into sections that develop from A to D suggests incompleteness, present-tense narration locks the story in the perpetual "now," and, since the final section actually represents the moment when "the painter and his wife invite [Thérèse] to sit down" (225) and then re-creates the opening scene when the girl first looks at the painting, the narrative achieves an effect of circularity, enclosing the characters in the liminal space of "in-betweenness."

Most importantly, however, the space of in-betweenness that Roberts's story creates to stage a meeting between Camille and Thérèse is also the location of a dynamic, intermedial exchange that arises out of its ekphrastic encounter with Monet's painting. For Jarniewicz, "ekphrasis is primarily a bridge-like figure of change: of transition, transfer, or translation, from the world of images into the world of words, from one semiotic system to another" (111). It is within such a zone of contact and potential metamorphosis that Roberts inserts her heroines. Though the story clearly implies that the women may have more in common than meets the eye, their brief encounter amounts to a missed opportunity: the two women fail to enter into a meaningful dialogue, Camille's invitation to lunch is rejected, and the woman is denied the chance to tap into Thérèse's potential for sensuality and so, perhaps, to change the girl's gloomy future. However, the ekphrastic

encounter that takes place within the same textual space proves to be far more fruitful. Removing Monet's painting from the anonymous, impersonal context of a museum, the story brings it to dynamic life, supplementing it with a narrative to reveal its performative, durational aspect and its functioning as a semiotic code. This positive impact also works in the opposite direction as Monet's Impressionist style begins to shape the structure and reinvigorate the language of the story. Ultimately, then, Roberts's text offers the reader much more than another battle between *paragone* or a simple meeting of Eros and Thanatos: it turns itself into a space of intermedial dialogue where "the relation of language and painting is one of reciprocal supplementarity" (Scobie 197). This, however, can only happen once the glance releases Monet's *The Beach at Trouville* from the staticity of the "frozen moment," destabilizes the rigid boundaries between word and image, and transfers the painting into the realm of linguistic contingency.

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Nec Tecum Nec Sine Te: The Inseparability of Word and Image in Virginia Woolf

ABSTRACT

This article explores the interaction of verbal and visual art in Virginia Woolf's fiction, exemplified by her novel, *To the Lighthouse*. The narrative of the novel not only features scenes of the painting of the Ramsays' portrait, but it unfolds as the creative process advances and concludes with Lily's final stroke of her brush. While words are used to enact the process of creation, visual art serves as both a frame and a basis for the verbal. The synergistic movement of storytelling and the act of painting a picture "within the narrative" is more than an interesting instance of ekphrasis. In *To the Lighthouse*, words operate like pictures—according to Horace's maxim, *ut pictura poesis*—and pictures work like words. Art's resonance in the novel extends beyond depicting the process of painting. I examine Woolf's aesthetic sensitivity and creative talent in relation to Paul Cézanne's and Paul Klee's art. The proximity between Woolf's novel and the works of the two painters encourages us to view the role of shape and color in the two seemingly separate arts as the space for uncovering some vital truth about our being-in-the-word.

Keywords: art, language, philosophical hermeneutics, Virginia Woolf, Paul Klee, Paul Cézanne.

INTRODUCTION

The lengthy history of the literary criticism of *To the Lighthouse* demonstrates its status as “a work of art about art—as are *Hamlet* and *Don Quixote*, as is much of the production of artists as diverse as Yeats, Braque, Pirandello, Mann” in a variety of ways (Cohn 127). The ekphrastic¹ co-existence of the visual and the verbal in this novel has become a constant source of critical interest.² Woolf (1882–1941) is undeniably one of the greatest British literary artists whose dual commitment to words and images has provoked ongoing academic debate. She resides at the top of this list, alongside William Blake, the visionary Romantic poet and painter (Greg). Blurring the distinction between the representation of ideas through words and images, Woolf weaves together the literary and the visual commendably in the medium of her art. In *Moments of Being*, she echoes Shakespeare’s iconic words “All the world’s a stage”³ and famously states that “the whole world is a work of art; . . . we are parts of the work of art” (*MOB* 72). Her fictional imaginings thematize this statement—Woolf creates a work of art while writing about art. Artistic creation transpires in her fiction both as a motif *sensu stricto* and as a theme embracing life as art. Woolf was fascinated with the art created by her contemporaries, especially that of Paul Cézanne. She was profoundly influenced by her sister Vanessa Bell, whose paintings were “winsome, sly, French Impressionism and Post-Impressionism as filtered through an English gaze” (Sasseen), as well as by the art critic and painter, Roger Fry and the bohemian lives and artistic output of other members of the Bloomsbury Group.⁴ Woolf potently entered the conversation with art and, more specifically, the artistic assumptions of her close circle of artist friends, sharing her thoughts on art with the readers of her fiction.⁵

The devaluation of pre-World War I forms of expression is crucial in modern literature. In the face of world strife, modernists no longer believe that language can portray the untranslatable truth of human suffering, loss, disorientation, and existential nothingness in its traditional way. Undoubtedly, Woolf’s inimitable integration of visual art into her writing interlocks with her modern stylistics, which like that of other great English modernists (e.g., Joyce and Eliot) and Americans (Wallace Stevens and Robert Frost), embraces a renewed interest in language. Her

¹ According to ThoughtCo.: “Ekphrasis is a rhetorical and poetic figure of speech in which a visual object (often a work of art) is vividly described in words.”

² Cf. e.g., Caracciolo. See also Bellamy or Olk.

³ See Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*, scene VII, line 139 (47).

⁴ Cf. e.g., Humm (“Virginia Woolf and Bloomsbury Aesthetics”). See also Maude and Nixon.

⁵ Cf. e.g., Humm (“Virginia Woolf and Bloomsbury Aesthetics”). See also Maude and Nixon.

modernist language experiments include notable disruptions of regular syntax (often resulting in obfuscated structures), unorthodox use of lexis and punctuation, sentence duration and punctuation testing, as well as the usage of a new language or typeface (sentences taken in square brackets) (cf. Richter). Importantly, Woolf also defies established conventions by treating her readers to writing that incorporates elements characteristic of visual arts (painting and photography)⁶ into the flow of the story.

Woolf brings the sister arts together in a way that rests on the hermeneutic recognition of their inclusive, transitional spheres. As a result, her modernist fiction provides a refreshing insight into the old topic of the distinction/oneness of the verbal and the visual arts. This cogent interrelationship—the visual as residing in word pictures and ideas as inhabiting pictorial images that can be transcribed into words—counterpoints the reductive oversimplification of the rigorous separation of the two arts. The extant scholarship takes notice of the multifarious art influences on Woolf in creating *To the Lighthouse*: Renaissance religious paintings, pre-Raphaelite art, Victorian photography, as well as paintings and photographs of her mother, Julia Stephen (cf. de Gay 1).⁷ Due to its immense concentration on subtle, impressionistic responses to reality, as well as an imitation of the elements of painting techniques, *To the Lighthouse* is said to be the reading counterpart of an impressionist picture.⁸

The exigency to situate *To the Lighthouse* within a broader art context seems to be well-grounded, given the role art plays in its narrative. Examining the intersections between the verbal and the visual in the novel, most critics focus on the painter Lily Briscoe and her art. Her portrait of Mrs. Ramsay and her son James serves as the pivot of the storyline, binding its parts together.⁹ The creation of the figure of the artist vividly shows the impact

⁶ A comprehensive survey of the impact of photography on Woolf's writing is offered e.g., by Humm ("Virginia Woolf and Photography").

⁷ On the impactful intersections between Woolf's fiction and works of art see, e.g., Gillespie and Hankis, and Reid.

⁸ For more on Woolf's modern aesthetics as reliant on impressionistic painting see, e.g., McWilliams, who detects the affinities between some famous impressionist artworks: Claude Monet's Rouen Cathedral paintings, *Regattas at Argenteuil*, *Storm at Belle Ile*, or post-impressionist painting of Gustave Courbet *The Wave* and Woolf's narratives. He fully acknowledges her impressionistic strategies, impressionist memory, and the ways in which her background made her lean towards impressionism and molded her as a master of "narrative impressionism": "In Woolf's hands, impressionism permits the interior life to float through the narrative like black ink in a basin of water, creating slowly shifting forms rather than hard lines, which seems about right if the goal is to explore the amorphous nature of the inner self."

⁹ On the complementariness of the verbal and pictorial in Woolf's fictional imaginings see, e.g., Lacourarie, who aptly accounts for the creative possibilities that arise from the co-influences between different media of artistic expressiveness: "Reading Woolf with pictorial aims

of art on Woolf's fiction.¹⁰ Critics agree that Lily is a fictional counterpart of Vanessa with whom Woolf had a loving but complex relationship. On the one hand, the two sisters were close collaborators; Vanessa illustrated Virginia's books and created covers for them, and Virginia was a model for her sister's pictures.¹¹ On the other hand, there was some underlying rivalry between them. Virginia's fascination with modern painting not only stimulated her new and mature aesthetic vision but also resulted in shaking up the sisterly bond when she grew in affection for Vanessa's husband, Clive Bell (cf. e.g., Sasseen; Reid 99–100; McParland 2).

Woolf's keen interest in visual art extends beyond evident associations. Her focus on the intertwining character of the two arts embraces more than the evocation of a creative process and modeling Lily on Vanessa. Rather than offering a stoppage or interpolation, which are the traditional functions of descriptive sections, the novel's imagery adopts the characteristics of a picture, animating, shaping, or even structuring the story (cf. Lewis 152). The central scene of the banquet in the novel is a good example that illustrates the narrative's saturation with word pictures in their molding function. Woolf's art hinges on following her writing talent against the backdrop of a painterly sensibility that is present in her creative consciousness. I propose to view the interaction between the verbal and the visual from two perspectives. Firstly, I examine the impact of Paul Cézanne's paintings on Woolf's writing. Secondly, I explore the affinities between Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* and Paul Klee's painting *The Grey Man and the Sea* on the grounds of its thematic and structural closeness to the pivotal image of Lily's painting in *To the Lighthouse*.

WOOLF, CÉZANNE, AND THE "GEOMETRY" OF HUMAN EXPERIENCE

The art of Paul Cézanne (1839–1909), a well-known post-impressionist, has exerted an important influence on the narrative of *To the Lighthouse*.¹² The process of examining the similarities between Woolf's writing

and means in mind enables the reader to throw a new light both on her linguistic idiosyncrasies and underlying philosophical and epistemological motives. Painting accounts for the way her works transcend their own limits by meeting another medium" (66). See also Torgovnick.

¹⁰ An original and highly comprehensive study of Lily and other women artists (for instance, Jane Austen's Emma, Kate Chopin's Edna Pontellier, Anne Brontë's Helen Huntingdon, or Mary Gordon's Monica Szabo) featuring in fiction can be found e.g., in White.

¹¹ For a detailed analysis of the collaboration between Virginia Woolf and her sister Vanessa see, e.g., Federici.

¹² More on the impact of post-impressionism on Woolf's writing can be found e.g., in Hodgkinson.

style and Cézanne's paintings yields intriguing results in terms of the hermeneutically rich meanings suggested by the two artists. Woolf's ardent interest in incorporating what is characteristic of Cézanne's artistic technique can be traced in the affinities between the descriptions of still life (fruit, shell, and skull) in the novel and the painter's artwork, *Still Life with Apples* (1895–98), which is exemplary of his craft. Despite its deceptively faithful rendition of ordinary objects and food, Cézanne's art captures human sensations rather than focusing on the mimetic representation of daily life. He is interested both in physical perceptions and how they concord with internal sensations.¹³ A depth of emotions lurks behind the facade of simplicity, or even primitiveness, in Cézanne's art. Typically of his artistic taste, *Still Life with Apples* is satiated with a curious fondness for trivia, which does not uphold the prosaic for its own sake, but rather intuits the universal beauty of everydayness.

Woolf achieves in *To the Lighthouse* something similar to Cézanne's effect of concentration on contemplative nuances. A sense of immediacy and closeness, which characterizes Woolf's modern consciousness, engages us with what her characters feel and experience in mundane situations. The narrative's central scene of the banquet mirrors Cézanne's geometrical and seemingly uncomplicated art.¹⁴ This episode reads like a "narrative painting" that resembles Cézanne's art, focusing on the multi-perspectival rendition of objects. The passage below exemplifies his influence on Woolf's style in creating apt descriptions of objects and nature:

No, she said, she did not want a pear. Indeed she had been keeping guard over the dish of fruit (without realizing it) jealously, hoping that nobody would touch it. Her eyes had been going in and out among the curves and shadows of the fruit, among the rich purples of the lowland grapes, then over the horny ridge of the shell, putting a yellow against a purple, a curved shape against a round shape, without knowing why she did it, or why, every time she did it, she felt more and more serene; until, oh, what a pity that they should do it—a hand reached out, took a pear, and spoilt the whole thing. (*TTL* 76)

The language used by Woolf is suggestive of geometrical, post-impressionist art à la Cézanne: "putting a yellow against a purple, a curved shape against

¹³ See "Paul Cézanne: The Father of Modern Art."

¹⁴ In the banquet scene, Woolf uses the technique of moving slowly from guests at dinner to objects and then to guests again while Mrs. Ramsay, with an eye of an artist, contemplates the picturesque plate of fruit arranged by her daughter Rose. This camera-like technique reminds us of one used in cinematography.

a round shape.”¹⁵ The verbal image of the fruit speaks powerfully not only to our sense of sight but evokes tender feelings of the wish to protect its beauty from perishing. For Mrs. Ramsay, a dish of fruit is far more than delicious food, she perceives it as an art that invokes a human being’s immersion in beauty. Desiring to make its attractiveness last, she seems to bring into realization Keats’s manifesto of art as not only memorializing beauty but acknowledging its everlastingness, expressed in his famous “Ode on a Grecian Urn”—a poem extolling a piece of ancient pottery whose beauty resides outside of the conventional understanding of time.¹⁶

As an onlooker, Mrs. Ramsay partakes in the mental process of creating art, which effectuates for her a remarkable change; it brings about peacefulness. Significantly, like Lily, she both creates and contemplates art. Mrs. Ramsay is not just the classic Angel in the House but a domestic artist: “Woolf celebrates the genuine creativity of Mrs. Ramsay’s in the way that she circles her family and friends about her and makes something beautiful of domestic life” (White 18).¹⁷ Mrs. Ramsay attempts to arrest beauty, to make it last. In a similar vein to Lily, she focuses on immortalizing the world of beauty (cf. e.g., Hirsch 112). The view of Mrs. Ramsay as an artist is not shared by other scholars, though. For instance, a distinct division between art and life that Lily and Mrs. Ramsay represent is claimed by Ruby Cohn who points to the significance of the first as “artistic” and the latter as “living.” This divide is also noticeable in the novel’s structure: life dominates in Part One, art is the main motif in Part Three when Mrs. Ramsay is no longer alive (Cohn 129).¹⁸ However, the intersecting paths of the verbal and the visual in the novel have even led critics to observe that the novel’s dinner party presided over by Mrs. Ramsay, the perfect hostess, can be compared to Leonardo da Vinci’s *The Last Supper* (Beach 1).¹⁹ If

¹⁵ For more on the intersections between post-impressionist art and Woolf’s fiction see, e.g., Stewart.

¹⁶ See Keats.

¹⁷ I offer a detailed analysis of Lily’s combination of creating artwork and tarrying in front of it in the light of H. G. Gadamer’s hermeneutic aesthetics in *On Beauty and Being: Hans-Georg Gadamer’s and Virginia Woolf’s Hermeneutics of the Beautiful* (2021).

¹⁸ An illuminative explication of life and art in the novel is proposed by Randi Koppen who writes: “[I]t is possible to read Woolf’s aesthetic transmutation of life into art in *To the Lighthouse* in light of a conception of art as at once disembodied and embodied, as a conversion/turn away from life and as experientially grounded” (378).

¹⁹ The spiritual dimension of the banquet induces a continuing critical interest, which results in a growing scholarship on Woolf’s secular mysticism. One such inquiry is Richard Kearney’s reading of the party’s Eucharist-like character, in which he advocates for a new form of spirituality discernible in the age of modernism that is troubled with the declining force of institutionalized religion. This tendency is reflected prominently in modern novelistic writing (275–77). Kearney’s notion of atheism (God-after-God), which seeks to theorize the new forms of spirituality, pinpoints an approach to the Christian religion

the dinner scene can be interpreted as a painting and the whole novel as a “reading version of a post-impressionist picture,” Woolf may be thought to have deployed here a literary correlative of a picture within a picture technique used in fine arts. Employment of the inside and the outside story, composed either of pictures or words, nears the visual and the verbal mode of expression to one another in the novel.

In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf alludes to yet another painting by Cézanne, *Still Life with Skull* (1890–93). Strangely enough but typically for many of his paintings, Cézanne depicts a skull, the terrifying object, in the vicinity of apples and pears that symbolize liveliness, lushness, and joyfulness. The oddity of a boar’s skull kept in a children’s room in Woolf’s novel resonates with the bizarre proximity between fruit and the human skull in Cézanne’s picture. In the novel, Mrs. Ramsay covers the skull with her shawl to mollify the children’s fear before they fall asleep, and persuades them into thinking that the skull is not what it is but many other things:

[S]he quickly took her own shawl off and wound it round the skull, round and round and round, and then she came back to Cam and laid her head almost flat on the pillow beside Cam’s and said how lovely it looked now; how the fairies would love it; it was like a bird’s nest; it was like a beautiful mountain such as she had seen abroad, with valleys and flowers and bells ringing and birds singing and little goats and antelopes and. . . She could see the words echoing as she spoke them rhythmically in Cam’s mind, and Cam was repeating after her how it was like a mountain, a bird’s nest, a garden, and there were little antelopes, and her eyes were opening and shutting, and Mrs. Ramsay went on speaking still more monotonously, and more rhythmically and more nonsensically[.] (*TTL* 81)²⁰

Mrs. Ramsay’s incantatory projection of multiple realities onto the frightening object to dematerialize the terror it causes corresponds to Cézanne’s displacement of the awesome reality that the human skull invokes by situating it next to apples and pears, whose luxuriance and colorfulness recall the elated, blissful, and Edenic state of being. The row of nonsensical “names” attributed to the skull and Mrs. Ramsay’s wish to make them sink into Cam’s mind illustrate the narrative’s disclosure of a perichoretic encounter between the verbal and the visual—the indivisible oneness of the said/written and the pictured.

that topples the distinction between the sacred and the profane and embraces a renewed interest in the holy and the mystical amongst human everydayness. For a further analysis of the Eucharist-like nature of the dinner party in the novel, see, e.g., Holda (*On Beauty and Being* 63–66).

²⁰ An engaging interpretation of the importance of the skull as a pictorial element that joins Woolf’s narrative and Cézanne’s painting is offered by Lewis (154–57).

The shift in the novel from Lily's first painting that features Mrs. Ramsay to the second in which she does not figure corresponds to the juxtaposition of the symbols of life (luscious fruit) and death (the human skull) in Cézanne's paintings of still nature. Cézanne attempts to grasp the intricacy of the relationship between life and death through the outlandishly opposing images. Woolf emphasizes the intimate connection between human finitude and infiniteness through Mrs. Ramsay's absence, which is more presence than absence: "[Y]et this painting is even more directly dependent on Mrs. Ramsay's life, and upon that larger, more profound and tragic vision of life, that includes death" (Cohn 131). In *To the Lighthouse*, life leads to art and art leads to life.

The visual art—Lily's painting—translated into words gives rise to questions regarding the meaning of the triangular shape and the purple color that she chooses to paint Mrs. Ramsay. Randi Koppen observes that "*To the Lighthouse* proceeds from the autobiographical but 'transcends' this base through various processes of aesthetic deflection, tropological and narratological" (375). The critic points out that the evidently therapeutic role that the writing of the novel played for Woolf entails "'the aesthetic (con)figuration of life' that uses shapes, tropes, and structures, and reminds us of the novelist's seminal words: 'I . . . got down my depths and made shapes square up'" (375).²¹ Could Mrs. Ramsay—the purple triangular shape—express the impossible possibility of grasping the essence of Woolf's mourning for her mother; the grief that is both concrete and acutely abstract, deeply humbling in its impasse to be pinned down, and is, at the same time, shaped (a triangle) and unshapely (the human figure cannot be discerned)?

The narrative of the novel encourages us to delve deeper into the meaning of Lily's portrayal of Mrs. Ramsay as a triangle rather than a realistic human figure. Why did Woolf choose this geometric figure to represent the female protagonist in the novel? If Mrs. Ramsay is a fictional counterpart of Woolf's mother, it seems that the aporia of precision and imprecision—the concrete shape of a triangle that bears no relevance to a mimetic representation of a human being but rather focuses on the intermingling roles of color and shape—relates to the misty recollection of the mother whom Virginia lost at the age of thirteen.²² However, more importantly, it seems that Mrs. Ramsay in Lily's picture is part of Cézanne's impact on Woolf's fictional writing. The use of the geometric figure is an expression of her fascination with his art. Even if one agrees

²¹ See "7 Nov." in Woolf's *Diary* (203).

²² Cf. e.g., Holda, "The (Self)portrait of a Writer: A Hermeneutic Reading of Virginia Woolf's (Auto)biographical Writings" (59).

that Woolf was preoccupied with the embodied existence of her characters: “What is evident is that Woolf in her memoirs shapes herself (her history/biography) as a body in space, a body with spatiotemporal relations to other bodies and objects with an acute awareness of sensory information, a body whose organic growth is directly linked to, in fact, constitutive of, the growth of feeling and mind” (Koppen 380), one still senses that the rationale behind the way of rendering the portrayal of Mrs. Ramsay is the result of the appeal of post-impressionist art.

The portrait of Mrs. Ramsay and James bears even more marks of Cézanne’s influence on Woolf’s narrative art. Lily’s minimalistic, economized in hue and shape, and, at the same time, profoundly ambiguous painting reflects the novelist’s interest in Cézanne’s style:

Illuminated by her associations and memories, her semantically rich and elastic “purple triangular shape” expresses a complex reality; mother and child; the child merged with the mother; and the difference of being that unfolds in the triangulation of desire for every subject—including the mother, herself “a wedge-shaped core of darkness,” “invisible to others” (*TL* 62) The figure of Mrs. Ramsay foreshadows Woolf’s later remark that “it would be as difficult” to portray her mother’s personality as “it should be done, as to paint a Cezanne” (*MB* 85). (Froula 146)

Drawing on post-impressionism under the influence of Roger Fry, Woolf adopts writing techniques expressive of her new artistic sensibility and skillfully combines her vision and design. Chantal Lacourarie emphasizes Woolf’s keen interest in the interconnections between shapes, masses, lights, and shadows, which resembles Cézanne’s:

Cézanne’s forms are simple, geometric, sometimes distorted shapes. According to him, nature should be treated with cylinders, spheres, and cones, pointing the way towards cubism (*Conversations* 120). Lily works with this precept, as well as Fry’s concept of significant form in mind “the question being one of the relations of masses, of lights and shadows” (*To the Lighthouse* 53). This explains why Mrs. Ramsay is represented as a “triangular purple shape” (52). The referent is far from Lily’s mind, plastic rhythm is what matters. (75)

It is not only Cézanne’s use of masses, lights, shadows, and distorted shapes that is evidently inspirational for Woolf. She attempts to demonstrate the loosening of the connection between the signified and the signifier, and the post-impressionist art of Cézanne comes as a meaningful stimulus of how this can be approached. Furthermore, the way the interplay of color and shape is present in the novel makes one also think of Cézanne’s paintings.

Lacourarie notices the significance of Woolf's emulating Cézanne's unity of drawing and coloring. Inasmuch striking as the similarity between Cezanne's painterly technique and Woolf's writing is, it highlights the appeal of his avant-garde art and her aim to employ what she considers as expressive of the modern spirit:

For Cézanne, drawing and coloring are not distinct processes. You draw as you dab colors on the canvas; the more harmonious colors become the more precise drawing gets; when color is rich, form is full. Drawing and relief thus depend upon contrasts and relations between contiguous shades (*Conversations* 80). This is exactly the way Lily Briscoe tackles her work: "Then beneath the color, there was the shape" (*To the Lighthouse* 22). She reaches a design by structuring colors, "putting a yellow against a purple" (100). (Lacourarie 75)

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Purple in Lily's picture anticipates Mrs. Ramsay's death, which symbolizes the demise of the contemplative way of understanding reality. Later, in Mr. Ramsay's re-direction of his life force and restored relevance of *vita contemplativa*, this style of being is rediscovered. The use of the triangular shape (in its regularity and boldness) suggests Woolf's defiance of the requirement that an aesthetic achievement should be complex in its design to be appealing, which can be regarded as an element of the post-impressionist legacy in her writing.

VIRGINIA WOOLF AND PAUL KLEE—COLOR AND OUR BEING-IN-THE-WORLD

The artistic message of *To the Lighthouse* potently resonates with that of the surrealist paintings by Paul Klee (1879–1940) and their immense attentiveness to color. Although there is no direct reference to Klee's influence on Woolf's writing in Woolfian scholarship,²³ the novelist and the painter were contemporaries, and some elements of their modern aesthetics seem to coalesce and inspire us to ponder the closeness between verbal and visual art. The interconnections between the novel and Klee's art can be traced to the example of his picture *Der Graue und die Küste* (*The Grey Man and the Coast*) (1938). Woolf's novel

²³ In her book, *Modernism and Phenomenology: Literature, Philosophy, Art* (2017), Ariane Mildenberg investigates the relationship between modern art and literature. She examines several modern painters and artists, including Klee and Woolf, stating that Woolf develops her innovative stylistics and creates modernist aesthetics by employing some elements of visual art (see especially 73–102).

shares with Klee's painting, which offers a simplistic but impactful image of the sea and a human being, an important fascination with the seascape. The influence of the sea on the characters' lives in the novel is more than evident in the portrayals of the Ramsays' lifestyle, scenes of the time spent on the beach, and, above all, in an excursion to the titled lighthouse. More significantly, though, Lily's striving to locate the central point in the family portrait she creates brings to mind the overpowering concentration on the color grey in Klee's painting and his notion of the "grey point."

Klee's art eclipses any easy classification and is usually located somewhere between cubism, impressionism, and surrealism.²⁴ Born in Switzerland, a German national, the key artist of the generation of painters in Germany after the Great War, Klee was fascinated with the theory of color and, most significantly, with "the notion of the grey point." He employs this term to name the moment of a painting's genesis—some intermediary point not only of black and white but of all color, which provides a transition between point and line, and is, at the same time, an axis in giving a start to a painting (cf. Vellodi). Much like the Swiss artist, the fictional character of Lily in *To the Lighthouse* is wholly engaged with isolating some central point in her picture. This point serves not just to determine a sense of direction for how to complete the picture, but signifies her search for a reality that transcends the confines of the feasible she endeavors to captivate and heralds the emergence of order from chaos. Lily's portrait and Klee's *Der Graue und die Küste* seem to encapsulate overlapping messages. They evoke an artist's yielding to the call to show the transcendent amid human everydayness, to mirror and traverse the actual to capture the lived experience.

Klee's picture invites us to acknowledge the intimate connection between a human being and the sea. A similar kind of closeness between humans and the sea is noticeable in *To the Lighthouse*. In Klee's painting, the waves, zigzagging and interfusing with the figure of a man bathing in the sea indicate the moment of an uncanny oneness between the sea's elemental force and human reality. At the same time, one can sense that the human being is not surrendering completely to the power of the waves. Part of the evocative strength of the picture comes from its ambiguity and the displacement of the power play between the human and the elemental. Inasmuch as the sea is the key motif in Woolf's narrative and Klee's painting, the two do not give a univocal answer to the question of the interrelationship between the sea and a human being, but rather manifest its enigmatic nature.

²⁴ Cf. "Paul Klee at Tate Modern."

The man in Klee's picture seems to enter some secret oneness with the sea in which the domineering or subservient role of the elemental and the human cannot be easily distinguished. The human figure is "the perceiving subject" and, at the same time, "a reflected object."²⁵ In a much similar vein, in the novel, Mrs. Ramsay identifies herself with the light of the lighthouse, the object whose light guards over the precariousness of a sea journey. The creation of Mrs. Ramsay, whose reality seems to be undifferentiated from the celestial reality of the light in its quivering, transient quality, seems to express in words the messages that accord with the concentration of the visual art on the interplay of light and shadow. The flatness of the waves and their retreating movement in Klee's painting suggest a strong co-belongingness, as well as a blurring of the subject-object boundary, which can also be seen in Woolf's portrayal of the oneness of Mrs. Ramsay and the lighthouse's light:

[S]he looked at the steady light, the pitiless, the remorseless, which was so much her, yet so little her, which had her at its beck and call (she woke in the night and saw it bent across their bed, stroking the floor), but for all that she thought, watching it with fascination, hypnotized, as if it were stroking with its silver fingers some sealed vessel in her brain whose bursting would flood her with delight, she had known happiness, exquisite happiness, intense happiness[.] (*TTL* 42)²⁶

Importantly, *To the Lighthouse* reveals Woolf's fascination with the interconnection between space, presence, and language. Next to the factor of light, the way she uses space is another element of her evocation of human feelings and sentiments:

Impressionistic space—be it in the form of big skies, hovering churches, fields of haystacks, or an expanse of lily pads—becomes the capacious room for Woolf's largest questions. Fearlessly, she plunks these queries into the novel like stones in a pond, confident that the ripple effects won't displace too much: *Is it good, is it bad, is it right or wrong . . . What does one live for . . . What does it all mean . . . What is the meaning of life . . . What am I? . . . Who knows what we are, what we feel?* (McWilliams)

Hermeneutic ambiguity and the absence of a univocal message pervade both Klee's painting and Woolf's novelistic discourse, pointing to something important about our human condition: namely, the complex

²⁵ Cf. Klee, *The Grey Man and the Coast* (1938). <https://www.zpk.org/en/sammlung-forschung/sammlung-archiv/highlights-aus-der-sammlung/der-graue-und-die-kuste-343.html>

²⁶ I offer a reflection on Mrs. Ramsay's mystical unity with the beam of light in *On Beauty and Being* (66–77).

reality of understanding our being-in-the-world; the subject's dissolution in a reality greater than him/herself.

The color grey, which conjures his theory of the grey point—the dividing line between chaos and order in an act of creation²⁷—cogently illustrates the closeness between Klee and Woolf. Lily's obsession with finding the central point from which all meaning radiates concurs with Klee's preoccupation with the grey point. The importance of focusing on this crucial point in Woolf's story and Klee's art reflects an unwavering search for an adequate response to a call to create that goes beyond the conventional understanding of mimetic representation and recognizes the ontological dimension of creation. Lily's fervent search for the central point reveals a need to locate something integral to her creative self and project towards the transcendent reality beyond her. Lily's need for a central point and Klee's fixation on the grey point articulate a vow to aesthetically reconcile the ontological and the existential, the impressionist and the realist, the lived and the projected. Lily is attempting to establish her creative self against the patriarchal, condescending attitude toward women artists, which drives them to either escape, conceal, sublimate, or transcend the position of a lovely "home adornment," as she struggles to isolate the major point in her painting (cf. White 18–19). Undoubtedly, in the creation of Lily and her picture, Woolf combines image and text in a way that encourages us to fully acknowledge the remarkable results that can be achieved via the hybridization of art forms. Such creative endeavors are also effective in emphasizing women's striving to push themselves upward from the liminal and the marginal to the legitimate spaces in creating art.

Revealing a profound engagement with color, Woolf's narrative can be viewed as a correlative of Klee's artistic credo—his firm belief that color alone is all that a painting needs.²⁸ The color purple not only dominates Lily's picture but is, at its very core, a capable expression of the similarity between Woolf's and Klee's art. The image of the enigmatic purple triangle concurs with the quintessential elements of Klee's artistic program, hinting, at the same time, as discussed earlier, upon Cézanne's geometrical images. Blue is another color that both dominates Klee's picture and excessively features in *To the Lighthouse*. Woolf uses color and distance to invoke and atone for human feelings, to create an evocative structure that would best render the workings of the human psyche. The complex nature of the characters' inner lives—the personal, the intimate, and the erotic—is brought to the surface via color, which helps capture the sense of estrangement and connection, the longing for fulfillment, and the consummation of this longing.

²⁷ Cf. e.g., Caliadro.

²⁸ Cf. "Paul Klee at Tate Modern."

Woolf's penchant for using color and distance to communicate can be seen, for example, in the scene where Lily regrets not complimenting Mr. Ramsay during the boat trip to the lighthouse:

But as she watched "the boat now flatten itself on the water and shoot off across the bay," she changed her mind. "The sympathy she had not given him weighed her down." To alleviate her guilt, to now reach out to Mr. Ramsay, Lily "dipped into the blue paint." As Woolf notes, she reached for art because "the problem of space remained." So the gap between them—which Woolf describes as "a fine gauze which held things"—needed to be closed. But, significantly, only painting had the power to do that. (McWilliams 3)

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Woolf's engaging of the reader with the quaint and the remote, as well as the domestic and the idyllic, is conveyed in the novel through the power of sketching, capable of accounting for what is blurred, or not fully shaped, for the evanescent realities that hover and vacillate but bespeak something genuinely true about our being-in-the-world.

WOOLF AND THE PLURIVOCITY OF THE VERBAL AND THE VISUAL

Woolf's fervent pursuit of the plurality of senses expressed via images runs parallel to her exploration of the boundless possibility of meaning enshrined in words. Laura Salisbury's interpretation, which focuses on the interconnections between materiality, corporeality, and neurology, encourages us to delve deeper into the versatile meanings of the novel's scene in which Mrs. Ramsay covers the skull with her shawl. Salisbury explains the act of covering "the matter of the skull with another material" as intended to defy the object's terrifying materiality. It is worth noticing that Mrs. Ramsay does not just cover the materiality of one object with that of another, but, much more importantly, she eclipses it with the power of the immaterial—with words. The words and the image interfuse, touch, and inform one another. Imagination capable of creating pictures needs language to conjure impossible realities—to think the unthinkable, to traverse the symbolic only to create new symbolic meanings. The hermeneutic, and thus, the inclusive encounter between image and word in Woolf's narrative testifies to the boundless reality of language which both *in-vokes* and *pro-vokes* meaning, summoning a different state of being.

All of Woolf's fictional writings potently express her dexterous crossing of the boundary between the verbal and the pictorial. Her openness to language's boundlessness intermingles with the meaning-suffused reality

of the visual art that she explores. The novel's focus on language's potential to produce multiple senses, discerned in the moment of Mrs. Ramsay's conjuring up other and powerful meanings, is strengthened throughout the narrative. Lily voices an assertion of the plurivocity of meaning in visual art when she talks to Mr. Bankes about her painting:

But the picture was not of them [the Ramsays], she said. Or, not in his sense. There were other senses too in which one might reverence them. By a shadow here and a light there, for instance. Her tribute took that form if, as she vaguely supposed, a picture must be a tribute. A mother and child might be reduced to a shadow without irreverence. A light here required a shadow there. (*TTL* 37)

Mr. Bankes is the only character in the novel who can enter into an intellectual conversation about art with Lily. Although they disagree (Mr. Bankes describes a painting by John Lavery that exemplifies the kind of art that Lily would not like to create), they are truly engaged in discussing art (*TTL* 36, 49–50, 122–23). Lily's picture is a family portrait, and, at the same time, it is not what it seems to be at first sight, but much more a pictorial reality that continually germinates new but also contradictory meanings. Her painting could be said to replicate many pictures of the Madonna and Child, but it equally brings to mind completely unexpected visions, thoughts, and sensations because it attempts to capture the enigmatic and multilayered meanings inhering in the interrelationship between color and shape—"the purple triangle." The sustained process, in which Lily both creates and interprets her art, can be viewed as evoking Hans-Georg Gadamer's aesthetics and his explication of the encounter with an artwork, in which the lingering or tarrying with art is the heart of its reception.²⁹ Woolf's embodiment of the intimacy of the aesthetic encounter is marked with a deep awareness of the multitudinous meanings that are born in the actualization of art; its true *being* comes into being in the process of contemplation.

The novel's continuous engagement with the polyvalence of meanings evoked through words and images is cogently encapsulated in James's meditation over the image of the lighthouse:

The Lighthouse was then a silvery, misty-looking tower with a yellow eye, that opened suddenly, and softly in the evening. Now—James looked at the Lighthouse. He could see the white-washed rocks; the tower, stark and straight; he could see that it was barred with black and white; he could see windows in it; he could even see washing spread on

²⁹ Cf. Holda, *On Beauty and Being* (134–46).

the rocks to dry. *So that was the Lighthouse, was it? No, the other was also the Lighthouse. For nothing was simply one thing. The other Lighthouse was true too.* It was sometimes hardly to be seen across the bay. In the evening one looked up and saw the eye opening and shutting and the light seemed to reach them in that airy sunny garden where they sat. (*TTL* 216, emphasis mine)

Rich in colors and shapes, James's deliberation expresses something vital about the human response to reality, perceptibility, and understanding that are always conditioned and provisional. Words and images, satiated with meaning, reveal in the novel the hermeneutic interplay of the concealment and unconcealment of Being.³⁰ Being discloses itself through language. Significantly, James's seminal words: "So that was the Lighthouse, was it? No, the other was also the Lighthouse" (*TTL* 216) not only express different perceptions of external reality because of time passing but remind one of Heidegger's use of the Greek word *Aletheia*—the truth which is revealed.³¹ Our seeing and understanding follow the trajectory of concealment and unconcealment—to remain in awe of the ever-new revelations of Being is part of our human condition. The vacillating borderline between fascination and disillusionment in James's interpretation of the image of the lighthouse discloses the tension between the veiled and the unveiled in the revelation of truth.

The encounter between the literary and the visual art in the novel takes on various ways of realization which demonstrate Woolf's limitless fascination with color and form. The interaction between color, space, form, and meaning is exemplified in the passage below:

[T]he whole bay spread before them and Mrs. Ramsay could not help exclaiming, "Oh, how beautiful!" For the great plateful of blue water was

³⁰ I refer here to the fundamental precept of Heidegger's ontological hermeneutics. Heidegger argues: "Being eludes being noticed by unconcealing itself in a being. This holds true for its truth, in the same way. Keeping to that way is the earlier way of its unconcealment. The early way of keeping to that way is *Aletheia*. By bringing the unconcealment of a being, the early way makes the concealment of Being possible. Yet the concealment remains in the course of keeping itself to itself, by way of refusing to let go of itself. We can call this illumining of its keeping-to-itself in the truth about its nature" (333–34).

³¹ Heidegger's revalidation of *Aletheia* draws our attention to the interplay of concealment and unconcealment in the disclosure of Being: "Understanding $\acute{\alpha}\text{-}\lambda\eta\theta\epsilon\iota\alpha$ as unconcealedness, places it in the dialectic horizon of concealment (*Verbergung*) and unconcealment (*Entbergung*) and opens up a world in which things are made intelligible for human beings in the first place. Dasein is always lost into the world since it is always concealing when it unconceals. It is the mystery of language, which allows us to capture the nature of Dasein as disclosure. Disclosing itself to itself points to Dasein as disclosing its own possibilities" (Wierciński 314).

before her; the hoary Lighthouse, distant, austere, in the midst; and on the right, as far as the eye could see, fading and falling, in soft low pleats, the green sand dunes with the wild flowing grasses on them, which always seemed to be running away into some moon country, uninhabited of men. (*TTL* 14)

With the zest of a “painterly writer,” thanks to her focus on multiple colors, Woolf pursues the possibilities of evoking various realities. Like words, color in her novel both reveals and conceals meaning, sensitizing us to the polyvalence of the human experience of being in the world.

CONCLUSION

Modern literature witnesses a seminal devaluation of the forms of expression that prevailed before the Great War. Facing the calamity of global conflict, modernists no longer find language in its conventional use capable of conveying the unconveyable reality of human sufferance, loss, disorientation, and existential void, potently diagnosed by Eliot in his landmark *The Waste Land* (1922). For modernists, the abiding forms of employing language as a medium to communicate the human condition cease to retain their validity, and thus, they seek new ways of expression. Woolf’s creative response to visual art contributes to her modern writerly technique. As she becomes increasingly aware of the insufficiency of capturing reality through the established modes of using language to meet the demands of the modern era with its new challenges, Woolf hermeneutically blends the possibilities that inhere in the verbal and the visual. She acknowledges the various pathways of human expressiveness that serve the same end of disclosing the ontological oneness of beauty and Being. Through the integration of what visual art has to offer, the narrative of *To the Lighthouse* illuminates the possible trajectories of the encounter between the verbal and the visual and decentralizes the classic distinction between those two modes of artistic expression.

The hermeneutic investigation of Woolf’s novel encourages us to locate the trans-disciplinary potential of those two provinces of art without a sense of losing their distinct merits and aesthetic value. Woolf’s recourse to the visual arts is not merely a facile appreciation of the new cultural trends but a fully-fledged engagement with the mutual enrichment of the seemingly separate modes of artistic expression. It is also a potent reaction to contemporaneous debate about color and form within the artistic context of the novel’s genesis. Going beyond the recognition of

the peaceful coexistence of the visual and the verbal, Woolf thinks the incommensurate, making it possible for the art of words and images to meet, touch, and meld, with the result of creating exceptionally appealing instances of an ekphrastic representation of art. Even more importantly, however, *To the Lighthouse* discloses a hermeneutic understanding of the affinities between the two arts; it points to their oneness. The simultaneity of the creative processes that the novel encompasses, with its storyline progressing alongside the prolonged act of creating a picture and ending when Lily lays down her brush, indicates Woolf's hyper-consciousness of the indivisible unity of the visual and verbal cultures.

The narrative of *To the Lighthouse* underlines the pertinence of the hermeneutic thinking of the art of words and images coming together into a meaningful union, exemplifying a magnificent entwinement of the sister arts. Woolf's narrative reveals that the exclusive province of one of those arts is a fake concept that does not find confirmation in the artistic practices across time and place. Woolf's adoption of Cézanne's artistic techniques gestures towards the meaningful interrelations between the literary and the painterly. In her writing, the hermeneutic fusion of those two horizons of human creativity works to the effect of eradicating formal divisions between visual and verbal art. Viewing *To the Lighthouse* from the perspective of post-impressionist art provides a unique lens for experiencing the hermeneutic entanglement of literature and visual art in practice (*Hermeneutik im Vollzug*). Likewise, tracing the commonalities between Woolf's novel and the contemporary art of Klee sensitizes us to her inimitable hybridization of the writerly and the painterly. Woolf's fiction, as a meeting point for literary and aesthetic imaginations, encourages us to seek and appreciate a broader and more nuanced range of possibilities for text to picture and image to text translation.

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REVIEWS AND INTERVIEWS

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A Review of *Variable Objects: Shakespeare and Speculative Appropriation*, edited by Valerie M. Fazel and Louise Geddes (Edinburgh UP, 2021)

William Shakespeare, a literary and cultural icon, and his no less iconic texts continue to fuel the performance and adaptation landscape, various areas of pedagogy, and, inexhaustibly, academic criticism. Dynamically developing theoretical approaches, be it corpus linguistics, media studies, adaptation studies, or posthumanism, reach out to Shakespeare for stimulating research material, taking Shakespeare studies further into exciting and productive areas. One of the issues that keeps returning to the centre of various discourses is the question of what Shakespeare is, and how to approach, understand, and analyze this complex assemblage of meanings—the poet of Stratford-upon-Avon, the theatre person, the theatrical texts themselves, metonymically referred to by the name of the man, as well as their afterlives in print, performance, and appropriations across centuries, cultures, and media. What emerges as an intuitive answer to that question is “Shakespeare”—the Shakespeare object—easily recognizable through its numerous fragmentary landmarks.

Variable Objects: Shakespeare and Speculative Appropriation, a collection edited by Valerie M. Fazel and Louise Geddes, ventures the exploration of that very concept. With its rich and stimulating interdisciplinary approach, it examines how “Shakespeare” keeps circulating in our world, but it does a lot more than discover ways to read Shakespeare’s texts anew. Recognizing “the interchangeability of humans and objects as its starting point” (VO 2), the volume takes for granted the power of Shakespeare’s texts to generate an abundance of new ideas. What it does is to propose a focus on how fragments and objects, material and immaterial, human and non-human, rhizomatically networking away from the “Shakespeare”

centre, eventually lead us back to it, allowing for “a more flexible, inclusive understanding of what Shakespeare is” (VO 2).

Primarily engaging with the concept of appropriation, *Variable Objects* continues to develop ideas put together in an earlier collection by Fazel and Geddes, *The Shakespeare User: Critical and Creative Appropriations in a Networked Culture* (2017). Published as part of the *Reproducing Shakespeare: New Studies in Adaptation and Appropriation* series, the 2017 volume proposes to see the presence of Shakespeare in digital culture in terms of use and explores how Shakespeare, understood as both the texts and the myth around the man, is no longer read but “broken down and reassembled by a body of users whose valuation of Shakespeare is unpredictable and often resistant to pre-conceived notions of cultural hegemony” (TSU 3–4). In *Variable Objects*, Fazel and Geddes explore those ideas in the context of adaptation and appropriation studies, relying on several interconnected discourses that are crucial to how Shakespeare studies have recently developed, such as digital media, posthumanism, or object-oriented ontology. Taking Jane Bennett’s philosophy of materiality (2010’s *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*) as its core, the volume also references numerous ground-breaking Shakespeare criticisms, such as Christy Desmet’s alien networks, Douglas Lanier’s rhizomes, and W. B. Worthen’s performance theory, as well as adaptation, appropriation, and new media studies of Stephen O’Neill, Alexa Huang, Daniel Fischlin, M. J. Kidney, Thomas Cartelli, and many other outstanding scholars in those fields. The volume takes those notions further, entering into dialogue with them and proposing to see Shakespeare primarily as a speculative object—not as a passive text or an icon to be owned, interpreted, or appropriated within the frames of hegemonic discourses, but as an entity with an affective agency and with “infinite meaning” (VO 2). The logic of speculative appropriation put forth by this approach sees the Shakespeare object as an equal participant in the affective dialogue with the appropriator; once the assumption of the appropriator’s interpretative autonomy is rejected in favour of the object’s agency, the dialogue opens up to unpredictable paths, as the book attempts to demonstrate.

The variable networks of potential meanings that emerge from our dialogues with Shakespeare—texts, fragments, and objects, both human and non-human—do not rely on our critical, interpretative, or appropriative efforts, and cannot be constrained by them. Shakespeare objects, understood as Bennett’s complex assemblages, generate their own energies. Shakespeare’s fecundity, the book argues, is not only in how the texts get iterated, transformed, and networked, all to celebrate the cultural supremacy of the Bard of Avon. Fazel and Geddes have a more complex agenda in mind. Seeking affective power in the Shakespeare composite

object, they propose a theory that accounts for the fact that Shakespeare remains recognizable, in its various forms and shapes, across media and cultures, however erratic its appropriation logic may be.

The volume is divided into three sections, each taking the new materialist discourse on Shakespeare appropriations in a slightly different direction. The contributions in part I—Disciplinary Objects—from Sujata Iyengar, Molly Seremet, and Robert Sawyer—discuss specific material objects, like the handkerchief in *Othello*, Ophelia's remembrances or flowers in Q1 *Hamlet*, and the currencies and algorithms of digitalized Shakespeare. These objects, the authors argue, have a forceful presence and, with their unpredictable energies, affect the meanings and circulation of Shakespeare.

In part II, L. Monique Pittman, Vanessa I. Corredera, Kristin N. Denslow and Karl G. Bailey discussing *Westworld*, Andrew Darr analyzing *Elsinore*, the videogame, Anna Blackwell exploring the Shakespearean biopic, and Emily MacLeod examining race and gender in *The Hollow Crown*, study how the vibrancy of objects is manifested in media. These chapters explore the ways in which various media frame the agency of objects, including thingified, racialized, or gendered bodies, or objects with prosthetic qualities. Studying their influence on humans, as well as other objects, the chapters invite us again to see Shakespeare—the texts, the man, the characters—not as an object to be used and reused in media adaptations, but as one invested with its agency and power, much perhaps like the hosts in *Westworld*.

In part III, Shanelle E. Kim, Valerie Clayman Pye and Cara Gargano, Louise Geddes, and Michael Lutz explore various relations between human and object mainly in the performance context. From a critical race studies perspective, the liminal status of a black slave—between a human and a thing—is explored with reference to *Othello*. *Macbeth* is discussed as a (variable) hyperobject, with its quantum potential animated in performance by human and non-human “actants.” The vitality of Shakespeare's most recognizable texts and their Great Roles, such as *Hamlet*/Hamlet, are explored as celebrity objects caught up in a celebrity network of actors, roles, performances, and texts. Finally, the volume closes with a discussion of how the motif of the end of the human, mainly in *King Lear*'s appropriations, can illustrate the potential for alternative futures for Shakespeare.

The volume's contributions are diverse and insightful, each engaging with the new materialist outlook differently to help the reader discover the unruly powers and energies in the complex Shakespeare assemblages. A number of plays and a variety of genres and media are scrutinized, offering a wide array of case studies that illustrate how to celebrate variously

framed objects with their potential variable meanings. As a collection, the book accepts the understanding of diverse and multiple Shakespeare appropriations as ways to acknowledge and celebrate the unpredictable agency and power of the Shakespeare object, not of the hegemonic and cultural power of the appropriator.

The proposed perspective is fascinating, but also challenging in that it once more destabilizes the appropriation landscape and invites yet another reconsideration of what Shakespeare means. Accepting the prism of object-oriented ontology and “vibrant” materialism, the volume explores Shakespeare—the man, the myth, the author, the texts—as “a multiplicitous object that is both human and not” (VO 9). Such an understanding takes the analysis of Shakespeare appropriation beyond the dialogue between the source and its appropriation, and, embracing what Bennett sees as the vitality of things, stresses the agency of matter in reference to Shakespeare objects. Thus, the book explores the titular “variable objects” as part of a larger (eco)system which keeps reorganizing and reassembling itself to generate new energies and create new meanings.

Variable Objects is, I believe, one of the most important books addressing current dilemmas in Shakespeare studies and definitely one of the most exciting of those published recently. It invites readers of various backgrounds to rethink the potency of the word “Shakespeare” and its implications. Through its contributions, the book manages to erase the iconic image of William Shakespeare, the man with the ruff, or of his works, heralded by the Folio edition, performance broadsheets, or Elizabethan theatres. It allows something more to shine through the word: the various objects that, however fragmented or dispersed, through their affective power remain recognized as, but not reduced to, “Shakespeare,” and that generate endless and vibrant meanings in appropriations across media and genres.

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“Productivity of Constraint”: Wit Pietrzak in Conversation with Philip Terry

WP: To begin with, some orientation points. You were born in Belfast but have lived outside Northern Ireland for extended periods of time. How much do you feel part of the Irish literary tradition? And is a notion of tradition a relevant idea for you (especially in view of the advice the poet-pilgrim receives from Dr Moss in your rendition of *Dante’s Inferno*: “Steer a path between the mainstream and the / Experimenters, that way nobody can claim you, // You’ll always be your own man”)?

PT: I left Ireland when I was around 11, at the height of the Troubles. Since then I’ve lived in England and in France. My sense of a poetic tradition, to start with that, is one that stands in opposition to the mainstream English tradition of the Movement, looking beyond that to European, and American traditions, especially the New York School. Irish traditions have their place here—I still find richnesses in the work of Heaney, for example—but the important Irish figures for me have mainly been prose writers, or writers best known for their prose, Jonathan Swift, Laurence Sterne, Joyce and Beckett. Taking the novel tradition more generally, I am most drawn to the anti-novel, writing that questions the assumptions of the well-made novel, whether that’s in Robbe-Grillet or Perec or Thomas Bernhard. The line from *Dante’s Inferno* that you quote perhaps hints at my anxiety at being claimed, or overly influenced, by any single tradition, as well as my conviction that, however experimental the work is, it needs to be accessible.

WP: On a related note. One could argue that in spite of itself almost, modern Irish literature was born in experiment (whether through the unwilling innovativeness of the Yeats-Synge camp or the very willing, almost willful, experimentalism of Joyce and later Beckett) but then that aspect of Irish writing has left the limelight, with for example Denis Devlin

and Brian Coffey receiving less attention than more conventional poets like Kavanagh. Your work features some of the most exciting experiments in contemporary English-language poetry but you tend to derive them from Oulipo rather than either the Irish or the British avant-garde traditions. What is your take on Irish innovative poetry and prose, both past and present, also as compared to the situation in Britain? And where would you situate your own brands of experimental writing? (Forgive the breadth and the generality of these two questions but I feel they can set the scene for the readers who might be less familiar with your work.)

PT: As I said earlier, the Irish experimental tradition, for me, is to be found in Swift, Sterne, Joyce and Beckett. These writers are open to the play of language, the play of the signifier so to speak, which is something I also find in Oulipo and its use of the lipogram, for example. Much Irish writing seems to me to have something in common with Oulipo, which may be to do with the constraint of working within the English language itself. Heaney, as I argued recently in a piece in the *London Review of Books*, is sometimes an instinctive Oulipian, as in his poem “Two Lorries,” where he rings the changes on the sestina using homophonic variations on the end-words. This is also the case with the most interesting and exciting poetry now being written in the UK. A key figure for me has been Tim Atkins, whose exhilaratingly free translations of Petrarch and Horace, and most recently Ovid, are explosive, opening the page up to almost infinite possibilities of play and language. Without his example, I’d never have rewritten Dante in the way I did, though even here the influence is more in the idea than the execution.

WP: On to more specific matters. *tapestry* retells the story of the Norman conquest through the eyes of the nuns who are charged with weaving what would become known as the Bayeux Tapestry. The novel features a brilliant language woven out of English, both Early Middle and contemporary, French and Latin, inviting comparisons to *Finnegans Wake* (an episodic character in *tapestry* is named Eyrawicker); but also, to name only the more obvious allusions, it harks back to *The Canterbury Tales* (the nuns tell each other stories that lie behind the fragments of the tapestry each is working on) and the *Decameron* (the nuns’ stories are a form of respite and relief from the pent-up traumas of Norman oppression). How conscious were these parallels? How does the language correspond to the nuns’ yarns that the scribe compares to the mazy flightpath of a bird, “since [birds] do not follow STRAIGHT LINES”?

PT: In the history of literature in England you have work in Anglo-Saxon, Latin, and Middle English, and some writings in Anglo-Norman,

but there's a gap in the history between the Anglo-Saxon works and the early Middle English works. What I was trying to do with the language in *tapestry*, and nobody has really picked up on this, was to invent that language that came between these periods—which is why it's a mish-mash of lots of different kinds of language. The occasional veerings into the contemporary add something comic—it's a clash of languages that I find in the New York School—but they were justified for me by the fact that the narrator has an ability to see into the future. The parallels between this work and Chaucer and Boccaccio are absolutely conscious—I reread these writers several times while working on the book, as well as *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, and many now forgotten poems recounting the Norman Conquest. But the main engagement is with reading the images in the Bayeux Tapestry aslant, as telling counternarratives to the official Norman story. The most obvious image that can be read in this way is one depicting a mother and child fleeing a house torched by the Normans, but there are many others, which give the fabric of the stories. The stories, then, are drawn directly out of the nuns' stitches, and this goes for the writing too, with its weave of different kinds of language. Finding the right language, essentially a lost or repressed language, was crucial in letting these stories come out, and they are all stories which run counter to the straight lines of the official Norman propaganda which the Bayeux Tapestry seems to encode.

WP: *tapestry* keeps returning to the idea of parallel versions of one's life story. The novel ends with the scribe admitting that like the nuns' yarns stitched into the margins of the tapestry, her chronicle is "unjustified" followed by the word amen. Playfulness belies what is a staggeringly complex suggestion: the chronicle is indeed unjustified in the sense that it is not verifiable by lived experience (many stories revolve around King Harold's fate after the battle of Hastings, all hearsay), reason (most stories include magic realist elements) or the royal approval (King William mustn't know of the secret meanings behind the tapestry); but then the text of the novel is justified on both sides, so that it seems the form is what after all yields justification to the arbitrary assortment of yarns. Could you justify this "unjustified" ending?

PT: To begin with the idea of parallel versions of one's life story, there's a sense in which the whole book is conjured out of my own name, Philip Terry, though I've tended to keep quiet about this. Philip means "lover of horses," and horses occupy large sections of the Bayeux Tapestry—and played a crucial role in William's victory at Hastings. Terry can be traced back to the French "terre isle"—literally "earth island" or even "slag heap"—but it can be seen to signify also the mounds of earth erected by

the Normans on which they built their castles, the construction of which are depicted in the Bayeux Tapestry. With the word “unjustified” at the end of the novel, it’s fair to say that my original intention was to have the text of the novel unjustified throughout, which would have given this moment added force, but this was lost during the publisher’s typesetting of the book. But the point stands—the stories are unjustified as far as the Norman account goes, the “justified” propaganda, but they carry their own truth. It is also a woman’s truth, as is hinted at in that “amen,” which can be read as “not men” or “without men.”

WP: Moving on to your poetry. *Quennets* utilizes Raymond Queneau’s constraint-predicated form that he employed in his last book *Morale élémentaire* (which you translated). However, you explain in the note at the end of the volume that the first sequence of poems, “Elementary Estuaries,” is “based around estuary walks in Essex,” the next one traces the walk round the Berlin Wall Trail, the titular “Mauerweg,” and the last “Waterlog” “retraces the steps of W. G. Sebald through Suffolk” which he recounted in *The Rings of Saturn*. Such precision in relating the poems to place and personal history emphasizes the biographical element in the construction of the book but at the same time one of the effects of the poems is that the “I” is reduced to the “eye”: it is the connection between the landscape or cityscape and the language that comes to the fore. As a result, one suggestion is that the poems allow language and material reality to speak out, with the human subject being only a space on which this language-matter interplay is registered. Could you say more about these tensions between the personalized motivation of the book and what seems to be an attempt at releasing language from the overbearing presence of the speaker? Furthermore, it would seem that you dispose of the I-constraint in favour of or by means of adopting and adapting Queneau’s formal constraints.

PT: *Quennets* grew out of work we were doing at the University of Essex on an MA course called Memory Maps, set up by Marina Warner. The idea was to explore what was then an emergent form of writing on place, the psychogeographical, which had historical roots in East Anglia going back to Sir Thomas Browne, that simultaneously explored history, folklore, biography, autobiography and fiction. I thought I could bring Oulipo to this—which, like psychogeography, has connections to the work of the Situationists—as well as poetry. The idea that the “I” of the poems is reduced to an “eye” was an observation made by Kevin Jackson, and it wasn’t something I was conscious of when writing. But it is true that the poems are about an engagement with place, or places, and the places in question were not ones I had a particular history in relation to. So

autobiography was not part of the mix, the poems were more concerned with immersion in a particular place at a particular time so as to let this space itself speak, though the “I” returns in certain places, in terms of an intersubjective “I.” So at one point in the Berlin walks I started to hallucinate after walking too far on one particular day, and this hallucination comes into the poems. Elsewhere the poems are made out of found text, signs, scribbles, information panels, and overheard voices encountered during the walks, and here the aesthetic is one of collage, where the writer is more of an arranger of text than a creator as such. The “I,” then, is always at a distance, but always capable of emerging into the present of the poem, but not as a historical subject, rather as a subject-in-process, a subject-in-the-moment. In this sense the subject in these poems is formed by the activity of walking, rather than being a subject with a prior and given identity. This is something like the “paper author” that Roland Barthes refers to in his essay “From Work to Text”—he has Proust in mind—where in a work consisting of a tissue of quotations, the author may still make a return, but on a different level.

WP: And again, on a more general note. What is your writing process like? I would imagine it varies, but are there any discernible patterns? At what stage do you determine what constraint(s) will be adopted? Does form precede the content, do they emerge jointly?

PT: The ideal work, for me, is where the form and the content are indistinguishable, like the two sides of a sheet of paper. You can think of an idea you’d like to write about, but you may never get it written if you can’t find the right form which enables it to take shape in language. With *tapestry* the idea of telling this from the point of view of the women embroiderers occurred when I first looked at the Bayeux Tapestry, when I was living in Normandy. But it was years before I found the language in which to tell it. Here an idea preceded the form or “constraint,” with *Quennets* it was perhaps the other way round, though as the work proceeded, the form had to be adapted to accommodate its material, as you mentioned earlier. You could say my process is twofold, then, and involves throwing up ideas and new forms, but only when these coincide or begin to mesh, does the space for writing open up.

WP: Although the political implications of a book like *tapestry* or *Dante’s Inferno* are clear, it is *Dictator*, a retelling of *Gilgamesh*, that foregrounds the critique of imperialist policies of ancient peoples, as well as of modern empires: “+ + + day |and night | he [DICTATOR] make | the weak | suffer / + + + day | and night | he ag | ent hunt | down. . . | the ref | ugee | who come | to the city | for shel | ter + + + / + + + day | and night

| he sec | urity pol | ice beat | the ref | ugee | in the | prison | behind | closed door.” The import of these lines echoes with a denouncing cry against all manner of tyrannies, the US being the latest addition. Moreover, the translation was undertaken as part of the Stories in Transit project that organizes storytelling workshops in the UK and in Palermo. Could you say something more of your role in the project? And, inevitably on these sort of occasions, the pressing question is to what extent do you believe that poetry can make something happen?

PT: Stories in Transit was set up by my friend and ex-colleague Marina Warner and I've been involved with this since it began. We work with refugees in Palermo, and the basic idea is that while governments may, at best, offer these young people asylum, and give them citizenship, clothes, and even a mobile phone, that their imaginative life isn't catered for. We get them involved in storytelling, which is something they already have in their cultures, as they often come from countries where traditions of storytelling are already rich, often richer than they are in European countries. We use drawing, animation, music and theatre practices, as well as poetry and storytelling, and the results are often startling. One of the projects we did in Palermo was to perform a version of *Gilgamesh*, and it was this performance, and the experience of working with these students, that partly fed into my version, *Dictator*. The lines you quote, about the treatment of refugees in Europe, aren't in the original poem, even if the figure of Gilgamesh is to some extent a tyrant, at least at the beginning of the poem, before he encounters Enkidu. Stories in Transit has had a really positive impact on these young people's lives, and has been transformative in a real sense: it has made something happen. Whether the same can be said of poetry in general it is hard to say, it's an old and vexed question, which goes back at least as far as Auden's poem "In Memory of W. B. Yeats." But poetry, partly because of its non-commercial status, can speak outside of the norms of neo-liberal economies, it can act as a witness, and it can give us a space in which we can say that which otherwise might not have been said. It can create a space in which we can think. In that sense, rather than make "nothing happen" poetry can make "nothing" happen, and in this nothing, this pause, something new can emerge. Poetry finds a way, it is "A way of happening" as Auden puts it later in the same poem, in a line that is often forgotten.

WP: While on the topic of *Dictator*, the poem features another amazing re-invention of English, which mixes Jean-Paul Nerrière's Globish with attempts at evoking cuneiform through the division of words into two-syllable units. In your afterword you explain in more depth the rationale behind the poem's formal experiments but I wonder if (and if so, how) the formal constraint you adopted speaks to the politics of the poem.

PT: As I said earlier, for me form and content should be one. Here the form, the language, is a version of Business English. And just as *tapestry* inverts the language of propaganda found in the Bayeux Tapestry, here the work of the poem is to invert the language of business, the language of neo-liberalism, somehow squeezing poetry out of this economically oriented language, and othering it as it does so. It interested me, too, that the poem was first written in cuneiform, a script that had its origins in methods of recording business transactions, and that the poem itself dealt with trade, as epics frequently do, here trade in hard wood. So the form is absolutely enmeshed with the politics of the poem. On another level the original poem is about deforestation, so there is always already a political aspect to the poem, one that is obviously increasingly relevant today.

WP: *When Two Are in Love or As I Came to Behind Frank's Transporter* is another genre-defying composition. Divided into thirty two chapters, each beginning with a sentence or sentences that are later altered at every subsequent iteration through substitution of one word at a time, the book tells stories of love and violence, whose fate, it appears, is determined by the operations of language. The opening sentence, "We held hands and walked along the beach," after thirty two revisions becomes "They swapped shotguns carefully, hurried down way-marked coast." The aura of levity is, however, tampered by recurrent images of violence and bloodshed, as though to suggest that regardless of how innocuous one may be, he or she is only one wrong word from becoming a full-throttle assailant. Could you say a little more about this linguistic potential for violence in the book?

PT: I don't think there was any intention to tip the stories here towards violence, but you are right, this happens quite frequently. On a narrative level, I suppose it echoes the method of composition. The book is written in collaboration with James Davies, and having set up the base narrative—a kind of pastiche of a Mills and Boon romance—we would change one word at a time in alternation. Of course, each of us saw directions we would like to push the metamorphosing narrative in, but we were unaware of each other's intentions, so often James would send things in a direction that completely contradicted and threw off track what I was trying to do, and vice-versa. So violence is at the very heart of the compositional process. At the same time, the kind of romance that Mills and Boon publishes, always has potential violence in the wings, the violence that comes with rejected loves, or just plain rejection. Romance can always tip into another mode or genre, such as tragedy or crime. The rejected lover of Mills and Boon can easily change into a stalker.

WP: Also, *When Two Are in Love*. . . bears some similarity to “50½ Crime Novels for Beginners” from *Advanced Immorality*, in that both turn employ plots from popular fiction, romance and crime respectively. Mathematics, it seems, is quite a violent business? Could you say more about this permutation technique and how it informs your work?

PT: One aspect of Oulipo, which stems from their interest in mathematics—originally Oulipo was set up, at least in part, to explore the ways in which mathematics could make a contribution to the creation of verbal art—is what they call “combinatory literature.” Oulipo have done a lot of work on this, which they trace back to the combinatorial mathematics of Leibniz, and the poetry of Ramon Lull. You find this in the fiction of Italo Calvino, where he often presents not just a single narrative, but a dizzying array of different and contradictory narrative possibilities, as in his short story “The Count of Monte Cristo.” And permutation is found in the work of other Oulipians, such as Queneau’s *Exercises in Style*, where a single story is told in 99 different ways, and Georges Perec’s “81 Easy-Cook Recipes for Beginners,” where a small number of instructions are combined and recombined to create a seemingly endless variety of recipes. I used the same method in “50½ Crime Novels for Beginners,” though less systematically than Perec. It’s a method which is used in *tapestry* too, most obviously in the tales about King Harold, but it isn’t something I have used systematically in any single long work. As to the “violence” of this method, while that may happen, as it does in *When Two Are In Love*. . ., it can also open into the opposite of violence, in that it can create an open form of possibilities. In that respect it is playful, even childlike, and funny, as so often in Perec.

WP: A lot of your work is to do with rewriting of classics: in addition to *Gilgamesh*, Dante’s *Inferno* and Queneau’s formal pattern from *Elementary Morality*, there is also the superb revision of Shakespeare’s sonnets. What is it that attracts you to such revisionary work? What constraints have you encountered when reworking *Inferno* and Shakespeare (your poet-pilgrim questions his ability to approach a work such as *Inferno* but finds the strength to carry on and does a brilliant job along the way)?

PT: My interest in rewriting goes back a long way. I’ve always liked this kind of writing, which is often seen as postmodern, and which you can find in feminist revisionings of classic texts and in works like Robert Coover’s *Pinocchio in Venice* and Kathy Acker’s *Don Quixote*. One of its appeals, among many, is that it liberates you from autobiographical writing. One of my first books was an edited collection of stories revisioning Ovid, *Ovid Metamorphosed*, with contributions by Margaret Atwood, Michèle Roberts and A. S. Byatt among others. But it was largely the work of Tim Atkins—

and also Stephen Rodefer—which opened my eyes to the possibilities for poetry here, and which indirectly led me towards tackling Shakespeare and then Dante. In *Shakespeare's Sonnets* I used a variety of more-or-less Oulipian constraints, rewriting the sonnets by using only one vowel and so on, but the majority of the poems were composed by using collage, collaging together the Shakespeare with found text taken from broadsheets, where a piece on anti-ageing products, for example, could stand in for a sonnet concerned with the process of ageing. If the word “star” appeared in the poem, I’d use the *Daily Star*, if the word “world” appeared, I’d use *The News of the World* and so on. With the Dante, there wasn’t really a “constraint” in the Oulipian sense, unless you call the method of translation “up-to-date” after Harry Mathews, but when I showed Harry this book, while he really liked it, and called it a “smasheroo,” he didn’t consider it to be particularly Oulipian. The work here is one of finding equivalents for the historical situations in Dante—substituting Belfast’s Catholics and Protestants for the Guelfs and Ghibellines of Dante’s Florence, substituting Bobby Sands for Ugolino and so on. It is more like performing Shakespeare in contemporary dress than anything strictly Oulipian.

WP: Finally, what are you working on now?

PT: Like Calvino, and like Perec, I tend to work on a lot of books at once. Perec compared this to farming practices, where one field might be left fallow for a year while others were in use. I’ve got a book coming out next year from Carcanet, called *The Lascaux Notebooks*, which is one of my favourites. It invents an author who the book is attributed to, Jean-Luc Champerret. Champerret takes the signs found at the Lascaux caves, and which archaeologists say we can’t read, and ascribes meanings to them—a sign resembling an upturned “v” becomes a mountain, a sign resembling a line of dots becomes a path, etc. And then he inserts these signs in 3x3 grids which are also found at Lascaux and reconstructs poems out of them, the first Ice Age poems. Apart from that I’ve just published a book of poem-objects in a box, *Turns*, one of them ringing the changes on “I wandered lonely as a cloud” in a combinatorial way to get alternative sentences, like “I wintered silent as a cop”—it’s a flip-flap book, like Queneau’s *A Hundred Thousand Billion Poems*. And I’m working on some other things, including a book called *From* and a book which uses Oulipian forms to document the pandemic, called *Covids*. *From* is a book which consists of extracts from books I’d like to write but perhaps don’t have time to bring to full fruition, in a word it’s a book of fragments of novels, plays, poems, essays, etc. A proleptic anthology in a word. It’s fun, and it solves the problem that all writers face, in that we can’t write everything we want to write because we don’t have time. As *Tristram Shandy* puts it,

the more we write the more we have to write—“Will this be good for your worships’ eyes?” Apart from that I’ve written a play about Boris Johnson and the pandemic, a kind of rewrite of *Ubu Roi*, but I’ve no idea how you go about putting a play on, so it might just remain on my laptop.

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