

Editorial 13.2

Heather I. Sullivan
Trinity University, USA
ecozona.associate.editor@gmail.com

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ecozona.2022.13.2.4918>



The question of how we attend to the nonhuman when discussing the array of destructive cultural inflections variously affecting global ecological systems is essential in this era of the Anthropocene with climate change and the ongoing sixth mass extinction event. Or, rather, the question would more accurately be: how could we not attend to the nonhuman lives and forms being impacted by such a wide variety of human actions, without falling prey to absurd assumptions of human exceptionalism that imply our existence at a distance from the other earthly beings? The nonhuman—whether forest, flora, fauna, or other multispecies entanglements with energy and the elements—is, to borrow from Ursula K. Le Guin’s famous 1972 story *The Word for World is Forest*, the world, the living world in which we exist. Though there are plenty of textual examples of fictional/historical human beings (seemingly) existing as if above, free from, or outside of ecological cycles, there is actually no life outside of the air/water/multispecies interactions. And human beings, it turns out (much to our surprise), are no exceptions to this rule. The massive interventions to land and cultural systems such those that take place with colonization and extractive societies influence all of these aspects of the world, human and nonhuman alike (or more-than-human, if you will). When writing and speaking of the human, we are always already writing and speaking of the nonhuman, too, though that is not often enough acknowledged. Our gut biota, for example, always travel with us, as do our other companions, the strange eyelash mites. And we tend to relocate our favorite vegetal beings and other companion species with us when moving across continents as well. Furthermore, colonization was as much about “conquering” land and transporting, exploiting, destroying, moving, and altering vegetal and animal life as it was about transporting, exploiting, destroying, moving, and enslaving other humans.

With such understandings in mind, our guest editors for this volume of *Ecozon@*, Erin James (University of Idaho), Cajetan Iheka (Yale University) and Juan Ignacio Oliva (University of La Laguna), offer an important introduction to, and array of, six excellent essays on the “postcolonial nonhuman.” They note that: “humans are not alone in peopling postcolonial environments. There is a growing awareness that environmental harm affects more than humans and that comprehensive accounts of postcolonial contexts must appreciate the interconnection of humans with nonhumans...” In other words, this is an important intervention in extending our study of postcolonial circumstances to include peoples, lands, and nonhuman beings together, entangled, and not as separate components that might only occasionally be linked. Using the tools of (green) postcolonial studies, material ecocriticism, and the now greatly expanding body of work on the non-

human including both critical plant studies and animals studies, these essays discuss “animist materialism” and “multispecies ethnography” that attribute a validity to a wide array of subjects/agents existing together and being changed by colonial impositions. The collection of essays offers significant contributions to formulating new aspects of environmental justice in startlingly interconnected forms. The places addressed cross borders, continents, and geographies from India to the Mexico-Texas border.

In the general section, there are five essays discussing, not surprisingly considering the relevance of the topics, related issues of the nonhuman, the post/colonial, and the posthuman. From the author of numerous works on the postcolonial green, Graham Huggan, we have the first essay: “From the Serengeti to the Bavarian Forest, and back again: Bernhard Grzimek, Celebrity Conservation, and the Transnational Politics of National Parks.” Huggan offers insights into Grzimek’s famous work for the African Serengeti in the context of his similar but less well-known work for the Bavarian Forest National Park, noting that such parks involve national and transnational discourse as “complex geopolitical formations in which human and animal interests alternately collide and converge.” Our second essay, from Timothy Ryan Day, also concentrates on the nonhuman, but in this case on trees: “The Forest for the Trees: The *umwelt*, the holobiont, and metaphor in Richard Powers’ *The Overstory* and Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*.” As a work of ecocritical narrative scholarship, Day links the trees of *Macbeth* to his own story of moving with his family during the COVID pandemic to a national park in Madrid where he encountered a tree with rich if disturbing historical implications (the tree marked the site of the death of Spain’s famous Olympic skier, Blanca Nieves Fernández Ochoa, as well as a site of Franco’s forces). Day’s work weaves together beautifully the tales of the trees with the interconnected fungal, vegetal and human lives. Similarly, our third essay by Jemma Deer explores the nonhuman, especially fungi, in an insightful study of “Mycorrhizal Metaphors: The Buried Life of Language and Elizabeth-Jane Burnett’s *The Grassling*.” Deer investigates the underground life of fungi and then moves through Burnett’s metaphors to reveal the subterranean currents of language itself that shares much with the interwoven, dispersed, active growth of fungi. With startling alacrity, Deer’s reading “invites us to recognise what lies below the surface of land, language and consciousness, thereby unravelling some of our restrictive anthropocentrisms.”

The final two essays study Italian- and Spanish-language texts addressing climate change and posthumanism. Anna Chiafele’s essay, “Francesco Aloe’s Climate Fiction: Ruins, Bodies and Memories from the Future in *L’ultima bambina d’Europa*” (*The Last Girl of Europe*), presents the Italian cli-fi novel in terms of a family’s journey across a devastated European landscape revealing its capitalistic, fossil-fueled self-destruction. While the parents experience “petro-melancholia” as they see old burnt up cars, their young daughter has only ever known the post-oil era of environmental and social collapse. Through her eyes as a vulnerable child who nevertheless brings strength in the landscape strewn with dead bodies, we see a new perspective on the spreading devastation. Our final essay in the general section by Nerea González Calvo, “San, le primere princese más que humane,” is a study of Hayao Miyazaki’s famous 1997 film, *Princess Mononoke*, and its protagonist as a posthumanist figure. In the animated film, animation of non-human

subjects is an inevitability, and González Calvo focuses her ecofeminist lens on the narrative's critique of capitalist extractivism. Overall, this volume of *Ecozon@* offers nuanced readings of literary works and film from across the world with insights into the human-nonhuman and energy landscapes that are relentlessly emerging from our endless burning of fossil fuels.

The Creative Arts and Writing section edited by Elizabeth Tavella also presents inspiring works that draw our awareness to the questions of environmental justice and the postcolonial nonhuman. As exquisite complements to the scholarly essays, these artworks reveal, as Tavella writes, the "slow violence of extractivism," particularly on rivers and waterways. The volume's cover picture and additional artworks are from Carolina Caycedo's *Serpent River Book* assembling images from rivers in Colombia, Brazil and Mexico, and exposing racial and colonial history in sharp relief.

Additionally, poems from five different authors are featured in this volume. The first contributions are from Amatoritsero Ede, an international award-winning Canadian poet born in Nigeria, whose poems wind through rivers in Germany and the Niger River Delta revealing the paths of water and the paths of devastating human impact. Second are poems from R. Sreejith Varma who writes poetry in English and Malayalam, and whose works here, as according to Tavella, play with "the synesthetic qualities of language to enter into dialogue with the nonhuman." The third poet featured is Uchechukwu Peter Umezurike, whose inspirations derive from African and African Diaspora, as we see in his poem, *The Raven*. Next, there are three wonderful poems by Manuela Palacios looking at whale-human interactions and dialogues. And finally, Rosanne van der Voet's work, *Living as Water*, returns us to visions of water networks enabling human-nonhuman lives. All these poems link water and/or nonhuman voices and subjectivities in various ways, giving us enriching, alternative perspectives on our entangled lives in these extractivist times.

Finally, there are four book reviews and one review essay in the volume that nicely complement the rest of the volume with the topics of Animal Studies, Climate History, Norwegian subjects, pedagogical hope, and narrative forms in the Anthropocene. In the review essay, Katsiaryna Nahornava considers "Developing Empathy Towards Other-than-Human Animals through Cultural and Literary Representations," with a discussion of Margarita Carretero-González's edited volume *Spanish Thinking About Animals* together with the 2019 book by Wojciech Małecki, Piotr Sorokowski, Bogusław Pawłowski, and Marcin Cieński, *Human Minds and Animal Stories: How Narratives Make Us Care About Other Species*. Michael O'Krent reviews Dipesh Chakrabarty's 2021 *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*; Georgiana Bozintan reviews the 2021 volume edited by Marcus Axelsson and Barbro Bredesen Opset, *Fortellinger om bærekraftig utvikling. Perspektiver for norskfaget [Narratives of Sustainable Development. Perspectives for the Norwegian Subject]*; Uwe Kuchler reviews Elin Kelsey's 2020, *Hope Matters: Why Changing the Way We Think is Critical to Solving the Environmental Crisis*; and Sean Singh Matharoo reviews Marco Caracciolo's 2021 book, *Narrating the Mesh: Form and Story in the Anthropocene*.

In addition, the editorial board would like to extend our heartfelt thanks to Damiano Benvegnù, our former Creative Writing and Arts Editor, who stepped down after years of significant contributions, including his masterful comments and summaries of each volume's featured works. Dr. Benvegnù has handed on the tradition to Dr. Elizabeth Tavella, with whom he co-edited the previous volume, 13.1, and she is now continuing the excellent work for *Ecozon@*.

Thanks are also owed to a number of members of the Advisory Board who are cycling off of the board after many years of service and guidance. We are extremely grateful to: Stacy Alaimo, University of Oregon, USA; Franca Anik Bellarsi, Université libre de Bruxelles, Belgium; Julio Cañero Serrano, Universidad de Alcalá, Spain; Fernando Galván Reula, Universidad de Alcalá, Spain; Greg Garrard, University of British Columbia, Canada; Esther Laso y León, Universidad de Alcalá, Spain; Juan Ignacio Oliva, Universidad de la Laguna, Spain; Roland Racevskis, University of Iowa, USA; Catherine (Kate) Elizabeth Rigby, University of Köln, Germany.

The Postcolonial Nonhuman An Introduction

Erin James
University of Idaho, USA
ejames@uidaho.edu

Cajetan Iheka
Yale University, USA
cajetan.iheka@yale.edu

Juan Ignacio Oliva
University of La Laguna, Spain
jioliva@ull.edu.es

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ecozone.2022.13.2.4913>



In her seminal discussion of the term “postcolonial” in *Colonialism-Postcolonialism* (1998), Ania Loomba turns to the Oxford English Dictionary to begin the conversation. She notes that the OED defines colonialism as “a settlement in a new country . . . a body of people who settle in a new locality” (7). Strikingly, she comments, the OED definition “avoids any reference to people other than the colonizers, people who might already have been living in those places where colonies were established,” thus alleviating colonialism of “any implication of an encounter between peoples, or of conquest and domination” (7). Loomba articulates a postcolonial project to correct this injustice. Her definition of “postcolonial” is nuanced and dependent upon context and situation. But it retains the OED’s focus on people, drawing attention to the varied and various human experiences of encounter, conquest, and domination. As such, it is illustrative of the broad focus on people—colonizers, colonized, and the formerly colonized—in postcolonial studies.

The environmental turn in postcolonial studies since the late 1990s has not fundamentally altered the preoccupation with the human. With an emphasis on environmental justice, scholarship on postcolonial ecologies, slow violence, and the afterlives of colonialism has prioritized deleterious environmental consequences for human communities (Mukherjee 2010; DeLoughrey and Handley 2011; Nixon 2011). Inspired by the environmental justice framework, scholars have examined the dispossession of land and inequitable distribution of the commons, interrogated the implications of energy extraction, especially oil, in the postcolony, and unearthed the dumping of toxic waste among other forms of violence inflicted on formerly colonized people (Caminero-Santangelo 2014; James 2015; Wenzel 2020). But humans are not alone in peopling postcolonial environments. There is a growing awareness that environmental harm affects more than humans and that comprehensive accounts of postcolonial contexts must appreciate the interconnection of humans with nonhumans,

questions of nonhuman subjectivity and agency, and how these complex factors play out in cultural texts as “aesthetics of proximity” (Huggan and Tiffin 2010; Iheka 2018).

This attention to more-than-the-human is inspired by indigenous cosmologies from Africa, to the Americas, and Asia that have always considered the nonhuman as “earth beings” characterized by an “animist materialism,” even if colonial thinking dismissed such practices as evidence of primitivity (Garuba 2003; de la Cadena 2010). Furthermore, recent writings on material ecocriticism, attuned to the agency, vitality, and vivacity of matter, have also shaped the nonhuman turn in the study of postcolonial environments (Alaimo 2010; Iovino and Oppermann 2014). Animals have been particularly studied in this new configuration of postcolonial ecocriticism but there is a broader constellation of nonhuman presences and assemblages deserving scrutiny in postcolonial settings (Mwangi 2020; Sinha and Baishya 2020).

In this special issue on “The Postcolonial Nonhuman,” we prioritize the multiplicities of nonhuman actors in postcolonial locales without losing sight of their entanglement with humans and their implications for ecological justice. We see rich potential for this prioritization, including discussions of nonhuman agency and subjectivity, and assemblages of the human and nonhuman, in colonial and postcolonial contexts. We also see a focus on the postcolonial nonhuman as challenging and/or enriching imperial narratives of the colonial nonhuman, which so often focus on charismatic megafauna such as tigers, elephants, condors, and pandas, or the vegetal monocrops of sugar, tobacco, and tea. In our revised project, we foreground the role that non-charismatic microfauna such as insects play in colonial and decolonial histories, as well as postcolonial flora beyond the plantation. Such a project also queries and illuminates the vital role of the nonhuman in decolonizing projects and postcolonial infrastructures, and fosters analysis of multimedia representations of the postcolonial nonhuman.

The six essays in this special issue of *Ecozon@* are rich illustrations of the varied approaches that a focus on the postcolonial nonhuman affords us. In “Subalterns in the House: Sites for a Postcolonial Multispecies Ethnography,” Susan Haris places explicit emphasis on the methodology of the postcolonial nonhuman project. She begins her essay by considering the obstacles to a productive postcolonial multispecies ethnography, most notably the resistance in postcolonial scholarship to focus on nonhuman animal subjects because of the traditional—and often violent—conflation of colonized peoples and animals that dehumanizes the human subject. Yet Haris finds promise in the work of scholars such as Bruno Latour, Donna Haraway, and Anna Tsing because of their emphasis on relation, mutuality, and alliances. Using this work as inspiration, she sketches out a postcolonial nonhuman ethnography that does not dehumanize, nor anthropomorphize, in damaging ways via its attention to five aspects common to both postcolonial studies and ethnography: the subaltern, the local, the collective, representation, and decolonization. Haris discusses examples of projects that illustrate all five aspects, providing her readers with concrete examples of a postcolonial multispecies ethnography that “re-dignifies the nonhuman animal subject” by fostering attunement to “the radical possibility of realizing their embodied perspectives”.

Ashwarya Samkaria turns to Amitav Ghosh's fiction to explore the intersection of the nonhuman and twenty-first-century racial and ecological injustices in India. In "Postcolonial Nonhuman Blurring (B)orders in Migrant Ecologies: A Postanthropocentric Reading of Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*," she argues that Ghosh's novel illuminates the agentic capacities of the postcolonial nonhuman subject via its deployment of the generic conventions of folkloric myths, its representations of human-nonhuman intermeshing and cohabitation, and the linguistic polyphony of migrant ecologies that make audible human and nonhuman voices. Above all, she argues that a "postanthropocentric" reading of *Gun Island* offers us "counter-hegemonic strategies to re-situate humans and nonhumans in an interconnected manner". As the essay's title suggests, Samkaria's analysis pays special attention to borders—both those that we must cross (transcorporeal, ontological), and those that we must maintain in order to limit the human practices of capitalist extraction and exploitation that instrumentalize nature (the borders of ecologically sustainable living).

Fiction—Namwali Serpell's novel *The Old Drift*—also offers a productive vantage point for Amit R. Baishya's accounting for more-than-human national histories in "Zt.Zzt in the Anthropocene." Focusing on the mosquitoes and drones in Serpell's Zambian novel and their interactions with humans, Baishya demonstrates how the telling of national history subverts anthropocentric time while foregrounding heterotemporalities implicating nonhuman actors. It is not just that the novel's sense of futurity decenters humans; it is rather that human obsolescence, hastened by error, marks the future—a future that prioritizes nonhuman assemblages. In Baishya's reading, the novel "continuously out-scales humanist comprehensions of space-time via its arthropod, technological and cyborg narrator(s)" even as it "evinces planetary and inter-planetary dimensions simultaneously." Baishya is also attentive to the crucial role that sound plays in the commingling of human and nonhuman actors in *The Old Drift*. Drawing on sonic and media studies and an impressive array of other interdisciplinary research, Baishya foregrounds the affordance of Serpell's complex acoustic languages to the project of more-than-human postcolonial worlding.

In "Bodies of the Border," English Brooks shifts the focus to the policing of migrants at the Mexico-United States border. While migrant and mobility discourses tend to center human bodies, Brooks targets another form of border porosity: the entanglement of human and nonhuman bodies at the scene of surveillance and exclusion. The article discusses the instrumentalization of nonhuman animals as a weapon of deterrence against migrants at the border but is also mindful of the role that nonhuman actors play to expose the violence against people seeking entry into the United States at the border. Whether it is in the discussion of grasshoppers' disregard for border walls as they utilize holes in border barriers to move around, the brutalization of Haitian migrants by Border Patrol officials on horseback in a move that recalls slavery, or the use of dogs to attack nonhuman bodies, Brooks's article details "the interspecies connections and tensions that ensue at the border." The work "remind us of the various layers of disastrous impacts such walls and other barriers entail for local ecosystems, as well as for the nonhuman biota

that require passage through them as they move between sometimes distant seasonal ranges.”

Marta Sofía López’s article, “Border Gnoseology: Akwaeke Emezi and the Decolonial Other-than-Human,” offers an insightful and innovative account of nonhumanity that tackles the very definition of the term: its scope and perspective mediated by a conventional Eurocentric hu-Man-ity. Therefore, she broadens the vision of the natural world as a kaleidoscope of the material spirituality of the Other-than-human, shaped by African onto-epistemology (thus crossing over the natural, the sacred and the human into alternative readings of selfhood and identity). To do so, she makes use of Emezi’s archetypes of ogbanje and the sacred python as avatar of Ala and of “border gnoseology” as method—imbued by the tentacular networks of the Cthulucene. López is, then, painfully aware of the differences existing between realms and, thus, pleads for a better understanding of trans-realities: transing, tranimalcy and (transatlantic) crossing, to dismantle the ontological, religious and temporal borders of Western worldviews.

On her side, writing in French, Sara Buekens’s essay, “Raconter l’Anthropocène : le réalisme magique comme mimesis” delves into the environmental damages caused by oil extraction in the African Niger delta and Gabon. Hence, through the analysis of Bessora’s *Petroleum* (2004) and Helon Habila’s *Oil on Water* (2010), the author opts for Magic Realism as the best tool to reflect the present unstable climatic situation, and make ecological problems visible. Among the manifold reasons provided stand the capacity to bestow direct agency on nature by the transgression of the literary norms and the suspension of disbelief implicit in the genre. Also, the capacity of mingling alternative universes, putting together different subaltern stories, proves especially relevant to bring human ecological harm to the frontline. Finally, in the subjective retelling of the more-than-human realm, Magic Realism acts as the best catalyst filter to contest the environmental crisis caused by the pillage of natural resources exerted by wild capitalism.

Works Cited

- Alaimo, Stacy. *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*. Indiana University Press, 2010.
- Caminero-Santangelo, Byron. *Different Shades of Green: African Literature, Environmental Justice, and Political Ecology*. University of Virginia Press, 2014.
- de la Cadena "Indigenous Cosmopolitics in the Andes: Conceptual Reflections Beyond 'Politics.'" *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2010, pp. 334-370.
- DeLoughrey, Elizabeth and George B. Handley, editors. *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment*. Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Garuba, Harry. “Explorations in Animist Materialism: Notes on Reading/Writing African Literature, Culture, and Society.” *Public Culture*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2003, pp. 261-285.
- Huggan, Graham and Helen Tiffin. *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*. Routledge, 2010
- Iheka, Cajetan. *Naturalizing Africa: Ecological Violence, Agency, and Postcolonial Resistance in African Literature*. Cambridge University Press, 2018.

Iovino, Serenella and Serpil Oppermann, editors. *Material Ecocriticism*, Indiana University Press, 2014.

James, Erin. *The Storyworld Accord: Econarratology and Postcolonial Narratives*. University of Nebraska Press, 2015.

Loomba, Ania. *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*. Routledge, 1998.

Mukherjee, Upamanyu Pablo. *Postcolonial Environments: Nature, Culture, and the Contemporary Indian Novel in English*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

Mwangi, Evan. *The Postcolonial Animal: African Literature and Posthuman Ethics*. University of Michigan Press, 2020.

Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard University Press, 2011.

Sinha, Suvadip and Amit Baishya, editors. *Postcolonial Animalities*. Routledge, 2020.

Wenzel, Jennifer. *The Disposition of Nature: Environmental Crisis and World Literature*. Fordham University Press, 2020.

Subalterns in the House: Sites for a Postcolonial Multispecies Ethnography¹

Susan Haris

University of California, Santa Cruz; IIT Delhi, India

susanharis@gmail.com

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ecozona.2022.13.2.4736>



Abstract

Multispecies ethnography attempts to bring to the forefront those animal lives previously overlooked by charting our shared social worlds and showing how humans and nonhumans are mutually affected by social, cultural and political processes. The resistance in postcolonial critique to focus on nonhuman animal subjects stems from making the colonised and the animal comparable and the fear that such an association may dehumanise the human subject. This paper suggests that multispecies ethnography influenced by Latour, Haraway, Tsing and others is a useful tool for analysing postcolonial contexts because of its emphasis on relation, mutuality and alliances. However, I suggest that this inheritance is rebuilt as a *postcolonial* multispecies ethnography because of its attention to five aspects that is common to both fields: subaltern, local, collective, representation and decolonisation. By a careful reading of these key concepts with examples from contemporary literature, I show how postcolonial multispecies ethnographies engage with hybrid identities that are culturally produced and historically situated and how they register the nonhuman animals as narrativisable subjects who are nevertheless “irretrievably heterogeneous” (284). In this ethnographic emergence, postcolonial multispecies ethnography re-dignifies the nonhuman animal subject which opens up the radical possibility of realizing their embodied perspectives.

Keywords: Postcolonial. multispecies ethnography, subaltern, collective, representation, local, decolonization.

Resumen

La etnografía multiespecie intenta poner en primera fila las vidas de aquellos animales que anteriormente se han ignorado trazando los mundos sociales compartidos y mostrando cómo humanos y no humanos se ven mutuamente afectados por los procesos sociales, culturales y políticos. La resistencia de la crítica poscolonial a la hora de fijarse en los sujetos animales no humanos surge de que la comparación del colonizado y el animal pueda deshumanizar al sujeto humano. Este ensayo sugiere que la etnografía multiespecie influida por Latour, Haraway, Tsing y otros es una herramienta útil para analizar los contextos poscoloniales debido a su énfasis en la relación, la mutualidad y las alianzas. Sin embargo, sugiero que este legado se reconstruye como una etnografía multiespecie *poscolonial* en base a su atención a cinco aspectos comunes a ambos campos: lo subalterno, lo local, lo colectivo, la representación y la descolonización. Por medio de una lectura detallada de estos conceptos clave con ejemplos de la literatura contemporánea, muestro como las etnografías multiespecie poscoloniales interactúan con las identidades híbridas

¹ This piece developed as a result of “Table Talk”, a series of conversations with academics who work on human-animal relations in India organised by the Indian Animal Studies Collective. My sincere thanks to all the panellists and listeners. Anu Pande, Rukmini Bhaya Nair and Krishanunni patiently discussed postcolonialism with me and confirmed my speculations and suspicions. Conversations with Anna Tsing greatly enriched my understanding of multispecies ethnography and her own work. Ankur Barua read my drafts with kindness.

producidas culturalmente y situadas históricamente, y cómo registran a los animales no humanos como sujetos narrativizables que son, no obstante, “irremediabilmente heterogéneos” (284). En este afloramiento etnográfico, la etnografía multispecie poscolonial re-dignifica al sujeto animal no-humano que se abre a la posibilidad radical de hacer realidad sus perspectivas encarnadas.

Palabras clave: Poscolonial, etnografía multispecie, subalterno, colectivo, representación, local, descolonización.

I remember the night my mother
was stung by a scorpion. Ten hours
of steady rain had driven him
to crawl beneath a sack of rice. (130)

So begins one of modern India’s most famous poems by Nissim Ezekiel, taught regularly in schools and anthologised routinely in collections of modern Indian poetry. Among other things, school students take away from the poem the phenomenological rawness of the pain experienced by the mother and a real fear of what a scorpion’s sting might be like. Yet, Ezekiel’s poem is rarely taught as a poem about the scorpion even though the scorpion is the primary antagonist and the title of the poem is “The Night of the Scorpion” (1992). That is because the reader is expected to share in the poet’s vision about the subject of the poem: the villagers from a distant past with their superstitious beliefs. In such a reading, the scorpion is only trope and prop to the long-range connections that the poet builds between a modern Indian identity and its past. However, the scorpion does not die in the poem but “with every move that the scorpion made his poison moved”. Ezekiel acknowledges the corporeal non-human when he writes: “they searched for him: he was not found”. The site of the poem is multispecies—replete with nonhumans that bear witness to and speak to humans on the very issues that the student is made alert to.

In an analogous enquiry, I want to introduce questions for a postcolonial multispecies ethnography that is attentive to the world of the local and of the subaltern as one that is not only human. Multispecies ethnography foregrounds animal lives by focusing on how the lives of nonhuman organisms are mutually shaped by the political, social, cultural forces that shape humans (Kirksey and Helmreich 545). As Eben Kirksey and Stefan Helmreich argue, we can begin to trace the nature of our entangled relationships in the asymmetrical and non-hierarchical alliances and connections that emerge (546). By pivoting narratives away from traditional ethnographic accounts which see animals merely as symbols and metaphors, multispecies ethnography relies on the material and processual relationships that bind together humans and nonhumans. In developing a decolonial praxis for multispecies ethnography, it is important to attempt to answer the simple provocation, what is *post* in the postcolonial? Or, how does that *post* alter and ground the nature of relationalities? This essay details some theoretical concerns common to the field of multispecies ethnography and postcolonial subalternity on the themes of speaking and representation. I analyse the meeting points and the divergences of postcolonial studies and multispecies ethnography through five sites. Each site has a conceptual history that features different ways that the animal subject is figured

in multispecies ethnography with strong resonances in postcolonial criticism: the subaltern, location, the collective, representation and decolonisation. Each aspect shapes how the multispecies ethnographer identifies the animal subject while attempting to instate them as proper subjects of “storied places” (van Dooren and Rose 1-24). In this essay, I only look at examples of multispecies ethnography conducted in India. But my hope is that some of the recurring strands running through the work of these scholars further demonstrate the postcolonial (hybrid) identities at play in their work.

Suvadip Sinha and Amit R. Bhaishya (2019) refer to the resonances between the two fields briefly in their well-received text on postcolonial animalities. They point out that multispecies ethnographers are interested in a wide range of “affective states” that focus on the relationship between human and animal and not prematurely invested only in relations of care (3). They also state boldly that multispecies ethnography has a decolonizing impulse by recognising that colonialism has thrived on the brutalisation of the lives of nonhumans. Further, multispecies ethnography is specifically attentive to the politics of place and space through its emphasis on the “storied experiences” that are constituted by multiple modalities of entanglement. Moreover, multispecies ethnography works to narrate the lives of actual animals (11).

In this regard, I want to highlight the emergence of multispecies ethnography in postcolonial contexts in contemporary academic writing. The celebratory mode of multispecies ethnography is replaced in postcolonial multispecies ethnography with notes of ambivalence, complexity, and tension. The relational thrust of multispecies ethnography, drawing on influential work by Haraway, Latour and Barad, has proven more amenable to talking about human-animal connections rather than critical animal studies or animal rights discourses for two reasons that are central to postcolonial critique. One, it allows for the nonhuman animal to be studied in a context of human politics, identities and aspirations, thereby networking the animal in a social world previously concerned with the human. Two, multispecies ethnography figures the nonhuman animal as an important actor of social worlds and not just as part of nature, thereby overcoming, to varying degrees of success, a postcolonial humanism which offers redemption only for humans. This adaptation also implies, in the reverse, that some of the trenchant criticism against multispecies ethnography that it is not politicised (Kopnina 2017) or that it is not ethical (Gillespie 2019) or that it is quietist (Weisberg 2009) will have to be reconsidered through a postcolonial lens. As we will see, these two preoccupations run as a single thread through my five questions arising in different forms and ways.

In the last part of the essay, I suggest that a postcolonial multispecies ethnography can re-dignify the nonhuman animal subject. In this contrapuntal reading of what is characteristically a human right and quality, dignity when charted ethnographically will not be bestowed upon an animal by a human subject (see Said). Instead, it will reveal itself and emerge ethnographically. The cultural difference that marks any postcolonial ethnography then when read into a multispecies society helps the ethnographer perceive nonhuman animals as socio-cultural subjects with interior and exterior landscapes of identity. In a multispecies re-coding of “Night of the Scorpion”, the house would not be a

felicitous space of deep reverie; it is one of stealth (the scorpion's) and agony (the mother's) as witnessed by other humans and non-humans. It becomes an auditorium that welcomes "more candles, more lanterns, / more insects, and the endless rain". This motley crew resists a modular reading of the poem as a Manichean psychodrama between human and animal. Instead, the house is a site for waiting with "the peace of understanding on each face".

Subaltern

The resistance in postcolonial criticism to figure nonhuman animal subjects is derived from the established position of the colonised and the animal in a postcolonial society and the dangers in making them comparable. Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin (2015) identify four such anxieties: the shifting nature of the species boundary that must be fixed, the unassailable supremacy of the colonised over the subhuman or the nonhuman that must not be questioned, trolley experiment type scenarios where the human is pitted against the animal over limited resources, and the relative value of animals in different cultures and the valuing of human life over other forms of life (135-38). To think about the subaltern vis-à-vis the nonhuman animal is not to overturn these charges by establishing the precarity of animal condition as more acute or irenically, extend subalternity to animals as well. Rather, an examination of subalternity problematizes multiplicity as well as agency.

In his thrilling essay on mosquitoes in colonial Egypt, Timothy Mitchell (2002) works through some of these concerns. He argues that in the postcolonial history of the malarial epidemic in Egypt, a set of human actors had already been identified: "There are the British, manipulating Egyptian politics ...Americans; ...national elites... commercial landowners, entrepreneurs, and military officers; and, now and again, there are the subaltern communities—the rural population, the urban working classes, women—making up the rest of the social order. The mosquito, on the other hand, is said to belong to nature. It cannot speak" (42). The mosquito became a tool to guide state measures on public health such as on hygiene and disease where the malaria eradication campaign became a way for the post-colonial state to assert their scientific expertise and their mastery of it.

For the subaltern historiographer, this form of violent, inconspicuous exclusion is precisely the modality of the subaltern. The term "subaltern" originally referred to people who were unacknowledged and unseen in the structures of domination in terms of caste, gender, race, culture. It not only embodied the position of the marginalised but it also referred to the "centrality of dominant/dominated relationships in history" (Prakash 1477). The subaltern cannot speak because the violence and the oppressiveness of the system that binds her also silences her even as she may continue to be exploited, tortured and injured (see Gramsci 1971; Guha 1995; Spivak 1988; Bhabha 1994). The subaltern is not easily assimilable because they are radically other so much so that it may be difficult to even "name" the subaltern (Spivak, "Postcoloniality and Value" 158). Nevertheless, as postcolonial studies has repeatedly shown, the subaltern is not a silent entity because

they occasionally enact practices with real consequences (such as the self-immolating Hindu widow).

Is the nonhuman subject that emerges in a multispecies ethnography a subaltern figure? Sundhya Walther engages with this possibility and asks if we could envision a subaltern solidarity if subalternity is indeed transspecies. Walther suggests that since subalternity is a zone of otherness the concept is amenable to non-anthropocentric analysis (10). This state of subalternity also leads one to ask if all animals are all subaltern and, if so, what exactly the *multi* means in multispecies ethnography (or multispecies justice, multispecies politics...). Does it refer to a form of multiplicity that is infinitely regressive? If it means something more than that—and it must be the case since the social field it aims to represent has the hierarchical and exclusionary power to silence the subaltern—then it is useful to pay closer attention to what multiplicity entails. Additionally, if human-animal social worlds are shared then there must be more interrelationships to be represented other than a solitary subaltern in a dyadic relation with another. Gyan Prakash argues that postcolonial critique does not zoom in on aporias and silences to celebrate polyphonic native voices or to privilege multiplicity. Instead, it shows how “the functioning of colonial power was heterogeneous with its founding oppositions. The “native” was at once an-*other* and entirely knowable; the Hindu widow was a silenced subaltern who was nonetheless sought as a sovereign subject asked to declare whether or not her immolation was voluntary. Clearly, colonial discourses operated as the structure of writing, with the structure of their enunciation remaining heterogeneous with the binary oppositions they instituted” (1488).

The subaltern historiographer resists the dominant narrative by keeping alive multiple narratives and histories of the subaltern pasts, thereby preserving heterogeneity as irreducible. On a similar note, Mitchell also concludes that to interrogate the presumed human agency that upholds a picture of universal reason that postcolonial states can then participate in does not mean introducing “limitless number of actors and networks” (43). He offers by way of a corrective that we take issue with conceptions of power and agency itself from which we extract notions of intentionality, autonomy, and expertise—crucial ingredients of human exceptionalism. In multispecies ethnography, the subaltern animal subject is narratively examined precisely in the ways it troubles neat divisions of nature and culture. Multispecies ethnography attempts to position the animal subject not as a perpetual subaltern but as subject to human sovereignty. At the same time, this human sovereignty depends on the animal’s otherness to exercise biopolitical control. Such control depends on the negotiation of animal agency and resistance which calls into question the unassailability of human sovereignty in the first place. The multiplicity in a multispecies narrative therefore aims not to recover a primordial animal subject but to show the interspecies relationships as pivoting on multiple histories that run counter to a popular history of capital or colonialism (see Tsing 2015).

A multispecies ethnography, like postcolonial critique, necessarily aims to narrate the hybrid agencies and encounters that involve human and nonhuman actors which go into the construction of a unitary human subject, in charge of their sovereign intention and unimpeded modernity. For example, Yamini Narayanan (2017) deploys Ananya Roy’s

theory of subaltern urbanism (2011) to theorise about a subaltern animism which recognizes the moral rights of nonhuman animals in India's urban spaces. She points out that urbanisation and informality have been typically analysed as human conditions and thinking about multi-species spaces as inclusive implies granting them the "right not to be criminalised" ("Subaltern Animism" 489). By politicising the street dog, she reframes the postcolonial city as a multispecies city that witnesses cross-species oppressions and violence, but also agency. The animal subaltern is entwined with human histories but a postcolonial multispecies ethnography illuminates the multiple histories and interagencies that implicate the animal and their exclusion.

Location

The "local" as a trope continues to enjoy a pre-eminence in multispecies ethnography and postcolonial studies. To engage with how animals live with humans is to record how animals are central to particular social worlds (Kirksey and Helmreich 545). Similarly, Armstrong (2002) suggests that it is in the production of politically and culturally nuanced local histories that we can locate fruitful intersections between animal studies and postcolonial studies (416). Recent multispecies postcolonial anthropological intersections take a cross-sectional local history to show how animal lives are constructed within and along human histories while remaining attentive to how rituals and traditions as well as processes of modernity and modernisation shape the material lives of animals (Parreñas 2018; Govindarajan 2018; Kavesh 2020).

Beyond ethnography's focus on the local and particular, such multispecies ethnographic accounts have drawn on local instantiations of nature-cultural interactions to demonstrate this enmeshed sociality. The accounts, which are often regionally focused, have been deployed as local to generate a specific kind of social reality that constitute nonhuman animals as actors in unpredictable ways. Instead, these rhizomatic accounts have functionally demonstrated and made legible the entangled biographical and political lives of nonhumans. It is important to stress that this vantage point, in positing the local as multispecies, attempts to avoid the pitfalls of exoticising nature or reifying nonhumans as nature.

Therefore, the primacy of relation that marks multispecies ethnography could be traced back to the decolonizing impulse of postcolonial studies where the ethical subject does not imply sameness but a radical alterity that is unknowable. Unlike the traditional anthropological subject who is a recognised social entity, the ethical subject in postcolonial studies is accessible through relational encounters. At the same time, for postcolonial others, the radical other is a non-western other and their irretrievable heterogeneity is outside of western philosophy's formulations. How can we account for this location of relation as postcolonial or the postcolonial as location of relation in multispecies ethnography?

The postcolonial local is easily reducible to an instance of locality in a global world where local ecological commitments can subvert the metanarrative of globalisation. The transnational turn, most evident in ecocriticism and literary studies, positions local

histories within situated readings of places that are implicated in global issues of race, gender, and class, and as a better methodological tool to appraise global flows of capital (see Heise 2008; Ahuja 2009). Moreover, the postcolonial local can appear to be a historical microcosm where there is space for resistance against the overwhelming power of capitalism. In such a theorisation, the local is an example of the multiple voices and multiple actors (human and nonhuman) that need to be registered for more expansive notions of multispecies justice. This generosity of diversity or a strand of cosmopolitanism can make history look unimportant in the general picture it offers and can in its worst forms lead to an environmental orientalism or a “dehistoricization of non-western peoples and nature” (Mount and Brien 527; see also Guha 1989).

This in turn can raise the question whether a postcolonial critique is necessary or if simply a Marxist one will do, as animals are resources and food in a factory scale that is unparalleled. In a related vein, Dipesh Chakrabarty (2012) suggests that the postcolonial scale has to be stretched to be useful to address climate change and other such planetary phenomena that can adversely affect the planet as a whole in the Anthropocene (“Climate Change” 1). Chakrabarty’s careful critique hinges on showing how the anthropological difference that the postcolonial subject makes explicit is necessary to challenge a rights-bearing Eurocentric human subject but is less effective against the human of the Anthropocene where humans are acting like a geological force on the planet. Notwithstanding the human exceptionalism that is the undercurrent of this declensionist thinking, Chakrabarty is interested in how the human species and how human history are challenged by the Anthropocene and the reorientation of the human this challenge demands.

Chakrabarty’s point is different to Kirksey and Helmreich’s formulation: “Multispecies ethnography contains a hidden ontology lurking within: that of ‘species’” (Kirksey & Helmreich 563). Here, the species is not only the human species that is independently responsible or a victim of anthropogenic change but a multiplying world of different species where “entangled agents torque one another in ongoing loops of multispecies intra-actions” (Kirksey 776). Thus, even if postcoloniality is overrun and overdetermined by capitalism, modernity or the Anthropocene, multispecies ethnography shows how local effects of capital or state power can be differentiated in the radical heterogeneity of encounters that are spatial. This is not to affix some romanticising notion of purity to the local that cannot be claimed in a world of networks and flows of capital alone but how multispecies communities offer counterproposals and different hybridities. The “in-between” spaces that Homi Bhabha describes are not a separate world and deny any essentialist claims as “reading from the transferential perspective, where the Western ratio returns to itself from the time lag of the colonial relation, then we see how modernity and postmodernity are themselves constituted from the marginal perspective of colonial difference. They encounter themselves contingently at the point at which the internal difference of their own society is reiterated in terms of the difference of the other, the alterity of the postcolonial site” (39-40). To narrate the ongoingness of the postcolonial in its non-sequential relation to colonization is to adequately address the

local as a distinctive site and not just situate it as networked and glued into a grand narrative of globalisation to which all alterities are supposedly assimilable.

Let us take one trope: co-constitution, which is frequently used in multispecies ethnography to signify how nonhuman animal lives are bound up with ours. This trope is certainly a Latourian inheritance which, in deeming nonhuman animals as co-actors, invites them into the collective that figures prominently in political and social life and therefore plays a role in the social construction of facts. The ethnographer can then be attentive to the hidden players and through his ethnography anoint them as co-actors (see O’Gorman and Gaynor 2021). However, such positions overlook an important insight from postcolonial studies about asymmetrical hierarchies where the local, despite its connectivities to the global, is not just another site where entangled relations are duplicated. Such a tableaux of co-constituted actors signals another kind of standardized environmental justice that explains away the prevailing social conditions by perfunctorily including the nonhuman. This move undercuts what is local for the local actors which is not homogeneous.

In her nuanced ethnography of “crooked cats” (tigers, leopards and lions deemed as man-eaters), Nayanika Mathur (2021) records a contradiction which is instructive. The local people from across towns in Central Himalayas wanted crooked cats to be killed or captured immediately but they also blamed structural problems and human action and expressed sympathy for the persecuted cats. Such an analysis attentive to heterogeneity of species—people as well as nonhuman animals—also poses methodological difficulties for the re-presentation of the animal. To put it crudely, it may not be such a privilege for the animal to be foregrounded in local histories if the animal continues to be the fixed subject of violence. If the postcolonial replicates colonial structures of violence and oppression, then it may appear that in this postcolonial sameness there is nothing postcolonial about location or that the postcolonial subject has any history from below to tell. Gayatri Spivak, writing at the cusp of digital modernity, pondered on these dilemmas. She noted that postcolonial studies can become an “alibi” unless it is contextualised in its privileging of a lost object (“A Critique of Postcolonial Reason” 1). On the other hand, colonial discourse studies can reproduce neocolonial knowledge by representing only the colonised and the colonies by drawing a straight line from the past to the present where imperialism is in a distant past.

If reconfiguring a zoöpolis is necessarily a spatial process, then the local spaces have a critical role in creating those alternate worlds even if we may have a sense of planetary transformation (Wolch 1996). For example, Anand Vivek Taneja shows how popular ritual “operates in the register of subjunctive nostalgia, which performs the way the world *could have been*, in tension with what it is” with respect to the veneration of animal saints vis-à-vis the increasingly anthropocentric practices of reformist Islamic piety (209). What I want to suggest is that when we think about the postcolonial local, shaped by colonial histories, transnational connections, and environmental politics, there is also the particularity of the local that must not be swallowed up in other critical discourses. The local is more than a knotted-up arrangement of human and nonhuman subalterns; it is a world for actors who live in it. Multispecies ethnography’s focus on the

local as an irreducible particularity can bring out the environmental history of a particular region and the subalterns in that locality as well as depict the human-nonhuman intersections as vignettes of a hierarchical world that must be redesigned by activists and theorists. We see this most fruitfully in Radhika Govindarajan's ethnographic exploration of interspecies relations in the Central Himalayas where the wildness—so crucial to colonial and postcolonial conservation policies—is not entirely determined by either and constructs a subalternist history that is local: “as it bears indelible traces of racial meaning and the workings of sovereign colonial power, contains within it the potential for an otherwild, a messy wildness that reconfigures, unsettles, and exceeds the ways in which it is framed in projects of colonial and caste domination or in fantasies of human mastery of the nonhuman” (12). The local is not a mirror site. It is irreducibly particular in its histories and hierarchies and the fate of the nonhumans in that story must be described and challenged.

Collective

Deborah Bird Rose's work draws attention to the “situated connectivities that bind us into multi-species communities” and the need to restate such configurations in the Anthropocene (87). Documenting the variety of lived realities of humans and nonhumans ethnographically can resist a monolithic conception of multispecies communities as abstract formations motivated solely by an ethics of care. Multispecies communities complicate notions of human agency and show how animals can resist roles ascribed to them. Members of a community are governed by biopolitics and a postcolonial critique can reveal what attitudes and traditions modify membership in a community (see Gandhi 2006). For example, Indian traditions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism have a long history of highlighting the fluid relationships between humans and animals. The motifs of non-injury to living beings (*ahimsa*), rebirth of all living beings (*samsara*), friendliness (*maitri*) towards all living things, and devotion to the good of all creatures (*sarva-bhuta-hita*) indicate a rich awareness of species interdependencies. It is widely theorised how religious beliefs propel animal protection, such as in the case of *gauseva* (cow welfare) which in turn propel fundamentalist religious ideologies that envision communities based on exclusion of non-members (Narayanan, “Cow Protection” 331). At the same time, animal welfare organizations in contemporary India trace their lineage to anti-imperialists whose demand for animal rights along with other social causes promised an “ideal community, a utopian order of things” (Gandhi 8; see also Dave 2014).

In my ethnographic work on street dogs in Kerala in India, I have recently looked at how street dogs were legitimised as members of a multispecies community during the pandemic as they began to starve from hunger and people began to feed them. Animal rights organisations appealed to what I call synergic suffering, which is based on “an implicit recognition that the other is undergoing a similar experience as you and therefore, warrants a response” (8). As a postcolonial state visible on the international stage, there was a lot of pressure on the Kerala government to develop effective human-centric policy but the centrality of compassion in Indian animal welfare laws temporarily

positioned street dogs as members of the community who needed food during the pandemic.

To understand these contingent communities, I want to consider the ontological and material politics of the multispecies assembly that is at the heart of postcolonial multispecies ethnography by distinguishing it from the Latourian collective. In this context, to talk of a postcolonial multispecies ethnography is to a) reconstitute communities as more-than-human and b) consider the type of relations that must exist for nonhuman animals to be part of a community. Latour's democratising project in *The Politics of Nature* (2004) destabilises the distinction between the dualist frame of a nonhuman nature and a human society where the scientist relays information from the nature to the social. In the dualist model, nature and society are divided and the model of the collective extends to include both human and nonhuman members. He proposes that in a true democracy of human and nonhuman actants, entities should be admitted into the common world through terms such as perplexity, consultation, hierarchy, and institutions would be collectively determined by scientists and politicians (91-121).

Matthew Watson brings Latour's representative democracy into dialogue with Chakrabarty's theory of the subaltern pasts to interrogate the limits of the relational networks that are common to both the projects. For Chakrabarty, subaltern pasts remain unrepresentable because they cannot be assimilated into a new all-encompassing narrative that propounds a unitary theory of historical truth. Latour's proposal is for specialist humans to become spokespersons to construct a cosmopolitical "common world" or, in other words, a multispecies collective that affords representation to those without human speech or language (57). What Watson is interested in is how some entities are clearly excluded from this collective and a negative category would appear to be forming externally containing all those who are not get welcomed in (59-62). Latour's representational capacity hinging on relational networks also seems to render a postcolonial position as the meta-organisational mode of spokespersons (much like the United Nations, or worse, the UN Security Council) that would strive towards the "progressive composition of the common world" (8).

A postcolonial perspective would be cautious of such a transcendental project, notwithstanding the promise of non-anthropocentrism, egalitarianism and democracy. After all, colonial violence was perpetrated in the guise of civilising missions aimed at elevating the native by promising them admission into a common world of peace, nobility and progress. Latour's externalisation is important here because it seems to be uncannily similar to the fate of the subaltern as the marginalised are made subordinate or deemed insignificant as enemies or aliens (191). Representational politics of animals, in fact, play out in realpolitik terms precisely in the form of a democracy into which some animals are invited on the basis of sentience while some remain out of the community's purview.

Ambika Aiyadurai's *Tigers are Our Brothers: Anthropology of Wildlife Conservation in Northeast India* (2021) discusses the positionality of conservation workers who seek to protect tigers in Dibang valley in Arunachal Pradesh and the various notions of community "embedded in hierarchy, power, and politics" (21). Instead of the locals or the local wildlife being perceived as separate communities, she emphasizes the tussle for

power and the tensions that emerge in reconstitution as actors from diverse backgrounds come together to discuss the rich biodiversity of the valley. She points out that there is no notion of nation or borders for wildlife but an “ecological nationalism” motivates the politics in the Dibang Wildlife Sanctuary (20). These “conservation imaginaries” situate the tiger cubs in a pristine nature in harmony with indigenous people and Aiyadurai’s ethnographic detailing of the Mishmi people who believe tigers are their brothers offers a different set of relationships on human-animal relations (22). For the Mishmi people, the community comprises of spirits and tigers but these relations are bound with their social practices, such as farming or hunting or rearing domesticated animals. Aiyadurai’s postcolonial multispecies ethnography details the tensions that emerge when this community is forced to redefine itself when it comes into contact with the wildlife conservation ethos from mainland India.

Representation

In her essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988), Spivak warns against dominant discourses—both intellectual and political—and their gross generalisations on behalf of the third world “masses.” For Spivak, they conflate two distinct meanings of representation: “proxy and portrait”, or speaking for in the case of political representation, and speaking about and speaking in the name of an Other that is constructed (“The Post-colonial Critic” 108). Three implications follow for multispecies ethnography. One, *who* speaks? Postcolonial criticism has tended to be interdisciplinary as well as attentive to the power of the discipline and the privilege of its practitioners to define it (see Chakrabarty 1992; Spivak 1999). Who writes multispecies ethnography and from where? Spivak writes about herself as the native informant who speaks on behalf of her community and in “clinging to marginality” may essentialise the ethnic other (“Outside in the Teaching Machine” 9). Two, *whom* do we speak for? The postcolonial critic also asks who is being represented since the subaltern escapes representation, and cannot easily speak or in the case of nonhuman animals, speak in human language. Spivak also refers to the “benevolent first-world appropriation and reinscription of the Third World as an Other” where the represented is a placeholder for theoretical analysis or an ahistorical portrayal of the other (“Can the Subaltern Speak?” 289). Third, *how* do we speak for the subaltern who cannot speak or who is silenced?

Ilan Kapoor in his careful reading of Spivak’s work notes five different ways in her oeuvre to at least partially overcome these obstacles (640-644): a) intimately inhabiting and negotiating discourse by deconstructing dominant discourses within which one is situated; b) acknowledging complicity about one’s own position; c) unlearning one’s privilege to retrain oneself out of their discipline’s prejudices and biases; d) Learning from the ground to begin to learn from the subaltern; and e) working without guarantees as the subaltern is heterogeneous and non-narratable and becoming aware of the flaws in a representation.

Multispecies ethnography is already aware of these difficulties since animals do not speak human language. It “seeks to understand the world as materially real, partially

knowable, multicultural and multinatured, magical, and emergent through the contingent relations of multiple beings and entities” (Ogden *et al.* 6). Sara Ahmed, writing on trauma and communication, suggests that the ethical encounter is not to be found through presence but through “other speech acts, scars and traumas, that remain unspoken, unvoiced or not fully spoken or voiced” (156). As a project, subaltern studies, for example, sought to recover the subject and thereby discover the agency of that lost subject (see O’Hanlon 1988). Postcolonial critique enthusiastically focused on myths, cults and ideologies that were appropriated by dominant colonial historiography. However, the quest for a subaltern agent did not always lead to a discovery of subaltern agency. Gyan Prakash notes that the “moment of rebellion always contained within it the moment of failure” (1480). Sporadic acts of resistance and absence of conventional records makes it difficult to not only attribute autonomy to the subaltern but also to recover it. Since the subaltern is irretrievably heterogeneous and unknowable, postcolonial criticism has attempted to locate the subaltern in the precarity of interstices, margins and gaps.

Multispecies ethnography has turned to different methods such as those from natural history, ethology and other scientific methods to “torque” them to figure the nonhuman animal (see Swanson 2017; Mathews 2018; Hartigan 2021). The self-reflexivity stems from a realisation that traditional fieldwork reliant on the observational prowess of the human ethnographer may not be useful in studying nonhuman subjects and their relationships. In negotiating the ethics of representation, should multispecies ethnographers attend to postcolonial difference in the same vein as they do about animal otherness?

A multisensorial approach could be one way to figure the nonhumans—the chapping calls of a house lizard, the soft croaking of a frog around the rain, the webs of a spider or its prey caught in it or around it like wings after a meal, the swift passing of a cockroach over you in the dark, the tell-tale stench of a rat or swarming of flies that come in when you turn on the tube light. A postcolonial multispecies ethnography can learn from and with these “unseen others” if we rethink methodologies and theoretical approaches to move beyond text and sight as Spivak suggests. Like Fijn and Kavesh who employ the term “sensory anthropology,” a combination of sensory ethnography and multispecies anthropology (6), and Tsing who uses the “arts of noticing” (370) to denote the toolkit which researchers need to effectively learn from and with more than human animals, a postcolonial multispecies ethnography focuses on a variety of sensory elements that opens up new avenues for thinking meaningfully and critically about our entanglement with the more-than-humans.

However, animal subjects in a postcolonial multispecies ethnography are not only found in interstices of human relations. For example, the “transspecies” spaces (Narayanan, “Subaltern Animism” 3) of India present a picture of mutual living that fully realises the more-than-human imperative of multispecies ethnography. The animal self is not only a textual embodiment or a being to be recovered through narration; the animal is present in social practices and traditions but also very much in reality.

In their work on macaques in urban India, Maan Barua and Anindya Sinha bring ethology into conversation with geography to understand what urbanisation means for the macaques. In foregrounding the animal lifeworlds, their subalternist project considers what it means for nonhuman knowledges to count as expertise in urban governance which is usually a bureaucratic, human enterprise. This interdisciplinary project reinterprets biological behaviors of the macaques to consider urban governance and its consequences for the macaques. In tracing the affective responses to macaques among people and in reorienting the macaque's ability to cause "trouble" in urban spaces, they flesh out notions of macaque knowledge and "enskilment" (1170). The postcolonial history of cohabitation represents a macaque who is agential, wilful and ecological (1160-1180).

Lastly, since multispecies ethnography is a mode of representation of animal subjects in different locations, it must not aim to recover a humanistic conception of the animal shaped by a discourse of human and animal rights. The ethical project thus envisioned would be starkly different from the ethical project of the subaltern historiographer who is confronted with the "systematic fragmentation of the record of subalternity" (Prakash 1483). This can lead to dilemmas and expectations—both moral and disciplinary—because of the crisis inaugurated by the Anthropocene and more broadly, by the continuous exploitation and extinction of animals in the Anthropocene (see Wadivel 2015). Will it be possible to retain an irretrievable heterogeneity of nonhuman subjects if the category is itself under siege? The ethnographer realises that the subaltern is the unwitnessed and the unspoken, ensnared in the dominant structures of oppression and there is no full recovery of the subaltern possible. However, if not a full, even a partial recovery is imperative to undercut anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism. Multispecies ethnography engages with this tension by emphasising the emergence as well as the oppression of the subaltern agency in dominant discourses.

Decolonization

How can multispecies ethnography be decolonial? Multispecies ethnography, in its attempt to foreground the elusive nonhuman, often relies on the tropes of wonder and enchantment to bring to our attention those we overlook (Ogden *et al.* 5). The associated turn towards attention and cultivation of attentiveness grants the ethnographer or the researcher much power in the form of observation and the sensibility to bring the previously hidden animals to the foreground (see Tsing 17; Rose and van Dooren 2011). This, coupled with the hyper self-reflexivity required of the ethnographer in decentering themselves to centre non-anthropocentric ways of being, can coalesce into an ethical project of reclaiming an ecological sensibility that is western in its approach (Guha, "A Third World Critique" 1-7). While this is certainly laudable, there is a risk of the unassimilable subaltern being further marginalised in such endeavors as the postcolonial ethnography, in its messy navigation of colonial and indigenous modernity, rarely leads to positions that meet the western criteria of animal rights (see Ahuja 2021). This produces to two difficulties: one, the animal subaltern seems hopelessly caught in neocolonial structures

of oppression and violence, such that no agency or autonomy can be attributed to them. This is soundly refuted by subaltern historiography that proves that agency thus denied comes from a potted history with humans as protagonists or a history from above. Two, the animal subaltern seems located within an ever-multiplying field of relations such that they appear decentered within their own histories. Confronted by hegemonic structures of trenchant colonial and neocolonial powers in such histories, it may appear that the subaltern indeed cannot speak.

One way to disentangle these issues is to explicitly link the decolonizing impulse to conceptions of multispecies justice which work against various premises of human exceptionalism: “a) that humans are physically separate or separable from other species and non-human nature, b) that humans are unique from all other species because they possess minds (or consciousness) and agency and c) that humans are therefore more important than other species” (Srinivasan & Kasturirangan 125-128 qtd. in Hayes *et al* 2022). Sinha and Bhaishya alert us to other possibilities by invoking the work of Sylvia Wynter and her work on the “genres of the human” (6). For Wynter, the Eurocentric human and human becoming is in the mode of the secular liberal monohumanism. Postcolonial representations must work against reinscribing the Eurocentric human as the type of human we expect to be in relation with nonhumans. The oft-quoted passage by Neel Ahuja from *Bioinsecurities* (2016) brings the theoretical considerations to the fore; problematising the celebratory nature of posthumanism:

This move allows some posthumanist critics to project upon an outside, the nonhuman (in the form of environment, animal, machine, or other object), the possibility of resistance to anthropocentrism. Such thinking might be seen as a ruse of transcendence—an assumption that turning attention from the human to the nonhuman could bypass Marxist, feminist, critical race, and postcolonial critiques of imperial systems that proliferate inequality under the guise of universal human freedom. (viii)

A decolonial multispecies ethnography must take issue with human exceptionalism but also remain attentive to the figure of the human, for the human who is to be destabilized is not an ahistorical, abstract category which when usurped by the nonhuman can readily institute the nonhuman in its own place. For multispecies ethnography, this has two important implications: firstly, the animal subject will have to be situated in alternative political structures outside the “Eurocentric narrative of humanity” (Sinha and Bhaishya 8). The danger is that otherwise we may extrapolate a common human-animal sociality, thereby unwittingly replicating a Eurocentric idea of human-animal sociality. Secondly, the postcolonial multispecies frame must be careful not to reproduce the oldest trick in the book, which is to invite animal subjects to enter the monohumanist narrative by expanding the framework of human rights. At the same time, postcolonial multispecies ethnography should not shy away from the question of the ethical and what and how that would like for animals and for a multispecies society.

The particularism that both fields aim for can appear to be upholding violent structures and perpetuating a passivity that further silences the subaltern under the guise of cultural relativism. Postcolonial studies has always been closely connected with emancipatory projects for its colonial critique and for demonstrating the interlinked oppressions of caste, gender, and religion (Young 64). In its interrogation of identities and

a politics of difference, it has drawn on interdisciplinary work to relinquish a dominant history, or what Spivak called catachresis: “reversing, displacing, and seizing the apparatus of value coding” (“Postcoloniality and Value” 228). The call for interdisciplinarity in multispecies ethnography should be simultaneously attentive to non-anthropocentric ways of figuring the nonhuman animal as well as the politics of difference and location.

Krithika Srinivasan’s decade-long engagement with street dogs in India is an exemplar of decolonising the discipline. Srinivasan highlights the material lives of street dogs in an attempt to situate them outside the neocolonial politics of conservation that cannot engage with the street dog as an animal subaltern. Within conservation politics, so intimately shaped by colonial politics, street dogs are problems for pristine ecologies that can only be populated by valuable or charismatic species (see Home *et al.* 2018). By framing them as zoonotic carriers that require biomedical and biopolitical control, state and conservation politics co-opt colonial patterns of exorcising of the “exemplary noxious other” to further silence the street dog (3). Srinivasan’s work aims to historicise and understand the multispecies community that the street dog is part of through a careful investigation of local relationships between people and street dogs. In the process, she discovers alliances, a fragile tolerance and perspectives that accept street dogs as “*paavam*” (innocent, poor), and hence companions and occupants in a multispecies world (7).

Conclusion: Re-dignifying the Postcolonial Localopolis

Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued that the “postcolonial critique of the subject was actually a deeper turning towards the human” (“Climate Change” 4). To bring multispecies ethnography into conversation with postcolonial studies is to be acutely aware of the latter’s avoidance of the nonhuman as a prospective subaltern. Thus, the cross-currents between the two fields must confront the principal danger the postcolonial human subject fears which is if association with the nonhuman subaltern relegates the human subject into a paradigm of dehumanisation or base animality.

In her discussion of the cosmopolis and what she calls the localopolis, Rukmini Bhaya Nair (2017) discusses the inherent contradictions and dangers of valorising a postcolonial space as the local which would be a suitable space to confront the world capitals of power, development and modernity. The localopolis is the “territory of the unspoken”, a place of “tacit enmities” (148). She describes how she had shared in a western perception of Timbuktu as an “outlandish wilderness” till she read Kamau Brathwaite who “re-dignified” Timbuktu for her in his decolonized vision so different from a cosmopolis imagined by Walter Benjamin or Umberto Eco (151). The localopolis carries within itself anxieties such as rootlessness which are “doppelgangers of otherness” but it also could have an archive that helps its inhabitants connect its present to pasts and alternative futures (157).

Similarly, the postcolonial animal in the localopolis can be portrayed easily as a secondary character of this peripheral slice of life; more than a symbol but subject to

cultural contexts that tell human stories. Accounts of reciprocity and relationality that elide what is asked of the nonhuman animal, whether it be labour, love or sacrifice (or all three in many cases) are mistellings that are sympathetic only to the human other in the localopolis. My suggestion is that a postcolonial rendering of an animal subaltern in relation must, in addition to the complex picture of networks it relates, also redignify the animal subject in multispecies ethnography. This is not to say that an ethically enriched version of the animal subject must be “invented” when there is no real-world referent of this subjectivity or that dignity be indulgently extended to animals as a benevolent, but ultimately, anthropocentric act.

The postcolonial localopolis holds within its interrelated constellations not only asteroids, supernovas, and galaxies in a dynamic matrix but also more relatively stable “observation posts” (150). From these observation posts, we must methodically scan the terrain and attempt to realise the embodied perspectives of those multiple beings that live in and around these locales. To redignify is to take seriously the postcolonial position and the decolonizing visions of those humans and nonhumans who live in ways and pasts that we call the global south. To redignify is not to simply elevate the animal to the level of the human nor is it to ask the human to level down.

For Spivak, redignifying would be inspired by deconstruction: “to question the authority of the investigating subject without paralysing him, persistently transforming conditions of impossibility into possibility” (“In Other Worlds” 201). As the examples of multispecies ethnography that I have cited in my essay show, anthropocentrism can be frustrated in numerous ways that allow the postcolonial animal to speak. Nevertheless, in this quest to re-dignify and to re-present, the ethnographer opens himself up to criticism. How can the multispecies ethnographer be equipped with “hyper-self-reflexivity” (Kapoor 2004)? There are two dangers here, in fact, common to ethnography and postcolonial criticism. One, as the “global south” gains prominence in contemporary parlance, multispecies ethnography faces the same challenge to not turn the postcolonial spaces into celebrated places of multispecies living and by extension, cultural difference. Second, which is more insidious, is that of the metaphysical transparency that can accompany the ethnographer simply because they know they want to study animals or focus on animals leading to an “orthodoxy of the local” (Mckinnon 22-34). This would preemptively make the ethnographer’s work a project of benevolent paternalism where nonhuman animals cannot say anything new.

To redignify is to situate human social worlds as entangled with animal life worlds such that the enervation of the animal is not necessary to chart those shared worlds ethnographically. For multispecies ethnography, animals are not the background for human politics and agencies. In the postcolonial multispecies ethnography, animals are more than dwellers and co-participants in a troubled and shared world and they are shaped and affected by human politics and visions of development, progress and modernity. Furthermore, the animal is not a free-floating agent of history impacted by changing fates of those in power; they are possessors of “interior landscapes of identity” (Venn 27). Anthropodenial (de Waal 2) would further subalternize the animal; and an uncritical anthropomorphism would essentialise them and make them human. The house

lizard flees when you approach it, and a street dog knows what it could mean when a human bends down to pick something up. The postcolonial animal has a notion of the human. The puzzle that postcolonial studies presents multispecies ethnography with is this: how do we figure the interior landscapes of those animals marked by identity, memory and sociality as we envision the shared worlds to reconstruct their animal identities *in situ*? (see Kraniauskas 2000). If we take seriously the continuities that the five shared features that I have discussed then the animal cannot be a perpetual subaltern in a constant state of abjection. The zoöpolis, after all, is a polis where norms are generated.

Submission received 24 March 2022

Revised version accepted 27 September 2022

Works Cited

- Ahmed, Sara. *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-coloniality*. Routledge, 2013.
- Ahuja, Neel. "On Phooka: Beef, Milk, and the Framing of Animal Cruelty in Late Colonial Bengal." *Meat! A Transnational Analysis*, edited by Sushmita Chatterjee and Banu Subramaniam, Duke University Press, 2021, 213-240.
- . *Bioinsecurities*. Duke University Press, 2016.
- . "Postcolonial Critique in a Multispecies World." *PMLA*, vol. 124, no. 2, 2009, pp. 556-563.
- Aiyadurai, Ambika. *Tigers Are Our Brothers: Anthropology of Wildlife Conservation in Northeast India*. Oxford University Press, 2021.
- Armstrong, Philip. "The Postcolonial Animal." *Society & Animals*, vol. 10, no. 4, 2002, pp. 413-419.
- Barua, Maan, and Anindya Sinha. "Animating the Urban: An Ethological and Geographical Conversation." *Social & Cultural Geography*, vol. 20, no. 8, 2019, pp. 1160-80. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2017.1409908>.
- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 2012.
- Bhaya Nair, Rukmini. "Localopolis and Cosmopolis: An Indian Narrative." *EU-topias*, vol. 14, 2017, pp. 147-159.
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. "Postcolonial Studies and the Challenge of Climate Change." *New Literary History*, vol. 43, no. 1, 2012, pp. 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.1353/nlh.2012.0007>.
- . "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for "Indian" Pasts?" *Representations*, vol. 37, 1992, pp 1-26.
- Dave, Naisargi N. "Witness: Humans, Animals, and the Politics of Becoming." *Cultural Anthropology*, vol 29, no.3, 2014, pp. 433-456.
- de Waal, Frans B. M. "Anthropomorphism and Anthropodenial: Consistency in Our Thinking about Humans and Other Animals." *Philosophical Topics*, vol. 27, no. 1, 1999, pp. 255-80.
- Ezekiel, Nissim. *Collected Poems 1952-1988*. Oxford University Press, 1992.

- Fijn, Natasha, and Muhammad A. Kavesh. "A Sensory Approach for Multispecies Anthropology." *The Australian Journal of Anthropology*, vol. 32, 2020, pp. 6-22.
- Gandhi, Leela. *Affective Communities*. Duke University Press, 2006.
- Gillespie, Kathryn A. "For a Politicized Multispecies Ethnography: Reflections on a Feminist Geographic Pedagogical Experiment." *Politics and Animals*, vol. 5, 2019, pp.17-32.
- Govindrajan, Radhika. *Animal Intimacies*. University of Chicago Press, 2018.
- Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections From the Prison Notebooks*. Routledge, 2020.
- Guha, Ramachandra. "Subaltern and Bhadrakok Studies." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 30, no. 33, 1995, pp. 2056-2058.
- . "Radical American Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation: A Third World Critique." *Environmental ethics*, vol. 11, no. 1, 1989, pp. 71-83.
- Haris, Susan. "Compassion, Hunger and Animal Suffering: Scenes from Kerala, South India." *Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science*, 2022, pp. 1-14.
- Hartigan Jr, John. "Knowing Animals: Multispecies Ethnography and the Scope of Anthropology." *American Anthropologist*, vol. 123, no. 4, 2021, pp. 846-860.
- Hayes, Graeme, et al. *Trajectories in Environmental Politics*. Routledge, 2022.
- Heise, Ursula K. "Ecocriticism and the Transnational Turn in American studies." *American Literary History*, vol. 20, no. 1-2, 2008, pp. 381-404.
- Home, Chandrima, Yash Veer Bhatnagar, and Abi Tamin Vanak. "Canine Conundrum: Domestic Dogs as an Invasive Species and Their Impacts on Wildlife in India." *Animal Conservation*, vol. 21, no. 4, 2018, pp. 275-282.
- Huggan, Graham. *The Oxford Handbook of Postcolonial Studies*. OUP Oxford, 2013.
- Huggan, Graham, and Helen Tiffin. *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*. Routledge, 2015.
- Kapoor, Ilan. "Hyper-Self-Reflexive Development? Spivak on Representing the Third World 'Other.'" *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 25, no. 4, 2004, pp. 627-47.
- Kavesh, Muhammad A. *Animal Enthusiasms: Life Beyond Cage and Leash in Rural Pakistan*. Routledge, 2020.
- Kirksey, S. Eben, and Stefan Helmreich. "The Emergence of Multispecies Ethnography." *Cultural anthropology*, vol. 25, no. 4, 2010, pp. 545-576.
- Kirksey, Eben. "Species: a Praxiographic Study." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, vol. 21, no. 4, 2015, pp. 758-80. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9655.12286>.
- Kopnina, Helen. "Beyond Multispecies Ethnography: Engaging with Violence and Animal Rights in Anthropology." *Critique of Anthropology*, vol. 37, no. 3, 2017, pp. 333-357.
- Kraniauskas, John. "Hybridity in a Transnational Frame: Latin-Americanist and Post-colonial Perspectives on Cultural Studies". *Hybridity and its Discontents: Politics, Science, Culture*, edited by Avtar Brah and Annie Coombes, Routledge, 2000, 235-256.
- Latour, Bruno. *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*. Harvard University Press, 2004.

- Mathews, Andrew S. "Landscapes and Throughscapes in Italian Forest Worlds: Thinking Dramatically about the Anthropocene." *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 33, no. 3, 2018, pp. 386-414.
- Mathur, Nayanika. *Crooked Cats: Beastly Encounters in the Anthropocene*. University of Chicago Press, 2021.
- Mckinnon, Katharine Islay. "An Orthodoxy of 'the Local': Post-Colonialism, Participation and Professionalism in Northern Thailand." *The Geographical Journal*, vol. 172, no. 1, 2006, pp. 22-34. *Wiley Online Library*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4959.2006.00182.x>.
- Mitchell, Timothy. *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity*. University of California Press, 2002.
- Mount, Dana, and Susie O'Brien. "Postcolonialism and the Environment." *The Oxford Handbook of Postcolonial Studies*, edited by Graham Huggan, OUP Oxford, 2013, 521-539. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199588251.013.0021>.
- Narayanan, Yamini. "Street Dogs at the Intersection of Colonialism and Informality: 'Subaltern Animism' as a Posthuman Critique of Indian Cities." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, vol. 35, no. 3, June 2017, pp. 475-94. *SAGE Journals*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263775816672860>.
- . "Cow Protection as 'Casteised Speciesism': Sacralisation, Commercialisation and Politicisation." *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, vol. 41, no. 2, 2018, pp. 331-351.
- O'Gorman, Emily, and Andrea Gaynor. "More-Than-Human Histories." *Environmental History*, vol. 25, no. 4, Oct. 2020, pp. 711-35. *journals.uchicago.edu (Atypon)*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/envhis/emma027>.
- Ogden, Laura A., Billy Hall, and Kimiko Tanita. "Animals, Plants, People, and Things: A Review of Multispecies Ethnography." *Environment and Society*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2013, pp. 5-24.
- O'Hanlon, Rosalind. "Recovering the Subject Subaltern Studies and Histories of Resistance in Colonial South Asia." *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 22, no. 1, 1988, pp. 189-224.
- Parreñas, Juno Salazar. *Decolonizing Extinction*. Duke University Press, 2018.
- Prakash, Gyan. "Subaltern Studies as Postcolonial Criticism." *The American Historical Review*, vol. 99, no. 5, 1994, pp. 1475-90. *JSTOR*. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2168385>.
- Rose, Deborah Bird "Introduction: Writing in the Anthropocene." *Australian Humanities Review*, vol. 47, 2009, 87.
- Rose, Deborah Bird and Thom van Dooren, "Unloved Others: Death of the Disregarded in the Time of Extinctions," *Australian Humanities Review*, vol. 50, 2011, pp. 1-4
- Roy, Ananya. "Slumdog Cities: Rethinking Subaltern Urbanism." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, vol. 35, no. 2, 2011, pp. 223-238.
- Said, Edward W. *Culture and Imperialism*. Vintage, 2012.
- Sinha, Suvadip, and Amit R. Baishya, editors. *Postcolonial Animalities*. Routledge, 2020.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "The Making of Americans, the Teaching of English, and the Future of Culture Studies." *New Literary History*, vol. 21, no. 4, 1990, 781-798.

- . "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, Urbana, Ill., 1988, 271-313.
- . *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*. Harvard University Press, 1999.
- . "Poststructuralism, Marginality, Postcoloniality and Value." *Literary Theory Today*, edited by Peter Collier and Helga Geyer-Ryan, Cornell UP, 1990, 219- 239.
- . *Outside in the Teaching Machine*. Routledge, 2012.
- . *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*. Routledge, 2012.
- . *The Post-colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*. Routledge, 2014.
- Srinivasan, Krithika. "Remaking More-than-Human Society: Thought Experiments on Street Dogs as 'Nature.'" *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, vol. 44, no. 2, 2019, pp. 376–91. *Wiley Online Library*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12291>.
- Srinivasan, Krithika, and Rajesh Kasturirangan. "Political Ecology, Development, and Human Exceptionalism." *Geoforum*, vol. 75, 2016, pp. 125–28. *ScienceDirect*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2016.07.011>.
- Swanson, Heather Anne. "Methods for Multispecies Anthropology: Thinking with Salmon Otoliths and Scales." *Social Analysis*, vol. 61, no. 2, 2017, pp. 81–99. www.berghahnjournals.com. <https://doi.org/10.3167/sa.2017.610206>.
- Taneja, Anand Vivek. "Saintly Animals: The Shifting Moral and Ecological Landscapes of North India." *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, vol. 35, no. 2, 2015, pp. 204-221.
- Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt. *The Mushroom at the End of the World*. Princeton University Press, 2015.
- Van Dooren, Thom, and Deborah Bird Rose. "Storied-places in a Multispecies City." *Humanimalia*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2012, pp. 1-27.
- Venn, Couze. *The Postcolonial Challenge: Towards Alternative Worlds*. Sage, 2006.
- Wadiwel, Dinesh. *The War Against Animals*. Brill, 2015.
- Watson, Matthew C. "Cosmopolitics and the Subaltern: Problematizing Latour's Idea of the Commons." *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 28, no. 3, May 2011, pp. 55–79. *SAGE Journals*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276410396913>.
- Weisberg, Zipporah. "The Broken Promises of Monsters: Haraway, Animals and the Humanist Legacy." *Journal for Critical Animal Studies*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2009, pp. 22-62.
- Wolch, Jennifer. *Zoöpolis*. Routledge, 2017.
- Young, Robert JC. *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2020.

Postcolonial Nonhuman Blurring (B)orders in Migrant Ecologies: A Postanthropocentric Reading of Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*

Ashwarya Samkaria
Independent researcher, India
23.ashwarya@gmail.com

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ecozona.2022.13.2.4671>



Abstract

Amitav Ghosh's novel *Gun Island* (2019) explores the intersection of the nonhuman with 21st century issues pertaining to racial and ecological injustice, ethnic cleansing, environmental catastrophe and migrant ecologies by way of allegorising the myth of Manasa Devi (goddess of snakes and other venomous creatures). A postcolonial ecocritical lens helps analyse how the novelist presents nonhuman actors to contest Western anthropocentric conceptualisations of human subjectivity shaped by historical forces of modernity. By positing a postanthropocentric way of reading the world in order to shape new human subjectivities which do not efface human-nonhuman entanglements, my paper studies how Ghosh recognises agentic capacities and storied matter of the postcolonial nonhuman subject matter by identifying the novel's subversive negotiations through the tropes of language, embodiment, genre, and everyday environmentalism. I analyse how the contextualisation of the postcolonial nonhuman not only critiques human exceptionalism but destabilises the constructedness of borders in terms of an immaterial myth projecting an otherworldly possibility, trans-corporeality positing inescapable interconnectedness between humans and all living and non-living matter, and everyday environmentalism broadening the definition of environment to contest nature-culture dualism. I also argue that this ecofiction's allegorisation of Manasa Devi's myth through the unseen boundaries that she seeks to retain problematises a simplistic understanding of borders as limiting. My paper thus analyses how this reconceptualisation through the postcolonial nonhuman blurs borders and their ordering of the world and posits, instead, a relational living that dismantles constructedness of hierarchies while paying heed to (b)orders for ecological sustainable living.

Keywords: Trans-corporeality, myth, migrant ecologies, nonhuman agency, postanthropocentric.

Resumen

La novela *Gun Island* (2019) de Amitav Ghosh explora la intersección de lo no humano con los problemas del siglo XXI relacionados con la injusticia racial y ecológica, la limpieza étnica, la catástrofe ambiental y las ecologías migratorias alegorizando el mito de Manasa Devi (diosa de las serpientes y otras criaturas venenosas). Una lente ecocrítica poscolonial ayuda a analizar cómo el novelista presenta actores no humanos para cuestionar las conceptualizaciones antropocéntricas occidentales de la subjetividad humana moldeadas por las fuerzas históricas de la modernidad. Al postular una forma posantropocéntrica de leer el mundo para dar forma a nuevas subjetividades humanas que no borran los enredos entre humanos y no humanos, mi artículo estudia cómo Ghosh reconoce las capacidades de los agentes y la materia histórica del tema poscolonial no humano al identificar las negociaciones subversivas de la novela a través de los tropos de lenguaje, encarnación, género y ecologismo cotidiano. Analizo cómo la contextualización de lo no humano poscolonial no solo critica el excepcionalismo humano sino que desestabiliza la construcción de las fronteras en términos de un mito inmaterial que proyecta una posibilidad de otro mundo. La transcorporeidad postula la interconexión ineludible entre los humanos y toda la materia viva y no viva, y el ecologismo cotidiano, ampliando así la definición de medio ambiente para cuestionar el dualismo naturaleza-cultura. También argumento que la alegorización de esta ecoficción del mito de Manasa Devi a través de los límites invisibles que ella busca retener problematiza una comprensión simplista de los bordes como limitantes. Por lo tanto, mi artículo analiza cómo esta reconceptualización a través de lo no humano poscolonial desdibuja las fronteras y su ordenamiento del mundo y postula, en

cambio, una vida relacional que desmantela la construcción de jerarquías mientras presta atención a órdenes/bordes para una vida ecológica sostenible.

Palabras clave: Transcorporeidad, mito, ecologías migratorias, agencia no humana, posantropocéntrico.

Amitav Ghosh in his novel *Gun Island* (2019) addresses our current ecological crisis in the age that we have come to know as the Anthropocene (the geological period wherein carbon-burning actions of humans are negatively impacting the planet's natural processes) and its consequential unfolding of an unprecedented humanitarian crisis. Anthropogenic activities which are negatively altering the planet's ecology and geological processes at an exponential rate are turning habitable places into uninhabitable spaces resulting in global displacements and migrations of human and nonhuman lifeworlds. The primary focus of Ghosh's novel traces experiential journeys of migrants who, by virtue of their displacement, destabilise manmade nation-state borders that re-entrench systemic processes of othering and hyper-separation.

The novel's overarching thematic ponders over the ideological and material construction of borders as fixed and totalitarian which, in the advent of (in)voluntary border-crossing and displacement are paradoxically rendered open and permeable. Ghosh in his latest nonfiction *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* (2021) points out how the precariously positioned Sundarbans region (one of the primary sites in the novel as well), which has experienced many cyclones in the past, has been a site of constant upheaval in terms of massive exodus of climate refugees and jobless migrants in the advent of climate-related changes in the environment¹. In his earlier influential work on climate crisis *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016) Ghosh also observes that "[c]limate change has reversed the temporal order of modernity: those on the margins are now the first to experience the future that awaits all of us" (84). Contesting the notion that knowledge is produced by the centre, climate change has inverted the transmission of valuable and authentic knowledge as these "subjugated knowledges"² (Haraway) located on the periphery are voices of those who are not only experiencing climate change's spectacularly visible instant havoc but also its slow violence at an alarming rate that is wrecking their livelihoods.

To engage with *Gun Island's* focus on the material-discursive nature of borders, my paper analyses the novel's deployment of tropes such as folkloric myth, human-nonhuman intermeshing and cohabitation, and language's polyphony in the event of migrant ecologies from the unaddressed lens of the postcolonial nonhuman. My paper studies how the novel's nonhuman as pertinent characters critique human centrality and

¹ For more on Sundarbans' precarity, see <https://www.yesmagazine.org/environment/2016/06/02/tired-of-running-from-the-river-adapting-to-climate-change-on-indias-disappearing-islands>.

² "'Subjugated' standpoints are preferred because they seem to promise more adequate, sustained, objective, transforming accounts of the world" (Haraway 584). As a counter to the totalising and systematic narrowing to a unified vision, Haraway steers attention towards subjugated knowledges which are situated and embodied knowledges as a razor-sharp critique of the 'objectivity' that modern sciences have propelled.

the dualisms which divide the human and the natural world in a manner that “lead to a logic of domination and the othering of diverse peoples and species” (Flys-Junquera 23). Through a postanthropocentric reading, my paper’s intertwined concerns analyse how Ghosh’s literary representation of the postcolonial nonhuman offer counter-hegemonic strategies to re-situate humans and nonhumans in an interconnected manner. Firstly, I analyse how the postcolonial cultural trope of writing an ecological myth pertaining to the nonhuman into the novel’s realist form challenges the singularity of reality espoused by Western epistemologies and posits instead, an animistic agency of the nonhuman world. Secondly, I focus on the novel’s trans-corporeal negotiations iterating relational entanglements between human, nonhuman, and the more-than-human in order to ascribe an embodied dimension to apprehending poststructuralist constructedness of reality. Lastly, I point out how the novel’s non-anthropomorphised nonhuman voicing itself through different semiotic codes and expressing its narratorial and agentic capacity contests anthropocentric hyper-separation and human exceptionalism in terms of communication via language.

Deploying an ecocritical methodological lens helps read the social production of the natural and the physical world while being aware of the dark spots that render the rights and values associated with nonhuman creatures, oppressed humans, and processes pertaining to ecology as invisible. Offering a transversal critique, it cuts through, firstly, the destructive tendencies of Western discourse of enlightenment ideals that not only separate humans from the natural world by ‘conquering’ the latter but also renders the human as the exclusive subject of analysis. An ecocritical lens makes the nonhuman and more-than-human world relationally visible and audible, and it lends focus to an affective impression of nonhuman sentient beings and the ecological processes of human cognition. Secondly, it problematises the preponderance of reason over other consciousnesses and ways of knowing the world. A postcolonial ecocritical exploration which “preserves the aesthetic function of the literary text while drawing attention to its social and political usefulness, its capacity to set out symbolic guidelines for the material transformation of the world” (Huggan and Tiffin 14) thus attempts to redefine what it means to be human in our (re)conceptualisation of ourselves as in relation to nature and the nonhuman world.

Routing through Mythic Roots

The myth that steers the narrative is based on a popular folk legend from the littoral zone of the Sundarban forest (between West Bengal in India and Bangladesh). It pertains to the wrath of Manasa Devi (goddess of snakes and other poisonous creatures) upon Bonduki Sadagar (Gun Merchant) who flees from one place to another in the hope and hubris of tricking the goddess, only to heuristically learn after practising evasiveness, of the power of the nonhuman world and the inconsequentiality of the human race in the face of environmental forces. The Gun Merchant’s deliverance is sought after he builds a dhaam (shrine) for Manasa Devi at the local site that is “teeming with snakes” (8) and hence ties his legend to hers at the site of the world’s largest mangrove forests, the

Sundarbans. Describing this site as “the frontier where commerce and the wilderness look each other directly in the eye” (8), the thematic becomes an allegorical interpretation of the politics of representation of matter and social constructivism that designs one as subservient to the other in the advent of geopolitical neoliberalism and unrestrained capitalism. The dhaam’s construction terminates the goddess’ wrath, thereby functioning as a metaphorical deterrent to anthropocentric thinking which espouses supremacist values and places humankind as/at the centre of the world.

The novel creates a palimpsest using Manasa Devi’s myth with the exploratory journey undertaken by the protagonist Deen (Americanised version of Dinanath Dutta), an antique book collector who ends up retracing the merchant’s journey by himself, travelling from one place to another. Both are migrants in different ways— the merchant as a slave who is bought and sold as he travels the globe with the colonial master and Deen who voluntarily moves between his homeland (West Bengal) and Los Angeles, which becomes home due to his professional life. The similarity of their migrant journeys is that both stories are enveloped within environmental and climatic changes. The Gun Merchant’s life is at risk due to the wrath of a goddess who alters the climate to wreak havoc upon him, and Deen constantly encounters occurrences (either experienced by him or as occurrences narrated to him by other characters) that are a result of/related to climate change. The close encounter with the king cobra at the dhaam unknowingly routes his voluntary travels that evince the reality of climate-induced migrations of the nonhuman. His encounters with the nonhuman world due to climate change seem improbable but are a reality with the nonhumans abandoning their habitats and seeking refuge by migrating to habitable atmospheres. Furthermore, through the myth, Ghosh deploys an etymological wordplay to reveal the gap between the idea that the word intends to hold and the materiality of it that takes shape. The word “bundook” (rifle in English), which entered the Bangla language through Arabic and Persian does not stand for a gun/rifle in the term ‘gun island/gun merchant’ but the place *al-Bunduqeyya*, Arabic name for Venice, the place where the merchant travelled to (as a slave) in order to escape the goddess’s wrath. If language as play is a leitmotif, it is perhaps noteworthy to ponder over the relationship established between language and myth in writing an ecologically-conscious novel.

Etymologically, the ancient Greek term *mythos* originally meant speech or word but it gradually separated from *logos* (Greek term for rationality) and adopted a more fantastical or fictional aspect. Laurence Coupe describes the literary theorist Kenneth Burke’s definition of myth as “a narrative that effects identification within the community that takes it seriously, endorsing shared interests and confirming the given notion of order, while at the same time gesturing toward a more comprehensive identification — that among humanity, the earth, and the universe” (6). Undercutting the linearity of progress espoused by the colonialist project of modernity, the performativity of the myth’s relevance to an ecofiction exploration rests in its ability to offer an otherworldly perspective which can provide an alternate way of dwelling in the world. By offering a different lens of viewing the world and its connectedness, myth brings together the material and immaterial, and posits a world that sutures the nonhuman and more-than-

human co-relationalities present in the local and immediate environment through the planet's empirical evidences. Such an epistemological shift posits mythic storytelling as a literary strategy to narrativise cultural and linguistic realities in a manner which refocalises land, water, air, and all its nonhuman sentient beings as "storied matter"³ (Oppermann and Serenella 1). In the novel, the majhi (boatman), dhaam's caretaker who originally belonged to Bangladesh which is on the other side of the Raimangal River (which flows as a marker separating lands between India and Bangladesh), functions as a littoral voice dwelling on land *and* on sea. His poignant statement, "but some day, when the time is right, someone will understand it [Manasa Devi's legend] and who knows? For them it may open up a world that we cannot see" (Ghosh 17) holds within its contours the iterability of the myth (i.e., reproducible in different contexts) and its embeddedness in elusive meanings that cannot be contained within the tropes of realism and of a singular meaning. His words highlight the myth's contemporaneous potential as a conduit between this world and another imagined world as well as surface as another lens with which to read the (present) world. Dovetailing a premodern form of storytelling that animates the nonhuman and more-than-human relationships and knowledges with an ecocritical approach that reads as if the physical material world and background environment setting mattered heightens the proximity between the human and the nonhuman. It recognises the materiality of reality and highlights the problematic that inheres in the linguistically cultural embeddedness of forms.

In the novel, the protagonist Deen's insistence upon unearthing a reasonable meaning and plausible explanation behind the Manasa Devi myth which grips the community's collective consciousness renders it as an exercise in allegorising the myth. As a self-proclaimed pragmatist who celebrates Western rationality, Deen is dismissive of the epistemological and ontological aspect of myths and other inexplicable occurrences to provide a different way of engaging and being in the world. He strikingly asserts, "I pride myself on being a rational, secular, scientifically minded person... I don't believe in the supernatural" (35) and is of the opinion that "[i]t's one thing, after all, to tell a child a fairy tale at bedtime; it's quite another to tell the same story to an adult, in all seriousness" (37). Ghosh creates a juxtaposition between scientism embodied by Deen and the journey he undertakes to historically unearth the factual meaning of the relationship between the myth of the goddess of all things venomous and the Gun Merchant. Myths are different from allegories since the latter are "*interpreted* myth and therefore can be regarded not merely as fiction but as an example to follow, and the word derives from the Greek word *allos* meaning 'other'" (da Silva 105). Fictionalising this in a literary form that is representing climate crisis allegorises the Manasi Devi-Gun Merchant's myth as an example of an ecologically conscious warning to the current age of the Anthropocene. Deen ends up tracing how a legend that he regarded as "just a story" (127) could hold within its contours the possibility of functioning as a cautionary tale to apprehend the

³ As Oppermann and Serenella affirm, "the world's material phenomena are knots in a vast network of agencies, which can be "read" and interpreted as forming narratives, stories" (1). This material turn in the humanities problematises the nature-culture divide by arguing that the natural and physical world also has agentic capacities.

current climate crisis. Immersing himself in imagining the Gun Merchant's flight from Bengal to Venice due to his fear of the goddess induces in Deen an unexpected realisation of how he "wasn't looking at the Merchant's predicament from his [merchant's] own point of view [anymore] but rather from the perspective of his pursuer, the goddess [of snakes and other venomous creatures] herself" (152). The urgency of paying heed to the goddess' caution of curbing human greed functions as a caveat for Deen, compelling him to reassess his eurocentrism and skepticism of the nonhuman's acts of communication. This shift in perspective of reading the Gun Merchant's story through Manasi Devi's eyes emerges as an act of taking cognisance of the entanglement between the materiality of the nonhuman environmental lifeworld and cultural embeddedness of environmental storytelling.

In *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh argues that in the historical moment of the modern, the novel form altered the way of reading the world through "the relocation of the unheard-of toward the background . . . while the everyday move[d] into the foreground" (23). Addressing the same by cutting through the realist tropes of the novel-form, Ghosh challenges the novel form's "banish[ment] of the improbable and the insertion of the everyday" (ibid.) by structuring Manasa Devi's myth as a force steering the novel's narrative. Preponderance of the myth in relation to human exceptionalism practiced by the Gun Merchant also extends the limits of the realist novel form to decentre human centrality and expand what it means to be a human, not as a self-enclosed entity but as a corporeal subjectivity that inevitably exists in tandem with its nonhuman environmental surroundings. Myth as a pertinent sight for an ecocritical enquiry, then, locates the world around the protagonist of a story (mythic or realist) as a living embodiment in itself where the nonhuman are given a voice and a glaringly obvious subjectivity and consciousness. Interestingly, the novel's thematic recognises a voice in the surrounding nonhuman and more-than-human elements not in terms of an anthropomorphic representation but in the nuances of the movements and expression of their characteristic traits that pertain to these living entities. Challenging modernist human exceptionalism, the novel's espousal of multivocality is an important trait of an ecocritical negotiation from a postmodern lens as it "fosters a cooperative learning process shifting attention from the position of authority to the idea of relationality" (Oppermann 116). It thereby posits an engagement between the human and the nonhuman in terms of a relation to one another as opposed to an anthropocentric supremacy over the nonhuman natural world.

The centrality of the logos is challenged as the myth is made apprehensible to the characters only through an embodied, visual, imagist, and oral form. The legend's specificity to a local place finds a physical manifestation of the reverence towards the goddess in the built-structure of the dhaam which acts as a archival storehouse. Engraved with pictorial hieroglyphic symbols (not alphabets) suggestive of the Gun Merchant's story, this act of archiving the folk legend characterises the dhaam as a storehouse which heightens the indispensable relevance of images, the pictorial as a form of writing, and the power of imagination in engaging with the world and reading its stories. The community experiences knowledge of the myth as a lived reality and it is this retelling from characters that attests to its ubiquitousness. Individuals living in the area

surrounding the dhaam acknowledged the myth's reality due to their belief that it is only because of Manasa Devi's blessings that their lives are spared during the cyclone. Established scholar of Venetian History, Professor Giacinta Schiavon (fondly called 'Cinta'), who is Deen's friend, recognises the effect upon the natives of Manasa Devi's myth within the coded language of jatra (local folk form of performance) which she attends during her trip to West Bengal. Her sharp observation that "for those people [locals attending the jatra performance based on Manasa Devi's story]... It is more real than real life" (34) attests to the power of the myth's performance. Moreover, Cinta corrects Deen by stating that concepts such as natural and supernatural work in tandem as "[n]either can exist without the other" (35), thereby acknowledging the plasticity of our rationally ordained world. The postcolonial novel's historicity is evinced by the inclusion of local myths, regional performing arts techniques such as jatra performances, and interspersions of the literary text with untranslated Bengali and Italian sentences (which too constitute a localism within Venice's spatiality and its relevance to the Bengali myth of Manasa Devi). Furthermore, the novel articulates a postcolonial historical situatedness via Cinta's deconstruction of the orientalist worldview that Deen prides himself in holding, by informing him of how densely populated Western discourse is with metaphysical tales that challenge European scientific rationality, particularly at the very site from which Renaissance rationalism originates: Italy.⁴

The problem of the representation of matter identified by the poststructuralists as an inevitable outcome of the constructedness of "realities" using language and of language's inherent instability and ambiguity also exposes the limits of rational discourse that uses language to apparently capture the internal logic of things. Interestingly, it is this inherent instability of language and its meaning that mythmaking deploys to iterate a connection between idea and matter. German philosopher Ernst Cassirer elucidates the methodological underpinnings of myth by mentioning that for the German philologist Max Müller, myth is "the product of a basic shortcoming, an inherent weakness of language. All linguistic denotation is essentially ambiguous—and in this ambiguity, this "paronymia" of words lies the source of all myths" (4). The question, then, is what knowledge does the ambiguity laden in the structural form of the myth of Bonduki Sadagar's encounter with the goddess of venomous nonhuman creatures present? What alternate world does the novelist imagine? It is through the constant act of incidental and deliberate storytelling, unexpected travel plans, uncanny weather occurrences due to climate crisis, and encounters with the power of the nonhuman and more-than-human to inflict misery upon the human's frail body that lead the protagonist to embark upon an exploratory journey which transforms his way of seeing and recognising the indivisibility of the human from one's environment. What needs further analysis is how a novel premised upon a myth

⁴ Ghosh destabilises European rationality by echoing Ernesto de Martino (Italian folklorist and ethnographer) whose seminal work on Tarantism (inspired by a *Tarantola*, venomous spider found in southern Italy) espoused the view that there exist "many well-documented instances of things that cannot be explained by so-called "natural" causes" (37) His work focused on how tarantism was a thriving practice in some parts of Italy wherein "... people believe that spirits can enter you through the bite of a tarantula [and to heal, these]... victims have to be exorcized by music, and especially dance – that is where the *tarantella* [folk dance form] comes from" (Ghosh 36).

enfolded around the nonhuman world negotiates the permeability of transcorporeality and language for shaping border negotiations concerning both, the human and the nonhuman.

Agentic “Storied Matter”: Blurring (B)orders through Trans-corporeality

The novel's emphasis upon and engagement with the nonhuman actively contests humanism's ontological hierarchy which declares agential capacity as the sole faculty of humans (Western, white, male). Ghosh points out in *The Great Derangement* that climate change has the power to make “apparently inanimate things com[e] suddenly alive” (85). He further states that “this renewed awareness of the elements of agency and consciousness that humans share with many other beings, and even perhaps the planet itself” is “one of the uncanniest effects of climate change” (85). Ecocritic Stacy Alaimo's development of trans-corporeality puts forth an ecologically fruitful approach and also re-defines our engagement with the environment per se. In her influential work *Bodily Natures* she argues that “imagining human corporeality as trans-corporeality, in which the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world, underlines the extent to which the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from ‘the environment’” (2). By way of transforming the human corporeal body as a site that is perpetually in motion, a state of becoming, and affected by the environment in which it finds itself, the material environment comes to play a pivotal role in human cognitive processes. Moreover, the interlinkages between the human body, material environment, and context of circulation of cultural labour output become relevant for further analysis.

The relationship between cultural forms of human labour and environment has been explored by the postcolonial ecocritic Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee through the Italian Marxist and literary critic Timpanaro's reflections on it: “concept of superstructure, *even understood non-mechanically*, cannot include the totality of cultural activities... Philosophy, science and art do not draw stimulus and nourishment solely from the ‘artificial terrain’ of society, but also from the ‘natural terrain’” (qtd. in Mukherjee 62–63; emphasis in original).⁵ Trans-corporeality which “denies the human subject the sovereign, central position” (Alaimo 16) is an important tool that problematises borders by stressing porosity as an inevitable movement interlinking human, nonhuman, and more-than-human actors that constitute the world. Opening up the human body as *one* of the corporeal entities in ecological processes that maintain the planet as a site for collective existence and proliferation of living matter thus challenges the “anthropocentric model of disenchantment that has led to rampant instrumentalisation of nature” (Rangarajan 128). By emphasising movement, Alaimo opines that trans-corporeality “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). Hence, porosity by virtue of its movement facilitates a

⁵ Mukherjee's engagement through basic materialist philosophical positions underscores conceptual frameworks of an aesthetics that he calls ‘eco-materialism’. For more, see his work *Postcolonial Environments: Nature, Culture and the Contemporary Indian Novel in English*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

disruption of manmade borders which conceptually seek to compartmentalise and retain dualisms between one and the other.

Dovetailing interconnectedness between human and nonhuman in terms of an invisible but scientifically and biologically identifiable reality (trans-corporeality) and as an invisible but inexplicably embodied experience (trans/altered consciousness) illustrates decolonial models of engagement that counter imperialist, neocolonial, and unjust practices of environmentalism. Numerous instances in the novel yoke together human, nonhuman, and more-than-human at a physical, material, and embodied level. Significantly, the most relevant entanglement is between Tipu, Deen, Rafi and the serpent that peacefully resides in the Gun Merchant's dhaam. King cobra's attack on Tipu feverishly consumes his body and releases into him a tiny amount of venomous "something" (79) that takes hold of him and burns him from within. While it unleashes physical un-ease in Tipu followed by visions that come true at later stages in the novel, the serpent also uses his fangs to bite into Deen's mindscape. The tumultuous episode of the snake bite renders Deen, a professional, educated individual, and a Bengali himself, as an outsider, inept at either providing solace or imparting knowledge. He observes a burgeoning animality grow in the interaction between injured Tipu and caretaker Rafi. "All at once his [Tipu's] body began to twitch and shake... like those of a dreaming animal" and "Rafi was like a wild creature... an odd bond seemed to have arisen between them; it was as if the venom that had passed from Tipu's body into Rafi's mouth had created an almost carnal connection" (80, 81). Deen's unhelpful responses highlight his inability to apprehend the knowledge system that governs the lives of people living in the Sundarbans. *Gun Island's* constant interface between the human and the nonhuman body collapses the differentiated body and mind into a conjoined bodymind and contests the notion of "body and its passions as potential obstacles to knowledge" (Wegenstein 24 qtd. in Mitchell and Hansen). In presenting the body's corporeality as an episteme, Ghosh counters the imperialist Cartesian duality which propagates conceptual knowing over physical and embodied knowing. Writing on the materiality of nonhuman bodies not as objects but as subjects unto themselves, Ghosh also presents how anthropogenically induced climate change and ecological events impact the nonhuman. I cite the cetologist Piya's insightful critique of the chemicalisation of water-bodies in detail to stress upon the strain experienced by the nonhuman in the face of forceful displacement, akin to that of a displaced migrant. She informs Deen that,

it's [chemicals flowing in the river] been a huge source of stress for them... to abandon all the places that you know and were forced to start all over again... There she [Rani, the matriarch of the dolphin pod] is, perfectly adapted to her environment, perfectly at home in it – and then things begin to change, so that all those years of learning become useless, the places you know best can't sustain you any more and you've got to find new hunting grounds. Rani must have felt that everything she knew, everything she was familiar with – the water, the currents, the earth itself – was rising up against her... No one knows where they belong any more, neither humans nor animals. (96-97)

In taking cognisance of nonhuman perspectives, Ghosh critiques anthropocentrism by inverting the gaze such that it is the nonhuman that is unleashed upon the human. Though wildfires wreak havoc for the larger ecological balance of the planet, Ghosh writes in the

novel how some birds of prey are known to start wildfires by carrying burning twigs in their beaks to forests since burning forests create favourable conditions for some species of raptor to prey on rodents and reptiles (117). Though the novel is interspersed with information regarding the destructiveness of wildfires for humans and nonhumans, inclusion of the activities of birds of prey provides another point of view that takes into consideration the agency of the birds of prey who act *for* themselves. Rani (the matriarch dolphin christened by Rafi), after being rescued by Piya establishes eye-contact with her, as if communicating an expression of gratitude for saving her life. Piya, a scientist by profession is reluctant to accept the blurring of species boundaries and is cautious to not anthropomorphise Rani and impose human sense-perceptions on cognitive faculties of the nonhuman creature. Cinta voices Alaimo's assertion that the environment needs to be re-defined using a different set of cognitive tools when she thanks Deen for having "brought the Gun Merchant into my life as well. I think that imposes an obligation on us... [t]o retrace his footsteps; to try to see Venice as it was when he was here" (217). In a bid to revisit the Venice of yore, its present spatiality confounds Deen when he and Cinta have an encounter with shipworms: "More and more of these are invading Venice, with the warming of the lagoon's water. They eat up the wood from the inside, in huge quantities. It has become a big problem because Venice is built on wooden pilings. They are literally eating the foundations of the city" (230).

Furthermore, the story of Lubna (Bangladeshi woman overseeing the legal rights of migrants in Venice) is a testimony to humanity's precariousness, vulnerability, and inconsequentiality while encountering the nonhuman and more-than-human. Her story from the global south's neglected region captures the extreme vulnerability of existence that millions living on the fringes experience as a lived reality. A deadly cyclone that hit Bangladesh, taking away her family's possessions and driving her family members to seek shelter in the tree, pushes them further to the edge of precarity: "being in that tree, with the wind howling and the flood raging below, not knowing whether you would be killed by the storm or a snake" (160). Tathagata Som in his essay "The Place of the Planet: Climate Change and Migration in Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*" makes a pertinent observation that the "juxtaposition of a premodern myth with ongoing anthropogenic climate change reframes contemporary discourses of climate change migration by pointing out that our shared species history is marked by both human and non-human migrations". Thus, Ghosh's attempt to suffuse the novel's primary narrative with multiple devastating environmental stories heightens the reality of how ecological fragility in the global south affects not only waterscapes and landscapes but lifeworlds of humans and nonhumans alike. Additionally, the novel not only registers climate catastrophe in the global south (here, the Sundarbans and Bangladesh) but also mentions Californian wildfires and the rising-sea level that is drowning Italy.⁶

⁶ Today, Venice stands at the brink of being placed on UNESCO's list of "World Heritage Sites in Danger". In 2019, it was flooded due to torrential downpour because of climate change <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-504013088>. Increased tourism activities have severely threatened its ecology resulting in UNESCO reviewing Venice's status (<https://www.hindustantimes.com/lifestyle/travel/venice-avoids-unesco-world-heritage-site-in-danger-list-after-ban-on-large-ships-101627004966405.html>). As of now, it has not been put on the list.

Negotiating Borders

Historically speaking, colonialism's expansionist and land-grabbing tendencies constructed nonhuman nature as an object meant for possession and dispossessed natives who laboured upon it for self-sustenance. Usurping natives' resources and extracting labour out of them to enrich their own accumulated wealth, colonialist tendencies constructed a relationship with nature in terms of dichotomies, hierarchies, and exploitation. Enfolded within negotiations regarding nature-culture dualism is another facet of othering: the issue of migration and displacement due to climate crisis and its resulting mass exodus. Socio-cultural practices of racial discrimination exacerbated in the advent of climate migration has classified displaced people as 'climate refugees'. Lester R. Brown explains that, "[o]ne of the defining characteristics of our time is the swelling flow of environmental refugees: people displaced by rising seas, more-destructive storms, expanding deserts, water shortages, and dangerously high levels of toxic pollutants in the local environment" (108). Inequalities in global social structures that retain global politics of exclusion trickle down to the immediate and personal social relations. The novel highlights how climate crisis severely exacerbates social injustices that greatly affect lives of people living on the margins (particularly in the global south). While the Gun Merchant travelled through international borders as a bonded slave subservient to "the greatest and most cruel experiment in planetary remaking... in the service of commerce" (279), climate migrants like Tipu and Rafi practice self-determination and assert their choice in the given circumstances of wanting a better life by moving beyond their homes that are constantly being eaten up by the sea. Migrant crisis that has at its root the problematic notion of 'identity' that shapes socio-political and economic aspect of migration is routed through the space of the internet. Though the internet saturates them with images of alluring life beyond home shores, the absence of the reality of racial and ethnic oppression is experienced by them only when they embark upon the journey. *Gun Island* explores the intersection of race, ethnicity, and environment by delineating a narrative that focuses on the lifeworld of displaced Dalits from the Sundarbans⁷ as they chart their journey through "dalals" (connecting men) in the hope of living a better life by crossing international borders. Voluntary displacement experienced by Tipu in response to the adverse effects of climate change on his family's livelihood is also exacerbated by social ostracisation for having been born into the Dalit community which faces systemic caste-based oppression within homeland borders and beyond as well.⁸

The Sundarbans' textured materiality with its muddy waters and shifting terrains destabilises borders that conceptually work to maintain dichotomies between collective

⁷ Social groups living in the Sundarbans primarily belong to four *jatis* (caste system for classifying people into hierarchies exercising different power equations): Midnapuris, East Bengalis, Muslims, and Adivasis. For more, see <http://uddin.digital.conncoll.edu/sundarbans/local/garjontola-satjelia-india/jatis/>

⁸ Ghosh has also engaged with displacement in his novel *The Hungry Tide* (2004) where he chronicles the Morichjhanpi massacre (1978-79) that resulted in the displacement of Bengali Hindu Dalit refugees who had settled in Morichjhanpi (northernmost island of the Sundarbans).

categories like “us” and “them” and singular subjectivities like “I” and “you”. Located in the marshy area of the Sunderbans with its characteristic “shifting mudflats of the Bengal delta” (5), Nilima Bose, a longtime resident who also runs the charitable organisation ‘Badabon Trust’ observes how “[t]he islands of the Sundarbans are constantly being swallowed up by the sea; they’re disappearing before our eyes” (18). A marginalised character like Moyna (Tipu’s mother who illegally helps people to cross borders and the widow of the poor fisherman Fokir who died saving the Indian-American cetologist Piya during a storm that hit the Sundarbans⁹) voices the wrath of the Sundarbans when she poignantly says that sometimes “it seemed as though both land and water were turning against those who lived in the Sunderbans” (47). Moreover, the social and ethnic demographic of Sundarbans comprising marginalised communities and adivasis (tribals living in forests) bear the brunt of vulnerabilities of different degrees—climatic, economic, social, and cultural. If the Sundarbans’ local spatiality blurs boundaries between land and water, stable and unstable, in itself it is constantly being usurped by a larger force of nature: the sea. Environmental detritus accumulated due to human activities is swallowing livable lands, disrupting the lives of humans and nonhuman species as well. Thus, the border discloses an important dimension of migrant ecologies: “the porous exchange of inside and outside” (Iovino 21). The pertinent question that arises is—what does the environmental refugees’ action that pierces through the perviousness of borders do to ideological and material constructions of nation-state boundaries?

The novel highlights the fact that the majority of the workers living in Venice are Bangladeshi migrants. On the one hand, for individuals with stable social and economic identities (Deen, Piya, Cinta, Lisa), transnational movement is carried out effectively through official fiefdom which generates and reaffirms state-sanctioned conceptual reality of borders as legitimate. On the other hand, marginalised people with less or no social mobility are constantly negotiating with borders, visibilising the constructedness of borders and their own precarious destinies. Transforming international spaces into a common point of gathering, characters that meet in the Sundarbans at the start of the novel (Deen, Tipu, Rafi, and Piya) end up finding each other in Venice due to unforeseeable climate events, uncanny coincidences, and social mobility (legally and illegally). Their different socio-economic positions point to the interface between legally sanctioned macro-level movements that adhere to borders and localised illegal individual self-determination that takes place to transcend borders that continually practice racial segregations. With a myth that sutures transnational locations through the Bonduki Sadagar’s story with attributes of environmental catastrophes spread across continents, the leitmotif of climate displacement is evinced when Deen observes from his aeroplane window of how “[f]rom that height it was possible to mistake the Venetian lagoon for the Sundarbans” (147). As planetarity brings the local and the global into dialogue, *Gun Island* “builds towards a translocal ecology that can accommodate a wider range of mobile

⁹ Fokir’s death occurs in Ghosh’s earlier novel *The Hungry Tide* (2004) in the chapter titled ‘The Wave’. He turns himself into a human shield to protect Piya from the tidal wave, ultimately leading to his demise.

populations, including climate migrants" (Newns 13). Heightening narratives of climate displacement surface as being instrumental in narrating an environmental tale that displaces the mainstream "dominant narrative of reason... [which has been resulting in] global economic regimes that threaten the biosphere" (Plumwood 5-6) and posits instead, a discursive-materialist way of experiencing the world.

The novel's climactic moment is the interface between overpowering forces of the nation-state and the natural world's climatic changes. On the one hand are manmade nation-state borders flanked by fascist right-wing forces and left-liberals seeking to engage (as per their politics) with the incoming Blue Boat carrying climate and economic refugees seeking asylum in Italy. On the other hand is the force of nature which at this opportune moment drastically changes the atmosphere. A severe change in the weather conditions results in the swirling of the waters and the sky and this natural disaster (storm) looms over *all* social actors. All passport-holding citizens on land and fleeing refugees on water become helpless, rendering the place-ness of the Italian border as an abstract space, vulnerable to environmental fury. Moreover, the nonhuman too, ends up defying manmade borders. The narrator observes how birds "must be migrating northwards- they're going to pass right over us" (281) and how "dolphins and whales that were undulating through the water" (282) were free to migrate from their domestic Venetian habitats to "international" habitats. If territorialisation locks land, the nonhuman and the more-than-human world deterritorialises atmosphere, landscape, and waterscape. The movement of the climate refugees becomes a symbolic reminder that the disastrous effects of climate crisis and the increasing threat to the planet becoming uninhabitable is not reserved either for solely human members of the global south or for nonhuman creatures of the global north. Thus, the act of crossing borders due to climate emergency is tantamount to the fact that climate change does not discriminate between geographical borders, nation-states, and living beings.

Manasa Devi as an Interpreter Re-presenting the (B)orders

The chasm between nature and culture becomes the novel's focal point of engagement and is explored through the interface between the planet's physical materiality and its presentation through the challenging task of using the representational tool *logos* to signify the physical world which is "out there". The disenchantment of nature as "the denial to nature of all subjectivity, all experience, all feeling [that renders] nature as disqualified" (Griffin 2) is effectively challenged by illustrating agentic capacities of the nonhuman and more-than-human world. Exploring the interrelatedness between language and the physical world through the postcolonial nonhuman, the novel highlights the presence of an intermeshed network of human, nonhuman, and more-than-human worlds, and thus dismantles the predominance of a homogenised world that positions the self-sufficiency of the human at its centre. It upturns the normative direction of communication from the human to the inanimate world and contests the notion that action is "always" acted/inscribed by the human *upon* the nonhuman.

Nonetheless, while *Gun Island* seeks to destabilise borders, it is pertinent to note that the unseen boundaries that the goddess Manasa Devi seeks to retain problematise a simplistic understanding of borders as limiting. The novel situates Manasa Devi as an intermediary between humans and nonhumans who do not speak each other's languages so as to retain borders that are needed between earth's generative capacity to give and humankind's exploitative capacity to take. By way of a postanthropocentric reading, the underlying impetus of my paper is that there are borders that *need* to be adhered to in order to contain human practices of capitalist exploitation which instrumentalise nature. As opposed to borders that have an exploitative xenophobic logic at their centre to racially segregate and possess people, reading borders defined by the figure of the mythic goddess of nonhuman creatures through an ecocritical prism refracts the ecological consciousness prevalent in pre-modern texts that recognise the inter-relationality between humans, nonhumans, earth, and the universe. My paper has thus shown how Ghosh's reconceptualisation through the postcolonial nonhuman blurs borders and posits instead, a relational way of living that dismantles the constructedness of hierarchies while paying heed to (b)orders for ecological sustainable living.

Submission received 24 March 2022

Revised version accepted 7 September 2022

Works Cited

- Alaimo, Stacy. *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*, Indiana University Press, 2010.
- Kuznetski, Julia. "Transcorporeality: An Interview with Stacy Alaimo." *Ecozon@*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2020, pp. 137-146.
- Brown, Lester R. *World on the Edge: How to Prevent Environmental and Economic Collapse*. Earth Policy Institute, W. W. Norton & Company, 2011.
- Cassirer, Ernst. *Language and Myth*. Dover Publications Inc., 1953.
- Coupe, Laurence. *Kenneth Burke on Myth: An Introduction*. Routledge, 2005.
- Flys-Junquera, Carmen. "Dissolving the False Divide: Literary Strategies for Re-Situating Humans Ecologically and Non-Humans Ethically". *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses*, vol. 63, 2011, pp. 21-38.
- Ghosh, Amitav. *Gun Island*. Penguin Random House India, 2019.
- . *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*. Penguin Random House, India, 2016.
- . *The Hungry Tide*. Harper Collins, 2004.
- . *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis*. University of Chicago Press, 2021.
- Griffin, David Ray, editor. *The Reenchantment of Science: Postmodern Proposals*. State University of New York Press, 1988.
- Haenlein, Adam Frederick. "The emergence and evolution of trans-corporeality in Charles Darwin's *On The Origin of Species* and Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* and "Walking" (2016). *Graduate Theses and Dissertations*. 15027. lib.dr.iastate.edu/etd/15027

- Huggan, Graham and Helen Tiffin. *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*. 2nd edition. Routledge, Oxon, 2015.
- Mukherjee, Upamanyu Pablo. *Postcolonial Environments: Nature, Culture and the Contemporary Indian Novel in English*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
- Mitchell, W.J.T. and Mark B.N. Hansen. *Critical Terms for Media Studies*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2010.
- O'Gorman, Emily and Andrea Gayson. "More-Than-Human Histories." *Environmental History*, vol. 25, no. 4, 2020, pp. 711-735. doi.org/10.1093/envhis/emma027
- Oppermann, Serpil. "Introducing Migrant Ecologies in an (Un)Bordered World." *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, vol. 24, no. 2, 2017, pp. 243-256
- Iovino, Serenella and Serpil Oppermann, editors. *Material Ecocriticism*. Indiana University Press, 2014.
- . *Ecocriticism and Italy: Ecology, Resistance, and Liberation*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2016.
- Newns, Lucinda. "The Sea Cannot be Fenced": "Natural" and "Unnatural" Borders in Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* and Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*". *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 2021, pp. 1-24.
- Plumwood, Val. *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason*. Routledge, 2004.
- Rangarajan, Swarnalatha and Scott Slovic, editors. *Ecocriticism: Big Ideas and Practical Strategies*. Orient and Black Swan, Hyderabad, 2018.
- Som, Tathagata. "The Place of the Planet: Climate Change and Migration in Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*". *Network in Canadian History & Environment*. 6 December 2021. niche-canada.org/2021/12/06/the-place-of-the-planet-climate-change-and-migration-in-amitav-ghoshs-gun-island/

Zt.Zzt in the Anthropocene: Arthropod Flesh, Solar-Strip Skin and Anthropocene Time in *The Old Drift*

Amit R. Baishya
University of Oklahoma, USA
arbaishya1@ou.edu

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ecozone.2022.13.2.4709>



Abstract

While Namwali Serpell's novel *The Old Drift* can be read as a fictional account of colonial and post-colonial Zambian history, this article focuses on the text's exploration of Anthropocene time—geobiochemical and planetary temporal scales that predate human histories, while also gesturing towards futures where *Homo sapiens* may be absent. This article focuses on deep temporality in the novel via the use of mosquito and Moskeetoze (mosquito-like microdrones) narrators. While mosquitoes facilitate encounters with the deep past and of entangled human-nonhuman histories, the Moskeetozes enable representations of the vicissitudes of the “Anthrobscene” (Parrikka) and the creative potentialities of improvised life that emerge in hazardscapes in the Global South. Additionally, *The Old Drift* gestures towards a speculative planetary future where mosquitoes and Moskeetozes integrate to evolve new modalities of swarm intelligence and forms of life.

Keywords: Anthropocene time, arthropods, drones, planetary, Anthrobscene.

Resumen

Mientras que la novela *The Old Drift* de Namwali Serpell puede leerse como un relato ficticio de la historia colonial y postcolonial de Zambia, este artículo se centra en cómo la obra explora la era del Antropoceno—las escalas temporales geobioquímicas y planetarias que preceden las historias humanas, a la vez que hacen un gesto hacia los futuros en los que el *Homo sapiens* puede estar ausente. Este artículo se centra en la profunda temporalidad en la novela por medio del uso del mosquito y del *Moskeetoze* (microdrones que parecen mosquitos) como narradores. Mientras que los mosquitos facilitan los encuentros con el pasado profundo y de historias entrelazadas de humanos y no-humanos, los *Moskeetozes* permiten representar las vicisitudes del “Antrobsceno” (Parrikka) y las posibilidades creativas de la vida improvisada que surge en los paisajes peligrosos del sur global. Además, *The Old Drift* hace un gesto hacia un futuro planetario especulativo en el que los mosquitos y los *Moskeetoze* se integran para desarrollar nuevas formas de inteligencia de enjambre y nuevas formas de vida.

Palabras clave: Era del Antropoceno, artrópodos, drones, planetario, Antrobsceno.

Discussing Anthropocene time, Sarah Nuttall writes: “If the Anthropocene invites a speculative future perspective, it...demands a reawakening of what is old” (471). In the Anthropocene epoch, deep time—both the deep past and the near/distant future—make insistent demands on the present, asking for the adoption of heterotemporal, multiscale lenses of analysis. This shift impacts a genre dominant in postcolonial literature—the fictionalization of the narrative of modern nationhood. Several postcolonial novels have juxtaposed national histories with the deep past of a locale. Afrofuturist, Africanfuturist,

Arab Futurist and South Asian Futurist works have adopted speculative future perspectives fruitfully. Recently, a small subset of the contemporary postcolonial novel, while simultaneously probing the history of a particular post-colonial nation, considers the multiple dimensions of Anthropocene time encompassing reawakened (deep) pasts and speculative futures *together*. These novels—Namwali Serpell’s *The Old Drift*, Numair Atif Chowdhury’s *Babu Bangladesh!*, Rita Indiana’s *Tentacle*, and Pitchaya Subanthad’s *Bangkok Wakes up to Rain*—are comparable because they depict the entanglement of human and nonhuman perspectives, allied with the mixture of generic modes.

Babu Bangladesh! begins in the year 2028. Narrative perspectives shift between human viewpoints and nonhuman entities like trees, tides and the tidal country, encompassing the bloody birth of Bangladesh as a nation in 1971, the deep history of the Bengal archipelago, and the impact of climate change on Bangladesh’s present and future. The primary timeline of action in Dominican writer Indiana’s *Tentacle* are the years 2027-37. A massive chemical leak destroys all life in the Caribbean Sea in 2024. The transgender woman protagonist, Acilde, is sent back in time in 2027 to stop this catastrophe from happening via a Santeria ritual involving a ghost species—the ball anemone (*Condylactis gigantea*). The time travelling Acilde is spiritually split into two male figures by the ritual: Giorgio who travels to the neoliberal 1990s and Roque to the colonial 1600s. Through this portrayal of time travel and spiritual splitting of the primary transgender character, Indiana explores the deep history of the Caribbean Sea, the depredations of the colonial era, the modern history of the Dominican Republic and the impact of climate change on the island nation’s present and future. Thai writer Subanthad’s *Bangkok* includes a large cast of characters scattered across an expansive timeline ranging from the nineteenth century to the future. Characters from the past and the future are connected to one plot of land in Bangkok through memories embedded in that place. The novel consists of episodic snapshots that combine to create a collage-like biography of a frequently flooded city. Bangkok city becomes metonymic for the ecological history of a nation. Space is provided for the perspectives of nonhuman entities like Sarus cranes and the Chao Phraya River.

Besides writing a fictional history of the Zambian nation from the period of colonization to the post-colonial period, Serpell’s *The Old Drift* (henceforth *OD*) depicts climate change as the time of “The Change” set in 2023 (533-61), while also gesturing towards the planet’s “warm and wet future” (563). *OD* displaces anthropocentrism by deploying mosquito swarms, Mosketozee drones (drones mimicked on mosquito physiognomy), and a hybrid cyborg futuristic species that emerges through the co-evolution of mosquitoes and Moskeetozes, as primary narrative agents. *OD* institutes multiple connections between “arthropod flesh,” “solar-strip skin” and human histories (564). A persisting connection is instituted through the sonic medium.¹ Onomatopoeic *zt.zts*, buzzings, zinging and massing activity like swarming connect arthropods like

¹Bombs and bombard draw from the Greek *bombos*, which signifies both the bee and sonic aspects such as humming, buzzing and booming (Lockwood 24). Similarly, the word “drone” could mean “both an insect and a sound” (Chamayou 26). Drones are male bees without stingers that are eventually killed by other bees.

mosquitos and products of biomimicry such as the drones. *OD* deploys insectile acoustics to show how human and nonhuman domains are porous. Acoustic language that connects human worlds to insect domains proliferate. When Ronald Banda first meets Agnes Clark, he hears an “insect hum followed by a hollow pock” (88). When Sylvia Mwamba smokes a cigarette, the “buzz hit her like a swarm” (234). Beyond the sonic equivalences, the two narrator-figures—the mosquitoes and the microdrones—first come-together in an ecology of waste and disposable trash, the e-waste dumping ground in the Kalingalinga settlement in Lusaka. Tech-wizard Jacob Mwamba develops his plans based on biomimicry—microdrones modeled on insect physiognomy—in these dumping grounds for e-waste as he salvages disposable parts of electronic and digital machinery. Eventually the mosquitoes and microdrones co-evolve into a cyborg species in the future. The presence of these swarming, buzzing nonhuman entities and the heterotemporal nodes they open portals to shows that *OD* can be read simultaneously via linear (the three-stage model of the national narrative: colonization, nationhood, post-colony) and nonlinear (intersecting, web-like family stories and their connections; multiscalar, porous correspondences instituted by the interdependency of acoustic and insectile metaphors) modes.

I argue that *OD* is the quintessential postcolonial novel about Anthropocene time as it goes even further than *Babu Bangladesh!*, *Tentacle* and *Bangkok* in its depiction of entangled heterotemporalities. In the brief representation of the climate-changed future, the depiction of the newly evolved cyborg species (both mosquito and Mosketozee), and the reflections on planet Earth’s position in an interplanetary cosmic system during *OD*’s closure, the novel reflects not only on the entanglement of human, nonhuman and inhuman entities, but broaches the possibility of human obsolescence and the deconstruction of anthropocentrism in the Anthropocene epoch. *OD* not only conducts a brief thought experiment on the times-to-come of species finitude, extinction and “the world without us” (Weisman), but also reflects on the fragile positioning of Earth in an interplanetary cosmic system. The importance of comparative planetary studies for the Anthropocene has been emphasized by Dipesh Chakrabarty who notes that both James Lovelock and Jan Jalasiewicz began their careers as planetary comparativists. Chakrabarty continues:

Planet emerged from the project of globalization, from ‘destruction’ and the futile project of human mastery. . . Yet it is neither the globe nor the world and definitely not the earth. It belongs to a domain where this planet reveals itself as an object of astronomical and geological studies and as a very special case containing the history of life—all of these dimensions vastly out-scaling human realities of space and time. (3)

OD continuously out-scales humanist comprehensions of space-time via its arthropod, technological and cyborg narrator(s). It evinces planetary and inter-planetary dimensions simultaneously.

The reading here will proceed in three stages or “sequences” (in a playful nod to the subtitles of the insectile horror trilogy, *The Human Centipede*): First Sequence, Full Sequence and Final Sequence. “First Sequence” draws on human-animal studies and multispecies ethnography to trace a miniature cultural history of mosquitoes. On the one

hand, colonial anthropocentric epistemologies depict mosquitoes as absolute enemies of human forms of life; on the other hand, a more ambiguous relationship to mosquitoes can be traced in colonial/post-colonial locales and postcolonial fiction. I also look at the specificity of how mosquito *umwelten* has been represented in postcolonial fiction and how *OD*'s representation of the arthropod both draws on and extends these depictions of insect life and deep time.

The key concept that underpins "Full Sequence" is the media scholar Jussi Parikka's "Anthrobscene"—"the unsustainable, politically dubious and ethically suspicious practices that maintain technological culture and its corporate networks" (Parikka, *The Anthrobscene* 11). The Anthrobscene includes both the processes of extractive capitalism via which minerals like Coltan are extracted from the African continent and end up in commodities like our iPhones, and the practices of shipping e-waste back to the same continent from where the materials were extracted. Africa becomes the ground zero for both the extraction and disposal of raw materials and electronic waste. However, locales for the disposal of waste in the Global South also become the locus for creative, improvisational economies. This is crucial for *OD* as a mosquito bite in an e-waste graveyard in the Kalingalinga settlement in Lusaka becomes the catalyst for Jacob Mwamba improvising and developing the insect-like Moskeetoozee via biomimicry. The focus in "Full Sequence" is on forms of life that develop in hazardscapes in the *contemporary* period where mosquito and Moskeetoozee make their joint appearance.

The gaze shifts to the future in "Final Sequence" where *OD* explores speculative what-if scenarios when the course of evolution cannot be plotted per predetermined linear teleologies but occurs contingently and unpredictably. *What if* the plastic bodies of mosquitoes and drones equipped with Artificial Intelligence were to merge in a climate-changed future? Through the depiction of chance, error and contingency, Serpell mines this what-if possibility to reflect on the eventual irrelevance of illusions of anthropocentric superiority, and simultaneously explore times of human obsolescence. But she throws the gauntlet further to close with a reflection on the precarious position of the Earth in the geo-cosmos, thus rendering *OD* one of the most far-reaching fictional explorations of the paradoxes of Anthropocene time.

First Sequence: Mosquitoes and Meandering Narrative Pathways

Animal theorist Neel Ahuja writes: "It is no surprise that companion animals, farmed animals, and charismatic "wildlife" species—physiologically close enough to humans for us to imagine certain interests—appear most often in animal studies" ("Abu Zubaydah" 144). Much has changed between 2011, when Ahuja penned these lines, and now. The increasing prominence of multispecies ethnography has helped probe a wide variety of affective responses to a panoply of animal forms, big or small. Insects, too, have been studied with greater interest (Raffles; Kosek). Furthermore, the alignment of multispecies ethnography with discourses on the Anthropocene has also helped reconsideration of smaller animal forms: not only are indistinguishable earth others

important for the sustainability and maintenance of biomes and microbiomes, but they open portals to the deep time of the planet, as smaller life-forms are more likely to survive in the distant future.

While it is possible to imagine interests in common with insects like butterflies or bees, Ahuja's reflections are pertinent to the mosquito, a being with which we are often in conflict. Hostility seems to be defining affective response to the mosquito. Consider the first sentence of Timothy Winegard's *The Mosquito*, a work that while critiquing anthropocentrism eventually falls back into a dualist rather than a relational framework: "We are at war with the mosquito" (1). Winegard continues: "As the pinnacle purveyor of our extermination...(the mosquito)...has consistently been at the front lines of history as the grim reaper, the harvester of human populations, and the ultimate agent of historical change" (3). The martial metaphors continue in Winegard's chapter titles—"General Anopheles" (in a chapter on Alexander), "Mosquito Legions" (a chapter on Rome) and "Mosquito Hordes" (a chapter on the Mongols).

While Winegard displaces human centrality in the making of history, his casting of mosquitos as the absolute enemy and the apex predator of humans is reductive. Mosquitos open portals to the deep past (mosquitos emerged around 190 million years ago) and to the deep future (hardy and small life forms like mosquitos are more likely to adapt to a climate changed planet). More importantly, an important chapter in the history of the mosquito is its co-evolution with humans. Discussing this co-evolutionary entanglement, JM McNeill writes that "the links between human history and ecological history are robust, sometimes to the point where mosquitos and viruses infringe on the fortunes of humankind in ways that seem unflattering to our species, making us seem mere playthings in dramas wrought (not directed) by tiny...creatures" (7). McNeill's insistence on wrought and not directed reduces the focus on mosquitoes as the arch-villains of history and shifts the focus to co-evolution.

Beyond human-mosquito entanglements, the arthropod form is also interesting autonomously. First, not all mosquitos are carriers of viruses. Discussing the Plasmodium parasite that is central for the spread of malaria, Sonia Shah writes: "The parasite's shtick fails in most of the world's 3,200 species of mosquito. It works only in a single genus, called *Anopheles*...most likely because of that mosquito's strangely tepid defenses" (15). Even among the 430 known species of *Anopheles*, only around 70 carry malaria. Furthermore, mosquitos are remarkably adaptable and mobile—two characteristics Serpell highlights in *OD*. All they sometimes need to survive (and thrive) is small amount of stagnant water in a recipient—no wonder then that mosquitos were co-travelers with humans in ships, most notably in the Columban exchange and the trans-Atlantic slave trade (McNeill; Ahuja, "M is for Mosquito"; Winegard 142-213), and, more recently as "tiny stowaways in aeroplanes, in tyres, in soil" (Spielman and D'Antonio 31-42). Mosquitos adapt flexibly—the evolution of their resistance to DDT is a case in point (Kinkela; Shah 139-169).

Apart from a few short stories in the Canadian-Tamil science fiction writer Kuzhali Manickavel's *Insects are Just Like You and Me Except Some of Them Have Wings*, *OD* is arguably the only contemporary postcolonial fiction that treats mosquitos as major

character-narrators, dwells in detail on their physiognomy and life cycles, deliberates on the “democratic,” nonhierarchical nature of insects [“Loafer, lord and lout were treated with strict impartiality in these parts, for the mosquito is a true democrat...” (9)],² and considers them as plastic, adaptable beings. In colonizing discourses in general, and colonial fiction in particular, mosquitos are hostile *objects* that must be eliminated if colonial society must be defended. Colonial discourses figure the arthropod by deploying the metaphor of war. The mosquito becomes a stand-in for barbarism and lack of civilization—unsurprising because colonialism is also predicated on a dualist anthropocentrism where the other is animalized or thingified. In his 1902 Nobel Prize acceptance speech, the controversial “conqueror” of malaria, Ronald Ross said:

Malarial fever is important, not only because of the misery which it inflicts on mankind, but because of the serious opposition which it has always given to the march of civilization in the tropics. Unlike many diseases, it is essentially endemic, a local malady, and one which haunts more especially the fertile well-watered and luxuriant tracts—precisely those which are of the greatest value to man. There it strikes down not only the indigenous barbaric population, but with still greater certainty, the pioneer of civilization—the planter, the trader, the missionary, and the soldier. It is therefore the principal and gigantic ally of Barbarism (qtd. in Jones 98-9).

Malaria and its vector, the mosquito, are figured here as allies of barbarism that civilization and its pioneers are at war. The summation of this colonialist view is provided by Fanon: “A hostile, ungovernable, and fundamentally rebellious Nature is in fact synonymous in the colonies with the bush, the mosquitoes, the natives and disease. Colonization has succeeded once this untamed Nature has been brought under control” (182). Mosquitoes figure as a crucial part of an “untamed Nature” that anthropocentric colonial sovereignty must conquer, tame or destroy. That is why, in “On Violence,” Fanon writes that “we should place DDT, which destroys parasites, carriers of disease, on the same level as Christianity, which roots out heresy, natural impulses” (7).

I juxtapose the colonial Ross with the anticolonial Fanon because it reveals a persisting theme of war with the mosquito-as-other that characterizes colonial fiction. As Jessica Howell argues, works of the colonial era “malarial Gothic,” like the colonial discourse and fiction of H. Rider Haggard, “displaces visions of illness onto racial and national others,” while presenting the African adventure as a rite of passage for the healthy, heroic, white colonial-masculine self (9). The horror of contamination by the “morphic, abhuman nature” of the mosquito also recurs, in a displaced fashion, in the gothic “puncture scene” of Victorian vampire fictions (174).³

Instead of looking at the mosquito as object, can we initiate projects of making the “mosquito speak” (Mitchell) or of “decolonizing mosquitos” (Garriga-Lopez), in line with recent postcolonial and decolonial approaches? Anthropologists like Mitchell and Garriga-Lopez consider medical and infrastructural discourses and practices. I will mine the resources that postcolonial fiction offers. While the metaphor of war recurs in

²For bees and democratic decision making, see Seeley.

³A counter-tradition that satirizes the metaphor of war can be found in Bengali fiction. Mosquitoes are often treated as “ubiquitous objects of fun, satire and irritation” (Deb Roy 247), an example being Premendra Mitra’s short story “Mosquito.”

postcolonial works, significant displacements can be noted, especially in the representations of the insects as characters in fiction. It would not be amiss to suggest that while colonial/post-colonial biopolitical discourse and cultural production on the management of mosquitoes has “human control *over* life at its core,” many postcolonial fictions that represent mosquitos emphasize “a relational knowledge *of* life” (Nading 15-16). Many postcolonial works treat the mosquito as *subject*, not object. I am not talking about “subject” purely in the sense of anthropomorphism, although I believe that anthropomorphic representation can have critical value as it enables us to “think with” (Daston and Mitman) animals. I also consider subject from the standpoint of Jacob von Uexküll’s biosemiotic theory of environments (*Umwelten*). As opposed to a purely mechanistic interpretation of animals, the Estonian biologist argued that the *Umwelt* combines a particular animal form’s “perception world [*Merkwelt*]” and its “effect world [*Wirkwelt*]” (42). In a Kantian vein, he argues that there is no time and space without a living subject. While we may naively believe that the same meadow is open to both humans and bees, the bees’ *Umwelt* is different from that of the human:

The sight of flitting insects...which cavort in a meadow full of flowers, always awakens in us the impression that the whole world would be open to these enviable creatures...This impression is misleading. The truth is that every animal, no matter how free its movements is bound to a certain dwelling-world, and it is one task of ecologists to research its limits. (139)

Works like *OD* combine both anthropomorphic representation and foray into the alterity of the mosquito’s dwelling-worlds. This dual move by Serpell has some noteworthy fictional precedents.

The shift to being a subject is evident in the representation of the mosquito as a figure chastised for lying in West African folktales like *Why Mosquitos Buzz in People’s Ears*. Folk wisdom is about the relationality of nonhuman with human worlds. Another representation recurs in the folktale about the spurned insect that buzzes near Ear who refuses marriage with him in Chapter 9 of Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. Okonkwo remembers this “feminine” folktale only to disavow it as he desires to abjure anything that seems “weak” and unmasculine. However, as Neil ten Kortenaar argues, Okonkwo’s act of remembering this folktale also functions in sync with a crucial event in the novel—Ezinma’s *iba* which roughly translates as fever, but whose semantic range also captures spiritual disorders such as the “mischief of the *ogbanje*” (128). Ezinma’s fever, and by extension the deaths of the *ogbanje*, could possibly be medically diagnosed as malaria. But this knowledge is not available to Okonkwo and his kinspeople as the recognition of the mosquito as a disease vector belongs to a “foreign *episteme*” (128). Chapter 9, “by making mosquitoes and *iba* contiguous, even if not explicitly linking cause to effect, acknowledges a connection where the characters themselves do not see one” (128). This connection is not instituted by Achebe for ironic exchanges with the readers, but to show the relationality of the arthropod and the human in becoming hosts for malarial parasites. Mosquito and human are entangled in the novel, and this entanglement is recognized in the Ibo worldview.

There are also explicit attempts at imaginatively exploring the alternative *Umwelt* of mosquito “subjectivity.” In Amitav Ghosh’s science fiction novel *The Calcutta Chromosome*, as one of the primary characters, Murugan, prepares to go to sleep, we briefly foray into the arthropod’s subjective viewpoint:

It was strangely intimate to lie there like that, against damp cloth, spread out in that elementally open posture of invitation, of embrace, of longing. When he looked down at his body, lying flat on the bed, he could not tell whether he was waiting for them to show themselves to him, or whether he was showing himself to them: displaying himself in those minute detailed ways that only they were small enough to see, to understand, because only they had the eyes that were designed to see not the whole, but the parts, each in its uniqueness. Involuntarily he flexed his shoulders, arching his back, waiting to discover where they would touch him first...(156)

Via manifestly erotic language and a reversal of the motif of the mosquito as an object observed under a microscope, the spatial boundaries between human-self and insect-other are momentarily rendered porous as Murugan imagines himself being seen by mosquitoes and then, through an invocation of the haptic, opening his body for tactile interspecies contact. The passage from Ghosh’s novel and the sections in *OD* about the mosquitoes’ “hundred eyes” (318) are good examples at representing the parallel worlds of an animal form.

The originality of its deployment of the mosquito swarm-as-narrator in *OD* lies in the fusion of two aspects—i) mosquitoes as cautionary folkloric figures or as anthropomorphized nonhuman witnesses of the action [“thin troubadours, the bare ruinous choir, a chorus of gossipy mites”] (19), and, ii) the attempt to represent the *Umwelt* of the animal other, most crucially through the representation of swarming.⁴ Furthermore, mosquitoes in *OD* are both accidental—by transmitting cerebral malaria to the charismatic anticolonial figure, Alice Lenshina, they play an inadvertent part in post-colonial Zambian history (139)—and co-constitutive—as “tiny stowaways in aeroplanes, in tyres, in soil” (375), they leave their mark on human lifeworlds—agents of human histories. They are also the witnesses of an inhuman history prior to the time of *Homo sapiens*. I quote two segments here in the swarm narrator’s voice, one from the beginning and the other from the end:

I: We have been needling you for centuries untold. Or perhaps we should say centuries told...Your earliest tales were of animals, of course, beastly fables carved into cave walls. Well, it’s time to turn the fables, time for us to tell you what we know. (18)

II: Oldest friends, ancient enemies, neighbourhood frenemy foes. We are perfectly matched, Mankind and Moz. We’re both useless, ubiquitous species. But while you rule the earth and destroy it for kicks, we loaf about, unsung heroes. We’ve been around here as long as you have—for eons before, say the fossils. (545)

There is a turning of the fables (and tables) from anthropogenic time to times before that of humans. The swarm here becomes the nonhuman witness narrating both human and inhuman histories. While the narration of human histories is usually characterized by an illusion of species sovereignty and human centrality, the swarm narrator(s) remind their audience about the fact of entanglement. Finally, there is irony in “useless, ubiquitous

⁴*Anopheles gambiae* (“no profit”) are the dominant vector of mosquito borne diseases in Africa.

species,” as mosquitos are often considered dispensable because of their perceived “uselessness.”⁵

Furthermore, this reversal from the human you-as-addressee to the collective “we” narrator also implies a shift into the *Umwelten* of the animal other. Key here is both the noun “swarm” and the verb “swarming.” Nuttall writes: “Most vitally, like a mosquito swarm, the narrative hovers, drifts, and turns elliptically to the same places...” (465). While this description captures the narrative movement of *OD*, what is also important is the development of swarm intelligence, a term that signifies a nonhierarchical, noncentralized and multitudinous collective in cultural theory.⁶ Parikka’s *Insect Media* provides us with a cultural genealogy of this term. While swarming could signify “horrors of nonindividual groups,” Parikka shows that cultural theorists, philosophers, literary writers and mystics from around the 18th century were fascinated by this term as an “alternative lesson on organization” and as “something akin to an uncontrolled (by a unity) but still concerted organization” (Parikka, *Insect* 48). Serpell’s passages below plays with the possibility of inhabiting an alternative *Umwelt*:

A swarm is but a loose net of knots. We hang, an elastic severalty...

All together at once is how a swarm sees but you humans go beginning to end. And so we recount each act in its turn: pace by pace, cause and effect, each and every flutter and tumble. (19)

And later: “Our essence is somewhere between or besides. We flee but our flight is unruly and tangled, a haphazard hover, a swarm. We loiter a lot but we move over time, we do best when we choose to meander” (486). A key for reading narrative temporality in *OD* kaleidoscopically emerges here. Imaginatively inhabiting the *Umwelt* of the swarm is an invitation to encounter narrative through intertwined temporalities and narrative pathways—not simply cause and effect, but in multiscalar fashion “all together at once.” Encounters with planetary history and the deep past and the future occur through “tangled” and “haphazard” pathways. As Nuttall observes: “The swarm augments and intensifies itself as it goes along, working to “dramatise the issue,” to overcome the “passive nihilism” of the present, and to bring the ecological into the political” (466). I will turn to one such contemporary entanglement of the ecological with the political in the next section—the representation of the Anthroscene in the Kalingalinga settlement in Lusaka.

⁵The latest attempt to eliminate mosquitos is CRISPR (Clustered Regularly Interspersed Short Palindromic Repeats) patented by biochemist Jennifer Doudna and her team at UC-Berkeley in 2012. CRISPR is a genetic procedure “that snips out a section of DNA sequencing from a gene and replaces it with another desired one, permanently altering a genome, quickly, cheaply and accurately” (Winegard 428). CRISPR could potentially exterminate “mosquitos by way of genetic sterilization” in less than two generations (430).

⁶For swarm intelligence, see Hardt and Negri (91-3); Connolly (124-29). Seeley compares the hive superorganism to the human brain and body as superorganisms (25). This comparison is reflected in *OD* when Joseph Banda says: “...if the physical activities of the mind are like insects, then consciousness is the swarm” (512).

Full Sequence: The Anthrobscene and Insect/Technological Plasticity

Parikka's works are part of not only of media ethology, but of a geology of media approach. This approach moves against dominant tendencies in media philosophy that are based on "the idea of inexorable, quasi-natural, technical progress" (Zielinski 3). Focusing both on the geological material that media products are constructed of and the rubbish and technofossils that discarded media are transformed into, a geology of media approach has two temporal dimensions—first, a "metallic materiality that links the earth to media productions" and second, a deep time aspect encompassing both "nonhuman earth times of decay and renewal but also to the current... obscenities of the ecocrisis—or to put it in one word, the Anthrobscene" (Parikka, *Geology* 44). These approaches transform geology "into a contested technologically conditioned object of research" and converts "issues of deep times from a merely temporal question of pasts to futures of extinction, pollution and resource depletion, triggering a huge chain of events and interlinked questions: the future landscape of media technological fossils" (51). Particularly relevant here is the "'paleontological' record" left by dead electronics and e-waste (Gabrys 5). These records leave its stratigraphic mark on the planet.

However, *OD* complicates Parikka's temporal framework of the "future landscape of media technological fossils." By projecting technofossils onto a yet-to-arrive future, Parikka participates in the default mode in the Global North via which such Anthrobscene futures are imagined: the narrative genre of "eco-apocalypse" (Wenzel 31). However, in e-waste graveyards in cities like Abidjan or Accra, this imagined future is a present and palpable reality. In such locales, the unregulated disposal of e-waste contaminates "soil, groundwater and air, as well as affecting all those involved in their end-of-life processing and the nearby communities" (Oteng-Ababio 192). As Iheka writes, the African continent is hardly considered in such future reckonings. There is an urgent need, he says, to relocate Africa "at the origin and conclusion, at the beginning and end, of media matter..." (8). This critical move will shift the gaze away from the stereotypical binary of "sites of energy production in Africa" and "scenes of consumption in the West" (11). It will also rethink Africa "not only as a site of ecological degradation but also as a generative site for apprehending the ecologies of media alongside alternative media practices and modes of ethical living" (10).

Iheka's observations chime with insights from urban studies of the Global South (DeBoeck and Baloji; Rai) that emphasize the creative, agential and improvisational potentials at "hacking" the neoliberal everyday through practices like piracy or secondhand consumption. By hacking, Rai means a "global but inchoate movement of workaround, informal...extralegal, democratic, subaltern, collective repurposing of found materials shifting ecologies from relative stasis to absolute flux...in innovative and 'game-changing' ways" (x). These improvisational and "game-changing" modes of life and living gesture towards alternative, and even energy-efficient uses of technology as in the case of the Moskeetozes (run by solar power) in *OD*.

OD refers to such hazardscapes with a twist about the improvisational and informal economies that swarm around such "wastelands":

So-called e-dumps had started to spring up all over Lusaka. These housed leftover gadgets, not from the rich...but from places they had been to: America, South Africa, China, all of the countries that had run out of room to discard their obsolete and broken tech. These nations were now paying to ship their 'e-waste' to what they considered the trash heap of the world. Little did they realise that they were jumpstarting a secondhand tech revolution. (442)

We can read the passage through the modality of eco-apocalypse, as Kalingalinga becomes one of the endpoints for the consumption economies of richer nations and of the Zambian elite. However, the last sentence gestures towards the game-changing potentialities that hacking facilitates in such informal salvage economies. Jacob Mwamba finds a discarded "white and spindly, about the size of a dove" toy chopper in a "spiky hill of plastic and glass" in a Kalingalinga junkyard (444).⁷ Jacob, while not formally educated, is obsessed with aviation machinery from childhood, a fascination fueled by his realization that his *gogo* (grandmother), Matha, had been a cadet in Edward Makuka Nkoloso's Zambian Space Programme—"Who knew technology was a family tradition—in his very blood" (444).⁸ His technical *nous* enables him to improvise forms of lightweight, remote-controlled aviation machinery from the junk choppers disposed in Lusaka's e-wastelands. The episode at everyday hacking with the toy chopper culminates in him attaching an "eyeball camera" to the contraption and controlling its flight with an app that he downloads into his salvaged iPhone (459-60).

Jacob moves on to "fry bigger fish, or rather, smaller ones"—drones (466). He constructs miniature versions of drones based on biomimicry—from small bird-sized ones to pigeon-like machines (473, 478). However, the catalyst for going even more miniature is a mosquito bite that interferes with the circuit of the Bead inserted into his hand.⁹ This bite creates a "zinging feeling" which leads to the genesis of the Moskeetozes. The bite makes him recognize that technological multifunctionality is "more like the splayed network of nerves in his hand..." (482). Mimicking a natural form, Jacob designs the Moskeetozes as an autophagous swarm:

Insect wings are flexible but have a built-in web of nerves, veins and arteries—this makes them stiff enough to flap. The nerves transmit signals for the wing to stroke and bend... The veins and arteries carry blood—energy. The wing also has tiny hairs that help the insect navigate through touch. To make his microdrone, he would replace blood with fuel, nerves with circuits, and tiny hairs with antennae that would brush the planes of the world and send Wi-Fi signals to the cloud—and to other microdrones. Together, Moskeetoze would move in concert, and if they ran low on energy, one could be sacrificed for fuel. It would be a swarm that ate itself once in a while to stay afloat. (483)

Jacob's ruminations gesture towards the fact that animal bodies themselves can be reconceptualized as forms of media attuned to their respective environments. If the animal body is a kind of medium, in terms of both an apparatus and an interface, then "zoology becomes the open book of comparative media studies" (Peters 112). Peters adds:

⁷Kalingalinga is an older area and poor settlement in Lusaka. (Hansen 80-85).

⁸While Nkoloso is a character in *OD*, see Serpell's essay in *The New Yorker* for a discussion of the utopian dimensions of his space program.

⁹The Beads are digital devices embedded in human hands.

The bodies of living creatures, with their carapaces and antennae, heat regulation and geomagnetic sensing, high-frequency hearing and ultraviolet vision, fluid retention, secretion of silk and venom, production and sensing of pheromones, and immune systems are historically rich solutions to the problem of interacting with environments...Animals provide alternate modes of being...As a treasury of the varieties of bodily shape and size, zoology is media theory *sans le savoir*. (112)

Jacob's eureka moment emerges through a reflection on the way in which insect physiognomy interacts with its *Umwelt*—the technological form he develops reveals the mediated forms of insect physiognomy.

Further, if we reconceptualize insects as forms of “plastic life,” they reveal “their ability to mutate and reinvent new forms...” (Mawani 161). Insects display their plasticity through their “fecundity, ferality and inscrutability” and by “constantly evolving, transforming, and innovating” (163). The plastic transformation of insect corporeality into machinic parts show the porousness of natureculture formations, emphasized by the sonic contiguities between insects and drones in *OD* (like the zinging feeling that leads to the genesis of the Moskeetozes). Further mutations are in store when the novel mines the plasticity of insectile and technological bodies as they evolve in the future—the focus of my concluding section.

Final Sequence: Plasticity, Errors and Evolution

Plasticity is not just the ability of insects to mutate and metamorphose. Mawani points out two other dimensions—annihilation and evolution. The appropriation of insects as military prototypes (drones, new nanotechnologies) reveals that “plasticity is not only the ability to give and receive form but also its explosion and annihilation...” (168). There is a fascinating and grisly history of how insects have been utilized as weapons of war from ancient times (Kosek; Raffles; Lockwood). A new development is the invention of insect-cyborgs—or what the US-based DARPA (Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency) calls “vivi-systems” (Lockwood 287)—for the purposes of warfare and surveillance. The DARPA has progressed far in the conceptualization and construction of MAVs (Micro Air Vehicles) like the entomopter (Lockwood 295), which bears similarities to imagined vivi-systems like the Moskeetozes. Lockwood describes a strange report featuring vivi-systems that bears uncanny similarities with *OD*:

A *Washington Post* article in October 2007 reported that people gathered at political rallies have been describing the appearance of insectlike flying devices since as early as 2004. One individual at the Republican National Convention in New York described a ‘jet-black dragonfly hovering about 10 feet off the ground...’ Perhaps the person was paranoid...or simply saw an actual dragonfly. However, several people at an antiwar rally in Washington, D.C., independently described large dragonflies trailing strings of small berrylike spheres and flying in formation. Not surprisingly, government agencies have declined to discuss the topic. (296)

This episode finds its echo in *OD*, emphasizing Nuttall's point that Serpell's “near-future is again embedded in near-fact or, at least, in scientifically enhanced prediction” (464). Jacob sells his Moskeetoze technology to the government. The government utilizes the

vivi-systems to deliver a vaccine shot against a deadly AIDS-like virus to a revolutionary crowd that gathers in 2019 in Kalingalinga (542-44). Unlike the trend in postcolonial literature and theory that looks at drone technology through its necropolitical aspects alone, *OD* reverses the gaze and looks at the “affordances...the possibilities that things offer for action” (Choi-Fitzpatrick 28). Choi-Fitzpatrick considers how drones can be used by social movements and civil society groups to democratize surveillance—a point concretized in *OD*’s closure when Naila, Jacob and Joseph use the Moskeetozes to disable the grid that powers the government AFRINET servers. This server connects the Beads and enables government surveillance. Disabling the server could help the revolutionaries to communicate directly with solar-powered microdrones instead. However, things do not go according to the dictates of anthropogenic calculations of means and ends, and this leads us to a discussion of the second sense of plasticity in terms of evolution and error.

Re-reading Bergson’s vitalist philosophy of life as a form of plasticity, Renisa Mawani writes that as an animating force, life, both human and nonhuman, carries plastic qualities as “its ever-changing conditions open the possibility to form, transform, and respond to change itself” (177). Plasticity:

...is a force that animates and permeates human and nonhuman life-forms, connecting the most elementary to the most complex. It interconnects and unifies these forms of life, unraveling their distinctions and hierarchies...all the while demonstrating that evolution is successive but never linear or predetermined...this creative capacity of life, its ability to evolve across divergent lines, is what repudiates...mechanistic and teleological understandings...and...opens possibilities for creative bursts and transformations. (177)

Life’s creative elements are always in a process of becoming and beyond the pale of predetermined teleologies. This notion of plasticity has the potentiality to rupture binary oppositions such as human/animal or insect/machine (181).

The “elastic severalty” of the mosquito swarm in *OD* is characterized by this quality. Consider this passage about how holometabolous insects like mosquitoes demonstrate their plasticity by the “ability to give, receive, and annihilate form as evidenced in the process of metamorphosis...” (Mawani 164):

We are like Russian dolls of metamorphosis, each phase of us hatched from the previous. Split the shell, breach the slit, then shed the old husk. From egg to larva, the comma-shaped pupa, then the winged and wobbly imago. Step into the water with delicate feet. Pause as the spine stiffens. (261)

This “insect-within-an-insect phenomenon” which characterizes an adult mosquito’s entrance in the world, was noticed first by Rickard Christophers in the 1920s (Spielman and D’Antonio 7). Add to that the remarkable ability of mosquitoes to breed wherever there is standing water—“You like to treat us like beasts of the wild, but civilization suits us fine” (*OD* 78). Navigating the fluid interfaces between naturecultures, mosquitoes are plastic beings *par excellence*.

The other dimension of Bergsonian plasticity—“evolution is successive but never linear or predetermined”—accelerates as the narrative progresses. Key here is the ontoepistemological category of “error.” This category is emphasized at the beginning—“Error, n., from the Latin *errare*: to stray or to veer or to wander”(2). This elaboration

connects with the operations of the swarm *Umwelten*—instead of cause and effect, *OD* can be read following haphazard pathways. *Errare* also emphasizes correlations between human and more-than-human worlds and illustrates the contingency, creativity and unpredictability of evolution. This aspect emerges below where the contingency of mosquito evolution is correlated with the operations of error and chance in *OD*'s plot:

Your beastly old tales know it all too well: we are Nature's great superfluity...We pollinate little and feed very few, and no predator needs us to live...We're an asterisk to nature, a flaw, a digression, a footnote if ever there was one. We are not just an accident, but issue it too. Extermination trials go wonky. *Toxorhynchites*, they thought, would devour us, but they released the wrong species and we did not just survive, we thrived!

Joseph himself has learned this the hard way: his vaccine, founded upon a mutation, has foundered on capital's reef. But all sorts of things can slip through the cracks, especially genetically tweaked ones. Evolution forged the entirety of life using only one tool: the mistake...(431)

The passage begins with the anthropocentric fantasy that “useless” species can be eliminated with no harm to ecosystems. “Useless” species are viewed as errors, as forms of superfluous luxury—straying or wandering from evolution's presumed teleological path towards increased progress, maximization of utility and perfection. Such positivist teleological views of evolution, unfortunately, have led to the elimination not only of other species, but humans conceived as other “species.” The shift to mosquito POV emerges in the sentence: “We are not just an accident, but issue it too.” The spotlight shifts to the “useless” species. Mosquitoes have had remarkable resistance to agents designed to eliminate them, like DDT. *Toxorhynchites*, species of mosquitoes that don't suck blood, but cannibalize the larvae of other species like *Aedes aegypti* have been introduced as biocontrol agents in places like Hawaii and Samoa, with mixed to little success (Peterson Jr.). Anthropogenic efforts at arthropod control have often been unsuccessful or led to unanticipated consequences—things “slip through the cracks.” Hence, the bestowal of mosquito “wisdom”: “To err is human you say with great sadness. But we thinfal singers give praise! To the drift, the diversion, that motion of motions! Obey the law of the flaw!” (545)

If ontoepistemological categories like error show that processes of evolution are never predetermined and progressive, what might happen in the future? This is where *OD* enters speculative territory with its final tableau where mosquito and Moskeetoze swarms integrate to form a multispecies-cyborgian alliance. The inability of humans to control consequences of plastic bodies was demonstrated when Naila and company's plan to sabotage the electric grid at Kariba Dam leads to unprecedented consequences. Because of their “Error of errors...simply forgetting the weather,” the drones block the sluices of the dam and cause the Zambezi to overflow drowning almost the entire country (563).

But something slips through the cracks creating an unanticipated “what-if” evolutionary possibility, signaled not only by the coda that closes the diegetic space, but by the only visual representations of *two* mosquito-like entities on the last page (each narrative section otherwise is bookended by a single mosquito) (563). The indistinguishable mosquito/Moskeetoze narrators say:

Are we truly man's enemy, *Anopheles gambiae*, or the microdrones Jacob designed? If that's who we are, then this tale has explained our invention. The problem is that we'll still never know because...we've joined up with the local mosquitoes. We get along fine, but can't tell us apart in this loose net of nodes in the air. We just buzz about and follow commands and lead lives of tense coordination. Half insects, half drones; perhaps all drones or none; maybe something between will emerge. But...What an error!...A semi-cyborgian nation! (562)

Indeed, in this "warm, wet future" ancient "arthropod flesh" and hi-tech "solar strip skin" evolve into an unprecedented form of swarm hivemind. Further unimaginable mutations induced by "error" could be in store—something "in-between," signaling not the post-colonial, but a "semi-cyborgian" nation. This is a portal to times beyond *our* species-history that the Anthropocene opens imaginatively, worlds without us that simultaneously look back to the forbidding epochs of inhuman entities. But, in the concluding sentences—"...outer space too, that celestial gyre, turns inward and outwards...And so we roil in the oldest of drifts..." (563)—*OD* looks beyond climate changed futures and fast forwards to the placement of our lonely planet in the abyssal temporalities of the geo-cosmos. *OD* closes by accounting for Anthropocene time in its kaleidoscopic multiplicity. The narrative meanders through intertwined temporalities and narrative pathways, and in multiscalar fashion makes us think of everything "all together at once."

Submission received 15 February 2022 Revised version accepted 10 September 2022

Works Cited

- Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. Penguin, 1994.
- Ahuja, Neel. "Abu Zubaydah and the Caterpillar." *Social Text* 29.1 (106), Spring 2011, pp. 127-49.
- . "M is for Mosquito." *Animalia: An Anti-Imperial Bestiary for our Times*, edited by Antoinette Burton and Renisa Mawani, Duke UP, 2020. pp. 117-130.
- Ardema, Verna. *Why Mosquitos Buzz in People's Ears: A West African Tale*. Puffin, 2004.
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. "The Planet: An Emergent Humanist Category," *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 46, no. 1, 2019, pp. 1-31.
- Chamayou, Grégoire. *A Theory of the Drone*, translated by Janet Lloyd, The New Press, 2013.
- Chaudhury, Numair Atif. *Babu Bangladesh!* Fourth Estate, 2019.
- Choi-Fitzpatrick, Austin. *The Good Drone: How Social Movements Democratize Surveillance*. MIT Press, 2020.
- Connolly, William. *Facing the Planetary: Entangled Humanism and the Politics of Swarming*. Duke UP, 2017.
- Daston, Lorraine and Gregg Mitman. Editors. *Thinking with Animals: New Perspectives on Anthropomorphism*. Columbia UP, 2006.
- Deb Roy, Rohan. *Malarial Subjects: Empire, Medicine and Nonhumans in British India, 1820-1909*. CUP, 2017.

- DeBoeck, Filip and Sammy Baloji. *Suturing the City: Living Together in Congo's Urban Worlds*. Autograph, 2018.
- Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*, translated by Richard Philcox, Grove Press, 2005.
- Gabrys, Jennifer. *Digital Rubbish: A Natural History of Electronics*. University of Michigan Press, 2013.
- Garriga-Lopez, Adriana. "Decolonizing Mosquitos: Processes and Experiments from the Periphery." *sfonline.barnard.edu*, vol. 16, no. 2, 2020.
- Ghosh, Amitav. *The Calcutta Chromosome: A Novel of Fevers, Delirium and Discovery*. Harper Perennial, 2001.
- Hansen, Karen Tranberg. *Keeping House in Lusaka*. Columbia UP, 1996.
- Hardt, Michael and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*. Penguin, 2005
- Howell, Jessica. *Malaria and the Victorian Fictions of Empire*. CUP, 2018.
- Iheka, Cajetan. *African Ecomedia: Network Forms, Planetary Politics*. Duke UP, 2021.
- Indiana, Rita. *Tentacle*. Translated by Achy Obejas, *And Other Stories*, 2019.
- Jones, Richard. *Mosquito*. Reaktion, 2012.
- Kinkela, David. *DDT and the American Century: Global Health, Environmental Politics and the Pesticide that Changed the World*. UNC Press, 2011.
- Kosek, Jake. "Ecologies of Empire: On the New Uses of the Honeybee." *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 25, no. 4, 2010, pp. 650-78.
- Lockwood, Jeffrey A. *Six-Legged Soldiers: Using Insects as Weapons of War*. OUP, 2009.
- Manickavel, Kuzhali. *Insects are Just Like You and Me Except Some of Them Have Wings*. Blaft Publications, 2008.
- Mawani, Renisa. "Insects, War, Plastic Life." *Plastic Materialities: Politics, Legality, and Metamorphosis in the Work of Catherine Malabou*, edited by Brenna Bhandar and Jonathan Goldberg-Hiller, Duke University Press, 2015, 159-87.
- McNeill, JR. *Mosquito Empires: Ecology and War in the Greater Caribbean, 1620-1914*. CUP, 2010.
- Mitchell, Timothy. *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity*. University of California Press, 2002.
- Mitra, Premendra. *Mosquito and Other Stories*, translated by Amlan, Penguin, 2009.
- Nading, Alex M. *Mosquito Trails: Ecology, Health, and the Politics of Entanglement*. University of California Press, 2014.
- Nuttall, Sarah. "Pluvial Time/Wet Form", *New Literary History*, vol. 51, no. 2, 2020, pp. 455-72.
- Oteng-Ababio, Martin. "E-Waste: An Emerging Challenge to Solid Waste Management in Ghana." *International Development Planning Review*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2010, pp. 191-206.
- Parikka, Jussi. *A Geology of Media*. University of Minnesota Press, 2015.
- . *Insect Media: An Archeology of Animals and Technology*. University of Minnesota Press, 2011.
- . *The Anthrobscene*. University of Minnesota Press, 2014.

- Peters, John Durham. *The Marvelous Clouds: Towards a Philosophy of Elemental Media*. Chicago UP, 2016.
- Peterson Jr., George D. "The Introduction of Mosquitoes of the Genus *Toxorhynchites* into American Samoa," *Journal of Economic Entomology*, vol. 49, no. 6, 1956, pp. 786-89.
- Raffles, Hugh. *Insectopedia*. Penguin, 2010.
- Rai, Amit S. *Jugaad Time: Ecologies of Everyday Hacking in India*. Duke University Press, 2020.
- Seeley, Thomas D. *Honeybee Democracy*. Princeton UP, 2011.
- Serpell, Namwali. *The Old Drift: A Novel*. Hogarth, 2019.
- . "The Zambian 'Afronaut' who Wanted to Join the Space Race." *newyorker.com*. 11 March 2017.
- Shah, Sonia. *Fever: How Malaria had Ruled Humankind for 500,000 Years*. Picador, 2011.
- Spielman, Andrew and Michael D'Antonio. *Mosquito: The Story of Man's Deadliest Foe*. Hyperion, 2001.
- Subanthad, Pitchaya. *Bangkok Wakes to Rain: A Novel*. Riverhead Books, 2019.
- ten Kortenaar, Neil. "How the Center is Made to Hold in *Things Fall Apart*." *Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart: A Casebook*, edited by Isidore Okpewho, OUP, 2003, 123-46.
- The Human Centipede: The Complete Sequence*. Dir. Tom Six. Shout Factory, 2017.
- von Uexküll, Jacob. *A Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans: With a Theory of Meaning*, translated by Joseph D. O'Neil, University of Minnesota Press, 2010.
- Weisman, Alan. *The World Without Us*. Picador, 2008.
- Wenzel, Jennifer. *The Disposition of Nature: Environmental Crisis and World Literature*. Fordham University Press, 2019
- Winegard, Timothy C. *The Mosquito: A Human History of our Deadliest Predator*. Dutton, 2019.
- Zielinski, Siegfried. *Deep Time of the Media: Towards an Archeology of Seeing and Hearing by Technical Means*, translated by Gloria Custance, MIT Press, 2008.

Bodies on the Border: (Re)materializing and Decolonizing Ecologies of Mobility in the Mexico-US Borderlands

English Brooks
Snow College, USA
english.brooks@snow.edu

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ecoazona.2022.13.2.4701>



Abstract

Current human migrations and nonhuman extinctions on massive scales compel us to more carefully apply interspecies concepts of mobility to understanding the roles played by geopolitical borders, as well as the various, ongoing forms of colonialism that have produced and continue to perpetuate these borders. This essay applies bioregional, material, decolonial, and borderlands ecocriticisms to historicize prevention through deterrence enforcement measures in the Mexico-US border region, and discusses several significant entanglements of interspecies actors in migratory contexts, exploring a range of ways that nonhuman nature has been and continues to be deployed materially against migrants. In historicizing US enforcement tactics, the essay tracks the distribution of human agency from settler colonial, ethnonationalist, and neoliberal US policy makers, to armed paramilitary human bodies, then into structures of the built environment, and, finally, to the ways that agency is further diffused across complex webs of multiple kinds of human and nonhuman actors—plants, animals, landforms, watercourses, climate and weather conditions, and so on. While in some instances, nonhuman animals are deployed against migrant and other indigenous and mestizo people, in other multispecies entanglements, animals participate in the revelation and denunciation of state sponsored violence, leading to larger questions of the status of other nonhuman animals in the borderlands. The essay's primary focus is on illustrating the practical untenability of, and the severe harm done in, continuing to regard the borderlands from settler colonialist or human exceptionalist positionalities.

Keywords: Bioregion, border, decolonial, material ecocriticism, Mexico, migration.

Resumen

Las migraciones humanas actuales y las extinciones a escala masiva de seres no-humanos nos obligan a aplicar de forma más cuidadosa conceptos interespecie de movilidad para entender los papeles que juegan las fronteras geopolíticas, así como las diversas formas de colonialismo en desarrollo que han producido y que continúan perpetuando estas fronteras. Este ensayo aplica las ecocríticas bioregional, material, descolonial y de frontera para historizar la prevención por medio de la puesta en práctica de medidas disuasorias en la región fronteriza entre México y Estados Unidos, y debate las diversas implicaciones significativas de los actores interespecies en los contextos migratorios, explorando las varias maneras en las que la naturaleza no humana continua desplegándose materialmente contra los inmigrantes. Al historizar las tácticas de imposición de los Estados Unidos, este ensayo rastrea la distribución de la agencia humana desde los legisladores coloniales, etnonacionalistas y neoliberales estadounidenses, pasando por los cuerpos humanos paramilitares, por las estructuras del entorno construido, hasta, finalmente, las maneras en las que la agencia se difumina aún más a través de las complejas redes de los diversos tipos de actores humanos y no-humanos—plantas, animales, accidentes geográficos, cauces de agua, condiciones climáticas y metereológicas, etcétera. Mientras que en algunos ejemplos los animales no-humanos se despliegan contra los inmigrantes y otros pueblos indígenas y mestizos, en otras implicaciones interespecies, los animales participan en la revelación y denuncia de la violencia patrocinada por el estado, llevando a cuestiones más amplias sobre el estatus de otros animales no-humanos en las zonas fronterizas. El principal centro de atención del ensayo es ilustrar lo prácticamente insostenible que es, y el daño severo

que se hace al seguir contemplando la frontera desde las posiciones del colonizador o de la excepcionalidad humana.

Palabras clave: Biorregión, frontera, descolonial, ecocrítica material, México, migración.

“The border ‘fence,’ irrespective of the complex indigeneity of peoples from the region it occupies, is a very long filter of bodies and goods — a mediator of imperialism, violence, market systems, and violence capitalism . . . [against] the historical stewards of the land, and those who are following ancient indigenous trade routes in search of economic opportunity.” (Postcommodity, interdisciplinary art collective; Raven Chacon, Cristóbal Martínez; Kade L. Twist, 2016)

“The ongoing separations and misunderstandings between decolonial thinking and projects and biodiversity thinking and projects is a tragedy for people, peoples, and other critters alike.” (Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 218)

Returning from a 2011 visit to the border wall separating Arizona from Sonora, Mexico, Los Angeles-based journalist Rubén Martínez describes an uncanny scene. Martínez had gone to see a newly constructed length of metal fence along an area near the San Pedro River. He looked up along the top of the fence, where perforations had been made to allow the wind to pass through. Around these wind holes, Martínez noticed a strange shimmering, and soon realized the effect was caused by the movement of hundreds of grasshoppers, passing through these holes in the fence to the other side. I find this deceptively ordinary occurrence suggestive in several ways. Of the selective, and often arbitrary, permeability of an increasingly hardening geopolitical border; of this border’s inevitable and ongoing failure as a barrier to the kinds of migrations it is intended to prevent; and, perhaps most strikingly, of its uneven consequences for wide-ranging varieties of migrant (human and otherwise) bodies, objects, and flows. While the mere existence of perforations in the fence clearly indicate the intentionally selective permeability of the structure’s design, the passage of these insects through the holes materializes as a minor revelation, rendering such phenomena visible. This single instance of the innumerable migration corridors transected by the Mexico-US border invites one to further extrapolate such phenomena over its entire roughly-two-thousand-mile length. While it reveals the differing impacts and forms of mobility produced by the border (walled or not) for different migrant bodies (human, nonhuman animal, etc.) through the border’s selective permeability/impenetrability, it equally illustrates the kinds of common, shared impacts this particular border entails (as do so many other borders, more generally) for a wide range of actors in and through the region. To recognize the ecology of the border as *oikos*, as a “house” divided, we find an otherwise whole and complete place across which space is artificially demarcated, fragmented, and disrupted. This fragmentation also reveals relationships of mutual dependency and alliance that would otherwise remain less visible, but are brought into sharper relief when viewed through the construct of borders.

If this mirage of migrant grasshoppers is legible as a revelation, I would also like to offer it as one example of a site-specific juncture of intervention. In this article, I hope

to illustrate that in such border sites, conventionally human, cultural/historical, and/or geopolitical approaches to place (such as decolonial and postcolonial studies, border and area studies, and anthropology) might be brought into more vigorous and thoroughgoing conversation with more-than-human/environmental inquiry (such as bioregionalism, material ecocriticism, and movement ecology). Experimental as these conversations may still seem, the stakes for attempting them could scarcely be higher. Current human migrations and nonhuman extinctions on massive, unprecedented scales,¹ as well as the intensely heightened visibility of epidemic phenomena, compel us to more carefully apply interspecies concepts of mobility to considering the roles played by geopolitical borders and border enforcement, as well as various, ongoing forms of colonialism and imperialism that have produced and continue to perpetuate and determine the meaning of these borders.

For roughly two decades, scholars have been working toward developing a more direct, explicit, and coherent conversation between decolonial and postcolonial thought and praxis, and those of ecocriticism and environmental humanities. Over this period, these mutual efforts toward engagement have included a variety of different theoretical lenses and areas of focus, ranging from animal studies and bioethics, to area studies, (bio)regionalisms, environmental justice, and narratology, just to name a few. Issues of foodways, sovereignty, spirituality, resource development and extraction, risk and natural v. anthropogenic disaster, and other material relations have often featured prevalently in such discussions. Indeed, the struggle to clearly define what constitutes “material” characterizes many of the tensions involved in seeking to reconcile postcolonial and ecocritical thought and discussion. Gurminder K Bhambra notes, for example, that “While much work in the area of postcolonial studies has directly addressed issues of the material, of the socio-economic, there has also been a tendency for it to remain firmly in the realm of the cultural” (115). Here we may recognize the trouble as twofold: first, the hierarchy of critical priorities usefully observed by Bhambra. And second, that her framing of “the material” also remains, consistent with that of so much postcolonial and other social theory, always already human, or social. David Bello similarly observes that “Critical studies of western colonialism have often been predicated on such anthropocentric, if politically understandable, premises” (6-7). In such ways, one might understand the gaps too often remaining between most varieties of environmental and postcolonial thought as recapitulating conventional western cultural divisions maintained between the more-than-human and the strictly human worlds. In

¹ For over a decade, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) has issued an annual report on “Global Trends in Forced Displacement.” The 2020 findings report the global forced displacement of a record 82.4 million people, more than “one per cent of the world’s population – or 1 in 95 people,” and more than double the rate of 2011. The report specifies that the “dynamics of poverty, food insecurity, climate change, conflict and displacement are increasingly interconnected and mutually reinforcing, driving more and more people to search for safety and security.” Additionally, extinction rates are currently accelerating to a thousand times higher than prehuman levels (De Vos), and according to a 2019 report from the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, at current rates, we are now poised to lose a million more species in the coming decades.

this sense, a more thorough decolonization of both postcolonial and ecocritical thought and practice requires stronger engagement between the two.

There are many junctures that both invite and compel us to apply decolonial and ecocritical approaches to the above-mentioned and other current questions and crises. In the essay “Postcolonial Studies and the Challenge of Climate Change,” for example, Dipesh Chakrabarty characterizes various “disjunctive” views or “images of the human,” from that of the Enlightenment, to that of the Anthropocene, concluding that the “wall of separation between natural and human histories that was erected in early modernity and reinforced in the nineteenth century as the human sciences and their disciplines consolidated themselves has some serious and long-running cracks in it” (10). I would like to propose that certain (actual, material) walls, and the geopolitical boundaries these have been erected to reinforce, also lend themselves as sites necessary to and productive for bringing decolonial and environmental criticism into conversation. Here I should note that, although I have so far referred to postcolonial and decolonial concepts somewhat interchangeably, my emphasis in this essay will tend toward the decolonial, for three reasons. First, as noted above, I propose that the need to better reconcile our understanding of the human with the nonhuman, dispelling modern western anthropocentric humanism, is itself a decolonial imperative. Second, as applied in border studies in the Americas, postcolonial approaches are often beset with contested notions of the temporality of “post” as applied to indigenous lands and other issues in an ongoing settler-colonial context. And third, the particular origins of decolonial movements—as coming from predominantly indigenous and mestizo inter-American historical, geographical, and critical positions (Bhambra 115)—are more consistent with the borderlands regions I wish to consider here.²

Rematerializing and Decolonizing Bodies on the Border

In applying material ecocriticism and decolonial studies to the Mexico-US borderlands, I would like to begin with the body. So often posited as ground zero for arbitrating our “wicked problems” and essential questions—gender and identity, race and

² This is certainly not to categorically dismiss postcolonial studies as any less suitable for bringing to bear on other aspects of empire and coloniality in the Americas. In an incisive and ranging 2004 review of several edited collections seeking to articulate various frameworks for “Postcolonial American Studies,” Malini Johar Schueller discussed their promise and tensions in terms of application to certain texts, unique forms of coloniality and resistance, periodization, race and ethnicity, etc. (172). While many of these tensions remain at play, we have also seen much evidence to support Schueller’s projection that “Postcolonial studies can intervene to suggest how US cultural history has always been a contradictory set of narratives with an endless entanglement of imperial and colonial experiences, and native resistances” (171). James Sidaway additionally notes that even many aspects of US economic liberalism and participation in globalization have resulted in these having “been resituated as entwined with empire and in particular, with settler colonialism (arguably the defining historical feature of the United States)” (271). Finally, even recent popular attention to the neocolonial aspects of US foreign policy, as discussed in works like Danial Immerwahr’s recent book *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States* (2019) remind us of the need to keep current US expansionist, imperialist, militarist, and cultural/racial supremacist tendencies open to similar scrutiny. All of the above demonstrate the continuing relevance of applying postcolonial studies to the US, and to the Americas, more generally.

ethnicity, class and citizenship, labor and economics—the human body, as a unitary concept, is regularly tasked with containing multitudes, from the discursive to the material. While ecocriticism has generally been characterized by attending carefully to our material, corporeal relationships with the nonhuman world, Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann describe two primary emphases of the material turn in the environmental humanities, in terms of its implications for the body.

The first of these points is the need to retrieve the body from the dimension of discourse, and to focus attention on bodily experiences and bodily practices (where “body” refers not only to the human body but to the concrete entanglements of plural “natures,” in both human and more-than-human realms). The second point is the need to respond to the linguistic turn with practical-theoretical strategies that attempt to overcome the chasm between cultural constructionism and the materiality of natures and bodies. (76)

Note that, contrary to occasional perfunctory mischaracterizations otherwise, such ecocritical inquiry is not dismissive of constructionism, but takes seriously the dialectical relationships between matter and meaning. Similarly productive tensions are present in decolonial conversations about both the social construction of bodies, and their material relations with places.

For example, when Walter Mignolo—referring to indigenous and other nonwestern peoples who have been colonized, in part, by western epistemologies and languages—says “we write with our bodies on the border,” he is referring to bodies primarily in the somatic, physical sense, and borders in the epistemological sense (“Geopolitics” 137). In other words, as he emphasizes, these are actual physical, sensing, knowing, speaking bodies, deterritorialized through historical processes of epistemic violence and colonialism, navigating a modernity wherein they inhabit plural identities and speak in a plurality of voices and registers. In this case, while the border is discursive, the bodies are material. And they are human.³ Elsewhere, however, Mignolo proposes more broadly, “I will take body to be ‘living organisms.’ . . . It is the materiality of the living that constitutes the body” (*On Decoloniality* 162). In this context, he considers how the “colonial matrix of power” has applied racist, sexist, and speciesist designations to define and rank which bodies matter. Mignolo explains, “Western imperial subjects secured themselves and their descendant as the superior subspecies. They invented also the idea of nature to separate their bodies from all living (and the very life-energy of the biosphere) organisms on the planet” (152-53). From here, he reminds us that “not only

³ To be clear, although in such instances Mignolo is using border in necessarily deterritorialized ways, as in his concept of “border thinking,” this is not to suggest his work is entirely removed from or not invested in actual places. On the contrary, one aspect of Mignolo’s project that ecocritics may find most compelling is its commitment, in identifying and naming certain founding premises of Western thought and claims to modernity, to then assiduously tracking down and locating these in their particular historical and geographical places of origin. Doing so demonstrates that Western forms of knowing and being are neither inevitable nor universal (as they have for centuries asserted themselves to be), and that the provincial origins of their propagation still have, as it were, names and addresses. We might also recognize certain aspects of this project as strikingly bioregional, in which local or vernacular human cultures (languages and thought patterns, knowledge and wisdom, ways of being in and knowing the world, etc.) are understood as emerging in response and relation to specific places, including their larger biotic communities.

Man/Human has a body: plants have bodies, fish have bodies, birds have bodies, vegetables have bodies, fruit have bodies,” gesturing toward certain transcorporeal relations these various bodies share (162).

When we recognize that it is the same Western colonial regard for nonhuman organisms and for land, that produces, discursively, both the hierarchical boundary between human and nonhuman, and also produces and reinforces modern geopolitical boundaries, the need to rematerialize—and thus, decolonize—both bodies and borderlands becomes more clearly evident. Here I must also qualify my use the terms “border” and “borderlands.” Any discussion of “the border” as a single place or phenomenon spanning the entire width of a continent is necessarily reductive. For this reason, I generally (except as otherwise noted) use “border” to refer to the construct (the idea, expressed and enforced as geopolitical fact, and the material realities of mobility that it has come to entail), and the word “borderlands” to refer broadly to the wide range of individual border communities and bioregions that, in being split apart (longitudinally), have been drawn together (latitudinally), however “naturally” or arbitrarily, by this construct. Tom Lynch cautions us that “bioregional analysis suggests that the search for universal meanings as the principal function of literary criticism colludes with the homogenizing tendencies of colonialism, and disempowers a [literary, artistic, or cultural] work from its vital function of granting us a politicized and particularized storied resistance in a specific local landscape” (61). In this way, the term “border studies,” in accepting a totalizing geopolitical thought, or subordinating additional realities to this thought, may at times risk obscuring more nuanced bioregional attention to specific places.

On the other hand, one benefit border studies can bring to bioregionalism is a stronger appreciation for various forms of mobility (in contrast to a conventionally valued rootedness) by rendering these mobilities more visible and available to ecocritical attention. In an essay about Inuit and Sámi people in the circumpolar north, for example, Pavel Cenkl closely attends to such issues of human and nonhuman mobility in relation to practices of hunting and transhumance. In addition to the particular biotic, climatic, topographic, and other natural features addressed in work like Cenkl’s, structures of the built borderlands environment (fences, roads, trenches, walls, etc.) also result in certain ecologies of mobility along and across these regions. When they have been considered in human and humanities contexts, ecologies of mobility have typically been approached through questions such as (un)sustainabilities in human travel practices, urban planning and other transportation infrastructure, or of wild lands access vs preservation. These are productive and relevant areas of inquiry, and not unrelated to this project. However, rather than examining “the different ecologies that are created or destabilized by our various modes of mobility,” here my interest is, conversely, more in the particular mobilities (human and otherwise) that result from the natural and built environment of the Mexico-US borderlands (Withers 72).

In the essay “Permeabilities, Ecology and Geopolitical Boundaries,” anthropologist Hilary Cunningham discusses the above issues in relation to a range of different international borders, noting that these are “never simply or uniformly permeable but . . .

are differentially ‘open and closed,’” at which point she poses “the question of *permeable for whom*” (373-74). Cunningham observes that, because “such borders have also been implemented within a complex set of relations with ‘nature,’” the resulting ecological systems “are also made up of complex kinds of boundaries, territorializations and agencies, and as such, entail many different . . . patterns of mobility” for “both human and nonhuman” biota (374-75). These patterns bear some closer consideration and historicizing here.

Mobilities and Permeabilities: Death and Taxa

In mapping its uneven impacts on the embodied lives it transects, I wish to illustrate the border as an ever-more physical embodiment of certain political agencies that have taken form by accretion since the nineteenth century. Alex Hunt notes how, in the US Army Corps of Topographical Engineers’ 1857 “Report on the United States and Mexican Boundary Survey,” William H. Emory, was tasked with projecting and inscribing the “absolute space of the state . . . onto the territory,” representing and asserting the border as a line “both culturally and naturally proper” (129, 131). For the first half-century of its invention, the border’s initial physical presence on the land began softly from these first surveys as a series of widely-spaced stone and concrete pyramids and monuments (Hunt 139). However, in the book *Border Land, Border Water*, environmental and border historian J.C. Alvarez points to the early twentieth century, “before the advent of the US Border Patrol,” as the period in which “the border region was first converted into a modern militarized police zone” (55). While many Mexicans fled to the US as refugees from the Mexican Revolution, the US temporarily militarized the border, to the point that at the height of deployment in 1917, “there were 160,000 American troops on the line” (53). Although their primary stated purpose was initially “to enforce neutrality laws” (53), Alvarez establishes that these deployments’ actual goal was an extension of US power (80). Alvarez demonstrates how “variations on these tactics persist to the present day, accompanied by a more durable built environment of policing” (55).

Perhaps of greatest interest to this discussion, however, is Alvarez’s observations on the emergence at this moment of what he refers to as “a hybrid patrol network of both animals and machines” (83). In this early military “transition from animal power to machine power,” the latter included preexisting rail lines, tractors, trucks and other “[r]ecently invented motor vehicles and airplanes,” operating concurrently alongside “mule trains and cavalry units” (75). In such instances, Alvarez argues that “[t]he mules themselves were a type of infrastructure, . . . monetized and standardized” through a system of anatomical and “technological knowledge” about the working “component parts” and “details of their bodies” (77, 79). Although this particular animal, human, machine hybrid military assemblage was largely dissolved when American forces were redeployed to World War II, Alvarez observes that “the accumulated work of building transportation infrastructure, mapping, surveying, and demarcating the border region [which] was all brought to bear in the context of a military invasion” would articulate a “landscape of coercive force . . . in the built world of the border region,” thus defining “US

federal border policing during the twentieth century and into the twenty-first.” (83, 92). In this period, decades before mass arrests and deportations like 1954’s “Operation Wetback,” and nearly a century before the actual placement of physical barriers and walls, we recognize the kinds of bodies (and kinds and character of assemblages of bodies) that were initially deployed on exceptional and provisional military terms, but which have now become normalized as a permanently installed presence in the borderlands.

One recent aspect of this revolution-era hybrid paramilitary apparatus remaining in use gained widespread attention in September 2021. When the now infamous photos and video of Border Patrol officers on horseback, charging, whipping, chasing, and grabbing Haitian asylum seekers crossing the Rio Grande between Coahuila and Texas circulated in news and social media, public denunciation of these tactics was strong and widespread. The political and public response to this incident—particularly to the cavalry/men-on-horses imagery—revealed latent guilt and anxiety in US national consciousness for legacies and ongoing practices of lynching and vigilantism in the region, and more generally, of deploying nonhuman animals such as horses and dogs against brown and black people as a means of imposing upon them a status of less-than-human. This unease was cynically underscored by the Biden administration’s response of cross-species deflection; in order to placate national anxieties about the optics of US border enforcement, while still maintaining its prevention through deterrence and mass deportation policies, they merely placed a moratorium on the Border Patrol’s use of horses in the Del Rio area.

Similar patterns of settler colonial and neoliberal deployment of violent multispecies assemblages against colonized groups is visible in other border regions. For instance, in September 2016, when indigenous water and land protectors intervened nonviolently to prevent Dakota Access pipeline bulldozers from cutting through tribal burial grounds and cultural sites on unceded Sioux lands, private security guards weaponized animal and botanical/chemical agents (German shepherds and pepper spray/oleoresin capsicum) against them. The former species is of Eurasian origin, the latter domesticated and cultivated in the Americas thousands of years prior to European colonization; each have long participated historically as weaponized agents, of colonial incursion, and of indigenous defense, respectively. Of the numerous cruelties attending the violent suppression of Native and other local opposition to the pipeline over the following year, the most salient to this discussion include the use of dog kennels by local law enforcement to detain protestors in mass arrest; the eventual deployment of US Border Patrol agents to ancestral Sioux lands on the northern boundary of the Standing Rock Reservation in November 2016; and, later that month, North Dakota police’s use of water cannons against water protectors in subfreezing temperatures. The appalling irony of weaponizing water—against people protecting water as sacred—is certainly not lost on those targeted. And it disturbingly illustrates the material and spiritual contours of Western instrumentalism in this quintessentially twenty-first century instance of militarized complicity between settler colonial and neoliberal interests, seeking to expedite the extraction and channeling of petroleum (and its entailed risks) through native lands. The use of such tactics against colonized indigenous and mestizo

communities, along both its internal and its outer borders, also demonstrates the US's character as a settler state, and its ongoing disposition toward black and brown bodies, especially in these various borderlands.

Although the US's southern border began taking the form of fenced boundaries later into the 1990s (Haddal 2), linear, physical barriers to the passage of bodies across sections of the border began, themselves, as lines of human bodies when, "in 1993, 'Operation Blockade' was deployed in the El Paso area [and] 450 agents working overtime covered a twenty mile stretch of the border" (Eschbach et al. 448). Timothy Dunn describes how this "mass posting of agents created an imposing line, if not virtual wall, of agents along the river" (60). Ensuing early nineties border security operations, such as "'Hold the Line' in El Paso, 'Gatekeeper' in San Diego, 'Lower Rio Grande' in South Texas, and later, 'Safeguard' in southern Arizona . . . positioned Border Patrol agents *en masse* along historically used migrant corridors" (Rosas 338). And Edward Williams and Irasema Coronado refer to these mid-nineties deployment operations as deploying "massive numbers of Border Patrol officers, national guardsmen, and other paramilitary" personnel (72). The overwhelming impression left by such accounts is of the immense material presence of militarized human bodies physically walling off passage to other migrant human bodies along these sections of the border. Through the mid-90s, before the escalation of built walls and fences, the walls and fences were human.

But as these actual bodies were eventually replaced, in many cases, by steel walls and concrete barricades, the agency of erstwhile human blockades was distributed into and over the length of these barriers built into the landscape. While such imposing structures are outstandingly visible, the "funneling," "channeling," or "balloon" effects these structures have had, forcing migrants across "killing deserts" and other forms of extreme risk and exposure have been less immediately observable (De León 6; Madsen; Rosas 334, 338). Hunt notes that, since the earliest boundary surveys, the borderlands deserts' aridity was conceived as a "buffer zone" of "racial separation," and an implicit deterrent to crossing (144-45). And Patrick Ettinger shows how, at least as far back as the Chinese exclusion acts of 1882, US authorities have consciously and deliberately understood and exploited the rough terrain and extreme climate conditions of remote borderlands mountains and deserts in early instances of what would officially become a prevention through deterrence (PTD) policy in the early nineties (256-57).

However, it was not until several years after the placement of these first barriers, human and structural, through more prominent migration corridors, that the thousands of "environmental deaths" by factors such as falls, drowning, "hyperthermia, hypothermia and dehydration" began to gain the attention of researchers (Eschbach et al. 430, 442) and scholars recognizing the ways in which "Border Patrol's strategy . . . wields the environment itself as a weapon" "against immigrants in the name of national security" (Adamson 234; Ray 2010, 726, 728). In historicizing this arc of PTD enforcement tactics, we witness the distribution of human agency from settler colonial, ethnonationalist, and neoliberal US policy makers, to armed paramilitary human bodies, then into structures of the built environment, and, finally, as that agency is further diffused across complex webs

of multiple kinds of human and nonhuman actors—plants, animals, landforms, watercourses, climate and weather conditions, and so on.

In his 2015 book *The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail*, Jason De León applies a holistic “four-field anthropology—that is ethnography, archaeology, forensic science, and linguistics” to study the impacts of prevention through deterrence on human migrants, in order to better “understand the structure of a wall of deterrence that is equal parts human, animal, plant, object, geography, temperature, and unknown” (14, 39). Framing this as a form of “structural violence,” De León documents the “cunning way that nature has been conscripted by the Border Patrol to act as an enforcer while simultaneously providing this federal agency with plausible deniability regarding blame for any victims the desert may claim” (16, 29-30). He argues that although “this violence has been outsourced” to environmental factors and agents, this “does not mean these fatalities should be characterized as ‘unintended consequences’ or natural events” (67-68). Going on to detail the full, morbid extent of this phenomenon, which he terms “necroviolence,” De León contends “that the unique deaths that border crossers experience and the way nature affects their bodies are a form of postmortem violence that developed out of the underlying logic of” PTD, wherein “American necropolitics are pecked onto the bones of those we deem excludable” (69, 72, 84). Such state-sanctioned deployment of “remote *deathscape(s)*” (deserts, jungles, oceans, etc.) for the illicit mass “disappearing” of human bodies is a tactic long practiced against and understood by indigenous, politically vulnerable, female and queer, dissident, and other marginalized people in Mexico and across Latin America generally (De León 84). In such instances, these *desaparecidos*—and their survivors—increasingly participate in “political imaginaries” of “transnational solidarity” with those of Argentina, Chile, Mexico, Peru, and across much of Central and South America (Rosas 336, 343; Brooks 129-135).

Due to the unavailability of a human cadaver farm in or near the Sonoran Desert, De León applies what he calls “multispecies ethnography,” using the bodies of domestic pigs to study the dismemberment, decomposition, weathering, animal scavenging (coyotes, dogs, vultures, insects), and dispersal of the bodies of people who die and remain missing in the course of their migration across the region (64, 75-80). He defines this approach as “an ethnography that focuses on how the lives and deaths of humans and nonhumans are closely intertwined and jointly shaped by cultural, economic, and political forces,” in order to “better document the demise of people the federal government has constructed as nonsubjects; people whose lives have no political or social value,” or, in other words, are considered less-than-fully-human (64). In recognizing the implicit and dark irony in the fact that “these animals are now tasked with humanizing death,” De León states that his purpose here is “to bear witness to animal suffering but also to demonstrate how pigs can do the social work of providing humans with access to the largely invisible suffering and violence associated with the postmortem lives of migrants” (64-65).

In contrast to earlier-noted instances in which nonhuman animals are deployed against migrant and other indigenous and mestizo people, in these multispecies entanglements, animals participate in the revelation and denunciation of state sponsored violence. Such cross-species witnessing can take many forms. For example, in the print

“Denounce the complicity of the Mexican government,” revolutionary artist collective ASARO depicts a scavenging dog uncovering the remains of a female human body. The call for denunciation is situated within a growing public recognition of what has increasingly been referred to as an “epidemic” of femicides in Mexico, both internally as well as in the borderlands. This national crisis is compounded by a negligent state that routinely fails or refuses to do its diligence in investigating femicides, especially in instances where public security and legal systems are known to collude with other parties, such as cartels, human traffickers, and US agencies who negotiate and enact coercive binational policies that expose refugees, asylum seekers, and other migrants to deadly risks. Here the denunciation is twofold. The title appeals directly to viewers to participate in demands for accountability, while the scavenging dog’s act constitutes the investigation of a femicide and is itself an act of denunciation.



fig. 1: “Denunciar la complicidad del gobierno de México,” ASARO (Asamblea de Artistas Revolucionarios de Oaxaca), 2006, wood engraving print.

These cross- and multispecies examples of witnessing, authenticating, and thus rehumanizing the deaths of those often regarded as less than fully human gestures inevitably toward larger questions about the status of other nonhuman animals in the borderlands. Over the past two decades of post-9/11 securitization, as sections along the Mexico-US border have been increasingly hardened, ecologists have studied the new (im)permeabilities and uneven mobilities emerging for nonhuman migrants through these regions. For example, in 2008, US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) completed construction on twelve new contiguous miles of barrier fencing in the Malpai Borderlands region of Arizona, New Mexico, Chihuahua, and Sonora. An analysis published shortly thereafter in *Conservation Biology* notes that

The construction was part of the U.S. Secure Fence Act of 2006, which mandated installation of fences, barriers, roads, and surveillance technology on five segments of the United States-Mexican border, totaling approximately 1120 km [700 miles] (or 35% of the entire border) by December 2008. To expedite implementation of the act, Congress authorized the secretary of Homeland Security to waive all or parts of 37 federal statutes pertaining to the conservation of cultural and environmental resources, including the National Environmental Policy Act, the Endangered Species Act (ESA), the Clean Air and Clean Water acts, and the Antiquities Act. (Sayre and Knight 345)

The authors explain how this particular stretch of the DHS project also disrupts “cultural sites and artifacts” across a region that “harbors an estimated 4000 species of plants, 104 species of mammals, 327 species of birds, 136 species of reptiles and amphibians, and the greatest known richness of bee species in the world . . . [in part] due to its location at the intersection of five continental biomes” (345). And, placing this region within the larger context of the borderlands generally, they note that

there are more species of plants and animals in the borderlands than in any other place of comparable size in the United States. . . . Indeed, it is precisely the relative lack of human impacts that has allowed the biological and cultural resources along the border to persist in situ, and it is for this reason that hardening the border may represent a threat of such great proportions. (345-46)

The threat noted above is not one of human migration and its potential or supposed impacts in the region—which has been recognized in “green anti-immigration discourse” and critically problematized for its “misdirected, uninformed, and dangerous” xenophobia and racism (Ray 2010, 729). Rather, the authors raise concerns primarily about environmental impacts of infrastructure associated with the building project, and, secondarily, about its impacts on the region’s prehistoric and historic “[c]ultural sites and artifacts” (345). The authors go on to discuss, more specifically, various species (mule deer, pronghorn antelope, javelina, coyote, mountain lion, etc.) who “can and do pass under or over this type of [Normandy] barrier, albeit after a period of cautious familiarization or hesitation” while newly constructed cattle guards “are effectively lethal pit-fall traps” for other, smaller species of mammals, amphibians, and reptiles (346-47).

Likewise, in 2009, in response to these same DHS border-hardening developments, the Cornell Lab of Ornithology partnered with the International League of Conservation Photographers to travel the entire length of the border to produce the short

twelve-minute documentary “Borderlands, Continental Divide.” The film’s stated purpose was “to raise awareness of the peril that border infrastructure places on the long-term survival of myriad species that live in the borderlands,” and it depicts a suite of wildlife impacted by various stretches of metal fencing, concrete walls, and other barriers, along with the erosion and other habitat degradation their construction entails. Foxes, jackrabbits, ground squirrels, prairie dogs, bobcats, ocelots, bison, porcupines, badgers, geese, grebes, Gila monsters, desert tortoises, toads, and other animals are specifically discussed and shown, in many cases, blocked by or bumping up against the fence, unable to pass through. And a study from the same period to those above, focusing more specifically on Ferruginous Pygmy-Owls and desert bighorn sheep, notes the ways in which “security infrastructure along international boundaries threatens to degrade [landscape] connectivity” and the “transboundary movements” of wildlife in these “highly fragmented environments” (Flesch et al. 171-72). These authors examine and compare the various body shapes and sizes (relative to gaps in or under certain fencing), and mobilities (terrestrial/pedestrian, flying heights, etc.) of “many Neotropical and Nearctic taxa” (desert tortoise, turkey, quail, black bear, jaguar, bats, etc.) whose ranges converge in the borderlands, concluding, in part, that “in regions with continuous impermeable fencing, wildlife crossing structures should be considered” (172, 180).

A consistent observation in these and other such studies is that the border’s “impacts are . . . uneven across different types of organisms, communities, and processes; and causal interactions are complex and difficult to disentangle” (Sayre and Knight 346). For example, they note how DHS enforcement roads may act as corridors for “invasive or nonnative plant species” (347), language that is often mirrored in nativist and other dehumanizing US rhetoric that has long marked the bodies of human migrants and immigrants as less-than-human (Ray 2010, 713-14; Santa Ana 314; Zavisca; Brooks). And because border fencing and walls are built with the explicit intention of blocking the movement of a single species—humans—that measures might be taken to offer better “transboundary connectivity” for other nonhuman animals (Flesch et al. 172). A noteworthy exception to this single-species-based exclusion has been the “search and destroy” missions directed toward “the invasion of Africanized ‘killer’ bees” when they crossed into the US from the south in the early 1990s (Williams and Coronado 70). One parallel between the crossing of these insects and of people over this national border that should strike us as unsettlingly familiar, is the siege mentality and rhetoric of panic and menace directed toward the former that currently persists toward the latter in public discourse. In the mid-90s, Hachiro Shimanuki, then national coordinator of USDA Agricultural Research Service’s Africanized Honey Bee Program, noted that “Africanized honey bees are actually a far cry from the image of the fearsome marauders constantly hunting for human victims that the media hype has created” (2). However, today a Google search for “killer bee” still brings in over two million results, compared to just over fifty thousand for “Africanized bee.” The close correspondence between the kinds of inflammatory epithets applied to “killer” bees nearly three decades ago, and those of “criminal,” “rapist,” and “murderer,” contemptuously applied to human migrants by the US’s forty-fifth president, should not escape our attention. Although measures taken

against these insects' entry into the US coincided roughly with the escalation of other such enforcement measures against human migrants, a key difference here is that the traplines and other monitoring practices undertaken with the bees were generally binational collaborations of Mexican and US researchers (Kaplan 6), as opposed to the unilateral actions taken by the US against human migrants.

Aside from the rhetorical and political parallels these studies in borderlands movement ecology illustrate, they should also remind us of the various layers of disastrous impacts such walls and other barriers entail for local ecosystems, as well as for the nonhuman biota that require passage through them as they move between sometimes distant seasonal ranges. Also, although, it is not my interest here to suggest that wildlife conservation is necessarily or in these cases misanthropic or racist, I do wish to draw greater attention to the complex interspecies and other material entanglements, the uneven contours of which I believe these studies help describe. Certain nonhuman animals participate in (certain kinds of) mobility, while (certain kinds of) humans do not. Certain material "human" and "natural" "resources" and substances, often asymmetrically commodified through "free trade" arrangements, participate unevenly in cross-border movement and traffic (Galemba 716, 729). And certain humans, and their "borderless" deterritorialized flows of capital, enjoy free passage, while others carry heavy material burdens and risks.

For example, in the hardening of the border since the mid 1990s, and its swollen militarization and securitization along many stretches of the boundary post-9/11, human migrants are increasingly compelled to throw in their lot with botanical partners or passengers like cannabis, cocaine, or heroin (Dunn 283). Javier Durán notes that, with "the increased number of actors involved," these "actors are part of full networks of very violent and competitive agendas in a context where the distinction between authorities and criminals is constantly blurred," and "that the human trafficking networks have close ties with drug traffickers, making the issue even more complex and dangerous for migrants" (206). As one migrant man explains in Francisco Cantú's 2018 memoir-exposé, "I don't want to carry drugs across the desert, I don't want to get myself into more problems, but sometimes it's not a choice. The same people who control the drug smuggling control the human trafficking, so in some places if you want to get across, you have to carry a load" (239). In such instances, we see how transnational human appetites for certain controlled botanical substances merge with northern demands for labor-ready human bodies, to dehumanize and recast certain people as "mules" and *pollos*, and others as "coyotes" and *polleros*.

Conclusion

Although elsewhere I and others have explored some of the more transformative, liberatory, and frankly, encouraging transnational interspecies alliances and solidarities that are emerging in response to uneven and dehumanizing valuations of life in the borderlands detailed here (Brooks; Ray "Environmental Justice"; Wald 207-220), I have primarily focused this essay's attention on these ongoing tragedies in the borderlands.

However, in order to clarify their structure and shape in conclusion, and to briefly indicate some directions toward progress, I wish to turn to a final set of examples. Earlier in this essay, I mentioned the 2009 partnership between Cornell Lab of Ornithology and the International League of Conservation Photographers to create a short video called “Borderlands, Continental Divide.” One of the video’s central arguments is that the conservationist priorities to “respect the needs of wildlife” by leaving corridors open for nonhuman animals (many of which are critically endangered) “to move through the landscape” are compatible with a model of “national security . . . [that] depends on the ability to seal off our borders.” Amid a montage of scenic border-region landscape photos interspersed with jarring images of sections of new border wall, and a soft audio backdrop of birdsong, wind, and camera shutter clicks, the video makes its closing appeal: “We can protect both our borders and our wildlife. Doing so is not only important but necessary” (9:00). Strategically understandable as this rhetorical framing may have been in its moment—and whether or not the above claim is actually true in practice—what I wish to underscore here is the *positionality* of such claims. As it applies to both wildlife and borders, the “our” of this final couplet remains a settler colonial one, framing the needs for protecting both evenly and above the needs of migrant, indigenous, mestizo, and other humans rendered vulnerable by colonialist and neoliberal economic and political structures. What I hope this and the above interspecies examples unmistakably indicate is the practical untenability of, and the severe harm done in continuing to pursue borderlands solutions from Western colonialist or human exceptionalist positionalities.

However, there have been significant shifts in the decade or so since the above and other aforementioned studies suggested possibilities for securing the border against human migrants while “enhanc[ing] connectivity” for “wildlife movement” (Flesch et al. 180). Human rights advocates, transnational indigenous sovereignty movements, and conservation organizations have increasingly rejected or simply bypassed arguments dependent on speciesism, human exceptionalism, individual rights, and limited wildlife protections, in favor of more profoundly holistic, interspecies, and decolonial claims to migrancy, human and otherwise. Such shifts are apparent, for instance, in a seventy-page report released in September 2018 by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), in partnership with the Center for Biological Diversity, the Southwest Environmental Center, the Sierra Club, and the Southern Border Communities Coalition. Titled “Death, Damage, and Failure: Past, Present, and Future Impacts of Walls on U.S.-Mexico Border,” the report details “the wide-ranging damages that existing walls have inflicted upon border communities, the environment, and the lives of border crossers” (2). In framing the harm and risk entailed in a hardened, militarized, and increasingly walled border as mutually shared among human and larger biotic communities, the ACLU report is in many ways encouragingly representative of the more-than-human turn that our attention must take in order to address these and other human rights, environmental justice, and conservation crises, including migrancy, displacement, refugeeism, and extinction.

In her popular and quite excellent 2020 book *The Next Great Migration: The Beauty and Terror of Life on the Move*, journalist Sonia Shah makes a ranging and often lyrical case for, among other things, naturalizing human migration. The book does so largely by

locating human migration within the global context of other nonhuman migrations, and by historicizing the normalization of hardened international borders as a recent and unnecessary development, to which there exist many alternatives. In the book's closing section, Shah invites readers to

envision a world in which people, too, safely move across the landscape. People seeking to move as the climate changes or as their livelihoods dry up don't have to risk being hunted down by Border Patrol agents or drowning in the sea or dying in the desert. International borders that now bristle with armed guards, razor wire, and border walls could be made softer and more permeable. (315)

The solutions she discusses in this concluding appeal for making "migration safe, dignified, and humane" include countries creating "legal pathways for migrants in search of new livelihoods . . . to collect and share [their] data . . . and provide them with proof of their identity, so that migration can become more regular and orderly," as well as "measures to make it easier for migrants to send funds and other support to the places they've left behind" (315-16). Shah concludes by suggesting how we "can turn migration from a crisis into its opposite: the solution" (316). Given the current status of the Mexico-US borderlands, such alternatives are, of course, tremendously appealing as comparatively compassionate and reasonable models for modest progress. And it is genuinely encouraging to see the prospect of these appeals reaching wider audiences. However, such arguments are still fraught with elisions of ongoing harm, as they remain contained within vestiges of colonialist, neoliberal, and globalist geopolitical paradigms that also assume as natural the economic and political causes—and the environmental factors these produce—that increasingly compel certain migrants (human and nonhuman) to leave their homes in order to survive.⁴ In removing built walls that violently divide both human and nonhuman communities and kin, we cannot then be satisfied with leaving in place colonial power systems, political structures, and patterns of thought. Just and viable solutions to the migratory circumstances produced by colonialism and environmental degradation must be prepared to engage more honestly and creatively with models other than Western humanist and speciesist ones. Our work as scholars, teachers, and human beings includes seeking to better identify, explore, understand, and practice such models.

Submission received 3 February 2022

Revised version accepted 4 September 2022

⁴ Just as many communities around the world are asserting their right to migrate as a matter of survival, others facing environmental and economic factors making survival in their home regions more precarious are asserting their right to not have to be forced to migrate. For example, labor journalist David Bacon's 2013 *The Right to Stay Home: How US Policy Drives Mexican Migration*, details *derecho de no migrar* movements in Oaxaca and elsewhere across Mexico, as they respond to global trade liberalization factors that are forcing people to leave lands where they have lived for thousands of years. Bacon argues that "protecting Mexico's environment, and the rights of migrants displaced by environmental and economic causes, requires making the connection between trade reform, environmental protection, and immigrant and labor rights" (4). Rob Nixon's concept of "displacement without moving" is especially operative in such instances (19).

Works Cited

- Adamson, Joni. "Encounter with a Mexican Jaguar: Nature, NAFTA, Militarization, and Ranching in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands." *Globalization on the Line: Culture, Capital, and Citizenship at U.S. Borders*. Edited by Claudia Sadowski-Smith, Palgrave, 2002, pp. 221-40.
- Alvarez, C. J. *Border Land, Border Water: A History of Construction on the US-Mexico Divide*. University of Texas Press, 2019.
- Bacon, David. *The Right to Stay Home: How US Policy Drives Mexican Migration*. Beacon Press, 2013.
- Bello, David A. *Across Forest, Steppe and Mountain: Environment, Identity and Empire in Qing China's Borderlands*. Cambridge University Press, 2015.
- Bhambra, Gurinder K. "Postcolonial and Decolonial Dialogues." *Postcolonial Studies*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2014, pp. 115-121.
- "Borderlands, Continental Divide." *Cornell Lab of Ornithology*, uploaded by International League of Conservation Photographers, 14 Oct. 2009. *Vimeo*, <https://vimeo.com/7065400>. Accessed 29 Jan. 2022.
- Brooks, English. "Quisieron Enterrarnos: Recovering Bare Life in More-than-Human Immigrant Subjectivities." *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies*, vol. 46, no. 2, Fall 2021, pp. 113-142.
- Cantú, Francisco. *The Line Becomes a River: Dispatches from the Border*. Riverhead Books, 2018.
- Cenkl, Pavel. "Reading Climate Change and Work in the Circumpolar North." *The Bioregional Imagination: Literature, Ecology, and Place*. Edited by Cheryll Glotfelty, Karla Armbruster, and Tom Lynch, University of Georgia Press, 2012, pp. 295-311.
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. "Postcolonial Studies and the Challenge of Climate Change." *New Literary History*, vol. 43, no. 1, 2012, pp. 1-18.
- Cunningham, Hilary. "Permeabilities, Ecology and Geopolitical Boundaries." *A Companion to Border Studies*. Edited by Thomas M. Wilson and Hastings Donnan, Blackwell, 2012, pp. 371-86.
- De León, Jason. *The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail*. University of California Press, 2015.
- De Vos, Jurriaan M., et al. "Estimating the Normal Background Rate of Species Extinction." *Conservation Biology*, vol. 29, no. 2, April 2015, pp. 452-462.
- "Death, Damage, and Failure: Past, Present, and Future Impacts of Walls on U.S.-Mexico Border." *ACLU Border Rights Center*, 12 Sept. 2018.
- Dunn, Timothy. *Blockading the Border and Human Rights: The El Paso Operation that Remade Immigration Enforcement*. University of Texas Press, 2009.
- Durán, Javier. "Ethical and Biopolitical Dimensions of Migrancy, Life, and Death in Mexico's Southern Border." *Migrant Deaths in the Arizona Desert: La Vida No Vale Nada*. Edited by Raquel Rubio-Goldsmith et al., University of Arizona Press, 2016, pp. 194-211.
- Eschbach, Karl, et al. "Death at the Border." *International Migration Review*, vol. 33, no. 2, Summer 1999, pp. 430-54.
- Ettinger, Patrick. *Imaginary Lines: Border Enforcement and the Origins of Undocumented Immigration: 1882-1930*. University of Texas Press, 2009.

- Flesch, Aaron, et al. "Potential Effects of the United States-Mexico Border Fence on Wildlife." *Conservation Biology*, vol. 24, no. 1, 2010, pp. 171-81.
- Galemba, Rebecca. "'Corn Is Food, Not Contraband:' The Right to 'Free Trade' at the Mexico-Guatemala Border." *American Ethnologist*, vol. 39, no. 4, pp. 716-34.
- Haddal, Chad, et al. *Border Security: Barriers Along the U.S. International Border*. Congressional Research Service, 16 March 2009.
- Haraway, Donna. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press, 2016.
- Hunt, Alex. "Mapping the Terrain, Marking the Earth: William Emory and the Writing of the U.S./Mexico Border." *American Literary Geographies: Spatial Practice and Cultural Production 1500-1900*. Edited by Martin Brückner and Hsuan L. Hsu. University of Delaware Press, 2007, pp. 127-46.
- Iovino, Serenella, and Serpil Oppermann "Material Ecocriticism: Materiality, Agency, and Models of Narrativity." *Ecozon@*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2012, pp. 75-91. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ecozona.2012.3.1.452>
- Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES). "Nature's Dangerous Decline 'Unprecedented' Species Extinction Rates 'Accelerating,'" May 2019. <https://www.ipbes.net/news/Media-Release-Global-Assessment>. Accessed 29 Jan. 2022.
- Kaplan, J. Kim. "Buzzing Across the Border: Scientists and Beekeepers Search for Ways to Lessen the Impact of Africanized Honey Bees on U.S. Agriculture and Society." *Agricultural Research*, vol. 44, no. 3, March 1996, pp. 4-10.
- Lynch, Tom. *Xerophilia: Ecocritical Explorations in Southwestern Literature*. Texas Tech University Press, 2008.
- Madsen, Kenneth. "Local Impacts of the Balloon Effect of Border Law Enforcement." *Geopolitics*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2007, pp. 280-98.
- Martinez, Rubén. "Desert America: Reading and Writing the Great Recession in the Borderlands." ASLE Ninth Biennial Conference, 23 June 2011, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN. Plenary Presentation.
- Mignolo, Walter. "Geopolitics of Sensing and Knowing: On (De)coloniality, Border Thinking, and Epistemic Disobedience." *Confero*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2013. pp. 129-50.
- Mignolo, Walter, and Catherine Walsh. *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis*. Duke University Press, 2018.
- Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard University Press, 2011.
- Postcommodity. "A Very Long Line" artist statement, 2016. <http://postcommodity.com/AVeryLongLine.html>. Accessed 29 Jan. 2022.
- Ray, Sarah Jaquette. "Endangering the Desert: Immigration, the Environment, and Security in the Arizona-Mexico Borderland." *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, vol. 17, no. 4, 2010, pp. 709-34.
- . "Environmental Justice and the Ecological Other in Ana Castillo's *So Far from God*." *Latinx Environmentalisms: Place, Justice, and the Decolonial*. Edited by Sarah D. Wald et al., Temple University Press, 2019, pp. 147-63.
- Rosas, Gilberto. "The Thickening Borderlands: Diffused Exceptionality and 'Immigrant' Social Struggles During the 'War on Terror.'" *Cultural Dynamics*, vol. 18, no. 3, 2006, pp. 335-49.

- Santa Ana, Otto. *Brown Tide Rising: Metaphors of Latinos in Contemporary American Public Discourse*. University of Texas Press, 2002.
- Sayre, Nathan F., and Richard L. Knight. "Potential Effects of United States-Mexico Border Hardening on Ecological and Human Communities in the Malpai Borderlands." *Conservation Biology*, vol. 24, no. 1, 2010, pp. 345-48.
- Schueller, Malini Johar. "Postcolonial American Studies." *American Literary History*, vol. 16, no. 1, Spring 2004, pp. 162- 75.
- Shah, Sonia. *The Next Great Migration: The Beauty and Terror of Life on the Move*. Bloomsbury, 2020.
- Shimanuki, Hachiro. "Africanized Honey Bees—the March North Has Slowed." *Agricultural Research*, vol. 44, no. 3, 1996, p. 2.
- Sidaway, James D. "Decolonizing Border Studies?" *Geopolitics*, vol. 24, no.1, 2019, pp. 270-75.
- United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHCR). "Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2020." <https://www.unhcr.org/flagship-reports/globaltrends/#>. Accessed 29 Jan. 2022.
- Wald, Sarah D. *The Nature of California: Race, Citizenship, and Farming Since the Dust Bowl*. University of Washington Press, 2016.
- Williams, Edward J., and Irasema Coronado. "The Hardening of the United States-Mexican Borderlands: Causes and Consequences." *International Boundaries Research Unit (IBRU) Boundary and Security Bulletin*, January 1994, pp. 69-73.
- Withers, Jeremy. "Introduction: The Ecologies of Mobility." *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, vol. 24, no. 1, Winter 2017, pp. 66-74.
- Zavisca, Jane. "Metaphorical Imagery in News Reporting on Migrant Deaths." *Migrant Deaths in the Arizona Desert: La Vida No Vale Nada*. Edited by Raquel Rubio-Goldsmith et al., University of Arizona Press, 2016. pp. 167–92.

Border Gnoseology: Akwaeke Emezi and the Decolonial Other-than-Human

Marta Sofía López
Universidad de León
marta-sofia.lopez@unileon.es

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ecoazona.2022.13.2.4669>



Abstract

The underlying assumption when speaking about the postcolonial nonhuman is that the other-than-human refers to what could be called, broadly speaking, the “natural world,” as opposed to “the human-as-Man,” but still usually understood in (Western) secular terms. Nevertheless, from the perspective of African onto-epistemologies, the nonhuman can also refer to the spiritual world, or to the diverse assemblages between the “natural,” the human and the sacred. *Freshwater* and *Dear Senthuran. A Black Spirit Memoir*, by Akwaeke Emezi, open up a space of “border gnoseology,” where contemporary Anglo-American discourses on transsexuality intersect with African ontologies and epistemologies, specifically with the well-known figure of the *ogbanje* and the sacred python as an avatar of Ala, the Earth goddess in Igbo culture, to produce a radically subversive embodied subjectivity. The ideas of movement, transing, tranimalcy and (transatlantic) crossing conspire to dismantle conventional Eurocentric humanist views on selfhood and identity. Reading Emezi on their own terms also requires revisiting alternative notions of temporality beyond secular, cisheteronormative, modern time, as well as an understanding that the sacred and the spiritual are indeed essential to the worldview and the processes of subjectivation of millions of people across the globe.

Keywords: Trans*, tranimality, Igbo cosmology, sacrality, Akwaeke Emezi.

Resumen

Cuando se habla de lo no humano postcolonial, la presuposición subyacente es que lo más-que-humano se refiere a lo que podríamos llamar, en términos generales, “el mundo natural,” como contrapuesto a lo humano-como-Hombre, pero todavía generalmente entendido desde la perspectiva del secularismo occidental. No obstante, en términos de las onto-epistemologías africanas, lo no humano puede también referirse al mundo espiritual, o a los diversos ensamblajes entre lo “natural,” lo humano y lo sagrado. *Freshwater* y *Dear Senthuran. A Black Spirit Memoir*, de Akwaeke Emezi, abren el espacio para una “gnoseología fronteriza” en la que los discursos angloamericanos contemporáneos sobre la transexualidad se entrecruzan con ontologías y cosmologías africanas, en particular con la conocida figura del *ogbanje* y con la pitón sagrada, como avatar de Ala, la diosa de la tierra igbo, para producir una subjetividad encarnada radicalmente subversiva. Las ideas de movimiento, transición, tranimalidad y cruce (transatlántico) conspiran para desmantelar nociones humanistas eurocéntricas del yo y la identidad. Leer a Emezi en sus propios términos implica también visitar nociones alternativas de la temporalidad más allá del tiempo secular moderno y cisheteronormativo, y al mismo tiempo entender que lo sagrado y lo espiritual son sin duda elementos esenciales en la visión del mundo y en los procesos de subjetivación de millones de personas en todo el planeta.

Palabras clave: Trans*, tranimalidad, cosmología igbo, sacralidad, Akwaeke Emezi.

I want to argue that “in the beginning is ‘trans’”: that what is original or primary is a not-yet differentiated singularity from which distinct genders, races, species, sexes, and sexualities are generated in a form of relative stability. Rather than the animal or the transindividual being a special test case that might provide the normal and normative with a basis for a renewed sense of its own difference, we should think the contrary: any dialogue between human and animal is preceded, conditioned, and haunted by a condition of transitivity. Fixed kinds such as the trans-gendered, trans-sexual, or trans-animal body are expressions of a more profound transitivity that is the condition for what becomes known as the human (Colebrook 228).

The trans as crossing becomes a space of simultaneities, whose orientation is other than just horizontal. The transatlantic is that space of simultaneity in which the body is also water and energy, the water is also energy and body, and the energy is also body and water. Transing, in this sense, is finding that space of transition with(in) body-water-energy. Water is the embodiment of trans-orientation (Silva Santana 183).

I am here and I am not here, real and not real, energy pushed into skin and bone. I am my others; we are one and we are many [...] I am the source of the spring. All freshwater comes out of my mouth (Emezi, *Freshwater* 226).

In their “Introduction” to the collection of essays *Postcolonial Animalities* (2020), Sinha and Baishya claim that “the fundamental predicament of studying the ‘nonhuman’ universe [...] is that it must pass through the human-as-Man, [...] which rests on the elevation of white, bourgeois, European, cisheterosexual masculinity as the only way to being human in Western modernity” (ix). Although this is irrefutably certain, and the essays in this volume are finely attuned to the “varying vectors of difference” and “the unevenly distributed materialities/structures and forms of agency” which affect the “shifting relational terrains that move in and out of the human and nonhuman” (x), both ways of being in the world are understood throughout the collection in consistently secular terms. Only one of the essays in the volume, namely “Wilder Powers: Magical Animalities in Tales of War and Terror,” by Jean M. Langford, points to the possibility of “a potential infinity of non-human animals” partaking of the divine (211) in suggesting that the distinction between the fabulous and the actual depends on “historically contingent measures for reality” (211). However, the very use of terms like “fabulous” or “magical” contributes to pre-empting any onto-epistemological claim to the real existence of forms of being that transcend in any way their embodied materiality, relegating them to the realm of folklore, legend or myth and therefore (unwillingly) privileging again Western frames of knowledge. Despite the editors’ explicit intention of skewing “the hierarchical divide between magical/transcendent and realist/natural” (2), from a critical reading of the collection we can ultimately infer that the (post)modern human-as-Man has not only emerged at the expense of women, peoples of colour, queers, nature and non-human animals, but also out of an agonistic fight with the Sacred or the divine, as Nietzsche sharply put it: “God is dead and we have killed him.” Mircea Eliade asserted in *The Sacred and the Profane* (1957) that the desacralization of the world is the basic experience of the modern man [sic], and with this desacralization of the cosmos comes a consciousness of time as “a precarious and evanescent duration which inevitably leads to

death” (85; my translation).¹ Underlying such a “degodded” (Wynter 263) worldview is the idea that flat, linear and teleological time and the understanding of the cosmos in purely material terms are universal, homogeneous frames of knowledge (epistemes) which affect and subjectively conform *all* human experience of the world, exception made of some peripheral, premodern, primitive societies or individuals. In Walter Mignolo’s terms, this perspective eventually amounts to “the denial of coevalness” (*The Darker Side* 249).

The experience of the divine or the sacred, however, as Jacqui Alexander claims in *Pedagogies of the Crossing*, is still essential to the processes of subjectivation of millions of people in the world: “Experience is a category of great epistemic import to feminism. But we have understood it primarily as secularized, as if it were absent Spirit and thus antithetical, albeit indirectly, to the Sacred” (296). And she goes on to argue:

[I]t is not only that (post)modernity’s secularism renders the Sacred as tradition, but it is also that tradition, understood as an extreme alterity, is always made to reside elsewhere and denied entry into the modern. In this context, African-based cosmological systems become subordinated to the European cosmos, not usually expected to accord any significance to modernity’s itinerary, their provenance of little value in the constitution and formation of the very *categories* on which we have relied. (296; emphasis in original)

But if Western (post)modernity, with its presumed global, homogeneous temporality and domesticated space, has (apparently) become universal, this has only been so by means of the multiple forms of violence and terror exercised on any alter/native ways of conceiving the cosmos and the human, or the divide between the human and the nonhuman (or the more-than-human). In the words of Mignolo again, “there is no modernity without coloniality and [...] coloniality is constitutive, and not derivative, of modernity” (*Local Histories* n/p). Indeed, it is impossible to disassociate modernity from the colonial project, an enterprise articulated around irreducible dualities, and which was sustained upon unassailable hierarchies of domination/exclusion: civilized/primitive; human/animal; male/female; spirit (understood exclusively in Christian terms)/body; culture/nature; science/myth. And as Sylvia Wynter so convincingly argues, it was the post-Renaissance construction of race as the emblematic axis of difference between the Europeans and their “Others”:

that would enable the now globally expanding West to replace the earlier mortal/immortal, natural/supernatural, human/the ancestors, the gods/God distinction as the one on whose basis all human groups had millennially ‘grounded’ their descriptive statement/prescriptive statements of what it is to be human, and to reground its secularizing own on a newly projected human/subhuman distinction instead. (264)

What are we then to make of Akwaeke Emezi, the Nigerian/Tamil/American author who declares to be neither male nor female, both flesh and (Black) spirit, human and animal, material yet immortal? In their debut novel, *Freshwater*, and in its epistolary, non-fictional sequel, *Dear Senthuran. A Black Spirit Memoir*,² as well as in their video art and in several

¹ “Definitivamente desacralizado, el tiempo se presenta como como una duración precaria y evanescente que conduce irremediabilmente a la muerte.”

² This deliberate blurring of conventional boundaries between genres (novel/memoir; fiction/fact) is proleptic of the many ways in which Emezi would defy established, naturalized Western categories, as we will see in the following pages

interviews,³ Emezi has proudly claimed their nonhuman and divine nature, thus reinscribing the sacred into the midst of (post)modernity by “grounding” their subjective being(s) on Igbo onto-epistemologies which, in turn, provide the foundation for their non-binarity and trans*ness.⁴ To complicate matters even further, Emezi claims to be simultaneously *ogbanje* (embodied spirit) and the child of Ala, the Igbo goddess of the Earth whose avatar is the sacred python, and therefore “tranimal.”

Freshwater, the novel that has launched Emezi’s career to international best-selling author in a question of a few months, tells the story of Ada from her childhood in Nigeria through to her formative years in the United States, where she finally comes out as trans* and nonhuman. As opposed to the conventional Western *bildungsroman*, the subjectivity that arises from this narrative, mostly undertaken by the spirits who inhabit the Ada,⁵ is decentered, multiple and fragmentary, illegible in terms of conventional identitary terms, including those that emerge out of transnormative narratives.⁶ As an amplification and further public assumption of this subjectivity, not as symbolic of cultural hybridity or metaphorical for mental illness, but as authentic and truthful to Emezi’s existential experience, *Dear Senthuran* revisits key moments in *Freshwater* and offers an account of the subsequent metamorphoses (tattoos, operations, self-fashioning) undergone by Emezi themselves, who in this text fully inhabits and recognizes their plural and other-than human selves and assumes the narrative voice. If insecurity, self-doubt, an impulse towards self-destruction and mental illness haunts the Ada in *Freshwater*, *Dear Senthuran* is a bold act of selves-assertion and an unapologetic disclosure. In their letter to Tony Morrison, Emezi proudly declares: “I made the NPR acknowledge my multiplicity on air, made the press use plural pronouns, centered Igbo ontology as a valid reality made unreal only by colonialism” (Emezi, *Dear Senthuran* 79). Their ultimate intention, they assert, is to offer a grounding alter/native center to “people like me: embodied but not human, terrified that they are going mad, unable to talk about it, and estranged from the indigenous Black realities that might make sense of it all” (79).

I am a white European, middle-class, cisgender woman. Although raised as a Catholic, I could not say I have much inclination for the spiritual; my intellectual trajectory has been, in that respect, preeminently postmodern. Therefore, I cannot pretend that I understand the reality Emezi inhabits and embodies, or the experience of the sacred they share, under different manifestations, with so many millions of people all over the world. But I am ready to assume that “reality” is much more, and surely other than, what can be measured and accounted for by Western scientific discourses, which from the Renaissance onwards have arrogantly monopolized (and imposed upon other epistemic

³ See their homepage <https://www.akwaeke.com/>

⁴ I use trans* with an asterisk not only to eschew the pathologizing connotations of more conventional terms, but also to underline the multiplicity of bodies, assemblages or ways of being that the paratactic nature of the asterisk invokes (Hayward and Weinstein 2015) as well as its link with decolonial projects (Kankler 2016).

⁵ Throughout the narrative, particularly in the sections narrated by the spiritual “we,” the main character is referred to as “the Ada,” possibly suggesting her condition of object in the hands of the spirits.

⁶ By “transnormativity” I refer to the legal, medical, psychological or surgical procedures, narratives and practices that understand transitioning as a (highly regulated) move from the assigned gender to the felt gender.

and ontological frameworks and geographies) the realms of “truth” and facticity, previously measured by the Church in Europe. “At stake in the distinction between the fabulous and the actual are not only historically contingent organizations of categories, but also historically contingent measures for reality,” (211) says Jean M. Langford. As for me, I would not dare to use the term “fabulous” to describe anybody else’s sense of what is real and true. I would rather accept, with Walter Mignolo, that “a world in which truth is taken to be in parenthesis and ‘geopolitics of knowledge’ prevails is a world of relational ontologies, as all indigenous philosophies around the world have been telling us for centuries” (Mignolo 2012).

Thus, in what follows, I will try to create bridges and connections between contemporary trans* theory and the Igbo worldview that sustains Emezi’s sense of who and what they are, in what is, on my part, a precarious exercise of translation between incommensurable dimensions and discursive universes,⁷ and an attempt to give account of a mode of “border thinking”⁸ which accommodates within itself an “African *gnosis*” (Mudimbe 1988)⁹ and a Western political, affective and bodily praxis, under the aegis of a decolonial project.¹⁰ In this, I will try to be faithful to the way in which Emezi conceives of themselves:

The possibility that I was an *ogbanje* came to me years before I wrote *Freshwater*, around the time I began calling myself trans, but it took me a while to collide and connect the two worlds. I suppressed it for a few years because most of my education had been in the sciences and all was Westernized—it was difficult for me to consider an Igbo spiritual world to be equally if not more valid. The legacy of colonialism has always taught us that such a world isn’t real, that it is nothing but juju and superstition. When I finally accepted its validity, I revisited what it could mean for my gender. (Emezi, *Dear Senthuran* 16)

To those familiar with Nigerian literature and anthropology, the figure of the *ogbanje* is well-known (Achebe 1986; Bastian 2002; Beneduce y Taliani 2006; Ilechukwu 2007; Schneider 2017): they are children who come and go between the world of the spirits and the world of the living, being born and dying in the same family again and again until the object (generally a stone) that serves them as a bridge between both worlds is found and

⁷ Susan Stryker admits that “‘Transgender’ is, without a doubt, a category of First World origin that is currently being exported for Third World consumption. Recently, however, engagements between a ‘transgender theory’ that circulates globally with Eurocentric privilege, and various non-European, colonized and diasporic communities whose members configure gender in ways that are marginalized within Eurocentric contexts, have begun to produce entirely new genres of analysis. Such encounters mark the geo-spatial, discursive and cultural boundaries of transgender studies as the field has been developed within Anglophone America and Europe, but also points towards the field’s untapped potential” (14).

⁸ In Walter Mignolo’s terms, “[t]o engage in border thinking requires engaging in conscientious epistemic, ethical, and *aesthetical* political projects. It requires first of all delinking from hegemonic epistemology (“absolute knowledge”) and the monoculture of the mind in its Western diversity” (n/p).

⁹ Mudimbe states the discomfort he found himself in when he had to survey the history of philosophy as a disciplined kind of practice imposed by colonialism and, at the same time, to deal with other undisciplined forms of knowledge that were reduced to subaltern knowledge by colonial disciplined knowing practices called philosophy and related to epistemology. The ‘African traditional system of thought’ was opposed to ‘philosophy’ as the traditional was opposed to the modern: philosophy became, in other words, a tool for subalternizing forms of knowledge beyond its disciplined boundaries. Mudimbe introduced the word *gnosis* to capture a wide range of forms of knowledge that ‘philosophy’ and ‘epistemology’ contributed to cast away (Mignolo, n/p).

¹⁰ Indeed, the idea of “border knowledge(s)” is akin to the notion of “double consciousness” as developed in Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic*, which significantly amplifies DuBois’s pioneering use of the term.

destroyed, thus tying them to the world of the living. Fastidious, ungovernable and tyrannical, they are considered to be a punishment to their parents. From Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) to Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1993) or Helen Oyeyemi's *Icarus Girl* (2005), from Jonh Pepper Clark's and Wole Soyinka's poetry to Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1976), *ogbanjes* (*abikus* for the Yoruba) have acquired a multiplicity of representational valences for African and Afrodiasporic writers. They have been read as symbols for the precarity and instability of the postcolonial state or the unavoidable hybridity of the Afro-European or Afro-American; as metaphors for the been-to writer or the despotic European colonizer; as a particular manifestation of psychopathology and as palliatives for maternal pain in contexts of extraordinarily high child mortality rates. In any case, the ontological status of the *ogbanje* is defined by continuous movement and transgression. According to Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi:

Ogbanje refers to the iconoclast, the one that runs back and forth from one realm of existence to another, always looking for a place other than where s/he is. It also refers to the mystical, unsettled condition of simultaneously existing in several spheres. Conceptually, the power inherent in the *ogbanje* erases natural and artificial boundaries that are drawn to systematize the cosmos. [...] The mystique of the time and space traveler, transcending human restraints, stands as the ultimate sign of liberation. Crossing borders that intersect others, *ogbanje* opens up the cosmos for a glimpse at the possibilities of becoming. (62)

Ogunyemi's proposal, articulated around ideas of movement, transformation, transgression and crossing, can thus be read in parallel to versions and visions of trans* ontology like those of Sandy Stone (1991), Susan Stryker (1994) or Eva Hayward (2015). To Stone, the transsexual body epitomizes "the complexities and ambiguities of lived experience, [...] that aspect of nature which Donna Haraway theorizes as Coyote—the Native American spirit animal which represents the power of continual transformation which is the heart of engaged life" (230). Stryker emphasizes the ways in which the "monstrous" transsexual body is located outside the "natural order." Hayward, on her part, asserts:

If trans* is ontological, it is that insofar as it is the movement that produces beingness. In other words, trans* is not a thing or being, it is rather the processes through which thingness and beingness are constituted. In its prefixial state, trans* is prepositionally oriented—marking the with, through, of, in, and across that make life possible. Trans*life works purposefully crabwise to ontological claims; trans* can be ontological to the extent that it is the movement across precisely vitality itself. (195-96)

Misty Bastian, in her article "Irregular Visitors," conversely emphasizes the eventual movement between, across or beyond genders that being *ogbanje* involves:

To be an *ogbanje* is to be categorized [as] other—and to bring alterity home in a way that transcends the more ordinary, bifurcated "otherness" of gender. This other gender is marked from birth—as male and female statuses are marked—by special behaviors towards and physical adornment of the child. The sexual appearance of the *ogbanje* may, indeed, be seen as a sham—yet another promise that the *ogbanje* is likely to break in its refusal to act according to human norms. (qtd. in Emezi, *Dear Senthuran* 11)

Emezi chooses this quotation from Bastian to head her essay "Mutilation," included in *Dear Senthuran*, which explains in retrospect the motivations of the author to transform and neutralize their body, as they are partly recounted through the voice of Ada and her

brothersisters in *Freshwater*. As opposed to the transnormative narrative of the “wrong body,” which ultimately reinforces “the binary phallographic founding view by which Western bodies and subjectivities are authorized, [in which] only one body per gendered subject is right” (Stone 231), Emezi transposes their feeling of “wrong” embodiment to the spiritual plane. What is definitely wrong with them is the fact itself of having a human body, and a sexed one at that:

If ogbanje represents an overlapping of realities—a spirit who looks incredibly convincing as a human—then what does it look like for one to experience dysphoria and take surgical steps to modify it? [...] What can we call the dysphoria experienced by spirits who find themselves embodied in human form? Flesh dysphoria, perhaps. Nonhuman dysphoria. Spirit dysphoria. Metaphysical dysphoria. I don’t know but it required me to modify my body to reflect the kind of entity I am. (Emezi, *Dear Senthuran* 15-16)

But the Ada’s/Emezi’s abject embodiment, “this abomination of the fleshly” (Emezi, *Freshwater* 4), does not only answer to their being *ogbanje*. As the narrative “we” in *Freshwater* expresses it, “it was an unusual incarnation, to be the child of Ala as well as an ogbanje, to be mothered by the god who owns life yet pulled toward death” (207). The dialectics between self-destruction and self-preservation, or in other words, the will to return to the world of Spirit which marks the trajectory of the *ogbanje* and the assurance of the continuity of life, which is the essence of Ala’s sacrality, constitutes the narrative substance of the novel and of *Dear Senthuran*. In *Freshwater*, the Ada’s final submission to Ala’s will and the recognition of her filial relationship to the python also marks her true rite of passage towards selves-recognition and affirmation, which further supports Emezi’s/Ada’s claim to a nonhuman, or other-than-human, status: “I am here and I am not here, real and not real, energy pushed into skin and bone. I am my others; we are one and we are many [...] I am the source of the spring. All freshwater comes out of my mouth” (226). From the very moment Emezi/Ada discovers that their name means “egg of the python” and even before, from the time of their first physical encounter with her, they recognize their familial relationship to Ala’s avatar. Her father had told the Ada that her name meant “precious,” “but that translation is loose and inadequate. The name meant, in its truest form, the egg of a python” (9). The narrative “we” goes on to explain:

Before a christ-induced amnesia struck the humans, it was well known that the python was sacred, beyond reptile. It is the source of the stream, the flesh form of the god Ala, who is the earth herself, the judge and mother, the giver of law. [...] It was taboo to kill her python, and of its egg, they would say you cannot find it. And if you find it, they would add, you cannot touch it. For the egg of a python and the child of Ala is not, and can never be, intended for your hands (9).

Thus, while Saachi, the Ada’s mother, observes in amazement that her baby does not move on all fours, but “crawls like a serpent” (10), Saul, her father and “a modern Igbo man,” does not hesitate to kill the python that is staring at her little child in the toilet: “He snatched her up and away, took a machete, went back and hacked the python to bits. Ala (our mother) dissolved amid broken scales and pieces of flesh” (13).¹¹ Nevertheless, Ala

¹¹ This act inevitably evokes the scene in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* when Okonkwo’s son also desecrates the sacred python, thus bringing about the end of an era and clearing the way for Christianity, which would prove to be devastating for the community.

would never leave her child alone: “After all, the Ada was her hatchling, her bloodthirsty little sun, covered in translucent scales” (38). As the grown-up Ada goes on learning about Igbo spirituality, she also sees with increasing clarity who she/they is/are: “We have understood what we are, the places we are suspended in, between the inaccurate concepts of male and female. [...] The prophecies that came later, [...] they explained this—the shifting, the quick skinning and reshaping, the falling and revival of scales” (193).

From a Western perspective, the identification between Ada and the python points directly to the notion of “tranimality,” which Sebastian De Line explains as follows: “‘Tranimalities’ is a neologism stemming from the word *tranimal* (trans and animal). In trans studies, words such as “*tranimal*” and “*tranimacy*” have become ways to describe relationships between nonhuman and human animals, trans embodiment, and questions relating to agency” (Hayward and Weinstein 100). Theoretical discourses on *tranimality* make manifest the points of confluence between trans* and animal embodiment, in so much as both forms of life are particularly vulnerable and often their subjectivities are expelled from a discourse on the human which has its roots on the idea of sexual dimorphism as a precondition for identity. Furthermore, both *tranimals* and trans* humans are engaged in the search for an “affirmative reconfiguration of trans-morphic embodiment *via* a notion of shared processes and experiences of worldly becoming” (Bresser 13). Hence, in the words of Hayward and Westein, “[t]ranimalities does not strive to provide yet another critique of humanism simply by adding trans* insights into the mix or as yet another vector in intersectional critique. [...] Instead, *tranimality* wishes to focus on trans-infused apprehensions and engagements with the expansive world of possibility opened up by non-anthropocentric perspectives” (200-201).

In “Lessons from a Starfish,” one of the seminal texts in *tranimal* discourse, Hayward uses the self-regenerative capacity of the starfish as a metaphor for the productivity and healing nature of the cuts and “mutilations” that trans* bodies experience in their processes of resignification. In her own words: “My cut enacts a regeneration of my bodily boundaries—boundaries redrawn [...] My cut is not passive—its very substance (materially and affectively) is generative and plays a significant role in my ongoing materialization. [...] My cut is *of* my body, not the absence of parts of my body” (72). In an analogous way, *Freshwater* incorporates the identification between the Ada and the python, underscored by the idea of “the shifting, the quick skinning and reshaping, the falling and revival of scales” (Emezi 193) (which also functions as metaphorical for the plasticity of the trans* body) as a further element to destabilize categories which are precisely delimited within Western scientific and philosophical discourses, but fluid and porous in African onto-epistemologies. The borders between the male and the female, the “animal” and the “human,” the natural and the cultural, the purely material and the transcendent become blurry and collapse. The process of getting rid of parts of their body (the breasts, the uterus, the ovaries) means to the Ada/Emezi a trajectory towards the visibility and realization of their spiritual being, as they make explicit in *Dear Senthuran*: “The surgeries were a bridge across realities, a movement from being assigned as a female to assigning myself as *ogbanje*—a spirit customizing its vessel to reflect its nature” (Emezi 16).

Cutting and self-cutting are thus retroactively explained as essential rituals in a process of self-inscription and progressive revelation of the Ada's complex selves: "The Ada was just a child when these sacrifices began. She broke skin without fully knowing why; the intricacies of self-worship were lost on her. She did only what she had to and thought little of it" (Emezi, *Freshwater* 42). At that point in the narrative, the Ada is being abused by her neighbor and his son (although we learn about it much later in the course of her non-linear narrative), has been abandoned by her mother and starts feeling a profound disgust towards her puberal, changing body: "The Ada became a precocious but easily bruised child, constantly pierced by the world, by the taunts of [her brother] and his friends as they mocked her body for being soft and rounded" (27). In their essay "Injurious Acts: Notes on Happiness from the Trans Ordinary," B. Lee Aultman argues that "[w]hen someone's ordinary is impinged on by an injurious world, they might discover that injurious acts reproduce the normative feelings that 'healthy' forms of self-care are supposed to produce. These include belonging, grounding, control, and relief" (Aultman 10). Thus, self-injuring is linked to the continuity of life, and the experience of self-cutting and scarification generates affects of peace and stability. And Aultman goes on to argue: "We have to think of how the fragility of being-in-crisis gets temporalized through acts that feel like self-sovereign control" (12). To the grown-up Ada, her cuts, scarifications and tattoos are a way of "reminding herself of her past versions" (Emezi, *Freshwater* 210); in Jay Prosser's terms, her skin literally becomes "the body's memory" of her life (Prosser, *Thinking* 2010). To the spirits who inhabit her body, "all these things she was doing to her skin made her closer to us; it was like an advertisement, a timeline of sections, who she was in the inside being revealed on the outside" (Emezi, *Freshwater* 210).

Indeed, it was the custom among the Igbos and the Yorubas to mark and cut *ogbanje* children as a memorial to their belonging to a house and a lineage, as the poem "Abiku," by John Pepper Clark, revealingly expresses: "We know the knife scars / Serrating down your back and front / Like beak of the sword-fish, / And both your ears, notched / As a bondsman to this house, / Are all relics of your first comings." Emezi, in *Dear Senthuran*, recalls and resignifies this practice:

Back in the day, my people used to mark ogbanje children after they died. There were multiple purposes for this: to identify the child when it came back, but also to alienate it from their brothersisters. [...] But imagine how different things are now, because now is not then. Imagine a cohort that is loyal; imagine a world where an ogbanje doesn't have to hide, where it marks itself because fuck a human and a mutilated body. (198-99)

On the other hand, Emezi's account of their self-inflicted wounds and scars also resonates with Jacqui Alexander's interpretation of the body praxis of Vodou and other African-based religions, expanded from Karen McCarthy Brown's idea of the "ritualized human body": "The tradition, the memory of how to serve the spirits is held in the ritualized and ritualizing human body" (McCarthy). Far from being merely superficial, these markings on the flesh—these inscriptions—are processes, ceremonial rituals through which practitioners become habituated to the spiritual, and this habituation implies that requirements are transposed onto the body. One of these requirements is to remember their source and purpose. In this matrix the body thus becomes a site of memory (298).

The bodily transformations undergone by the Ada in *Freshwater*, a mastectomy, and by Emezi, the hysterectomy they recount in detail in the above-mentioned essay, “Mutilation,” answer then to this habituation to the spiritual demanded both by the *ogbanje* brothersisters and by Ala. In answering to the Ada’s call (significantly verbalized in Igbo and not in English), the python says: “Find your tail” (224). To the Ada, by now openly receptive to “the Sacred,” the message is clear:

I had forgotten that if she is a python, so am I. If I don’t know where my tail is, then I don’t know anything. I don’t know where I am going. I don’t know where the ground is, or where the sky is, or if I’m pointing away from my head. The meaning was clear. Curve in on yourself. You will form the inevitable circle, the beginning that is an end. This immortal space is who and where you are, shapeshifter. Everything is shedding and everything is resurrection. (224)

Nevertheless, this “curving in on themselves” also involves a high-tech intervention on Emezi’s material body. “The robot was called a Da Vinci,” they recount in “Mutilations”: “It was delicate, precise, inserted through my navel to slice my uterus and fallopian tubes into small, unimportant pieces. The procedure had a technical name that filled my mouth—a robotic-assisted subtotal hysterectomy with a bilateral salpingectomy” (Emezi, *Dear Senthuran* 14). In the operation theatre where the procedure is performed, a trans*formation involving the human, the spiritual, the animal and the technological intra-act to create a post-gender monster, a new interspecies cyborg, embodying and giving linguistic and literary shape to a way of being partly (only partly) prophesized in Donna Haraway’s post-humanist thought: “I would suggest that cyborgs have got more to do with regeneration and are suspicious of the reproductive matrix and of most birthing. [...] We require regeneration, not rebirth, and the possibilities for our reconstitution include the utopian dream of the hope for a monstrous future without gender” (116). Furthermore, forming the “inevitable circle” demanded by Ala involves the ultimate refusal to perpetuate the horizontal and vertical lines of the genealogical tree, a deliberate “disorientation” and deviation from heteronormativity, “the potentiality of not following certain conventional scripts of family, inheritance, and child rearing” (569), as Sarah Ahmed puts it; but this foreclosing of the possibility of reproduction also implies for the Ada/Emezi complying to the exigencies of neutrality demanded by the *ogbanje* brothersisters, thus amplifying the idea of the cyborg to approach a different kind of assemblage between the spiritual, the technological and the tranimal:¹²

You must understand it, fertility was a pure and clear abomination to us. It would be unthinkable, unbelievably cruel for us to ever swell so unnaturally, to lactate, to mutate our vessel. Could there be anything more human? The ways of our brothersisters, of *ogbanje*, were clear. Do not leave a human lineage, for you did not come from a human lineage. If you have no ancestors, you cannot become an ancestor. (187)

¹² Jasbir Puar points to the possibility of such assemblages in her essay “I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess’ Becoming-Intersectional in Assemblage Theory”: “Certainly it sounds sexier, these days, to lay claim to being a cyborg than a goddess. But why disaggregate the two when there surely must be cyborgian-goddesses in our midst? Now that is a becoming-intersectional assemblage that I could really appreciate” (13).

Current accounts of trans-temporality (Hallberstan 2005; Carson 2013; Horak 2014; Lau 2016; Pearson 2018) have underlined the multiple ways in which time is experienced by trans* subjects outside the regulatory frames of cishetereronormative temporality, marked by “the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction” (Hallberstan 1). Trans-time is discontinuous and non-diachronic, it is transversed by fissures, disruptions and ruptures; it defies the logic of a unified and sovereign subjectivity evolving through the self-conscious memory of a chronological and straight linear progression. But trans* temporality has also been read in terms of anticipation, futurity, and/or the continual interplay of past/present/future (Horak 2014). Thus, the narrative “we” in *Freshwater* says: “After our first birth, it took only a short time before we realized that time had trapped us in a space where we no longer were what we used to be, but had not yet become what we were going to be” (193). However, the telos of Emezi’s narrative is definitely not the moment of bodily trans*formation, but a boundless, sacred and non-teleological time that both precedes and goes beyond human understanding:

[I/my spirit is] sixteen thousand years old, at an estimate. Maybe that’s just where memory stops, or as far back as we can see. The flesh can be dead if likes, but the god who animates it will always be louder. [...] I wasn’t meant to exist like this, but I’m on assignment and since these humans have collared time and created ends, then this too will and I will go home to my brothersisters and it won’t even feel like forever, because what is forever when there is no concept of anything else, a world with no end. (Emezi, *Dear Senthuran* 211-12)

On a collective rather than individual level, a feeling of profound historical rupture and discontinuity, brought about by the violent insertion of diverse cultures into an imperialist enlightenment narrative of progress and modernity, is also characteristic of most colonized peoples and societies. As Huggan and Tiffin assert, “different cultures, with very different notions of time, all found themselves [...] wrenched out of a time of land and ancestry, and subjected to the exigencies of Greenwich time, or in its modern form, ‘corporate time’” (2). Radically heterogeneous temporalities were subsumed under the common rubric of Christian teleological narratives first, and then under the discourses and practices of modernization, thus producing what Emezi calls “a christ-induced amnesia,” and which Jacqui Alexander understands as the collapsing of “divergent histories and temporalities into these apparently irreconcilable binaries of tradition and modernity, [which] produce other accompanying corollaries around religion and secular reason, stasis and change, and science and the nonrational” (186).

Emezi’s countermovement has been, as we have seen, to embrace the non-historical, cyclical, (a)temporality of the sacred, as it was lived in most pre-colonial and pre-modern societies. Not only in Igbo belief, but in many other cultures, religions and schools of thought from Ancient Egypt to Gnosticism or Jungian psychoanalysis, the serpent (particularly when it is represented as *ouroboros*) is a symbol of rebirth and healing, of transformation and immortality: “Everything is shedding and everything is resurrection” (Emezi, *Freshwater* 224), as Emezi puts it. Escaping from the global designs of (post)modernity or taking advantage of the possibilities that it offers for the recovery of subaltern and subjugated knowledges and gnoseology, Emezi has managed to create, understand and project themselves onto the world as a rather unique assemblage between the human, the nonhuman and the divine. They have managed to actualize the

sacred from the distinctive “colonial difference” of the diasporic experience, where temporality is palimpsestic (Alexander 190) and therefore “‘tradition’ [...] doesn’t mean something ‘before’ modernity but rather the persistence of memory” (Mignolo n/p). Emezi has come to inhabit Spirit time, in the terms that Jacqui Alexander understands it:

Spirit brings knowledge from past, present, and future to a particular moment called a now. Time becomes a moment, an instant, experienced in the now, but also a space crammed with moments of wisdom about an event or series of events already having inhabited different moments, or with the intention of inhabiting them, while all occurring simultaneously in this instant, in this space, as well as in other instants and spaces of which we are not immediately aware. Spirit energy both travels in Time and travels differently through linear time, so that there is no distance between space and time that it is unable to navigate. Thus, linear time does not exist because energy simply does not obey the human idiom. (309)

Whether we can understand or are willing to believe Emezi’s truth is, after all, utterly irrelevant. As they claim, all this is ultimately “between us and God, and we know what we are, what we were made to be” (Emezi, *Dear Senthuran* 155).

Submission received 15 January 2022 Revised version accepted 27 September 2022

Works Cited

- Achebe, Chinwe. *The World of the Ogbanje*. Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1986.
- Adeleke, Israel. *Theorizing the Abiku/Ogbanje Motif in Sefi Atta’s Everything Good Will Come, Wale Okediran’s Tenants of the House and Helon Habila’s Oil on Water*, 2016, https://www.academia.edu/45202896/THEORISING_THE_ABIKU_OGBANJE_MOTIF_IN_SEFI_ATTAS_EVERYTHING_GOOD_WILL_COME_WALE_OKEDIRANS_TENANTS_OF_THE_HOUSE_AND_HELON_HABILAS_OIL_ON_WATER?email_work_card=title. Accessed 25 Jul. 2021.
- Ahmed, Sara. “Orientations: Toward a Queer Phenomenology.” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, vol. 12, no. 4, Oct. 2006, pp. 543–74, doi: [10.1215/10642684-2006-002](https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-2006-002).
- Alexander, M. Jaqui. *Pedagogies of Crossing. Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory and the Sacred*. Duke University Press, 2005, doi: [10.1215/9780822386988](https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822386988).
- Aultman, B Lee. *Injurious Acts: Notes on Happiness from the Trans Ordinary*, 2019, https://www.academia.edu/41177271/Injurious_Acts_Notes_on_Happiness_from_the_Trans_Ordinary?email_work_card=title. Accessed 2 Aug. 2021.
- Bastian, Misty. “Irregular Visitors: Narratives about Ogbanje (Spirit Children) in Nigerian Popular Writing.” *Readings in African Popular Fiction*, edited by Stephanie Newell, IAI/James Currey, 2002.
- Beneduce, Roberto, and Simona Taliani. “Embodied Powers, Deconstructed Bodies. Spirit Possession, Sickness, and the Search for Wealth of Nigerian Immigrant Women.” *Anthropos*, vol. 101, no. 2, 2006, pp. 429-449.
- Bresser, Nina. *Tranimal Trajectories: Re-Configuring Trans-Embodiment Through a Companion Species Figuration*, 2015, <https://www.academia.edu/10955519/T>

- [ranimal Trajectories Re Configuring Trans Embodiment Through a Companion Species Figuration](#). Accessed 4 Aug. 2021.
- Carter, J. "Embracing Transition, or Dancing in the Folds of Time." *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*, edited by Susan Stryker and Aren Z. Aizura. Routledge, 2013, pp. 130-143.
- Colebrook, Claire. "What Is It Like to Be a Human?" *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2015, pp. 227-243, doi: [10.1215/23289252-2867472](https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-2867472).
- Ebhomienlen, Thomas O. "The Concepts of Born to Die Children and the Fate of Victim Mothers in Nigeria." *International Journal of Humanities and Cultural Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2015, pp. 142-155.
- Eliade, Mircea. *Lo Sagrado y lo profano*. Paidós, 1957, 1998.
- Emezi, Akwaeke. *Freshwater*. Grove Press, 2018.
- *Dear Senthuran*. Faber & Faber, 2021.
- Flax-Clark Aidan. "Debut novelist Akwaeke Emezi Recenters Reality." *The NYPL Podcast*, Ep. 206, March 2018, <https://www.nypl.org/blog/2018/03/12/debut-novelist-akwaeke-emezi-recenters-reality-nypl-podcast-ep-tk>. Accessed 29 Jun. 2021.
- Halberstam, J. *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. New York University Press, 2005.
- Haraway, Donna. "A Cyborg Manifesto." *The Transgender Studies Reader*, edited by Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle, Routledge, 2006, pp. 103-118. doi: [10.4324/9780203955055](https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203955055).
- Hayward, Eva. "Lessons from a Starfish." *Queering the Non/Human*, edited by Hird Myra J. and Noreen Giffney, Routledge, 2008, doi: [10.4324/9781315603308](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315603308).
- Hayward, Eva, and Jami Weinstein. "Tranimalities in the Age of Trans* Life." *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2015, pp. 195-208, doi: [10.1215/23289252-2867446](https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-2867446).
- Hewett, Heather. "Litany of Madness." *Women's Review of Books*, vol. 35, no. 4, 2018, p. 15.
- Horak, L. "Trans on YouTube: Intimacy, Visibility, Temporality." *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, vol. 1, no. 4, 2014, pp. 572-585, doi: [10.1215/23289252-2815255](https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-2815255).
- Huggan, Graham and Helen Tiffin. "Green Postcolonialism." *Interventions*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2007, pp. 1-11, doi: [10.1080/13698010601173783](https://doi.org/10.1080/13698010601173783).
- Ilechukwu, Sunday T. C. "Ogbanje/Abiku and cultural conceptualizations of psychopathology in Nigeria." *Mental Health Religion & Culture*, vol. 10, no. 3, 2007, pp. 239-255, doi: [10.1080/13694670600621795](https://doi.org/10.1080/13694670600621795). Accessed 3 Aug. 2021.
- Kancler, Tjaša. *Body-politics, Trans* Imaginary and Decoloniality*, 2016, <https://www.academia.edu/31557368/Body-politics-Trans-Imaginary-and-Decoloniality>. Accessed 23 Jul. 2021.
- Lau, Jacob Roberts. Between the Times: "Trans-Temporality and Historical Representation." *UCLA*, 2016, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3js3t1s5>. Accessed 3 Sept. 2021.
- Line, Sebastian De. "A Generous and Troubled Chthulucene: Contemplating Indigenous and Tranimal Relations in (Un)settled Worldings." *Graduate Journal of Social Science*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2018, pp. 83-106, <http://gjss.org/sites/default/>

<files/issues/chapters/papers/GJSS%20Vol%2014-2%206%20De%20Line.pdf>.

Accessed 5 Aug. 2021.

- Midde, Max van, Ludovico Vick Virtù and Olga Cielemecka. "Editorial – Trans materialities." *Graduate Journal of Social Science*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2018, pp. 4-9.
- Mignolo, Walter D. *The Darker Side of the Renaissance: Literacy, Territoriality and Colonization*. University of Michigan Press, 1995.
- . *Local Histories/Global Designs*. E-book, Princeton University Press, 2012.
- Mudimbe, V. Y. *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge*. Indiana University Press, 1988.
- Ogundare, Temitope. "Mental Illness or A Dwelling Place of the Gods? Exploration of Psychopathology in 'Freshwater'." *International Journal of Psychiatry*, vol. 5, no. 4, 2021, https://www.academia.edu/44992255/Mental_Illness_or_A_Dwelling_Place_of_the_Gods_Exploration_of_Psychopathology_in_Freshwater . Accessed 1 Jul. 2021.
- Ogunyemi, Chikwenye O. *Africa Wo/Man Palava*. The University of Chicago Press, 1996.
- Okonkwo, Christopher N. "A Critical Divination: Reading Sula as Ogbanje-Abiku." *African American Review*, vol. 38, no. 4, 2004, pp. 651-668. *JSTOR*, doi: [10.2307/4134423](https://doi.org/10.2307/4134423).
- Pearce, Ruth. "Trans Temporalities and Non-Linear Ageing." *Older Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans People: Minding the Knowledge Gaps*, Routledge, 2018.
- Prosser, Jay. "Skin Memories." *Thinking through the Skin*, edited by Sara Ahmed y Jackie Stacy, Routledge, 2001, pp. 52-68.
- Puar, Jasbir. "I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess' Becoming-Intersectional in Assemblage Theory," *Transversal*, 2012, <https://transversal.at/transversal/0811/puar/en>. Accessed 19 Aug. 2021.
- Schneider, Luisa T. "The Ogbanje Who Wanted to Stay: The Occult, Belonging, Family and Therapy in Sierra Leone." *Ethnography*, vol. 18, no. 2, Oct. 2016, pp. 133-52. *Sage Journals*, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/146613811667338>
- Silva Santana, Dora. "Transitionings and Returnings." *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, vol. 4, no. 2, May 2017, pp. 181-90. *Duke University Press*, doi: [10.1215/23289252-3814973](https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-3814973)
- Sinha, Suvadip, and Amit R. Baishya, editors. *Postcolonial Animalities*. E-book, Taylor and Francis, 2021.
- Stone, Sandy. "The Empire Strikes Back. A Posttranssexual Manifesto." *The Transgender Studies Reader*, edited by Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle, Routledge, 2006, pp. 221-235. doi: [10.4324/9780203955055](https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203955055).
- Stryker, Susan. "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamonix." *The Transgender Studies Reader*, edited by Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle, Routledge, 2006, pp. 244-256. doi: [10.4324/9780203955055](https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203955055).
- " (De)Subjugated Knowledges: An Introduction to transgender Studies." *The Transgender Studies Reader*, edited by Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle, Routledge, 2006, pp. 1-18. doi: [10.4324/9780203955055](https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203955055).
- Stryker, Susan, and Aren Z. Aizura, editors. *The Transgender Studies Reader 2.*, 2013.

Wynter, Sylvia. "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation--An Argument." *CR: The New Centennial Review*, vol. 3, no. 3, 2003, pp. 257–337. *Project Muse*, doi:[10.1353/ncr.2004.0015](https://doi.org/10.1353/ncr.2004.0015)

Raconter l'Anthropocène : Le réalisme magique comme mimesis

Sara Buekens
BAEF/University of Idaho, USA
sara.buekens@ugent.be

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ecozone.2022.13.2.4678>



Résumé

Dans cet article, nous argumenterons que le mode littéraire du réalisme magique se montre particulièrement apte à refléter les indéterminations, instabilités et ambiguïtés qui marquent l'état actuel du climat, en particulier dans le contexte de l'extraction pétrolière en Afrique occidentale, en mettant l'accent sur le caractère imprévisible et souvent invisible des problèmes écologiques et en accordant une agentivité particulière aux éléments naturels qui réagissent aux activités humaines nuisibles. À partir d'une lecture de *Petroleum* (2004) de Bessora et de *Oil on Water* (2010) de Helon Habila, dont l'intrigue se situe dans le contexte de l'extraction pétrolière respectivement au Gabon et dans le delta du Niger, nous montrerons que le réalisme magique, par son dépassement des antinomies traditionnelles et des différents niveaux ontologiques, ainsi que par sa présentation d'un univers essentiellement hybride, fait voir les interrelations invisibles et complexes des différents facteurs à l'origine de la crise environnementale, comme le capitalisme et le commerce mondial des ressources naturelles. En outre, ce mode littéraire permet, par le biais de la figure de style de la personnification et de verbes actifs, d'attribuer un pouvoir d'action direct au monde naturel ainsi qu'au pétrole, sans aucun intermédiaire. Il en résulte un univers essentiellement hybride, qui évoque les rythmes plus qu'humains des paysages et des éléments, où l'agentivité d'un environnement à la fois artificiel et naturel ajoute non seulement à la confusion des personnages, mais visualise en outre les atteintes portées à la nature.

Mots-clés : Extraction pétrolière, réalisme magique, littérature africaine.

Abstract

In this paper, I will argue that the literary mode of magical realism proves particularly apt to reflect the indeterminacies, instabilities, and ambiguities that mark the current climatic situation, particularly in the context of oil extraction in West Africa, emphasizing the unexpected and often invisible character of ecological problems and granting a particular agency to natural elements as they respond to harmful human activities. Based on a reading of Bessora's *Petroleum* (2004) and Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* (2010), which are set in the context of oil extraction in Gabon and the Niger Delta respectively, I will show that magical realism, by its transgression of traditional antinomies and various ontological levels, and by its presentation of an inherently hybrid universe, allows us to see the invisible and complex interrelationships of the different factors at the origin of the environmental crisis, such as capitalism and the global trade in natural resources. Moreover, this literary mode allows for the attribution of direct agency to the natural world as well as to oil, without intermediary, through the use of personification and active verbs. The result is an essentially hybrid universe, which evokes the more-than-human rhythms of landscapes and elements, where the agency of an environment that is both artificial and natural not only adds to the confusion of the characters but also visualizes the harm done to nature.

Keywords: Oil extraction, magical realism, African literature.

Resumen

En este artículo se argumenta que el modo literario del realismo mágico es especialmente adecuado para reflejar las indeterminaciones, inestabilidades y ambigüedades que marcan el estado actual del clima, especialmente en el contexto de la extracción de petróleo en África Occidental, al subrayar la imprevisibilidad y la frecuente invisibilidad de los problemas ecológicos y al dar una agencia particular a los elementos naturales que reaccionan ante las actividades humanas dañinas. A partir de una lectura de *Petroleum* (2004) de Bessora y de *Oil on Water* (2010) de Helon Habila, ambientados en el contexto de la extracción de petróleo en Gabón y en el delta del Níger respectivamente, mostraremos que el realismo mágico, a través de la superación de las antinomias tradicionales y de los diferentes niveles ontológicos, así como de la presentación de un universo esencialmente híbrido, muestra las interrelaciones invisibles y complejas de los diferentes factores que están en el origen de la crisis medioambiental, como el capitalismo y el comercio mundial de los recursos naturales. Además, este modo literario permite, mediante la figura retórica de la personificación y los verbos activos, atribuir un poder de acción directo al mundo natural, así como al petróleo, sin intermediarios. El resultado es un mundo esencialmente híbrido, que evoca los ritmos más que humanos de los paisajes y los elementos, donde la agencia de un entorno que es a la vez artificial y natural no sólo se suma a la confusión de los personajes, sino que también visualiza el daño causado a la naturaleza.

Palabras clave: Extracción de petróleo, realismo mágico, literatura africana.

Depuis que la planète est entrée dans l'Anthropocène, les altérations écologiques effectuées par l'humanité à un rythme exponentiel s'intensifient et s'étendent de façon spectaculaire qu'il est de plus en plus difficile de trouver des diagrammes et simulations scientifiques offrant des pronostics univoques et unanimes sur l'avenir biologique et géologique de la Terre. Dans cette ère d'incertitude climatique, les informations scientifiques déconcertent davantage l'être humain qu'elles ne le rassurent ou lui proposent des solutions concrètes, puisque les mesures nécessaires pour résoudre la crise écologique s'annoncent incommensurables et exigent un changement radical et bouleversant de la société actuelle. Cette incertitude se reflète aussi dans le champ littéraire—l'univers fictionnel dialogue traditionnellement avec des repères ontologiques empruntés à la réalité concrète, en les imitant ou en s'en détachant—, où de nombreux chercheurs constatent la nécessité de nouvelles formes d'expression pour répondre à ce que l'écrivain Amitav Ghosh appelle une « crise de l'imagination ». À partir d'une lecture de *Petroleum* (2004) de Bessora (en abrégé *Pet*) et de *Oil on Water* (2010) de Helon Habila (en abrégé *OOW*), deux œuvres dont l'intrigue se situe dans le contexte de l'extraction pétrolière au Gabon et dans le delta du Niger respectivement, nous argumenterons que le mode littéraire¹ du réalisme magique se montre particulièrement apte à refléter les indéterminations, instabilités et ambiguïtés qui marquent la situation environnementale actuelle, notamment dans le contexte de l'extraction du pétrole en Afrique occidentale, en mettant l'accent sur le caractère imprévisible et invisible des problèmes écologiques contemporains et en accordant une agentivité particulière aux éléments naturels qui réagissent aux activités humaines nuisibles.

¹ Pour une analyse détaillée du réalisme magique comme mode littéraire, voir Holgate (15).

Le réalisme magique comme reflet d'un monde instable

Le réalisme magique se présente comme un mode littéraire qui introduit des éléments fantastiques, surnaturels ou mythiques dans un monde réaliste. En écartant toute distinction entre des événements réalistes et non réalistes, les récits magico-réalistes juxtaposent des situations, personnages et objets ordinaires et magiques, sans qu'il y ait une rupture perceptive dans la conscience du narrateur ou des protagonistes (voir Standish 156-157). Il en résulte que ces œuvres ne rompent pas tout à fait avec les principes du réalisme : le réel et l'irréel se trouvent indissociablement entremêlés dans un univers à la fois reconnaissable et étrange, qui finit par défamiliariser le lecteur. Comme l'expliquent Jesús Bénito, Ana María Manzanos et Begoña Simal, le réalisme magique « favorise la juxtaposition de paires contradictoires, pour ensuite déconstruire leurs antithèses apparemment insolubles. De cette façon, les antinomies traditionnelles sont résolues et les ordres ontologiques sont constamment traversés et transgressés » (164).² Dans le contexte africain, les éléments fantastiques et surnaturels proviennent souvent de mythes indigènes et d'histoires remontant à une tradition orale ancestrale, qui sont habituellement ancrés dans une société préindustrielle et/ou dans une nature encore sauvage et inaltérée, et qui montrent une interconnexion profonde entre tous les éléments du monde naturel, y compris l'humain. C'est cette vision du monde, que nous qualifions aujourd'hui d'« écocentrique », qui incite à explorer les chevauchements entre le réalisme magique et la thématique environnementale. Comme le montre Ben Holgate, le réalisme magique « aide la critique environnementale à déconstruire les conventions normatives supposées, grâce à sa "fluidité des domaines" et sa capacité à briser les frontières » (4)³, par exemple par le biais de métamorphoses ou de fusions, comme celle entre l'homme et l'animal. Le « troisième espace » qui se situe au croisement du réel et du surnaturel et qui réunit des éléments à première vue opposés, fournit une base ontologique fructueuse pour transgresser l'opposition entre l'humain et le non-humain, l'animé et l'inanimé, l'artificiel et le naturel. Ainsi, dans *Petroleum*, le surnaturel et le récit réaliste de la quête du pétrole se chevauchent lorsque Médée, ingénieur sur la plate-forme pétrolière d'Elf-Gabon, fait de l'or noir un dieu qu'elle appelle Bitume et dont elle cherche à expliquer les origines—imperceptibles à l'œil nu et dépassant largement la notion humaine du temps—par une nouvelle mythologie : « Enfant caché d'un amour honteux, rejeté par ses deux parents. Nomade malgré lui, il errait en Terre qui l'avait recueilli, selon un décret du Grand Astre. La Terre fut la prison de Bitume. Sans doute, il vouait une haine secrète et tenace à son père. Il lui reprochait de l'avoir engendré et détestait sa mère de s'être laissé séduire par Soleil. En Terre, il s'ennuyait, alors un jour, il remonta à la surface » (*Pet* 218). À l'arrivée des premières entreprises pétrolières, les indigènes essaient également de réconcilier les activités industrielles avec des croyances mythiques : « Maintenant, les casques orange

² « Itself an oxymoron, magical realism fosters the juxtaposition of contradictory pairings, only to deconstruct their apparently unsolvable antitheses. In this way, traditional antinomies are resolved and ontological orders are constantly crossed and transgressed »

³ « A non-realistic mode like magical realism helps environmental criticism deconstruct assumed, normative conventions due to its "fluidity of realms" and capacity to break down boundaries »

fouillaient les eaux ; les génies aquatiques, sujets de Mamiwata, demanderaient-ils leur comptant ? » (*Pet* 192-193). Dans *Oil on Water*, les journalistes Zaq et Rufus, à la recherche d'une femme britannique prise en otage par des rebelles nigériens, commencent à errer dans le delta du Niger entre des villages indigènes, des campements militaires, des camps de militants, et l'île d'Irikefe, qui est le sanctuaire d'une communauté religieuse vivant en harmonie avec les éléments naturels : « We believe the sun rising brings a renewal. All of creation is born anew with the new day. Whatever goes wrong in the night has a chance for redemption after a cycle » (*OOW* 90). Dans leur vision du monde mythique, les effets néfastes de l'extraction pétrolière actuelle s'inscrivent dans un ordre magique, de sorte que le réel et le mythique s'entremêlent et interagissent : « we believe in spirits, good and bad. The bad are the ones who have sinned against Mother Earth and can't find rest in her womb. They roam the earth, restless, looking for redemption » (*OOW* 114).

C'est précisément en transgressant différents niveaux ontologiques et en présentant un univers essentiellement hybride, que le réalisme magique permet de faire voir les interrelations invisibles et complexes des différents facteurs à l'origine de la dégradation de l'environnement, comme le capitalisme et le commerce mondial des ressources naturelles. Au Gabon, le caractère anonyme de ces forces trouve son reflet symbolique dans le fait que les rues, qui portent les noms de politiciens étrangers et de multinationales pétrolières, sont dénuées de plaques. Cette absence finit par plonger les personnages dans un espace sans repères, dont, par conséquent, l'existence même devient incertaine : « Le boulevard du Président-Bongo, rejoint par l'avenue Charles-de-Gaulle, débouche sur le boulevard Elf-Gabon. [...] Aucune pancarte n'indique les noms de ces avenues. On peut comprendre que ces réalités cadastrales soient cachées [...]. Oui, ces réalités sont invisibles » (*Pet* 87). D'une façon similaire, le mode littéraire magico-réaliste fait dialoguer des forces, échelles et sources épistémologiques disparates ou en tension, comme le local et le global, le naturel et l'artificiel, l'immédiat et le différé, les connaissances scientifiques et le savoir indigène. Comme le montre Holgate, l'une des caractéristiques du réalisme magique est de révolutionner les conceptions traditionnelles du temps et de l'espace, avec des « extensions en arrière » et des « espaces dénationalisés » (7)⁴, immergeant par exemple le lecteur dans ce que Wai Chee Dimock appelle « le temps profond », « un ensemble de cadres longitudinaux, à la fois projectifs et récessifs [...] liant les continents et les millénaires dans de nombreuses boucles de relations » (3)⁵, ou les « timescape perspectives » de Barbara Adam (19), des contractions du temps et de l'espace qui dépassent la durée de la vie humaine. En outre, en mettant en scène une coexistence de temporalités et un chevauchement de lieux, qui dépassent les conventions plus étroites du roman réaliste, la littérature magico-réaliste se révèle susceptible de visualiser ce que Rob Nixon appelle la « slow violence », une forme de violence environnementale qui produit des effets différés et à long terme, souvent à l'abri des regards et dispersés dans le temps et dans l'espace. Si, comme l'argumente Dana Phillips, « des phénomènes et environnements naturels ne se prêtent pas... à [cette] représentation dont les textes

⁴ « backward extension », « denationalized space »

⁵ « a set of longitudinal frames, at once projective and recessional, [...] binding continents and millennia into many loops of relations »

littéraires sont capables » (461),⁶ le réalisme magique permet de dépasser ces limites par sa nature hybride et son dépassement de différentes échelles ontologiques. Dans *Petroleum*, les chapitres qui décrivent les activités pétrolières actuelles alternent avec des chapitres de mythes indigènes évoquant les mêmes lieux bien avant et au moment de l'arrivée des premiers chercheurs de pétrole, de sorte que le temps de la « vieille roche liquide et noire [qui] migre en silence sous la terre depuis des millions d'années » (*Pet* 60), celui des activités des premiers géologues en 1928, et l'actualité des pollutions pétrolières se trouvent entremêlés dans un seul espace-temps à la fois historique et mythique. Ainsi, des arbres sacrés engloutissant les intrus étrangers, des « oracles » (*Pet* 62) et signes « prémonitoires » (*Pet* 75), et le « néo-colonialisme » (*Pet* 73) se trouvent juxtaposés dans une nouvelle version de l'histoire—« la mythologie pétrolière » (*Pet* 170)—qui comprime le temps, suggérant que le passé est fusionné avec le présent et continue à déterminer la situation actuelle. Car, explique le roman, « quelques années d'intervalles [...] ne sont que quelques secondes pour la Dame Noire » (*Pet* 229). L'ingénieur Médée se présente d'ailleurs comme un de ces « vertébrés à sang tiède, porteurs de mamelles » (*Pet* 7) : une définition ironique qui renvoie à un imaginaire évolutionnaire rappelant que tout produit culturel, y compris le pétrole, trouve ses origines dans un monde naturel qui dépasse de loin l'existence de l'humanité.

De la même manière que, pour certaines sociétés africaines, l'univers surnaturel qui s'immisce dans la réalité est au moins aussi réel que le monde décrit par les sciences naturelles occidentales, l'aliénation et la défamiliarisation qui résultent d'événements imprévus ou mystérieux dans les récits magico-réalistes environnementaux traduisent des expériences réelles et concrètes de nombreux êtres humains à l'ère de l'Anthropocène. Les personnages de *Petroleum* voient dans Port-Gentil une « ville fantôme » à cause du caractère étrange, hanté et contre-nature de ce « cimetière [de] tubes, fosse commune des cuves anonymes » (*Pet* 102). Les journalistes Rufus et Zaq se perdent dans les canaux étroits, opaques et pollués du delta du Niger, qui semblent appartenir à un univers hanté. Les changements climatiques rapides, causés essentiellement par les émissions de l'industrie pétrolière, plongent les personnages dans un monde où tout se ressemble, et dont les transformations soudaines et inattendues ne répondent plus aux règles de la logique : « the sky and the water and the dense foliage on the riverbanks all looked the same : blue and green and blue-green misty. The whole landscape was now a mere trick of light, vaporous and shape-shifting, appearing and disappearing behind the fog » (*OOW* 4). Les personnages semblent se mouvoir dans un monde des ombres, parallèle au monde réel, mais aux contours moins sûrs et soumis à des changements brusques : une grande falaise est « appearing suddenly out of the water, like a mirage » (*OOW* : 8) ; des palmiers « seemed to be jetting out of the water, and behind them the land appeared a few seconds later. A sudden and unexpected place », et les ruisseaux « were inconstant, and could change from the clearest, friendliest blue to a turbid, unknowable gray in a minute » (*OOW* 74). Des repères sûrs apparaissent et disparaissent comme des fantômes, absorbés

⁶ « natural phenomena and environments do not lend themselves...to [that] representation of which literary texts are capable »

par un brouillard épais, « the dense gray stuff » (OOW 5), dont l'origine industrielle est suggérée par une comparaison avec la fumée : « Irikefe Island, [...] had long since disappeared, swallowed by the distance and the darkness cast by the mist that rose like smoke from the riverbanks » (OOW 4-5) ; « soon Irikefe Island was behind us, swallowed by the distance and the darkness of the mist that rose like smoke from the riverbanks » (OOW 179). La reprise presque littérale de la comparaison semble accorder à cette île un pouvoir incessant d'apparaître et de disparaître, comme s'il s'agissait d'un espace fantomatique doté d'une volonté propre. Remarquons qu'un grand nombre de ces descriptions arrivent en début du roman, de sorte que le lecteur se sent également perdu dans cet univers romanesque qu'il n'arrive pas à reconstruire mentalement avec sûreté. N'oublions d'ailleurs pas que la perception du « réel » est essentiellement une construction culturelle. Bénito, Manzanas et Simal donnent l'exemple de l'autobiographie d'Olaudah Equiano, dans laquelle ce jeune esclave voit en l'arrivée des premiers blancs et leurs navires négriers au XVIII^e siècle un événement surnaturel, initié par de mauvais esprits : « Ce qui peut apparaître de l'extérieur comme une pratique magique peut aussi constituer quelque chose d'aussi rationnel et réel qu'un bateau ou un cheval, ou même un homme blanc » (40)⁷ Au Gabon, les premiers géologues suscitent un sentiment d'incrédulité chez les habitants des lagunes côtières : « Une mère rapporta que là-bas, en mer, ils cherchaient un trésor. Mais non, dit une autre, ils cherchaient le pétrole. En mer ? rétorqua un homme. Histoires de bonne femme... On n'a jamais vu l'huile de pierre sortir des océans. Et puis plutôt que déranger les génies des eaux pour de rien, embraya un vieillard, ils feraient mieux de nous construire des routes » (Pet 54). Les villages du delta du Niger observent avec étonnement les changements provoqués par l'arrivée des extracteurs de pétrole : « the changes going on all around them : the gas flares that lit up neighboring villages all day and all night, and the cars and TVs and video players in the front rooms of their neighbors who had allowed the flares to be set up » (OOW 42). Le caractère soudain et inattendu de ces changements radicaux, plongeant d'un jour à l'autre le monde traditionnel du delta dans la modernité, amène les habitants à voir dans la flamme du torchage—la combustion du résidu de gaz naturel présent dans le pétrole—« a snake, whispering, winking, hissing » (OOW 42), alors que le peuple du Gabon y voit la manifestation impossible « de l'eau qui brûle » (Pet 170).

Ainsi, les éléments magiques faisant intrusion dans la vie quotidienne visualisent non seulement des aspects de la crise écologique qui restent cachés ou sont imperceptibles à l'œil humain, mais présentent aussi de manière « réaliste » la façon dont surviennent des désastres écologiques « anormaux », car souvent ressentis comme inexplicables. Tout comme la réalité environnementale actuelle, le monde magico-réaliste n'est ni stable, ni statique, ni sujet à une détermination rigoureuse. Dans cette optique, les récits magico-réalistes environnementaux ne cherchent pas à « réimaginer » le monde ou à révéler une réalité « alternative » inspirée par la coexistence harmonieuse entre les sociétés indigènes et la nature, mais reflètent de manière tout à fait véridique la façon dont les activités

⁷ « What may appear from the outside to be a magical practice may also constitute something as rational and real as a ship or a horse, or even a white man »

humaines altèrent la planète. Ces récits ne montrent plus « les possibilités de ce qui pourrait être », comme c'est le cas dans le réalisme magique traditionnel (voir Holgate 229), mais « ce qui est ». Ils ne sont plus de simples « expériences de pensée » qui autrefois permettaient d'imaginer un « retour à la nature » (Bénito, Manzanas, Simal 201), ni des simulations d'un futur distant. L'étrange et le surnaturel qui font partie intégrante de l'expérience quotidienne des personnages sont caractéristiques de l'« ordinaire » ou du « normal » de la société africaine occidentale contemporaine, sous forme de la mort soudaine d'un grand nombre d'animaux, de fumées aveuglantes, de pluies noires... Ainsi, loin de constituer le contrepoint de la réalité, les récits magico-réalistes en offrent une représentation très concrète dans ce contexte de crise écologique.

Dans ce sens, le réalisme magique se présente comme une forme particulière du réalisme littéraire, dans la mesure où ce mode sert à représenter une perception tout à fait véridique du monde extra-littéraire et que les aspects environnementaux se concrétisent autant dans les composants magiques que dans les éléments réalistes du texte. Si la notion de « mimesis » renvoie traditionnellement à une forme artistique qui fonctionne comme une copie du monde réel, imitant les lois de ce dernier de la façon la plus rigoureuse possible—« the world-reflecting model »—, elle correspond dans ce contexte au « world-simulating model » (Halliwell 23), où « l'art est comme un miroir tourné vers le spectateur et ses croyances » (Bénito, Manzanas, Simal 8)⁸ Car, argumentent Bénito, Manzanas et Simal, la mimesis est nécessairement instable, étant donné que la littérature n'est jamais tout à fait capable de décrire le monde d'une façon complète et implique automatiquement un processus d'abstraction, lorsque le langage transforme la simultanéité de la perception en des séquences successives (9). Ce rapport essentiellement oblique entre la forme littéraire et la réalité remet en question la thèse que le monde n'est pas seulement rationnel et descriptible, mais aussi connaissable, contrôlable, prévisible et maîtrisable – des caractéristiques que l'Anthropocène a radicalement bousculées. Ainsi, à mesure que de nouvelles expériences modifient notre perception du réel et du vraisemblable, de nouvelles formes mimétiques émergent ou d'anciens modes littéraires se révèlent tout à coup mieux adaptés pour décrire la réalité (incertaine et instable). Dans *Oil on Water*, les renvois à la mythologie ne servent plus à évoquer un environnement primitif ou inaltéré, mais expriment les sentiments de désarroi des personnages dans un monde pollué qui ne répond plus aux attentes logiques et dont ils ont perdu tous les repères : « Events were always a step ahead of us, as if Eshu the trickster god were out to play with us » (*OOW* 29). Des expressions comme « what seemed to be » (*OOW* 85), « appeared (to) » (*OOW* 8, 16, 176) et « seemed (to) » (*OOW* 48, 75, 93) traduisent la confusion des personnages, dont non seulement la vue mais aussi l'odorat est constamment mis à l'épreuve lorsqu'ils essaient de contrôler « the dizzying, nauseating effect of the petrol smell » (*OOW* 161). En outre, le lecteur est lui-même déconcerté par un jeu de l'être et du paraître : si la première description d'un ciel orange – « a pageant of orange and pink colors » (*OOW* 66) – peut faire penser à une scène de coucher de soleil idyllique, des rencontres ponctuelles avec les habitants des lieux révèlent l'origine artificielle et dangereuse de ce tableau : « I've been in

⁸ « art is like a mirror turned to the spectator and his or her beliefs »

these waters five years now and I tell you this place is a dead place, a place for dying. He pointed at the faraway orange sky. —Those damned flares » (OOW 151). Il en va de même sur la plateforme pétrolière d'Elf-Gabon, où les personnages essaient de comprendre l'origine d'une tache orange flottant au-dessus du bateau comme un bout de soleil descendu du ciel : « Elle flamboyait comme l'azur d'avant la nuit. Tombée du soleil ? Bout de moment de rose échappé du ciel pour s'échouer au sommet d'un navire ? Ni le ciel ni le soleil n'étaient tombés dans l'eau. C'était le pétrole qui était remonté de sous les mers » (Pet 85). Comme le pose Raymond Olderman, « les critères de ce qui est réaliste dans un roman doivent nécessairement devenir instables lorsque nous perdons notre confiance dans les faits reconnaissables. Si la réalité est devenue surréaliste, que doit faire la fiction pour être réaliste ? » (6).⁹ C'est à partir de ce constat que Jon Hegglund propose également d'élargir le champ des modes littéraires regroupés sous le terme d'«unnatural narratology», qui se concentre sur des événements physiquement ou logiquement impossibles et adopte une perspective non- ou antimimétique. Ainsi, à l'origine, cette approche ne tient pas compte des « matérialités étranges et transformatrices de l'Anthropocène » et du « caractère 'dénaturé' du monde naturel lui-même » (29).¹⁰ Dans sa conception traditionnelle, l'«unnatural narratology» présuppose l'existence d'une nature stable, à laquelle s'opposent alors les phénomènes non-naturels et antimimétiques. Argumentant en faveur d'une narratologie qui prendrait en compte une réalité dont les contours ne peuvent plus être considérés comme ontologiquement sûrs, sans toutefois qualifier ce monde d'impossible, Hegglund part à la recherche d'un mode littéraire où « la stabilité supposée du 'monde' n'est plus un point de référence stable et normatif » (34)¹¹ : la « weird fiction ».

Étant donné que, dans le cas du réalisme magique, le réalisme n'est pas transfiguré par « une perspective magique », mais la réalité « est en soi magique ou fantastique »¹² (Jameson 311), ce mode littéraire se prête bien à l'évocation du caractère aliénant et inexplicable—et partant parfois perçu comme « magique »—des altérations écologiques. Les personnages mêmes de *Petroleum* semblent confirmer ce constat dans un passage métalittéraire, lorsque Médée prend pour une illusion artistique ce qui se révèle être une scène réelle : « Une fenêtre... C'était juste une fenêtre ouverte sur un réel illusoire » (Pet 293). Paradoxalement, en rejetant la distinction entre ce qui est empiriquement vérifiable et ce qui ne l'est pas, le réalisme magique permet de visualiser, concrétiser et rendre tangibles les effets de nombreux problèmes écologiques difficiles à saisir pour l'esprit humain. Ainsi, les différentes formes de destruction environnementale hantent les lieux traversés par les protagonistes d'*Oil on Water*, remplissant le rôle du surnaturel dans le récit magico-réaliste traditionnel : l'eau se révèle soudainement « foul and sulphurous » (OOW 9), le paysage devient « a setting for a sci-fi movie : the meager landscape was covered in pipelines flying in all directions, sprouting from the evil-smelling, oil-fecund

⁹ « [t]he criteria of what is realistic in a novel must necessarily become shaky when we lose our confidence in recognizable facts. If reality has become surrealist, what must fiction do to be realistic ? »

¹⁰ « the strange, transformative materialities of the Anthropocene » ; « “unnaturalness” of the natural world itself »

¹¹ « the assumed stability of “the world” is no longer a stable, normative point of reference »

¹² « a magical perspective », « reality which is already in and of itself magical or fantastic »

earth » (OOW 38). Or, la vraisemblance de la trame narrative n'est jamais suspendue par ces paysages inhabituels et perçus comme étranges ou même surnaturels : dans les romans, ils font partie de la réalité environnementale des lieux. Il en va de même pour les animaux morts qui hantent l'environnement du delta comme des fantômes maléfiques : « dead birds draped over tree branches, their outstretched wings black and slick with oil ; dead fishes bobbed white-bellied between tree roots » (OOW 9) ; le bateau doit chercher son chemin parmi « a dead fowl, a bloated dog belly up with black birds perching on it, their expressionless eyes blinking rapidly, their sharp beaks savagely cutting into the soft decaying flesh. Once we saw a human arm severed at the elbow bobbing away from us, its fingers opening and closing, beckoning » (OOW 33) et il semble que l'expression « bird of ill omen » (OOW 166), utilisée ici pour désigner un hélicoptère, se littéralise à d'autres moments de l'intrigue où le surnaturel semble devenir réalité pour ces personnages incapables de donner un sens aux altérations écologiques qu'ils observent. Flottant dans « black, expressionless water [where] there were no birds or fish or other water creatures », la barque se mue en « a ghost ship » (WOO 11).

La magie de l'industrie pétrolière

De façon générale, on pourrait qualifier de « fantômes » toute espèce et tout élément paysager disparus à cause des effets polluants de l'extraction pétrolière, à l'exemple de la métaphore utilisée par les études réunies dans *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene*, qui démontrent que « les vents de l'Anthropocène transportent des fantômes—les vestiges et les signes de modes de vie passés encore chargés dans le présent » (Bubandt, Gan, Swanson, Tsing 1)¹³—, comme les « trou[s] d'une profondeur incommensurable » (*Pet* 24) qui continuent à témoigner des activités d'extraction. Ces fantômes et paysages hantés sont les traces d'histoires à la fois humaines et plus qu'humaines, qu'il s'agisse de substances toxiques qui se déplacent invisibles dans l'eau et dans le sol ou des effets sinistres du passé dans le présent, comme c'est le cas pour les changements géologiques, qui ne se manifestent que longtemps après un déversement souterrain de pétrole. Ainsi, vivant dans un paysage où rien n'est certain, les habitants de Sidoarjo en Indonésie cherchent dans le monde des esprits des explications à l'énigme du volcan de boue, alors que les scientifiques se disputent quant aux origines du phénomène géologique—l'industrie pétrochimique ou des mouvements tectoniques naturels ? —, illustrant l'impossibilité croissante de distinguer les forces humaines et plus qu'humaines dans l'Anthropocène. Ressenti comme monstrueux et maudit, le paysage reflète la transgression de différents niveaux ontologiques caractéristique du réalisme magique : « Sur les vasières de Java Est, les domaines de la géologie, de la politique, de l'industrie, de la divination, des procès, de la vengeance spirituelle et de la corruption sont inextricablement liés les uns aux autres. En effet, l'impossibilité de séparer les uns des autres [...] est un élément constitutif de la

¹³ « The winds of the Anthropocene carry ghosts — the vestiges and signs of past ways of life still charged in the present »

nécropolitique du volcan » (Bubandt 124).¹⁴ Ainsi, conclut Nils Bubandt, « dans l'Anthropocène, la science du climat et la biologie semblent ramener à la vie des esprits que l'on croyait tués par la pensée laïque » (125).¹⁵

À la fois invisible et omniprésent dans la vie quotidienne, rare par sa provenance mais utilisé globalement, rendu utile par sa propre destruction, le pétrole ne peut pas être détaché d'un champ dynamique de représentations et de symboles essentiellement ambivalents et contradictoires. C'est pourquoi, conclut Stoekl, « nous ne pouvons pas connaître le pétrole (et donc nous-mêmes) si nous le connaissons uniquement en termes géophysiques ou chimiques » (xiii).¹⁶ Dans *Oil on Water*, la science s'avère d'ailleurs tout à fait impuissante face à un discours mystificateur condensant la découverte du pétrole en une iconographie de la flamme orange. Ainsi, les avertissements du médecin concernant l'insalubrité des fumées se volatilisent, et les dommages consécutifs sont tellement spectaculaires et inattendus qu'ils finissent par être attribués à une force magique :

They called it the Fire of Pentecost. [...] They said it was a sign [...] I told them of the dangers that accompany that quenchless flare, but they wouldn't listen. And then a year later, when the livestock began to die and the plants began to wither on their stalks, I took samples of the drinking water and in my lab I measured the level of toxins in it : it was rising, steadily. [...] Of course, the people didn't listen, they were still in thrall to the orange glare. [...] More people fell sick, a lot died. Almost overnight I watched the whole village disappear, just like that. (*OOW* 152-153)

Rochelle Raineri Zuck montre aussi comment des savoirs amérindiens et géologiques ont fusionné en une forme de « practical spiritualism » (21) lors des premières explorations pétrolières américaines du XIX^e siècle. Des « magiciens du pétrole » et des « praticiens de la divination » (21)¹⁷ y servaient de médium pour scruter des mondes souterrains invisibles. Le *New York Times* se hasarde à relier également le processus de l'extraction du pétrole au surnaturel dans un article sur la catastrophe de la marée noire dans le golfe du Mexique, affirmant que « malgré toute la magie de l'ingénierie de [la compagnie pétrolière] Horizon, [le pétrole] était aux prises avec des forces géologiques puissantes et imprévisibles » (Barstow, Rohde, Saul)¹⁸. Il en va de même dans *Petroleum*, où le nom de la société pétrolière « Elf » est un « mot magique » (*Pet* 154) et les employés de la plateforme pétrolière d'Elf-Gabon sont des « oracles-géologues » (*Pet* 7-8), des « alchimistes » et « prophètes » (*Pet* 10), qui « prophétis[e]nt » les sources de l'or noir, appelée une « pierre philosophale » (*Pet* 10). Lorsque, après un « long périple » (*Pet* 7), l'or noir atteint la surface de la terre, les géologues « se sont ébaubis comme des enfants devant des paquets cadeaux sous un beau sapin de Noël. On eût trouvé des bottes de sept lieues

¹⁴ « On the mudflats of East Java, the realms of geology, politics, industry, divination, lawsuits, spiritual revenge, and corruption are inextricably entangled in each other. Indeed, the inability to separate one from the other – nature from politics, geothermal activity from industrial activity, human corruption from spiritual revenge – is a constituent part of the volcano's necropolitics. »

¹⁵ « In the Anthropocene, both climate science and biology seem to bring spirits, once thought to have been killed by secular thought, back to life »

¹⁶ « We cannot know oil (and hence ourselves) if we know it only in geophysical or chemical terms : where it is to be found, how it is to be refined. »

¹⁷ « oil wizard » ; « practitioners of divination »

¹⁸ « for all of the Horizon's engineering wizardry, it was tangling with powerful and highly unpredictable geological forces »

que ça n'aurait étonné personne » (*Pet* 10-11). Le groupe extatique d'employés se mue en une « chevauchée fantastique » (*Pet* 24) qui vit « intensément ces moments magiques » (*Pet* 30). Dans son essai consacré au Venezuela, *The Magic State*, l'historien Fernando Coronil fait le constat de ce qu'il appelle la « petro-magic », l'ensemble des illusions liées à la découverte du pétrole et reposant sur les fausses promesses d'une richesse obtenue sans labeur, par un heureux hasard, ce qui rapproche cette ressource naturelle du conte de fées (voir Watts 203). Jennifer Wenzel parle du « *toy tale* de la transformation instantanée au coup de baguette magique, où tous les rêves d'infrastructure deviennent réalité » (« Petro-Magic-Realism Revisited » 212).¹⁹

C'est à partir de ces constats que Wenzel a créé le concept de « petro-magic-realism », un mode littéraire qui montre les aspects magiques et violents de la pétro-modernité en les intégrant dans une tradition fantastique plus ancienne (« Petro-magic-realism : toward a political ecology » 456). Car, explique Wenzel, des auteurs comme Ben Okri recourent à des formes du fantastique pour montrer comment, dans la société nigérienne, l'aubaine magique de la découverte du pétrole a donné lieu à une frénésie spéculative. C'est à travers des récits magico-réalistes qu'ils percent « l'illusion de la richesse sans travail » (« Petro-Magic-Realism Revisited » 219)²⁰ et remettent en question « la magie de la modernité naissante du Nigeria » (Apter 8).²¹ En outre, comme l'affirme Sarah L. Lincoln, le caractère irréel du boom pétrolier, renforcé par son caractère à la fois intangible et invisible—profondément sous terre ou dans des tuyaux —, ainsi que sa promesse de profit direct sans labeur—la richesse se génère à partir d'elle-même—résulte en une réalité monétaire « fantastique », où le signifiant (la valeur monétaire) perd tout rapport stable et logique avec le signifié (le bien matériel) et se mue en une forme sans contenu, une ombre fantomatique sans fond. Il en résulte une « crise sémiotique » (254)²² suscitant un sentiment d'instabilité et d'irréalité dans la vie quotidienne. Il n'est donc pas surprenant que les personnages d'*Oil on Water* découvrent un puits de pétrole abandonné qui « domine » le centre d'un village, « like some sacrificial altar » (*OOW* 8). Or, les descriptions détaillées de la plateforme montrent combien le caractère « sacré », qui tient à la promesse de modernité et de progrès technologique, se dissipe lorsque la nature—végétaux, animaux et éléments naturels—reprend ses droits sur les aménagements humains : « Abandoned oil-drilling paraphernalia were strewn around the platform ; some appeared to be sprouting out of widening cracks in the concrete, alongside thick clumps of grass. High up in the rusty rigging wasps flew in and out of their nests. A weather-beaten signboard near the platform said OIL WELL NO. 2. 1999. 15,000 METERS » (*OOW* 8-9). Dans un autre village, la modernisation du paysage du fait des installations industrielles incite les habitants à abandonner les lieux, sans toutefois accepter l'argent maudit qui aurait dû leur apporter tant de prospérité : « We didn't take their money. The money would be our curse on them, for taking our land, and for killing our chief » (*OOW* 45). Il en va de

¹⁹ « toy tale of instant transformation at the wave of a magic wand, in which every dream of infrastructure comes true »

²⁰ « the illusion of wealth without work »

²¹ « the magic of Nigeria's nascent modernity »

²² « semiotic crisis »

même pour les promesses d'enrichissement rapide liées aux emplois offerts par les compagnies pétrolières—le jeu de mots qui résulte de l'écho *awash-watch* souligne le renversement du sort soudain : « They all worked for the ABZ Oil Company, and now the people, once awash in oil money, watch in astonishment as the streets daily fill up with fleeing families » (*OOW* 67). Dans *Petroleum*, la comparaison *quelque chose se produit* « comme l'argent du pétrole s'est envolé en fumée » (*Pet* 323) semble faire partie du fonds culturel partagé pour désigner la fuite du temps.

En mettant l'accent sur le caractère subversif et antihégémonique du réalisme magique, Wenzel réfute l'idée selon laquelle le rapport entre réalisme et magie serait le reflet de l'opposition binaire entre des perspectives occidentales, modernes et scientifiques, et des visions du monde préscientifiques ou « primitives ». Le *petro-magic-realism* perce les illusions d'un monde présenté comme magique par la promesse d'un enrichissement soudain et inattendu en « ancrant sa vision dans un paysage dévasté mais reconnaissable, et aussi fantastique mais reconnaissable » (« *Petro-magic-realism : toward a political ecology* » 457).²³ Dans *Oil on Water*, c'est essentiellement après l'abandon des puits épuisés, lorsque les illusions de richesse et de prospérité se voient percées par les limites des ressources naturelles, que la réalité commence à adopter un caractère fantomatique, voire effrayant, par l'uniformité et la désolation des paysages, et par la pollution à laquelle ils sont soumis et les désagréments sensoriels qui en résultent : « The next village was almost a replica of the last : the same empty squat dwellings, the same ripe and flagrant stench, the barrenness, the oil slick and the same indefinable sadness in the air, as if a community of ghosts were suspended above the punctured zinc roofs, unwilling to depart, yet powerless to return » (*OOW* 10). Toutefois, comme nous allons le montrer, le magico-réalisme ne reflète pas seulement les expériences désillusionnelles et cauchemardesques—mais essentiellement psychiques, culturelles et sociétales—liées aux nouveaux modes de production et de réalisation de bénéfices, mais permet aussi de matérialiser ces destructions en accordant une agentivité particulière aux éléments naturels.

L'agentivité de l'environnement

Reposant sur la transgression de frontières—entre le réel et le surnaturel, l'animé et l'inanimé—le réalisme magique présente souvent un monde où les éléments naturels, comme les rivières, les montagnes ou les forêts, sont dotés, non plus métaphoriquement mais littéralement, de caractéristiques humaines ou animales, voire d'une capacité d'agir, sans être réduits à « une note ethno-exotique »²⁴ : « En rendant littéral—et pas seulement métaphorique—l'enchevêtrement des domaines organiques et inorganiques, humains et non humains, le réalisme magique s'avère très propice aux programmes écocentriques et biocentriques » (Bénito, Manzanar, Simal 211 ; 199).²⁵ La déconstruction de conventions

²³ « grounding its vision in a recognizably devastated, if also recognisably fantastic, landscape »

²⁴ « an ethno-exotic note »

²⁵ « In rendering literal – not just metaphorical – the intermingling of organic and inorganic, human and nonhuman realms, magical realism proves highly amenable to the ecocentric and biocentric agendas »

normatives telles que « l'humain versus le non-humain » cesse d'être allégorique lorsque les événements et subversions magiques reflètent des problèmes écologiques concrets et actuels : « l'interprétation de la magie et du réel n'est plus métaphorique mais littérale ; le paysage n'est plus passif mais actif—il envahit, piège, entraîne » (232),²⁶ explique Jeanne Delbaere-Garant. Ainsi, la « littéralisation » des métaphores et le mélange de mythes et de réalisme littéraire permettent de concrétiser la nature catastrophique des différentes formes de pollution causées par l'extraction pétrolière.

En accordant une agentivité au monde naturel, le réalisme magique utilise son pouvoir de transfigurer les réalités quotidiennes pour en révéler des caractéristiques qui ne sont pas immédiatement visibles. Les messages provenant du monde naturel ne sont pas codés en mots, ni transmis par des savoirs scientifiques, mais véhiculés par une sorte de communication dynamique des éléments. Ainsi, les manifestations des éléments naturels dans les textes magico-réalistes se révèlent comme des avertissements magiques ou des messages cryptiques provenant de Gaia, telle que la planète a été conçue par Lovelock et Latour. Ce n'est donc pas une coïncidence si le monde naturel d'avant les exploitations, qui est évoqué dans les passages mythiques de *Petroleum*, se présente comme un univers sain et vif, alors que les protagonistes d'*Oil on Water* voient dans le paysage pollué du delta un personnage malade souffrant de l'exploitation industrielle. Heidi Scott parle à ce sujet de « la descente du corps écologique de l'hétérogénéité saine à l'homogénéité malade » (17).²⁷ Le roman suggère d'ailleurs que cette atmosphère mortifère affecte les écosystèmes entiers, sans aucune distinction entre l'animal, le végétal, le minéral ou l'humain, étant donné que le corps de Zaq se présente aussi comme un système énergétique détériorant, voire épuisé.²⁸

Si des personnifications semblent accorder aux paysages des caractéristiques surnaturelles, elles ne relèguent plus l'agentivité du monde naturel à un autre niveau ontologique. Il ne s'agit plus d'une vision cosmologique ou animiste de la nature, qui serait pourvue de pouvoirs mythiques pour lutter contre les activités nuisibles de l'être humain, comme c'est le cas dans la conception par Garuba de l'« animist realism » et de l'« animist materialism »,²⁹ mais d'une façon très concrète de représenter le rôle du non-humain et de combler les « trous » dans l'histoire des formations et fonctionnements planétaires à l'ère de l'Anthropocène. Nombreuses sont les comparaisons qui assimilent le monde naturel à un corps doté d'une certaine agentivité : « the weight of the oil [is] tight like a hangman's noose round the neck of whatever life form lay underneath » (*OOW* 238) ; « grass [...] was suffocated by a film of oil, each blade covered with blotches like the liver spots on a smoker's hand » (*OOW* 10) ; « pipelines crisscrossing the landscape, sometimes like three roots surfacing far away from the parent tree, sometimes like diseased veins on the back of an old shriveled hand » (*OOW* 192). Dans ce dernier exemple, la comparaison semble

²⁶ « [t]he interpretation of the magic and the real is no longer metaphorical but literal ; the landscape is no longer passive but active – invading, trapping, dragging away »

²⁷ « the ecological body's descent from healthy heterogeneity to sickly homogeneity »

²⁸ Voir l'analyse de Maximilian Feldner (525).

²⁹ Pour Garuba, le réalisme animiste et le matérialisme animiste ont pour objectif de réenchanter et retraditionnaliser le monde africain en repeuplant la modernité d'esprits et de pouvoirs fantastiques (261-285).

également suggérer que les éléments artificiels, comme les pipelines, sont en train de prendre la place de leurs « équivalents » naturels, les arbres. Or, dans ces rapprochements la distance entre le comparant et le comparé est maintenue de façon explicite (« like »). À d'autres moments, ces assimilations sont « matérialisées » ou « littéralisées » et un pouvoir d'action direct est attribué au monde naturel ainsi qu'au pétrole, sans intermédiaire, par le biais de verbes actifs : le pétrole « scorches » la terre (*OOW* 192) et « suffocates » l'herbe (*OOW* 10). Il en va de même lorsque des glissements de terrain—fréquents dans les lieux de forage et d'extraction—prennent une force surhumaine aux yeux des personnages étonnés : « le bruit des roches qui, sous le sable, se mettent en place pour accomplir une manière d'apocalypse. [...] Derrière eux, à l'endroit même où ils auraient dû se trouver [...], la terre s'effondre sans bruit et disparaît dans les flots. Sucée par le grand canyon à l'insatiable appétit » (*Pet* 331-333). Si les habitants des lieux continuent à recourir à des références mythiques pour expliquer ces événements inattendus, qu'ils ne peuvent ni déchiffrer ni contrôler, les employés d'Elf-Gabon sont bien conscients de l'origine anthropocentrique des altérations, mais continuent toutefois de décrire les réactions du monde non humain en termes d'actions ciblées :

il y a là-dessous un grand canyon. Il capture les sédiments, déclenche des avalanches sous-marines auxquelles il sacrifie ses flancs. Tout ça pour former des vallées propices au piégeage du pétrole. Imaginez ces gigantesques gorges sous-marines, montrant des incisions parfois supérieures à mille mètres, de quelques centaines de mètres à quelques kilomètres de large. Et parfois plusieurs centaines de kilomètres de long! [...] Les avalanches sous-marines peuvent avoir des répercussions désastreuses sur la frange littorale [...] Vous savez... temporise Alidor, jusque-là, le canyon s'était montré plutôt généreux : il avait engraisé l'île en y crachant ses sables. Mais depuis quelque temps, il reprend ce qu'il a donné. Des bouts de l'île glissent dans l'eau à peu près tous les trois ans... Des légendes locales attribuent ce phénomène à des divinités marines qui vivraient sur ces falaises. (*Pet* 127-129)

Le monde non humain est susceptible d'effectuer des actions, de produire des effets, et se voit accorder un rôle actif dans la production d'agentivité. Dans les mangroves remplies d'eau polluée, les racines essaient de fuir les détériorations produites par l'industrie pétrolière : « hanging roots [...] grew out of the water like proboscises gasping for air. The atmosphere grew heavy with the suspended stench of dead matter » (*OOW* 9). Il en résulte un univers essentiellement hybride, qui évoque les rythmes plus qu'humains des paysages et des éléments, y compris du pétrole, sans que ce pouvoir d'agir implique nécessairement une intentionnalité. Ainsi, Médée, ingénieur sur la plateforme pétrolière d'Elf-Gabon, se met à l'écoute des « roches [...] sentimentales : – Elles ont des émotions que je capte : j'entends le pétrole même quand il ne me parle pas » (*Pet* 13). Cajetan Iheka parle à ce sujet d'une « agentivité distribuée ou diffuse » (4),³⁰ qui réfère aux actions produites par tout un réseau d'acteurs, aussi bien humains que non humains, et prend en considération le rôle que l'environnement peut jouer en réponse aux activités humaines, ainsi que les multiples effets que cette agentivité réactive peut produire.

Or, même si les éléments naturels résistent à la violence des activités industrielles—le style télégraphique en souligne la fermeté : « Mer démontée. Vent siffleur. Pluie rageuse. Vagues meurtrières. Courants féroces » (*Pet* 19) —, ils ne sont pas de taille

³⁰ « distributed or diffuse agency »

à chasser les interventions destructrices de l'humain : « des champs de clams se gavent de détritrus et des bactéries dévorent du gaz méthane en silence. Mais le trépan s'en fiche. Il creuse aveuglément dans l'oasis de vie. Il brûle d'obstination » (*Pet* 20). Les engins pétroliers tiennent en bride une mer particulièrement dynamique et dotée d'une capacité d'agir : « La mer a beau éructer des vagues, vomir de l'écume, le navire ne bouge pas d'un pouce ; tour de force qu'il doit à son positionnement dynamique : l'Océan Liberator est immunisé contre la tempête grâce à des satellites, douze propulseurs et des balises commandées par deux ordinateurs de bord » (*Pet* 19). Dans ces exemples, toute référence aux êtres humains a disparu, de sorte que le lecteur a l'impression de se trouver dans un univers parallèle, constitué seulement d'éléments naturels et de machines, qui luttent de façon si intense qu'il devient impossible de distinguer l'artificiel du naturel : « Autour du puits, l'air carburé se trouble par endroits, là où des vapeurs de gaz se mélangent à l'oxygène. Et le vent se lève pour enflammer la dispute. Un brouillard de méthane s'en mêle, puis une bruine de propane. [...] un rien d'hydrogène sulfuré s'échauffe avec l'air ambiant » (*Pet* 59). Le pétrole se présente d'ailleurs aussi comme une entité non humaine dotée d'un pouvoir agentiel propre, qu'il s'agisse de la matière dans sa forme naturelle, encore enfermée dans la terre, ou de ses transformations industrielles, lorsque des « faraway gas flares [...] emerg[e] suddenly from pillarlike pipes, holding up their roof of odious black smoke » (*OOW* 139). Remarquons que ces images de fumée noire se révèlent particulièrement aptes à rendre visible l'invisible, et deviennent dans l'environnement du delta un point de comparaison fixe et généralisé : « silence hung in the air like the black smoke from the faraway pillars » (*OOW* 140).

Comme le formule Andreas Hejnl, « le monde reste capable de nous surprendre et de bouleverser nos cadres. L'empirique est toujours plus étrange que ce que nous avons imaginé » (100).³¹ C'est pourquoi, à une époque où les altérations écologiques bouleversent tous les repères connus, les façons d'évoquer les rythmes plus qu'humains des paysages et des éléments naturels requièrent une révolution ou un détachement radical des tropes connus et des métaphores habituelles. Et c'est précisément en transformant le monde naturel en un agent plus qu'humain, que le réalisme magique montre les forces environnementales en action telles qu'elles se présentent à l'œil du spectateur stupéfait. Ainsi, la stratégie rhétorique de la personnification non seulement visualise, voire « matérialise » les atteintes portées à la nature ainsi que les dynamiques et mouvements paysagers consécutifs, mais elle traduit aussi les expériences des personnages pour qui l'environnement pollué se présente comme un monde hanté. Les romans de Bessora et de Habila soulignent ainsi la nature étrange, et apparemment magique, de la réalité, causée par la présence de phénomènes qui ne peuvent plus être expliqués à l'aide de nos connaissances du monde réel et des paramètres cognitifs qui en résultent.

Article reçu 23 février 2022

Article lu et accepté pour publication 4 septembre 2022

³¹ « the world remains able to surprise us and disrupt our frames. The empirical is always stranger than we imagined »

Œuvres citées

- Adam, Barbara. *Timescapes of Modernity: The Environment and Invisible Hazards*. Routledge, 1998.
- Apter, Andrew. *The Pan-African Nation: Oil and the Spectacle of Culture in Nigeria*. The University of Chicago Press, 2005.
- Barstow, David, David Rohde et Stephanie Saul. « Deep Water Horizons Final Hours. » *New York Times*, 25 décembre 2010.
- Bénito, Jesús, Ana María Manzananas et Begoña Simal. *Uncertain Mirrors, Magical Realisms in US Ethnic Literatures*. Rodopi, 2009.
- Bessora. *Petroleum*. Denoël, 2004.
- Bubandt, Nils. « Haunted Geologies: Spirits, Stones, and the Necropolitics of the Anthropocene. », *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts of the Anthropocene*. Édité par Nils Bubandt, Elaine Gan, Heather Swanson et Anna Tsing, University of Minnesota Press, 2017, pp. 121-41.
- Bubandt, Nils, Elaine Gan, Heather Swanson et Anna Tsing. « Introduction: Haunted Landscapes of the Anthropocene. » *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts of the Anthropocene*. Édité par Nils Bubandt, Elaine Gan, Heather Swanson et Anna Tsing, University of Minnesota Press, 2017, pp. 1-15.
- Coronil, Fernando. *The Magical State: Nature, Money, and Modernity in Venezuela*. The University of Chicago Press, 1997.
- Delbaere-Garant, Jeanne. « Psychic Realism, Mythic Realism, Grotesque Realism: Variations on Magic Realism in Contemporary Literature in English. », *Magical Realism*. Édité par Lois Parkinson Zamora et Wendy B. Faris, Duke University Press, 1995, pp. 249-63.
- Dimock, Wai Chee. *Through Other Continents*. Princeton University Press, 2006.
- Feldner, Maximilian. « Representing the neocolonial destruction of the Niger Delta: Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* (2011). » *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol. 54, no. 4, 2018, pp. 515-27.
- Garuba, Harry. « Explorations in Animist Materialism: Notes on Reading/Writing African Literature, Culture, and Society. » *Public Culture*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2003, p. 261-85.
- Habila, Helon. *Oil on Water*. Penguin, 2010.
- Halliwell, Stephen. *The Aesthetics of Mimesis*. Princeton University Press, 2002.
- Hegglund, Jon. « Unnatural Narratology and Weird Realism in Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation*. », *Environment and Narrative: New Directions in Econarratology*. Édité par Erin James et Eric Morel, The Ohio State University Press, 2020, pp. 27-44.
- Hejnol, Andreas. « Ladders, Trees, Complexity, and Other Metaphors in Evolutionary Thinking. » *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet : Ghosts of the Anthropocene*. Édité par Nils Bubandt, Elaine Gan, Heather Swanson et Anna Tsing, University of Minnesota Press, 2017, pp. 87-102.
- Holgate, Ben. *Climate and Crises. Magical Realism as Environmental Discourse*. Routledge, 2019.

- Iheka, Cajetan. *Naturalizing Africa: Ecological Violence, Agency, and Postcolonial Resistance in African Literature*. Cambridge University Press, 2018.
- Jameson, Frederic. « On Magic Realism in Film. » *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 12, no. 2, 1986, pp. 301-25.
- Latour, Bruno. *Face à Gaïa: huit conférences sur le nouveau régime climatique*. La Découverte, 2015.
- Lincoln, Sarah L.. « 'Petro-magic Realism': Ben Okri's Inflationary Modernism. » *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms*. Édité par Mark Wollaeger et Matt Eatough, Oxford University Press, 2012, pp. 249-66.
- Lovelock, James. *The Ages of Gaia: A Biography of Our Living Earth*. Norton, 1995.
- Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environment of the Poor*. Harvard University Press, 2011.
- Olderman, Raynold. *Beyond the Wasteland*. Yale University Press, 1972.
- Phillips, Dana. « Ecocriticism's Hard Problems (Its Ironies, Too). » *American Literary History*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2013, pp. 455-67.
- Scott, Heidi. « Whale Oil Culture, Consumerism, and Modern Conservation. » *Oil Culture*. Édité par Ross Barrett et Daniel Worden, University of Minnesota Press, 2014, pp. 3-18.
- Standish, Peter. *Dictionary of the Twentieth Century Culture: Hispanic Culture of South America*. Manly/Gale, 1995.
- Stoekl, Alan. « Foreword. » *Oil Culture*. Édité par Ross Barrett et Daniel Worden. University of Minnesota Press, 2014, pp. xi-xiv.
- Watts, Michael. « Petro-Violence: Community, Extraction, and Political Ecology of a Mythic Commodity. » *Violent Environments*. Édité par Nancy L. Peluso et Michael Watts, Cornell University Press, 2001, pp. 189-212.
- Wenzel, Jennifer. « Petro-magic-realism: toward a political ecology of Nigerian literature. » *Postcolonial Studies*, no. 4, 2006, pp. 449-64.
- . « Petro-Magic-Realism Revisited. Unimagining and Reimagining the Niger Delta. » *Oil Culture*. Édité par Ross Barrett et Daniel Worden, University of Minnesota Press, 2014, pp. 211-25.
- Zuck, Rochelle Raineri. « The Wizard of Oil. » *Oil Culture*. Édité par Ross Barrett et Daniel Worden, University of Minnesota Press, 2014, pp. 19-42.

From the Serengeti to the Bavarian Forest, and back again: Bernhard Grzimek, Celebrity Conservation, and the Transnational Politics of National Parks

Graham Huggan
University of Leeds, United Kingdom
G.D.M.Huggan@leeds.ac.uk

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ecoazona.2022.13.2.4525>



Abstract

This short piece focuses on the work of the German “celebrity conservationist,” Bernhard Grzimek, situating it in the context of historical and contemporary debates about the political and ecological importance of national parks. Grzimek’s role in the creation of Bavarian Forest National Park may not be as well-known as his public ministrations on behalf of the wild animals of the Serengeti, but in several ways his work in and for these two national parks, engaging with the fraught politics of the period, was intertwined. The essay looks at some of these overlaps, using them to make the case for national parks as complex geopolitical formations in which human and animal interests alternately collide and converge. The essay also makes the case for national parks as multi-scalar entities that need to be understood—politically and ecologically—in both local and global, both national and transnational terms. Finally, the essay cites the multiple roles of Grzimek to re-examine the ambivalent role of the celebrity conservationist as a media spokesperson and publicity-conscious advocate for the world’s wildlife.

Keywords: Grzimek, conservation, celebrity, transnationalism, national parks.

Resumen

Este breve trabajo aborda la obra del “conservacionista” y al mismo tiempo “celebridad,” Bernhard Grzimek, al que se sitúa en el contexto de los debates históricos y contemporáneos sobre la importancia política y ecológica de los parques nacionales. Aunque el papel de Grzimek en la creación del parque nacional del Bosque Bávaro no sea tan conocido como el ejercicio público de su ministerio en favor de los animales salvajes del Serengeti, su trabajo en y por estos parques nacionales, comprometido con las tensiones políticas de la época, estuvo estrechamente ligado. Este ensayo analiza algunos de estos solapamientos y los utiliza para abogar por los parques nacionales como formaciones geopolíticas complejas en las cuales colisionan y a la vez convergen los intereses de humanos y animales. El ensayo también aboga por los parques nacionales como entidades multiescalares que requieren una comprensión—a nivel político y ecológico—en términos tanto locales y globales como nacionales y transnacionales. Por último, el ensayo cita los múltiples papeles de Grzimek para reexaminar el papel ambivalente del “conservacionista-celebridad” como portavoz ante los medios de comunicación y defensor, consciente de la publicidad, de la fauna de nuestro mundo.¹

Keywords: Grzimek, conservación, celebridad, transnacionalismo, parques nacionales.

¹ My thanks to Professor Maya García de Vinuesa de la Concha (University of Alcalá) for the Spanish translation.

This short essay emerges out of the context of one of my current international collaborative research projects (<https://conservationhumanities.com/corridor-talk/>), a broad comparative study of human/animal mobilities in and across four European transboundary national parks. Transboundary parks are obvious places to look when considering the politics of national parks, which necessarily involve transnational considerations. For if national parks—like nations themselves—are ideas, they are clearly not just *national* ideas, and as the German environmental historian Bernhard Gissibl and his colleagues put it, they are perhaps “more adequately understood as *transnational* parks: globalized localities that owe their establishment to transnational practices of learning, pressure, support and exchange” (Gissibl, Höhler, and Kupper 2; my emphasis). And while national parks, in different ways and to varying degrees, are local responses to global environmental pressures, they are also regional responses to pressures *within* the nation; as such, there is a case to be made for national parks as *regional* rather than national entities, and they are frequently the products of factional disputes between provincial and federal actors, political battles within the nation-state.² My “Corridor Talk” colleagues and I have made this case at greater length elsewhere, and I refer the reader to this longer essay (see Carruthers-Jones et al., forthcoming). Here instead, I want to dwell on one particular example, involving the twentieth-century German “celebrity conservationist” Bernhard Grzimek, whose fame is mostly based on the role he played in advertising the plight of the wild animals of the Serengeti, but whose conservation work—as we will see—spanned countries and continents, and was deeply entangled with the fractious Cold War and decolonization politics of his time.³

² National parks are many different things at once: “open” scientific laboratories, “closed” nature reserves, “hybrid” recreational outlets. They also come in many different shapes and sizes, and are controlled by a range of entities with different purposes in mind. Indeed, one of the few uncontested things that can be said about them is that (albeit not for the want of trying) there is no standard model of what constitutes, and may legitimately be classified as, a national park (Frost and Hall). The most elaborate current classification system is that adopted by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), which puts national parks in Category II of protected areas worldwide, acknowledging that they are something less than “strict nature reserves,” but also something more insofar as they are designed to “provide a foundation for environmentally and culturally compatible spiritual, scientific, educational, recreational and visitor opportunities” (Dudley 16; also quoted in Gissibl, Höhler, and Kupper 13). However, attempts to standardize this definition have inevitably been unsuccessful, mainly because, as Gissibl et al. argue, the concept of a national park, first developed in the US, has been mobilized globally to support initiatives that serve often radically different purposes to those with which it originally began (13). Indeed, the IUCN guidelines on how to interpret the different management categories lists protected areas in every category which are named as a “national park,” and note that “*the fact that a government has called, or wants to call, an area a national park does not mean that it has to be managed according to the guidelines under category II*” (Dudley; emphasis in the original). The categories themselves, in other words, are explicitly not an attempt to prescribe what should happen within these places, but rather a tool to describe and analyze them.

³ As in previous work (Huggan), I want to distinguish here between “celebrity conservationists,” who have at least some degree of formal scientific training, and “conservationist celebrities” (politicians, entertainers, and the like) whose effectiveness is largely a function of their high degree of media visibility, and who are generally characterized by their emotional commitment to, rather than their in-depth understanding of, one or more popular conservation cause (Huggan 3). At times, of course, the lines between the two can become blurred – as turned out to be the case with Grzimek. While there is no space here to examine this in detail, Grzimek, who was very much a man of his time, brought out the tensions, not just within specific sets of contemporaneous social and political issues, but within the composite figure of the contemporary celebrity

Grzimek has been described as “Europe’s most important wildlife conservationist of the twentieth century” (Lekan vii). For all that, his work, partly because most of the available sources on it are in German (see, for example, Claudia Sewig’s 2009 biography), has not been given the attention it deserves. Though Grzimek’s star may not shine quite as brightly today, for a good while, from roughly the mid-1950s through until the late 1980s, he was a household name in his native Germany, a “charismatic mega-scientist,” as Thomas Lekan wryly calls him, whose winning media persona and widespread political connections enabled him to advocate for global nature, galvanizing national TV audiences with “a vision of wildlife conservation as a noble, apolitical cause above the ideological and Cold War anxieties that dominated Europe in the aftermath of the Third Reich” (2).

Grzimek was many different things at different times, and some of them simultaneously: trained veterinarian, conservation-minded agricultural minister, modernizing director of the Frankfurt Zoological Society, indefatigable champion of the world’s wildlife. But for most of the German public it was his media role as a TV presenter that took him into the nation’s hearts, while his international reputation was sealed by the landmark 1959 wildlife documentary film that he made together with his son Michael, *Serengeti darf nicht sterben* (*The Serengeti Shall Not Die*).⁴ Parallels can be traced here between Grzimek’s work and that of other mid to late twentieth-century celebrity conservationists such as David Attenborough and Jacques-Yves Cousteau. Telegenic figures both, Attenborough and Cousteau, like Grzimek, were able (and, in Attenborough’s case, are still able) to use their celebrity to advocate for various environmental causes, while also like Grzimek, Attenborough and Cousteau were/are both national and global figures, the celebrity status accorded to them having been produced by a “heavily mediated conversation between national and transnational understandings of their work” (Huggan 3).

The relationship between conservation and celebrity is increasingly well documented (Brockington, *Celebrity and the Environment*; Huggan), while the entanglement of both with histories and discourses of colonialism has also been well covered, and is evident in—for example—Thomas Lekan’s recent critical assessment of Grzimek’s work (Lekan). I am indebted in what follows to Lekan, whose work shows better than most that while Grzimek may have been hugely popular on screen, in other respects he was a deeply ambivalent figure, and was often as arrogant in his dealings with his fellow humans as he was affectionate in his attentions to the world’s wildlife (Lekan;

conservationist as moral educator, bound up as he/she is with the moral ambivalence of celebrity *and* the perceived integrity of the greater conservation cause (Huggan 3).

⁴ Michael and Bernhard, while by no means alike in personality or always in agreement on conservationist principles and methods, joined together in terms of their effectiveness in cultivating what might loosely be called the Grzimek mythos, which was characterized by the heroic mission to save the African continent’s (and, by equally loose extension, the world’s) wildlife. Michael’s untimely death in 1959, when the light propellor plane he was flying fatally crashed, most likely after a collision with a local griffon vulture, fed into this mythos, which has proved remarkably resilient over time. It is perhaps unsurprising that Frankfurt Zoo’s Grzimek House continues to this day to pursue a largely hagiographic approach to the Grzimek legacy, but a similar commemorative display at the Serengeti Wildlife Research Center, “right in the heart of East Africa’s savannas, raises the specter of a not-yet-resolved colonial past” (Lekan 254).

see also Sewig, Torma). Certainly, it is difficult not to consider him today as a more or less paradigmatic example of a mid-twentieth-century “environmental saviour” (Huggan) whose conservation work, however admirable in intent, eventually served to buttress the white-male privilege and colonialist hierarchies that have long since been recognized as deeply entangled in the history of conservation, both on the African continent and elsewhere (see, for example, Adams and McShane; Adams and Mulligan; Brockington *Fortress Conservation*; Garland; on the “redemptive” contexts for Grzimek’s work, see also Lekan and Torma).⁵ And certainly he could cut a confrontational figure to those who happened to disagree with him, not least in the multiple roles he played (corporate organizer, public-relations guru, political arm-twister) in the formation and development of the Serengeti and Bavarian Forest National Parks.

Seen from the vantage point of the early twenty-first century, these two geographically distant parks may seem to have little to do with one another, but as several of Grzimek’s commentators have shown, back in the 1960s—the decade during which nature conservation is generally acknowledged as having become a truly global movement—their existences were inextricably entwined (see, for example, Gissibl; Lekan; Torma). There were several good reasons for this transnational convergence. First and most obviously, “wild Africa” was viewed by Grzimek and other conservationists of his time as an antidote to the ecological impoverishment that was the “dark side” of Germany’s post-WWII economic miracle; but conversely, it was seen as an ecological disaster waiting to happen: an animal paradise, assailed by the twin forces of US-style materialism and Soviet-style collectivism, that was in the process of being destroyed (Lekan 79, 76; see also Adams and McShane).

Various critical attempts have been made to account for the Cold War tensions in Grzimek’s conservation work, though Grzimek himself disingenuously claimed to have transcended these (Sewi). As Lekan and Gissibl point out, these tensions were apparent in Grzimek’s virulent anti-Americanism—about which he *was* more than happy to own up—while they were also projected internationally, e.g. onto postcolonial East Africa, and within the nation, e.g. in his support for Bavarian Forest National Park, which is located in a border zone which, at the time of its creation and early development, lay alongside the Iron Curtain (Chaney 214; see also Lekan, Gissibl). American interests were relevant, too, insofar as Bavarian Forest National Park was both influenced by the “universal” preservationist ideologies that underpinned the formation of the early US national parks, from the late nineteenth century onwards (Minteer and Pyne), and fully cognizant of national and regional alternatives to them. As I will show in more detail later, the park that eventually emerged was thus a compromise in more ways than one, a multi-purpose space which aimed to protect nature through reshaping it (*gestaltender Naturschutz*), and

⁵ To see Grzimek as an out-and-out colonialist is, however, oversimplified. Grzimek was by no means apolitical, as he sometimes strategically claimed to be; rather he was adept at capitalizing on the new opportunities provided by changing social and political circumstances. Behind the “honest broker” image thus lay a shrewd political manipulator, who was perfectly prepared in the context of his African work to take advantage of the colonial privileges that his nationality and status gave him, but was equally keen to profit from African decolonization, which gave him the chance to cultivate an enlightened self-image as a durable friend to Africa and a “European outsider who cared” (Lekan 194).

which mixed commercial imperatives with preservationist ones while attempting to avoid the moral dilemmas that complicated the US “wilderness ethic”—especially the thorny issue of whether national parks were *for* the people or were designed to protect nature *from* people and/or to keep particular kinds of people out (Chaney 233).

Grzimek’s interpretation of the Cold War era was a particularly gloomy one, structured around a stark declensionist narrative that pegged Africa’s animals as dying out because “Africans were gradually recapitulating the stages of development set in motion by European civilization” (Lekan 63). At the same time and typically for him, Grzimek recast this sorry scenario of social and environmental decline as a triumphant opportunity. Based on his ostensibly globalist, strategically apolitical view of African wildlife as the common heritage of mankind, he thus set about his mission of creating a national park that would provide a spectacular shop-window onto an ecologically threatened Earth while also functioning as a sustainable global commons: a “for-the-ages” animal sanctuary, but also a thoroughly modern natural laboratory in which conservation—practised according to the best European scientific principles—would promote a forward-looking, pacifistic internationalism that turned its back on both the imperial and the recent Nazi past (123). Serengeti National Park, according to this vision, would help save the world but it would also help save Germany, allowing (West) Germans to “redeem themselves in the world community by [rescuing] life rather than destroying it” (6).

This heady view, suggests Gissibl, was very much of its time, but it also harked back to earlier times, conjuring up early twentieth-century European images of African nature as “a heterotopian wilderness equalling the prehistoric landscape of Europe thousands of years ago” (Gissibl 107). Bringing Africa and Europe together once more, Gissibl links Grzimek’s less well-known role in the discussions that would eventually lead to the establishment of Bavarian Forest National Park in 1970 to his fascination with what would probably be known today as rewilding, the reintroduction of larger, supposedly native fauna that might help restore the “lost originality” of the German landscape (104). The connection, however, is a loose one. It is certainly true that Grzimek was interested in the possibility of reintroducing megafauna – including that semi-mythical Aryan beast, the bison – into German-themed motorized safari parks, and that this, to some extent at least, represented an attempt on his part to “translate the wildlife experience of East Africa’s national parks into West Germany’s cultural landscape” (102; see also Lorimer; Schama, esp. chapters 1 and 2). It is also true that, in the often heated debates that led up to the belated creation of Germany’s first national park, Grzimek insisted—though for once he would eventually lose out—that space be allocated to autochthonous wildlife that had once lived in German forests, and that his staunchly preservationist view of nature conservation flirted at times with the National Socialist conceptions of “characteristic” animals and “original” nature that he publicly disavowed (Gissibl 112; see also Chaney 221).

However, it seems unwise to go too far with this. After all, Grzimek had previously distanced himself from, *inter alia*, Lutz Heck’s notorious animal breeding experiments, which “paralleled Nazi efforts to locate and replenish ‘Aryan racial stock’” (Lekan 33; see

also Driessen and Lorimer). Meanwhile, he never tired of repeating that his was, above all else, a *global* mission, and that he was opposed to all forms of national and regional partisanship: partisanship he decried in his dealings with the various players and interest groups—federal and state politicians, but also scientists, foresters, hunters, industrialists—who, seemingly endlessly in the late 1960s, traded disparate visions and versions of a German national or, as some of the harder-headed secessionists preferred to call it, a *Bavarian* national park (Chaney 229).

That said, Grzimek always had German national interests at heart in his international conservation work, and it seems fair to say that he was as committed to preserving the natural environments of his homeland as he was to saving African wildlife. He was also acutely aware of the cultural capital to be gained from making connections between the two—and likewise aware of the political advantage of claiming to be apolitical which, whatever else he might have been, he was certainly not. Thus, while he liked to project a neutral image of himself as a “globalist without imperial ties or Cold War ambitions, an ‘honest broker’ mediating between the competing claims of international conservationists and African national leaders” (Lekan 182), there seems little doubt that Grzimek was continually looking to prolong West German influence in postcolonial East Africa. Initially, he did this by justifying his and other European conservationists’ roles as technical experts in the run-up to independence. Then, later, he voiced enthusiastic support for Julius Nyerere’s plans to reclaim Tanzania’s national parks for the Tanzanian people, but worked behind the scenes to secure a bipartisan legacy (one that Nyerere, no mean political operator himself, would seek to manipulate to his own advantage, for example, by soliciting Grzimek’s support for evicting Maasai herders from one, particularly threatened corner of Serengeti National Park).

As these various machinations suggest, national parks are political footballs *par excellence*, whether kicked around by federal and state authorities (the Bavarian instance), or subject to competing national and international interests (the Tanzanian case). In the global environmental context of the 1960s and 1970s, conservation became the primary conduit for these hard-fought political games, which played between different versions of the national park idea as embodying a mythical national character, as expressing regional alternatives to that character, or as eschewing national aspirations altogether to lay claims to nature and/or wildlife as a common heritage of mankind. As the American historian Sandra Chaney points out, national parks are cultural ideas, protecting nature but also protecting “cultural views of what nature is [supposed] to be like [and seeking] to naturalize what is deeply cultural” (Chaney 214-15). This certainly proved to be the case with both the Serengeti and Bavarian Forest National Parks, which either transferred German *national* cultural anxieties onto the “primitive” domain of African nature and wildlife, or reflected German *regional* rivalries about what a national park was supposed to be, along with deeper concerns about what a nationalized nature—still not fully excised of the darker eugenicist assumptions behind Germany’s “original” animals and landscapes—was supposed to register to the people who were intended to benefit from it; and *which* particular people were implied (Chaney 221; see also Gissibl 110-112).

Last but not least, the national park idea as it emerged in these local (social) and global (environmental) contexts gave cause for reflection on what “nature” itself meant, and whether it was entangled with “culture” or somehow separate from it. It seems difficult from the ecological standpoint of today to imagine that “nature” was *ever* separate from “culture,” but such arbitrary separations have historically served a multitude of social, political, and economic uses, as can be seen in turn in any attempt to engage with the social, political, and economic history of national parks. Bavarian Forest National Park is a case in point insofar as it was designed and has subsequently been developed on sound ecological principles (Heurich and Mauch); but it still depended, especially in its early years, on the view that “nature” was somehow external to people, and that these “natural processes” could be independently observed (Chaney 234).

Like most national parks today, Bavarian Forest NP is a segmented, multi-purpose site that seeks to balance the sometimes competing demands of recreation and research, though its claim to provide an authentic experience of the natural world, along with its distinctly preservationist motives (“*Natur Natur sein lassen*”: “letting nature be nature”),⁶ is complicated by its hybrid status and underlying economic rationale. (As Chaney argues, the primary reason for the creation of the park was economic, even as its early existence was defined by a state law that stipulated that it should not serve any specific economic purpose. Indeed, as Chaney concludes, the park “was singled out for protection, not because it was seen as hallowed ground symbolizing a mythical national character—or a uniquely Bavarian one—[but] because it was a unique, sparsely populated landscape situated in a region in economic trouble” [235-6]).

As Germany’s first national park, Bavarian Forest NP has a history of its own that confirms that national parks are best understood in their cultural and historical specificity. Part of this specificity relates to its evolving status as a *transboundary* entity: a space that is defined by the borders it crosses as much as the borders within which it is nominally enclosed. Indeed, the story of the park, like that of other transboundary protected areas, is a story of borders. For one thing, Bavarian Forest NP abuts another national park, Šumava NP in what is now the Czech Republic, with the two parks together comprising one of the largest continuous forested areas in Central Europe (Chaney). And for another, the debates surrounding its creation in the mid to late 1960s—debates in which Grzimek played a typically forthright role—could hardly help but be influenced by the fact that the two adjacent parks lay on either side of the Iron Curtain: a fact that necessarily limited opportunities for cross-border cooperation even though there was substantial support for nature protection on both sides and, as Grzimek among others was quick to argue, the area immediately beyond the German park was a wildlife-friendly “no-man’s-land,” kept free of human habitation and cultivation by the land mines and electric fences that were the all-too-familiar accoutrements of the Cold War (Chaney 224-225).

National parks, now as then, are complex geopolitical entities. But if the usual definition of a transboundary national park is one that spans the geographical and

⁶ On the “*Natur Natur sein lassen*” policy, which is usually associated with the founding director of the Bavarian Forest National Park, the conservationist and forester Hans Bibelriether, see Heurich and Mauch (including a chapter by Bibelriether himself); also Chaney.

administrative boundaries of more than one country, it is also an *ecological* one insofar as national parks, whether situated in border regions or not, are designed to support the lives of the nonhuman as well as human actors that are bound up with them – actors whose movements extend beyond the official boundaries of the parks themselves. In this sense, while national parks may by definition be enclosed geographical entities, they are also paradoxically open spaces that provide valuable refuges and corridors for mobile wildlife. This ecological understanding of national parks, while by no means new (see, for example, Timko and Innes; also Carruthers), has assumed increasing importance at a time of mass species extinctions in which the conservationist imperative to protect wildlife faces unprecedented challenges. Take Europe, for example, where the EU’s ambitious Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 has recently called for 30% of all terrestrial areas to be protected. This requires going beyond the dominant “islands of protection” idea that is historically encapsulated in European national parks, and involves a different – or at least revitalized – understanding of connectivity in which the spaces *between* these “islands” are taken into critical consideration, as is the internal logic of self-sufficiency implied by the term “island” itself (Cartwright).

Such insights on “connectivity conservation” (Worboys et al.) are an integral part of current European environmental initiatives such as those attached to the aforementioned Biodiversity Strategy which, in calling for the *layering* of nature protection as well as *additional* nature protection, enjoins EU member states to “create ecological corridors between protected sites to prevent genetic isolation, allow for species migration, and maintain and enhance healthy ecosystems,” the main aim being to build “a truly coherent Trans-European Nature Network” (*Nature and Biodiversity Newsletter* 4). At the same time though, the Strategy somewhat counter-intuitively states that “It will be up to the [individual] Member States to designate the additional protected and strictly protected areas” (4); in other words, it is *national* governments that should ultimately determine which *transnational* guidelines to follow—and which not. Although the new trans-European language of “multispecies conservation” (Lorimer) might seem a long way from the kinds of debates that Grzimek and other German conservationists were pursuing in the 1960s, it thus resonates with at least some of the same political dilemmas, as well as reconfirming that national parks represent just one particular piece of a much larger conservation puzzle that requires collective thinking and action across a wide variety of spatial and temporal scales. Finally, Grzimek’s legacy also shows us that celebrity—for good or ill—continues to play its part in many attempts to solve the puzzle. While numerous convincing critiques have been made of the at best ambivalent role played by celebrity in conservation, it is increasingly recognized, not least by those doing the critiquing, that celebrity remains a powerful mechanism for soliciting public sympathy for conservation in media-driven times (Brockington, *Celebrity and the Environment*). Grzimek may thus have been a man of his time, but he is also a man of *our* time, and like several other twentieth-century celebrity conservationists, he cuts both an exemplary national figure and a contradictory global one, embodying some of the contradictions inscribed within the contemporary practices of conservation itself.

Submission received 21 September 2021

Revised version accepted 23 March 2022

Works Cited

- Adams, Jonathan S., and Thomas O. McShane. *The Myth of Wild Africa: Conservation without Illusion*. University of California Press, 1977.
- Adams, William M., and Martin Mulligan, editors. *Decolonizing Nature: Strategies for Conserving Nature in a Post-colonial Era*. Routledge/Earthscan, 2002.
- Brockington, Dan. *Celebrity and the Environment: Fame, Wealth and Power in Conservation*. Zed Books, 2009.
- . *Fortress Conservation: The Preservation of the Mkomazi Game Reserve, Tanzania*. Indiana University Press, 2002.
- Carruthers, Jane. *National Park Science: A Century of Research in South Africa*. Cambridge University Press, 2017.
- Carruthers-Jones, Jonathan, Eveline de Smalen, George Holmes, Graham Huggan, Katie Ritson, and Pavla Šimková. "Conservation Nationalism and Beyond: The Future of Europe's National Parks," forthcoming 2022.
- Cartwright, Jennifer. "Ecological islands: conserving biodiversity hotspots in a changing climate." *Frontiers of Ecology and the Environment*, vol. 17, no. 6, 2019, pp. 331-340.
- Chaney, Sandra. *Nature of the Miracle Years: Conservation in West Germany, 1945-1975*. Berghahn Books, 2012.
- Driessen, Clemens P.G., and Jamie Lorimer. "Back-breeding the aurochs: the Heck brothers, National Socialism and imagined geographies for nonhuman Lebensraum". *Hitler's Geographies: the Spatialities of the Third Reich*, edited by P. Giaccaria and C. Minca, University of Chicago Press, 2016, 138-159.
- Dudley, N., ed. *Guidelines for Applying Protected Area Management Categories*. IUCN, 2008.
- Frost, W., and C. M. Hall, eds. *Tourism and national parks: International perspectives on development, histories and change*. Routledge, 2009.
- Garland, Elizabeth. "The Elephant in the Room: Confronting the Colonial Character of Conservation in Africa." *African Studies Review*, vol. 51, no.3, 2008, pp. 51-74.
- Gissibl, Bernhard. "A Bavarian Serengeti: Space, Race and Time in the Entangled History of Nature Conservation in East Africa and Germany." *Civilizing Nature: National Parks in Global Historical Perspective*, edited by B. Gissibl, S. Höhler, and P. Kupper Berghahn, 2012, pp. 102-119.
- Gissibl, Bernhard, Sabine Höhler, and Patrick Kupper, editors. *Civilizing Nature: National Parks in Global Historical Perspective*. Berghahn, 2012.
- Heurich, Marco and Christof Mauch, editors. *Urwald der Bayern: Geschichte, Politik und Natur im Nationalpark Bayerischer Wald*. Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht Verlag, 2020.
- Huggan, Graham. *Nature's Saviours: Celebrity Conservationists in the Television Age*. Routledge/Earthscan, 2013.
- Lekan, Thomas M. *Our Gigantic Zoo: A German Quest to Save the Serengeti*. Oxford University Press, 2020.

- Lorimer, Jamie. *Wildlife in the Anthropocene: Conservation after Nature*. University of Minnesota Press, 2015.
- Minteer, Ben A. and Stephen J. Pyne, editors. *After Preservation: Saving American Nature in the Age of Humans*. University of Chicago Press, 2015.
- Schama, Simon. *Landscape and Memory*. Alfred A. Knopf, 1996.
- Sewig, Claudia. *Bernhard Grzimek. Der Mann, der die Tiere liebte*. Bastei Lübbe Verlag, 2009.
- Sundseth, Kerstin et al. "EU biodiversity strategy for 2030." *Nature and Biodiversity Newsletter*, vol. 48, July 2020, pp. 3-13.
- Timko, J. and J. L. Innes. "Evaluating the effectiveness of national parks: case studies from Canada and South Africa." *Biology Conservation*, vol. 142, 2009, pp. 676-688.
- Torma, Franziska. *Eine Naturschutzkampagne in der Ära Adenauer: Bernhard Grzimeks Afrikafilme in den Medien der 50er Jahre*. Peter Lang Verlag, 2004.
- Worboys, Graeme, Wendy L. Francis, and Michael Lockwood, editors. *Connectivity Conservation Management: A Global Guide*. Earthscan, 2010.

The Forest for the Trees: The *umwelt*, the holobiont, and metaphor in Richard Powers' *The Overstory* and Shakespeare's *Macbeth*

Timothy Ryan Day
Saint Louis University, Spain
timothy.day@slu.edu

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ecozone.2022.13.2.4398>



Abstract

This work of ecocritical narrative scholarship weaves analysis of Richard Powers' *The Overstory*—specifically its invocation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*—with a discussion of biosemiotics, metaphor, emergence, and the narrative of my own family's pandemic-inspired move to a national park in the mountains outside of Madrid. The essay investigates the juncture between the human holobiont—the space in and around the human body that constitutes shared habitats for symbionts—, the holobiont of pine trees, and the human *umwelt*. In other words, this piece focuses on the spaces in which bacteria, fungi, and the biological origins of semiosis and language converge. I seek to present a clearer perception of the natural world rooted in narratives of emergence that foreground connections—literary, natural, metaphorical, and material. The form of this paper—the latticework that emerges from the interweaving of literary analysis, biosemiotic and ecocritical theory, and personal narrative—is also part of its content. Through its focus on the intersection of narrative, biosemiotics and material ecocriticism, this work calls into question the very nature of literary metaphor and investigates how the material of literature literally ties us to our environment. Through an exploration of the phenomenological parallel between textual motion in literature, viral motion in nature, and the movement of people through natural and social environments, this document challenges the very idea of metaphor, proposing in its stead an insistence that story, consciousness, and organisms converge in the same material space creating patterns of resemblance that speak to the kinship of all biological systems.

Keywords: Biosemiotics, mind, metaphor, Shakespeare, mycorrhizae, emergence, ecocriticism, narrative scholarship, holobiont.

Resumen

Este trabajo de narrativa ecocrítica y académica entrelaza el análisis de la obra *The Overstory* de Richard Powers—específicamente su invocación del *Macbeth* de Shakespeare—con una discusión sobre biosemiótica, metáfora, emergencia y la narrativa de la mudanza de mi propia familia, inspirada por la pandemia, a un parque nacional en las montañas de las afueras de Madrid. El ensayo investiga la coyuntura entre el holobionte humano—el espacio dentro y alrededor del cuerpo humano que constituye hábitats compartidos por simbioses—, el holobionte de los pinos y el *umwelt* humano. En otras palabras, esta obra se centra en los espacios en los que convergen las bacterias, los hongos y los orígenes biológicos de la semiosis y el lenguaje. Trato de presentar una percepción más clara del mundo natural enraizada en las narrativas de la emergencia que ponen en primer plano las conexiones—literarias, naturales, metafóricas y materiales. La forma de este artículo—el entramado que surge del entrelazar el análisis literario, la teoría biosemiótica y ecocrítica y la narrativa personal—es también parte de su contenido. Al centrarse en la intersección de la narrativa, la biosemiótica y la ecocrítica material, este trabajo cuestiona la naturaleza misma de la metáfora literaria e investiga cómo el material de la literatura nos ata literalmente a nuestro entorno. A través de una exploración del paralelismo fenomenológico entre el movimiento textual en la literatura, el movimiento viral en la naturaleza y el movimiento de las personas a través de los entornos naturales y sociales, este documento desafía la idea misma de metáfora, proponiendo en su lugar una insistencia en que la historia, la conciencia y los organismos convergen en el mismo espacio material creando patrones de semejanza que hablan del parentesco de todos los sistemas biológicos.

Keywords: Biosemiotica, mente, metáfora, Shakespeare, micorriza, emergente, ecocrítica, narrativa académica, holobionte.

"Ecocriticism without narrative is like stepping off the face of a mountain—it's the disoriented silence of freefall, the numb, blind rasp of friction descent." (Scott Slovic, "Ecocriticism with or without Narrative")

"Evolution is systems (organism-in-environments) education." (Wendy Wheeler)

Perhaps it should be stated at the outset of this paper that I share Scott Slovic's opinion that "the goal of narrative scholarship is usually not to highlight the unique subjectivity of the scholar, but rather to use the seemingly subjective language of story as a scaffolding to reveal a shared human experience of ideas, texts, social realities, and the physical world" ("Narrative" 318). The current narrative is about the nature of narrative itself and its material significance in the evolution of cells into bodies who turn around and tell stories of their own. It is about the tumbling of matter into story, and the reciprocal push of story into environment. It is a narrative launched from the collision of a virus, a pine tree, scientific insights about the porosity of bodies and knowledge, and two texts, Richard Powers' *the Overstory* and Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, that speak to each other across four centuries, illuminating the path of human thought about nature's vitality and the relationship of human consciousness to material world with which it is bound.

During the early days of the pandemic, Spain was home to one of the world's most restrictive lockdowns. People were prohibited from going outdoors except for absolute necessities. At the end of 10-weeks confined to a small apartment with our two-year-old son, my wife and I left Madrid behind for a house with a yard in a pueblo in the mountains an hour north of the city. The lone tree on the mountainside above our new home was one of the first things we noticed as we moved in. The tree, and the stories that it harbored from its vantage overlooking four centuries of life in the Sierra de Guadarrama, intermingled with the texts I was reading, the emotional experience of the pandemic, and the emerging scientific understanding of the world as a porous place pervaded by communication at every level. During our first encounter, however, it was just a striking vision: a massive tree, alone on the face of a mountain. Its solitude was an illusion, of course. The tree was part of an ecosystem, and therefore vulnerable to fire, blight, predation. It was part of a history, and therefore vulnerable to human expansion, warfare, unintended consequences of agricultural activity. The tree's solitude became a sort of metaphor for the distance we sought as I began to think of our move in terms of the virus, and in turn to see the virus as an integral piece of our ecosystem as it defied the illusion of the human holobiont as a thing discrete from the rest of nature. In her discussion of the vast extension of symbiosis across biological systems, Lynn Margulis defines a holobiont as a "symbiont compound of recognizable bionts", and a biont as an "individual organism" (Margulis 2). Her argument, in effect, is that symbiosis is not the exception in evolutionary systems, but the rule, and that change ultimately occurs because of the ability for

individual bionts—organisms—to exchange genetic information, nutrients, and a mutually constructed phenotype.

"Look at that," I said pointing to the top of the hill where the pine stood apart from the tree line. I was teaching *Macbeth* at the time of the move. I thought of Birnam Wood, whose dismembered branches disguised Malcom's soldiers creating the illusion that the forest itself advanced on Dunsinane Castle and validated the augury of the witches on the heath in what amounted to the resolution of a riddle. I became aware of how quickly I passed from an experience of the material world, to one that was narratively mediated. I stepped off the biosphere and into Jacob Von Uexküell's *umwelt*, a place where the body of a tree—already a genetic, and therefore textual, body—coagulates with the stories that inhabit it.

"Tree!" shouted our son, less distracted by digressions into literary trains of thought.

"Vaya," said my wife.

In part, this was why we'd come. We wanted him to be near these things—mountains and trees—as he formed his ideas of the world. When I was 12 my mom moved us from Georgia to Chicago. In the intervening years I had become a city-dweller with the zealous passion of the converted. I was convinced that our family would stay in the city, or a city anyway. I think my wife was too. She was born in the Dominican Republic, but had lived in Murcia, a city in the South of Spain, since she was 8. We both moved to Madrid in our mid-twenties. Our son was born in Madrid. He is part of a new generation of Spaniards many of whom are the children of immigrants, growing up during a massive demographic shift across the country as people from Asia, Latin America, North Africa, and the Middle East change the makeup of the country. According to the Instituto Nacional de Estadística, of the 6,853 people who live in our new small-town home, Cercedilla, full time, 5,956 were born in Spain and 897 were born abroad. Of those nearly 900 foreign born, they are nearly evenly divided between European, American, and African countries of origin. There are 36 people who were born in the Dominican Republic, and according to the obviously flawed statistics, no US born residents. What accounted for this movement, for this uprooting of lives and reseeded in homes often on the other side of the globe? Did it have anything to do with conscious intent, or was nature filled with Macbeth's "sound and fury signifying nothing"? Were we all merely reacting to our environments and narrativizing the decisions after the fact?

In some sense, the question I was asking was that of where the individual begins and ends with in the context of the collective, but not *just* the human collective, rather the collective of all animate matter. What we perceive as a discrete body, an individual, might be more accurately described as host to millions of microorganisms that play a role in constituting the whole. But, the body also extends beyond the limits of its skin, relying on organisms in its surrounding environment to thrive. Bodies, and the biomes they house, are a cascading series of interpenetrating communities. In fact, the rise of eukaryotes, like humans, is largely due to the code they were able to purloin from their prokaryotic forerunners. This is intertextuality at the biological level. I do not intend for that to be read as metaphor. The material ancestry, the DNA, of what will become the capacity for

language and literature was always already a text to be read, interpreted, and performed, and it was always a text that was written from a symbiotic space that bridged the bacterial and the mammalian. The exodus from cities around the world of which our move formed part was not something that could be understood without taking the microbial—or the viral—into account. In writing *Macbeth*, Shakespeare did not have such notions as the *umwelt* and the holobiont at hand, nonetheless the agency of nature, the contingency of human intention on a vast array of natural phenomena, and the space in which consciousness and material coagulate into experience, were close to at hand.

In the Introduction to the innovative collection *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* the editors Elaine Gan, Anna Tsing, Heather Swanson and Nils Budandt, present the idea of “Haunted Landscapes of the Anthropocene,” or “the vestiges and signs of past ways of life still charged in the present” (1). These haunted vestiges can include rubble, garbage dumps, seeds whose symbionts or pollinators have gone extinct, or characteristics in currently thriving plants that evolved to suit—or evade—long extinct species. The book forces the reader into the logic of deep time even as they look around at their present landscape which can help us counteract the “shifting baseline syndrome,” which the authors describe as what happens when “Our newly shaped and ruined landscapes become the new reality” (6). We should perform the same analysis on the landscape of our consciousness, our *umwelt*, which, of course, is never really an entity apart. The continuum of time makes it impossible to cleanly divide past materials from present—or even future—ones. Likewise, Margulis tells us that it is hard to know where the text of one body ends and that of the next begins. Bacteria coexisting with RNA may have penetrated the molecular structure and paved the way for the DNA that *writes* the bodies we inhabit, *that encodes them in language*. And the human body, the eukaryote at the center of the human holobiont, is a space where countless systems and organisms come together into a functioning universe. The many viral and bacterial systems to which we play host, and which play a critical role in maintaining our health, and which make up substantial parts of our mass—the microbiome of the gut, for example—all come together to create a whole human organism that we often—and perhaps erroneously—perceive as an autonomous self. It is from within this context that it is, for me, so tempting to think of literature as part of the human holobiont: a material extension of the genetic code that has written us over generations. It is tempting to think that the cultures we carry are part of the diversity that makes us strong as a species, and that this new Spain of which my family forms part and which is made of people like us carrying stories from around the globe to far flung villages, will ultimately lead to a stronger human superorganism. Much like the extension of the human holobiont beyond the visible limit of our skin, the extension of our *umwelt*, which Uexküll defined as a species-specific linguistic habitat, extends beyond the visible limits of any text, of any border, or of any other material artifact of culture. In other words, the holobiont and the *umwelt* describe emergent webs, mycelia if you will, that extend between the visible outcroppings of our cultural reality that too often remain invisible. If only we could *perceive* the reality of our interdependence, we could learn to focus on the strengths of our interconnectivity, our kinship with all biological life.

The move did not feel like a decision. It was just an event that slowly became inevitable. A notion invaded both my wife's mind and my own as we spent nearly three months shut inside a small apartment during the quarantine. I don't remember which of us planted the seed: *We should move to the mountains*. But, like Banquo's "seeds of time," once planted it grew, and on the first day the lockdown ended we found ourselves having lunch in Cercedilla, the last stop on the commuter train to the Sierra de Guadarrama, the mountain range to the north of Madrid. A few months later, we had found a house, a school, and finally ourselves at the base of a pine covered mountain, La Peñota, populated with cows, sheep, and on the weekend, hikers escaping the city. The city's population grew by nearly 10% when the pandemic ended. I read articles about people fleeing New York, San Francisco, Paris, and London for more remote locations. It was a global phenomenon. We were part of an exodus, a large-scale migration of professionals with the luxury to work at home, from urban centers to rural areas in the wake of COVID-19. It was an unconscious statistical migration brought on by an invisible infectious agent. As I read about the legions of people around the globe who had made a move like ours, I did not see the results of conscious deliberation. I saw the retroactive narrativization of the heedless reaction to this new textual entry into the human holobiont. Did the decision lie with us, with the virus, or somewhere in between?

At once a symbol of nature's agency and a refutation of the supernatural, the marching of Birnam Wood is one of the great paradoxes in Shakespeare's works, which firmly roots the pagan-infused illusion of a pantheistic nature in the mundane human discipline of a military strategy. The question the play seems to pose again and again: How can we approach the liminal space between the agency entailed in human consciousness and the utter dependence of human subjectivity on the natural phenomena which inscribe experience? I was spending more time in the woods—hiking in the pine forests—than I had since I was a child in Georgia. I had taught Richard Powers' *The Overstory* in the previous semester, and the book had stuck with me, deepening insights that I first gleaned years prior from Michael Pollan and Bruno Latour. In the *Botany of Desire*, Pollan showed his readers how plants learned to coopt human agency for their own evolutionary ends, and in so doing calls the primacy of human subjectivity into question: "Our grammar might teach us to divide the world into active subjects and passive objects, but in a coevolutionary relationship every subject is also an object, every object a subject. that's why it makes just as much sense to think of agriculture as something the grasses did to people as a way to conquer the trees" (xxi). In *We Have Never Been Modern* Latour set about retying what he describes as the "Gordian Knot": "That a delicate shuttle should have woven together the heavens, industry, texts, souls, and mortal law—this remains uncanny, unthinkable, unseemly" (5). Somewhere along the way we began to imagine the continuous as discrete. The mystery of the marching wood, ultimately, does not lie in the marching of the wood itself, but in the curious ability of the Weird Sisters to narrativize the way that nature will be manipulated to offer *the appearance of* the supernatural. Human agency is questioned as the subject becomes the object of nature, of textual augury, and of the seminal emergence implied by Banquo's "seeds of time." The witches embody what is a decidedly anthropomorphic supernatural, one that allows a glimpse of

an agency that moves beyond the human, even as it remains rooted in the comforting home of the human body. They are both familiar and strange, both human and more than human. The whole of the mystery created by the witches' prediction and the all too worldly mechanism that leads to the seeming magic of a marching forest sits uncannily between the human and the more than human, as if Latour's "heavens, industry, texts, souls, and mortal law" are indeed all spun together. The trees rely on human will to march, but the prediction itself still alludes to supernatural events. It is no surprise then, that 400 years later, on the other side of the enlightenment, Richard Powers returns to just this scene from Shakespeare's play as he constructs a text dedicated to the complex and unwieldy juncture of human agency and the agency of nature, particularly our currently unfolding notions of the intelligence of forests and how they force us to question our own cherished idol of the subjective human self. As Pollan and Latour point out, that agency is a shared thing, existing somewhere between human will and the botanical, animal, or even inanimate. The augury is both human and more than human.

The marching of Birnam Wood has recently received plentiful attention by ecocritics studying the liminal space between human agency and the networks with which it is enmeshed. There is something confounding about this scene's complication of the relationship between myth, human will, and the agency of nature—simulated or otherwise. Randall Martin describes an imbalance brought on by Macbeth's excesses which is restored through Malcolm's temperance. In the chapter "Gunpowder, Militarization, and threshold ecologies in *Henry IV Part Two* and *Macbeth*" from his book *Shakespeare & Ecology*, Martin describes Malcolm's use of Birnam Wood as representing a sort of sustainable ecology: "...Malcolm's order to cut only 'a bough' from Birnam's trees indicates a limited rational use rather than clear-cutting." He goes on to write that "Malcolm might be seen as a kind of conservation biologist in Birnam, making a necessary but controlled intervention to regenerate a landscape that has been savagely degraded by Macbeth's savagery" (110). Steve Mentz writes about a nature whose wildness is a constant reminder that it preexists the human: "The forests of Scotland to the 'blasted heath' where the Weird Sisters gather, define the green world of *Macbeth*. To rule this kingdom requires engaging a land in which, to borrow the phrase Robert Pogue Harrison adopts from Vico, the forests were *first*" (86). Referring more generally to Shakespeare's body of work, he writes,

The plays create for a brief shared time and space an imaginative world that follows its own rules. Inside the charmed circle, the boundary between "art"—things created by human ingenuity and technique—and "nature"—the physical landscape into which we are born—ceases to hold. The art-nature distinction becomes flexible, textured, and subject to poetic play and refiguring. It's like crossing over without leaving our seats. We dive in without getting wet. (84)

While Mentz points to the artifice of a space in which the inside and the outside of whatever we define as human are allowed to hover in one another's vicinity without completely collapsing, Nicholas Ciavarra points out that despite a tendency for Shakespeare to represent forests as liminal spaces, in early modern times "outside of the cities, thousands of citizens lived near or within wooded regions and forests" (95). "For many," he goes on to say, "the forest was not a deserted space but their life and livelihood"

(95-6). And then, “Despite our modern sense of cities as antithetical to wilderness, early modern London was very much a wooden space” (96). Michael Lutz reads the scene through the lens of Latour and the Vital Materialism of Jane Bennet: “Indeed, we have only to remember the famous scene of Birnam Wood marching on Macbeth’s Dunsinane to realize how the play refuses to reduce the landscape of Scotland to what Bruno Latour would call ‘mere stuff’” (197). This is by no means an exhaustive list of recent ecological approaches to Shakespeare’s scene, but it does go to show, along with Powers’ own literary engagement with Birnam Wood, that this strange conflation of human agency, with the invocation of witchcraft and animate nature, continues to demand our attention—perhaps demands it more than ever—after four centuries.

Of course, *Macbeth* is far from unique in Shakespeare’s body of work for its exploration of the liminal zone between nature and culture. It is a virtual obsession and one of the primary engines of Shakespeare’s sustained ability to engage audiences across the centuries. Prospero’s books are a notable example of human knowledge having the capacity to manipulate the natural world, while the hallucinogenic juice from Puck’s flower is a botanical example of nature’s capacity to infiltrate and alter human minds and emotions. References to Ovid’s Daphne in *Titus*, or to Midas in *The Winter’s Tale*, or even to the Minotaur in *Hamlet*, remind the reader that pagan notions of nature are still powerful cultural narratives in Shakespeare’s time and our own. For all our obsession with the subjective self, the scientific method, and modernity in general, our narrative selves are never quite capable of escaping a basic intuition that we might not be as separate as we would like to imagine. Again and again the *umwelt* leads us back to anxieties about the holobiont and the skepticism that it implies towards anything like a discrete embodied self. Humans are not nature’s likeness, but nature itself. Anthropomorphizing is an impossibility because we are identical with the object of our gaze. What we fail to do, is to recognize ourselves in the mirror of the world. In her article “Delectable Creatures and the Fundamental Reality of Metaphor” Wendy Wheeler argues that metaphor itself is not so much an abstract connection between two dissociated entities that exists only in the mind of the observer as the material remnant of some evolutionary connection which is not so exclusively human as we might wish:

We tend to think, carelessly, of metaphor as not real (as in “it’s only a metaphor”), but what we call metaphor seems to me to be a most basic aspect of living things. Metaphor describes the case where one function (‘meaning’) is able to bear the weight of another function, which it can then carry, because they are sufficiently similar. Whether in biology or in language, the temporality of evolutionary process lies in the fact that the new always derives some elements of the past (or what already exists) which are creatively recombined.

She discusses the need to embrace Peircean abduction—a playful alternative to induction and deduction that allows for surprising and poetically emergent conclusions—in pursuit of a “night science” that might allow us to engage not only our rationality and methodology, but also our intuition and spirituality broadly defined:

Our modern mistake has been to believe that only what is consciously known and measurable is real. We so-called moderns think that ‘faith’ and ‘belief’ belong to misguided human reason and rational error. But the states of mind which involve ‘faith’ and ‘belief’ clearly belong to the ‘mind’ of all sensuously responsive living things. ‘Faith’ and ‘belief’,

the real life of affect and intuition (which we like to designate as animal instinct from which we have more or less escaped), are in fact, clearly absolutely fundamental to normal human reasoning.

Superstition, religion, spirituality, and a visceral awe before the sublimity of nature, keep coming back to remind us that we are, despite the best efforts of our impressive intellectual and technological efforts, completely interwoven with the world in our midst. In short, the *umwelt* reminds us that it is steeped in what Serenella Iovino has called “porosity,” as it constantly traverses and is traversed by the holobiont. Iovino writes, “And it is this interplay that makes all bodies, from atoms and molecules to assemblages and collectives of humans and nonhumans, permeable to the world. This porosity occurs at many levels, both material and semiotic...” (101). Bodies and minds rely on each other for their mutual creations. Texts are environmental forces. The *umwelt* needs the holobiont, arises from it, feeds back into it as they mutually create all the material that is consciously perceived.

Richard Powers' novel *The Overstory* is steeped in an awareness of Latour's “delicate shuttle”, Iovino's “porosity”, and Wheeler's “Night Science”, as he invokes Shakespeare repeatedly in eight stories of how trees move individuals towards activism, of how nature co-opts the willpower of humans to coerce them into doing its bidding, leaving us with the question—the same question that sits at the center of *Macbeth*—where does agency really exist and what does it have to do with the creation of a better world? And maybe more to the point, a better world for whom? For the individual, for humanity as a whole—what Wendy Wheeler calls *The Whole Creature*—, for the myriad animal species that inhabit the planet, or for the balance of all the forces and beings in the natural world that we have come to refer to as Gaia? Any contemporary notion of nature, and its connection to consciousness and intention, must contend with complexity inherent in current understandings of physics, biology and the neuroscience that weaves itself into our vision of the subject as it wanes from its position at the center of our approach to nature. *Emergence is a literary matter, as much the material of poetry as biology or physics.*

Where Wheeler writes about the slippage from the individual human consciousness to the species-wide superorganism of the “Whole Creature,” Merlin Sheldrake explicitly challenges the juncture between animal and plant by demonstrating that the likeness between mycelia and neural networks may be more than mere metaphor. In his book *Entangled Life*, Sheldrake presents the possibility of fungal computers based on the mycorrhizal networks that traverse forest floors that outperform our current capacity before writing:

Traditionally, intelligence and cognition have been defined in human terms as something that requires at least a brain and, more usually, a mind. Cognitive science emerged from the study of humans and so naturally placed the human mind at the center of its inquiry. Without a mind, the classical examples of cognitive processes—language, logic, reasoning, and recognizing oneself in a mirror—seem impossible... For many, the brain-centric view is too limited. The idea that a neat line can be drawn that separates nonhumans from humans with “real minds” and “real comprehension” has been curtly dismissed by the philosopher Daniel Dennett as an “archaic myth.” (Sheldrake 65)

Sheldrake's mycological inquiries, informed by Suzanne Simard's notion of the Wood Wide Web—the rhizomatic network of mycelia that pass neurotransmitters across root systems beneath the forest floor—lead him through a careful analysis of botanical communication to a skepticism towards the peculiarity of the human mind. Where Wheeler, invoking biosemiotics in the tradition of Jesper Hoffmeyer, Thomas Sebeok, and Jakob Von Uexküll, draws evolutionary connections from the cellular, through the animal, to the human, Sheldrake extends the same line of thought to encapsulate the fungal. Where Shakespeare had to rely on a tactical trick to represent the agency of nature, scientists like Simard and Sheldrake have paved the way for Powers to speak more literally about the agency of trees. His only trick is to lend the trees the persuasive power of human language.

Into the midst of this evolving matrix of animal, fungal, and arboreal ideas with which Powers is clearly engaged, marches the metaphor of an advancing forest. *Macbeth* first appears explicitly in *The Overstory* in the chapter about Mimi Ma. In 1948, as the communists approached, Mimi's father Sih Hsuin, a Hui Muslim trader, was forced to escape Shanghai, and his father's successful business on Nanjing Road. As his father prepares the young engineering student for his trip to the United States, he gives him three jade rings and a scroll. The rings are carved with images of landscapes. His father tells him "You live between three trees. One is behind you. The Lote—the tree of life for your Persian ancestors. The tree at the boundary of the seventh heaven, that none may pass. Ah, but engineers have no use for the past, do they?" (26). Handing him the second ring, he says "Another tree stands in front of you—Fusang. A magical mulberry tree far to the east, where they keep the elixir of life" (26). Finally, he offers him the third ring, saying "The third tree is all around you: Now. And like *Now* itself, it will follow wherever you go" (27). After giving Sih Hsuin the rings, he unrolls a scroll with the image of three men. His father tells him that the men are "*Luohan*. Arhat. Adepts who have passed through the four stages of Enlightenment and now live in pure, knowing joy" (27). The three rings and the three arhats clearly become stand-ins for the wayward sisters, a connection that becomes explicit when the elderly Sih Hsuin becomes obsessed with the Verdi opera version of *Macbeth*, but here Powers has given them a very different hue. They do not appear tinted with the darkness and witchcraft we tend to associate with the sisters, but with wisdom and a spiritual magic that is associated with nature's grandeur and beneficence. Here, the witches are wisemen who have cultivated their spiritual centers, honed their connectivity to the natural world, become "enlightened" and as such have wisdom to pass on. This is a radical re-reading of the witches from *Macbeth*. The witches are often connected to a pagan tradition, and thus with the wildness of the heath, but rarely has their witchcraft been interpreted as the result of a virtuous relationship to nature. Here, the witches' ability to see what Macbeth cannot, is not a result of black magic, but meditation, presence, and a sense of being tuned in to the messages being communicated from the physical world. It is the Macbeth's failure to read the signs all around them, their misconception that they are somehow separate from hierarchies and social intricacies that generates the dramatic rupture in nature. They cannot perceive, or refuse to, their own integration with the world beyond their bodies and consciousnesses.

The tree that we spotted that first morning on the side of La Peñota is visible from my son's bedroom window. It is the oldest and largest of los Pinos Silvestres which cover the mountainside to the North and East. It is set apart from the wide swathes of white and green that are the snow-covered pine forest carpeting the mountain. It is the lone tree on the mountain's southwest face, covered in patchy mazes of green grass and thorny brown branches of blackberry brambles, grazing land where cows and sheep wander. We noticed the tree as we read our son bedtime stories each night. Once he had fallen asleep, the silhouette of the tree against the moonlit mountain was a sort of nightly meditation on the isolation of our new surroundings. From below the tree does not look particularly big, but as it turns out it is possibly the largest pine in all of Spain. El Pino Solitario, or "the Lonely Pine" is a local fixture. I walked along the base of the mountain, beneath the tree, each morning on my way to the train station and each evening when I returned. Sometimes it looked as if El Pino Solitario was a lone soldier confronting a legion of pines that might have advanced over the peak at any moment. Other times it looked like a stoic orator, speaking to the assembled masses. Others still it looked like a hermit who had wandered away from the crowds for a better view of the valley beneath the mountain. Without trying to, I found myself looking up to it each day, staring into it as if returning to a conversation that we'd left unfinished the previous evening. It was a conversation about time. The tree reminded me of all the things it had witnessed, perched above the valley for over 350 years amidst the unfolding of the human *umwelt*. It had also seen the decimation of its kin—and much of the pine holobiont that pervaded the mountainside—in a fire in the nineteenth century. The tree was probably seeded sometime soon after completion of Felipe II's monastery at El Escorial while Spain was still an imperial power. It was a sapling as the Hapsburgs passed to the Bourbons, and already 200 years old with establishment of the first republic in 1873. Fortifications used by Franco's forces during the Spanish Civil War still dot the mountainside beneath the tree. Ernest Hemingway, Martha Gellhorn and John Dos Pasos may well have looked on it when they came to the Sierra de Guadarrama during the war. El Valle de los Caídos, or The Valley of the Fallen, which served as Franco's tomb until he was recently exhumed and moved to a family plot in el Pardo, is visible from the tree's vantage. In *Underland* Robert Macfarlane compares the Sierra de Guadarrama and its history to that of the northern Scotland that would have been familiar to Macbeth: "I have walked through numerous occulting landscapes over the years from the cleared valleys of northern Scotland, where the scattered stones of abandoned houses are oversung by skylarks, to the Guadarrama mountains north of Madrid, where a savage partisan war was fought among ancient pines, under the gaze of vultures..." (230-1). Staring up at the tree is a reminder of how short a time we will spend in this valley, even if we stay for the rest of our lives. It is a reminder of how much more of the story the tree will witness than we will. The awareness of that brevity ought to breed kindness and intent in the way we live.

We can infer *Macbeth's* presence in Powers' novel right from the outset. The novel begins almost biblically: "*First there was nothing. Then there was everything*" (3, cursive in original). Then, a paragraph later after introducing a woman who sits in a park taking in

the nature that is unfolding all around her, Powers writes, “*Signals rain down around her like seeds*” (3). The chapter that follows, the story of Nicholas Hoel and his antecedents, is a story about seeds that are planted and the trees that grow from them alongside generations of Hoels. The steady progress of the tree across a century and a half is juxtaposed against the short lives of the Hoels who watch it grow. All of this calls to mind Banquo’s famous line in *Macbeth* when he speaks to the witches, “If you can look into the seeds of time/ And say which grain will grow and which will not,/ Speak then to me, who neither beg nor fear/ Your favours nor your hate” (1.3.56-9). The metaphor is a clear one: the unfolding of time, of a life, is similar to the incalculable potential for the complex emergence of a plant from a seed to veer from any predictable path. We can assume to a degree of certainty that a plant will issue from the seed and even the type of plant it will be, but not exactly how tall it will grow, how many leaves or flowers it may have, in which direction it will reach, what weather will greet it, what bacteria or pests it may encounter, etc... In short, there are many branches on the tree of time and each arises from a set of factors so immense as to seem random. But, when Powers says that “signals rain down around her like seeds,” he seems to be looking at the inverse of Banquo’s dilemma about time’s unforeseeable emergence. He is implying that there is a message in the unfolding of nature, that there is a story being told by the seeds and signals. They are not arbitrary, but legible. He is flying in the face of Macbeth’s famous line at the end of the “Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow” speech, that life is “a tale/ Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,/ signifying nothing” (5.5.25-7). Rather, all of nature is meaningful in ways that exceed the human capacity or need to understand. Narrative is not something uniquely human, rather it is all around us, there for us to bask in, enjoy, appreciate, and play with. It might be that narrative can only be described as “signifying nothing” when it is isolated from its totality and forced into the context of human consciousness and its desires—and probably not even then. If we choose to ignore the more than human for all the ways it fails to resemble us, we dissolve into egocentrism, connection becomes impossible, and meaning evades our perception, trapping us in the same solipsistic stories about our exceptional—solitary even—species. Of course, Shakespeare’s audience was probably already meant to read *Macbeth* as a character whose relationship to nature was desperately flawed, and as such we should not take his nihilist rant as truth, rather as a reflection on where his tyrannical bent on power led his own subjective experience. The difference in Powers’ version lies more in its attitude towards the natural world, which is full of mystery, magic, and the constant transmission of signals, but avoids giving in to the irrational fear of the supernatural potentials of nature that was endemic to Shakespeare’s time in which King James—a famous proponent of witchcraft conspiracy theories—wrote a book, *Daemonologie*, on the dangers presented to society by witches. In Shakespeare’s play, the voices of nature follow a Cartesian model, serving principally to bewilder and confuse, whereas in Powers’ novel, the signals coming from the natural world can lead us to balance, if we are willing and able to listen. This is clear nowhere more than when the customs agent opens Hui’s trunk upon landing in San Francisco and asks him to unroll the scroll with the patenting of the Arhat’s. “Who are they?” The agent asks Hui. He replies: “Holy People.” “What’s wrong with them?” She asks. “Happiness. They see the true thing.”

She asks him what the true thing is, and he struggles to put it into words before saying, “The True Thing mean: human beings so small. And life, so very big.” Macbeth’s mistake is to take himself, his advancement, too seriously, to think that nature is at all concerned with his advancement. The forest will not move to stop him. Only humans would deal in such petty timeframes. However, this is not to say that nature is not communicating, teaching, playing. It is, and if we listen from a place of humility, we may learn.

The Overstory explicitly explores our nascent understanding of the ways that symbiosis between rhizomes and mycelium leads to a sort of semiosis, both in cultural and botanical contexts. The character of Patricia Westerford—who is based on the real-life professor of forestry, ecologist, and author Suzanne Simard—has dedicated her life to understanding the ways that trees communicate. Aided by professional alienation from her fellow PhD’s in forestry, a father who died young only after planting in her the narrative seeds of humanity’s mythological and pulmonary dependence on their arboreal companions, and a tendency towards the solitary that may be in part the result of her hearing loss, Patricia is given to understand trees as complex beings. She studies Mycorrhizal networks, in which plants and fungi mutually benefit from a symbiotic relationship which allow trees to send signals across the forest floor. A pine forest, for example, will have an abundance of fungi in its rhizosphere, its root system, which it can use to transfer nutrients and water from one section of the forest to another, and even to emit enzymes that might help fight off unwanted pests or disease. The forest, it turns out, is not a collection of trees, but an entity unto itself.

The human holobiont is a material notion aimed at an understanding of all the organisms that swirl in our orbit, making us stronger, making us functional, benefiting from our skin, our organs, the controlled atmosphere of our homes and our bodies. But, as *the Overstory* shows us, all the bodily complexity that constitutes a holobiont is also host to an informational system—an *umwelt*—that has crossed generations, oceans, and continents, bringing us closer, perhaps to what Stacy Alaimo has called trans-corporeality, a concept that Serenella Iovino and Serpil Opperman have described as “the transit of substances and discursive practices within and across bodies” (4). Alaimo writes that “the time-space where human corporeality, in all its material fleshiness, is inseparable from ‘nature’ or ‘environment,’ offers a critical lens that unites the body to its environment, creating a material bond between subject and the world” (238). Our shared narrative habitat (our *umwelt*) has persevered through wars, plagues, and famines, swirling in our midst as a reminder of our mythological/literary/spiritual connection to story. Above all, our cultural history has been a migratory phenomenon, one in which unexpected encounters have had the potential to lead to expanded horizons and an ever-increasing richness, not that we have always or even most often cultivated that potential. Powers exerts much energy towards showing us how the roots of the trees are intertwined with our own metaphorical roots, and the complex he creates is at least as literary as scientific. We are tied to trees by genes, by personal history, by a symbiotic relationship between our need for oxygen and theirs for carbon-dioxide, by shared mental and physical space, by Ovid, and yes, by Shakespeare. The human holobiont is made of viruses and bacteria, but also of narrative, the roots of which run through our metaphorical and literal ground,

through our literary landscape and through our DNA. The question that we must ask ourselves is, do we want to *see* the richness of this interconnectivity, to marvel as we “look into the seeds of time,” and witness the stories as they unfold? The challenge will be to create narratives that can house—even encourage—emergent narratives that help us to *see* who and what we are as humans in relation to the natural world. Powers’ novel, and its invocation of Shakespeare’s play, are steps in that direction.

Macbeth reappears at the scene of Hui’s suicide. He is listening to Verdi’s *Macbeth* as he shoots himself, sitting beneath the mulberry tree that he had planted with his wife years before. There is an ancient poem by Wang Wei unscrolled before him which reads in part:

An old man, I want
only peace.
The things of this world
mean nothing.
I know no good way
to live and I can’t
stop getting lost in my
thoughts, my ancient forests. (41)

The poem again calls to mind Macbeth’s “sound and fury, signifying nothing.” The old man’s mind is full, but the signals are meaningless, or at least beyond his ability to organize into meaningful patterns. He was unable to hear the voices of the Arhats and instead was led down the path of the witches. In the chapter “Seeking a Discourse of Scientific Sensitivity” in his book *Going Away to Think*, Scott Slovic poses the question, “... what is the relationship between information and meaning? To phrase another way, what is the relationship between the meaning or import of scattered pieces of information and what we might call ‘an integrated worldview? To push this a little bit further, it seems significant to ponder the relationship between such a worldview and daily behavior” (144). Slovic’s questions seem to get at issues that are at the heart of both *Macbeth* and *the Overstory*: How do minds take fragmented information and turn it into a narrative that creates meaning and then action? How does a rational, even disembodied, approach to data open into and communicate with Wheeler’s affective, intuitive “night science”, and offer up a vision of life that connects the human, the animal, the botanical, and even the inanimate into a continuum of meaningful experience? Can the post-enlightenment scientific approaches that have defined the era between Shakespeare’s and our own lead us to meaning? Or do we need to learn new modes of perception?

Mimi Ma’s path through the novel might provide an answer to Slovic’s questions. Mimi flirts with the same destructive nature that consumed her father and ultimately led him to suicide. She follows the voice that calls to her from nature through trials, anxieties, rages, and even ambition that ultimately proves deadly to someone close to her. Her activism is first spurred by the clear-cutting of a forest behind her office. Without realizing it, she associates the forest with the rings, the Arhats, and ultimately, her father. Her reaction is emotional and unconscious, and despite her aversion to people with conviction, she finds herself leaping into a movement to protect trees in an old-growth forest. Her increasing dedication to the cause flies in the face of the career-driven

materialist she knew herself to be, and pushes her, despite herself, into a close relationship with the novel's other protagonists, each of whom have been led by some interaction with a tree—either mystical or mundane—to the same project. Importantly, none of them arrive to this fate through the result of conscious intention. Their collective zealotry ultimately leads to an act of terrorism in which Olivia Vandergriff—a young woman who believes she can communicate with trees after a near death experience on her college campus and claims to have foreseen the successful conclusion of their efforts to save the forest—dies. Powers writes of Mimi, looking into Olivia's eyes as her life fades: "As clearly as if she speaks the words out loud, she puts the idea into Mimi's skull: *Something's wrong. I've been shown what happens, and this isn't it*" (351, cursive in original). Olivia transmits to Mimi the frustration and failure that consumes Macbeth when he concludes that the signals of nature have all been meaningless. The tragedy forces the characters to scatter around the country and to start new lives, each of their idealisms shattered by the violence that marked their failure. Mimi could have taken the lesson that her father did, the lesson that Macbeth did, the lesson that she detected in the eyes of Olivia as she watched her die, but she chooses another path. Instead of hiding from the signals of nature, the mysterious communicativeness of consciousness, she dives into it as we see in the scenes of the career she builds after the traumatic events lead her to sell the scroll of the Arhats and start a new career:

Stephanie bows her head. She sits up, and they try again. It happens often, this false start. No one suspects how hard it is to hold another's gaze for more than three seconds. A quarter minute and they're in agony—introverts and extroverts, dominants and submissive alike. Scopophobia hits them all—fear of seeing and being seen. A dog will bite if you stare at it too hard. People will shoot you. And though she has looked for hours into the eyes of hundreds of people, though she has perfected the art of endurance staring, Mimi feels a tinge of fear herself, even now, gazing into the skittering eyes of Stephanie, who, blushing a little, powers through the shame and settles down. (400)

Mimi has become a therapist working in a type of tantra based on maintaining eye contact. She is dismissing the human narratives, eschewing the anxieties of our need to know, to arrange the world into consumable stories, and looking right into the eyes of another being without preconditions. She is basking in the sublimity of another being, allowing the signals of nature to pour over her without making demands. It is not that life, that nature, is full of meaningless signals, it is that the complexity of those signals is great, and we are small. The realization embedded in staring is that we are already completely interpenetrated by the world around us. The lesson is that we—humans—must learn to look that complexity straight in the eyes without demanding anything of it, without demanding anything of ourselves.

Moira Marquis' recent article in *Green Letters*, "Listening to the Trees: *The Overstory's* Dendrography and Sugar Maple Speaks" contends that despite Powers' work having been showered with praise, and the Pulitzer Prize, it was ultimately a failure in its effort to give voice to trees. This is not an observation that is lost on Powers himself. In an interview with Emmanuel Vaughan-Lee for *Emergence Magazine*, Powers is confronted with a comment from Barbara Kingsolver's New York Times review: "People will only read stories about people, as this author knows perfectly well. *The Overstory* is a

delightfully choreographed, ultimately breathtaking hoodwink" (qtd. in Vaughan-Lee). Powers responds that

There is a bit of a hoodwink involved, or let's call it a bait and switch, in the book, in which there is an invitation initially to read the book as a classic work of literary fiction that is immersed deeply in the lives of individuals who seem to be making meaning in and for themselves. Gradually, using this seduction shifts the readers' focus to this broader question of who we are inside the larger community of life. (Vaughan-Lee)

He goes on to comment: "You could also say that there is a kind of hoodwinking in status quo literary fiction that does not attempt to situate us in that larger context. The hoodwink would be the invitation to the reader to believe that there is a separate story called nature" (Vaughan-Lee). Marquis' critique is compelling, especially in its appraisal of realism as a style that too often perpetuates a corroded status quo steeped in the hierarchical logics of misogyny and colonialism. However, Powers' project clearly struggles with the question of how to portray nonhuman consciousness through a narrative form that appeals to humans and succeeds at bringing a crucial narrative to a very broad public. His reliance on the genre of realism is at a minimum complicated by forays into fantasy, spirituality, and virtual reality. Powers' aversion to anthropomorphizing the trees in his text does not need to be read as genuflecting to the superiority of human consciousness; rather, it reflects on how the narrative flow which marks human consciousness becomes a point of division between humans and their environments, offering both the powers and the limitations that self-consciousness carry. In the character of Mimi Ma, there is an almost Platonic recognition that it is the narrative distraction that degrades human consciousness from anything like a seamless integration into its habitat. Mimi's tantric practice is—ironically given she is a character in a novel—an effort to banish the poets from the Republic of her mind, to silence the many narratives that seek to give finite form to an expansive reality in favor of an acceptance of the infinite narratives that are always streaming down around us, and which will always remain plentiful to be assimilated into anything approximating a complete knowledge. The stories we should tell are those that open out into evolution, connection, emergence. It is difficult for me to read this novel as one that bows to the post-enlightenment traditions it is so clearly engaged with dismantling.

The Solitary Pine wasn't alone on the hillside. The Macbeth's weren't either. They felt alone, perhaps because of the ambition that drove them further into isolation. The consolidation of power is an inherently alienating act, after all. "Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown," as Henry IV reminds us (3.1.15-16). Or, perhaps, it was Lady Macbeth's barrenness that led them to feel cut off from the genetic lineage that felt personal and discrete from within a hierarchical system. Shakespeare often invoked the metaphor of bastards (*King John*) and even grafting (*All's Well that Ends Well* and *The Winter's Tale*) to discuss the connection of one generation to the next, which can at times seem arbitrary. What the Macbeths failed to see was how connected they were, and that no amount of steeling themselves against their own conscience could cut the invisible Mycorrhizal connections that tied them to all the other trees in the forest: to Banquo, to Duncan, to each other. As Freud understood, the conscience is built on deep rooted

narrative ties. Ties that intermingle like roots in the underworld. In an effort to bypass the inherent interconnectivity of the human, Lady Macbeth infamously pleads:

...Come you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full
Of direst cruelty. Make thick my blood,
Stop up th'access and passage to remotes,
That no compunctious listings of nature
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between
Th'effect and it. (1.5.38-45)

Her commentary is often read as one that rebukes the frailty of her sex, but it could just as easily be read as an incantation against all sex, all gender, all the debility implied by the symbiosis inherent in a living biological system. She asks, after all, for her blood to be made thick, for the passages to be stopped up, and that nature itself not be allowed to stop her from attaining her goal. This is a prayer for some power to intercede in the face of time and life as much as gender. She wants to be freed of all the interconnectivity that conscience implies. Shakespeare, in almost every one of his works, sets individual intent, individual desire, against the complex unfolding of social hierarchies. Our pursuit of stasis, unity, is simply at odds with the unfolding of time. We are, all of us, dependents.

In looking at the Arhats beside the witches, and at the parallel paths of Macbeth and Hui, or perhaps even more to the point at the generations that exceed them in the forms of Banquo's offspring who finally constitute the royal lineage that evades Macbeth, or Mimi Ma who attains something akin to the peace that eluded her father, we can begin to see how the breadth of nature's timescale diminishes the temporal ambitions of any one life, and perhaps makes the very notion of individuality a foolish pursuit of stagnation amidst a dynamically unfolding material world that is dependent at every step. Our world is one of movement across space and through deep time. Continents and borders emerge and disintegrate even as states of material being metamorphose from inanimate substance to living bodies and back again. We will come and go. So will the tree. So will the mountain.

I wanted to see the tree up close. I set off from the base of la Peñota where we live and headed up a winding path that passes a field marked with a sign that reads "*PELIGRO. GANADO BRAVO*" which translates to "DANGER. BULLS." There is a small practice ring at the far end of the field indicating that these bulls are indeed intended for the bullring, and not just here to sire the cows that roam the open mountainside pasture. I watch the bulls as they graze, seemingly as tranquil as any of the other cows I have come across on walks through these woods. I disturb a murder of crows which surprise me as they take off in unison, squawking their annoyance from above. Stone fences traverse the landscape and I think for a moment of the tremendous amount of work that must go into their maintenance on these steep inclines. Having recently read James Rebanks' *The Shepherd's Life: A Tale of the Lake District*, I imagine the generations and generations of shepherds that have kept those stone walls standing on the impossible grades. I think of the frustration he expresses at the likes of me, urban interlopers who come to understand this

landscape as a place of escape. "It is curious thing," he writes "to slowly discover that your landscape is loved by other people. It is even more curious, and a little unsettling, when you discover by stages that you as a native are not really part of the story and meaning they attach to the place" (88). I breathe in the fresh mountain air, meditate on the pine covered horizon and feel unapologetic about my need for this space. The tree is visible as I walk, but I know the path well enough to know that it doesn't go anywhere near el Pino Solitario's perch. At some point, I will have to ditch the path and rustle up the hillside through the brush.

As I climb, I consider the gap of time between Shakespeare's era and our own, and that span's implications on Powers' decision to rely so heavily on *Macbeth* in the creation of his own meaning. In *Shakespeare and Ecocritical Theory*, Gabriel Egan writes about James Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis, which he explored in detail in his earlier work *Green Shakespeare*. The Gaia hypothesis, writes Egan, proposes that "the entire Earth is considered as essentially a single organism comprising all the component organisms that we generally treat as alive" (38). In other words, the systems of Earth are an ever-expanding system of interlaced, or porous, holobionts, contributing to the macro-organism of Earth. The umwelt might be something similar, parallel, inextricable: an expansive system of interlaced meaning, weaving in and out of its material habitat. Egan points out that early moderns already harbored vitalist notions about the agency of nature and its role in human life, but there's something new in Lovelock:

But Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis takes us even further than this, since it requires us to accept the term 'environment'—meaning that which surrounds life—is itself misleading, since the Earth's crust, the oceans and the atmosphere are just as much part of the singular life-form of Earth as are the micro-organisms, the plants and the animals that we are accustomed to call life. (38)

What is so refreshing about this take, is that it glances backward without becoming nostalgic. We look to Shakespeare's moment on the other side of the Enlightenment for what wisdom it contained, but do not fall into a bleary universal criticism of the science of the past four centuries. We can look back, regain Wheeler's "night science," reclaim the best bits of the vitalist tendencies, and yet maintain an adherence to rational enquiry. Margulis, Sheldrake, and Simard give us the scientific license to ask the humanistic questions posed by Iovino, Alaimo, Bennet, Wheeler, and Latour.

I realize quickly that the approach from this side of the mountain is going to be difficult and I will have to start back down the hill so that I am not late to pick up my son from school. The next day after I drop him off, I get a flat tire which compels me to leave the car at the shop. Luck would have it, there is a path that leads up the other side of la Peñota beginning in the parking lot of the auto shop. In theory, I should be able to hike up the mountain, see the tree, which has become a bit of an obsession, and make my way back down to our house on the other side in a couple of hours. There's a light drizzle, but I am wearing a raincoat, so I start the path.

I veer off the path and hike countercurrent of a stream that flows down the mountainside. I think I have seen this stream from above on another hike, so I am fairly confident that if I walk along it, I will emerge into a flat open space called los

Campamentos because of their historic use as a base for Franco's equivalent of the Hitler Youth. It is hard to imagine *that* Spain from the perspective of the one I have come to know, harder still to imagine this landscape as the site of so much indoctrination. Though, it's easy to see how this majesty, these views, were somehow braided into a sense of national supremacy. I think, for a moment, how integral mountains and forests were in forging the ideologies of fascism. It's a loose and fleeting thought, but I am sure there is something to it. Some misidentification. Some anthropomorphizing of the landscape that is reintegrated into a sense of self as resilient and atemporal as a geological formation. I head up from los Campamentos into the pines.

The incline is steep, and the fog grows thicker with each meter. I remember that this is where Blanca Nieves Fernández Ochoa was found dead in 2019 from an apparent suicide. Blanca Nieves. Snow White. She was the first woman to win a medal for Spain in the Winter Olympics when she took home the bronze for slalom in 1992. Her brother Francisco Fernández Ochoa remains the only Spaniard to have brought home a gold medal in the Winter Olympics which he won in 1972. His statue is the centerpiece of Cercedilla. My path to the tree will pass by el Collado del Rey, a rock formation that serves as a sort of natural lookout over the valley beneath la Peñota. The fog takes on a heavier metaphorical weight an hour into my hike as I imagine her body lying alone on the mountainside for days before being discovered by an officer and his German Shepherd. I think of the Scottish Highlands and of Lady Macbeth coming to the recognition that she cannot live with the sum of her choices.

Then there is the metaphor of the viral, pumping through our veins and across our screens, emerging in the words we choose, and the politics we express, through the literature we read. Following Wheeler's lead, it's time to recognize that the abstraction of mind is never about disconnection, but always about *seeing* more clearly. Seeing that the metaphor, under the scrutiny of the critical gaze, is always covering up a more affective connection rooted in an evolutionary and material bridge from mind to body, from plant to animal, from literature to experience. When I get to the top, the fog is so thick I can barely see a few feet ahead of me, I wander down towards where the tree should be, but come across a barbed wire fence. I can see the Lonely Pine's silhouette, the strong outline of its massive trunk and the cotton-ball bulb of its needles, but I won't be able to get any closer. Not today.

Submission received 24 June 2021

Revised version accepted 2 May 2022

Works Cited

- Alaimo, Stacy. *Bodily Natures*. Indiana University, 2010.
- Carmen Sanchez-Cañizares, Beatriz Jorrín, Philip S. Poole, Andrezej Tkacs. "Understanding the Holobiont: the Interdependence of Plants and their Microbiome." *Current Opinion in Microbiology*, vol. 38, 2017, pp. 188-196.
- Ciavarra, Nicholas. "Recentring the Forest in Early Modern England." *Renaissance Papers*, 2020, pp. 95-104.
- Day, Timothy Ryan. "Slaughtering the Beast: Applause, bullfighting, and Fascism in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Richard Wright's *Pagan Spain*." *Shakespeare and the Evolution of the Human Umwelt*. Routledge, 2021.
- Egan, Gabriel. *Shakespeare and Ecocritical Theory*. Bloomsbury, 2015.
- Instituto Nacional de Estadístico. <http://www.ine.es>. Accessed December 10, 2020.
- Iovino, Serenella, and Serpil Opperman. "Introduction: Stories Come to Matter." *Material Ecocriticisms*, edited by Iovino and Opperman, Indiana University Press, 2014, 1-17.
- Iovino, Serenella. "Bodies of Naples." *Material Ecocriticism*. Ed. Iovino and Opperman. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014, 97-113.
- Latour, Bruno. *We Have Never Been Modern*. Harvard University Press, 1991.
- Lutz, Michael. "Strange Intelligence: Humans, Nonhumans, and History in *Macbeth*." *Modern Philology*, vol. 117, no. 2. 2019, pp. 194-213
- Macfarlane, Robert. *Underland*. Norton, 2020.
- Margulis, Lynn. "Symbiogenesis and Symbiogenesis." *Symbiosis as a Source of Evolutionary Innovation: Speciation and Morphogenesis*. MIT Press, 1991.
- Martin, Randall. *Shakespeare & Ecology*. Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Marquis, Moira. "Listening to Trees: *The Overstory's* Dendrography and Sugar Maple Speaks." *Green Letters*, 2021, doi.org/10.1080/14688417.2021.2023031
- Mentz, Steve. "Shakespeare's Beach House, or the Green and the Blue in *Macbeth*." *Shakespeare Studies*, vol. 39, 2011, pp 84-93.
- Pollan, Michael. *The Botany of Desire: A Plant's Eye View of the World*. Random House, 2002.
- Power, Richard. *The Overstory*. Random house, 2019.
- Rebanks, James. *The Shepherd's Life*. Penguin, 2016.
- Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth*. *The Norton Shakespeare*, edited by Stephen Greenblatt, Norton, 2008.
- Slovic, Scott. *Going Away to Think*. University of Nevada Press, 2008.
- Slovic, Scott. "Narrative Scholarship as a Contribution to American Scholarship." *Handbook of Ecocritical and Cultural Ecology*, edited by Hubert Zapf, DeGruyter, 2016, 315-333
- Slovic, Scott. "Ecocriticism with or without Narrative: The Language of Conscious Experience Versus the Language of Freefall." 19 Position Papers from the 1995 Western Literature Association Meeting. Vancouver, B.C. 11-14 October, 1995.
- Tsing, Anna, et al., editors. *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*. University of Minnesota Press, 2017.

Author: Day, Timothy Ryan Title: The Forest for the Trees: The umwelt, the holobiont, and metaphor in Richard Powers' The Overstory and Shakespeare's Macbeth

Vaughan-Lee, Emmanuel. "Kinship, Community, and Consciousness: An Interview with Richard Powers." *Emergence Magazine*, Kalliopeia Foundation, 16 Jan. 2020 <https://emergencemagazine.org/interview/kinship-community-and-consciousness/>. Accessed Dec. 30 2021.

Wheeler, Wendy. "Delectable Creatures and the Fundamental Reality of Metaphor: Biosemiotics and Animal Mind." *Biosemiotics*, vol. 3, no. 3, 2010.

Mycorrhizal Metaphors: The Buried Life of Language and Elizabeth-Jane Burnett's *The Grassling*

Jemma Deer
University of Sussex, United Kingdom
jemmadeer@gmail.com

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ecozone.2022.13.2.4652>



Abstract

Fungi generate and demand subterranean thinking: thinking beyond the visible, thinking that makes connections between things previously supposed to be separate or individual. This article traces an extended subterranean metaphor that likens human language to fungal networks, showing how *thinking fungally* can transform how we conceive of the strange, underground life of language and our entanglements in it. The article opens with a brief exploration of the relevant mycological science and the ways in which "symbiotic" metaphors shape and transform human thinking and being. I then offer a close reading of Elizabeth-Jane Burnett's beautiful reflection on the relations between memory, language and landscape, *The Grassling: A Geological Memoir* (2019). I show how Burnett is attuned to what I call "the buried life of language": its subterranean or invisible connectivities, its undoing of notions of individuality and centrality, and its dispersed and incalculable mode of co-creation that troubles assumptions about human agency. I argue that the etymological and lyrical mode of *The Grassling* invites us to recognise what lies below the surface of land, language and consciousness, thereby unravelling some of our restrictive anthropocentrism.

Keywords: Fungi, language, metaphor, memoir, Elizabeth-Jane Burnett.

Resumen

Los hongos generan y exigen un pensamiento subterráneo: un pensamiento más allá de lo visible, un pensamiento que establece conexiones entre cosas que antes se suponían separadas o individuales. Este artículo rastrea una metáfora subterránea extendida que equipara el lenguaje humano con las redes fúngicas, demostrando cómo *pensar fúngicamente* puede transformar nuestra concepción de la vida extraña y subterránea del lenguaje y de nuestros enredos con ella. El artículo comienza con una breve exploración de la ciencia micológica relevante y las formas en que las metáforas "simbióticas" dan forma al pensamiento humano y lo transforman. Luego ofrezco una lectura detallada de la hermosa reflexión de Elizabeth-Jane Burnett sobre las relaciones entre la memoria, el lenguaje y el paisaje, *The Grassling: A Geological Memoir* (2019). Muestro cómo Burnett está en sintonía con lo que llamo "la vida enterrada" del lenguaje: sus conectividades subterráneas o invisibles, su desconstrucción de las nociones de individualidad y centralidad, y su manera dispersa e incalculable de cocrear, la cual quebranta las suposiciones sobre la agencia humana. Sostengo que la forma etimológica y lírica de *The Grassling* nos invita a reconocer lo que se encuentra bajo la superficie de la tierra, el lenguaje y la conciencia, y de ese modo desentrañar algunos de nuestros antropocentrismos restrictivos.

Palabras clave: Hongos, lenguaje, metáfora, memorias, Elizabeth-Jane Burnett.

Symbiotic Metaphors

Fungi have long had the capacity to change the way that humans think, to disrupt the ground of our established conceptual repertoires. Neither plant nor animal, they digest and decompose old frameworks, and grow strange new shapes from the mulch. Mushrooms—the fungal emergences that so inspire our curiosity and our fear; our desire and our disgust—are but the brief fruit of an organism that is mostly out of sight, underground. The main body of the fungus is the mycelium, a vast meshwork of microscopic filaments (called hyphae) that wend and weave through the soil, and—in ways we are only beginning to understand—connect whole ecosystems together. Fungi generate and demand subterranean thinking: thinking beyond the visible, thinking that makes connections between things previously supposed to be separate or individual.

Fungi have troubled long-held assumptions in biology (assumptions based largely on animal or mammal tendencies and habits), demanding new concepts of life, species and relationship. Fungi *change our minds*—a fact recognised by the subtitle and contents of mycologist Merlin Sheldrake's book *Entangled Life: How Fungi Make Our Worlds, Change Our Minds and Shape Our Futures* (2020). In this article, I propose a new way that fungi might fundamentally change our minds, by enabling us to think and feel differently about another form of buried life: the buried life of language. Thinking fungally can transform how we conceive of the strange, underground life of language and our inextricable entanglements in it. It can transform how we read literary texts—as well as how we read ourselves and the world. After delving into the relevant mycological science, and the ways in which language and metaphor affect and infect thinking and being, I will offer a close reading of Elizabeth-Jane Burnett's stunning reflection on the relations between memory, language and landscape, *The Grassling: A Geological Memoir* (2019). Burnett's work—in its deep attention to the subterranean liveliness of language—provides fertile ground through which to demonstrate the transformative power of fungal thinking and being.

Ecologists now know that forest ecosystems are extensively connected underground by mycorrhizae, the mutually-beneficial partnerships between fungi and plants (“mycorrhiza” comes from the Ancient Greek *myco*, meaning “mushroom” or “fungus,” and *rhizo*, meaning “root”): the plants provide photosynthesised carbohydrates; the fungi share nutrients foraged from the soil. But mycorrhizae are much more than a partnership between two species. Mycorrhizal networks connect many plants together and transfer water, carbon, nutrients, bacteria, infochemicals and (possibly) electrical activity between them (Sheldrake 168–71; 181–83). Since the health and success of individual organisms is thus bound to others in the network—including others to whom they are not directly or genetically connected—entire ecosystems start to look like symbiotic entities. When the Caterpillar of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*—who just so happens to be sitting on a “large mushroom”—asks Alice “Who are you?,” she replies: “I can't explain *myself*, I'm afraid, [...] because I'm not myself, you see” (Carroll 39–41). Alice has not (yet) eaten of the mushroom, but her troubling of individual identity seems already to be a kind of fungal thinking, anticipating the revelations of deeply

interdependent mycorrhizal ecologies. It is perhaps no coincidence that Alice's adventures—as Carroll's original title for the book emphasised—happened “under Ground.”¹

The most famous metaphor for these subterranean associations is the Wood Wide Web²—a metaphor that, in comparing mycorrhizal networks to the Internet, recognises the far-reaching connectivity of forest ecosystems, and the multiplicitous relationships this connectivity enables. However, as Sheldrake points out, the Wood Wide Web metaphor is “plant-centric”: the trees and plants are figured as agents, who make use of the underground network to share information and resources, just as humans make use of the Internet to organise their lives (177). Sheldrake reminds us that mycorrhizal fungi are “far from being passive cables”: they are living organisms with lives and interests of their own (178). And so the Wood Wide Web metaphor is insufficient to fully make sense of what goes on under the ground of a forest. After relating various discoveries about how mycorrhizal networks function, and the metaphors used to elaborate such functioning, Sheldrake asks:

How best to think about shared mycorrhizal networks then? Are we dealing with a superorganism? A metropolis? [...] Nursery schools for trees? Socialism in the soil? Deregulated markets of late capitalism, with fungi jostling on the trading floor of a forest stock exchange? Or maybe it's fungal feudalism, with mycorrhizal overlords presiding over the lives of their plant laborers for their own ultimate benefit. (190–91)

Sheldrake also considers forest ecologist Suzanne Simard's idea of conceiving of mycorrhizal networks in terms of brains—that is, as dynamic, self-organising networks of cells that give rise to complex adaptive behaviours (191).

Some of the metaphors listed by Sheldrake are “myco-centric” instead of “plant-centric”: they ascribe agency to the fungi and strip it from the plants. And yet what studying symbioses and mutualisms show us is that the question is not from which point of view we should see something (plant-centrism vs myco-centrism), but is rather a troubling of the very validity and logic of any “centrism” at all. As Donna Haraway writes, “the relationship is the smallest possible unit of analysis” (315). The point is not, then, to ask whether it is plants or fungi that are “in control” of mycorrhizal networks, but rather to appreciate them as inextricable entanglements, processes of co-becoming in which both plants and fungi are engaged.

Likewise, we can also think of metaphors as a kind of symbiotic relationship, conceptually entangling two separate entities together.³ The meaning that emerges out of this relationship works to transform *both* entities. So while the images of brains, cities, economies or the Internet might help us to make sense of mycorrhizal networks, the metaphors also work the other way too:⁴ how might mycorrhizal fungi change how we

¹ Charles Dodgson gave a version called *Alice's Adventures under Ground* to Alice Liddell (Hunt xxv–xxvi).

² The metaphor dates to 1997. It was used on the front page of *Nature* to introduce Suzanne Simard's ground-breaking work on mycorrhizal networks (Simard).

³ For a fuller exploration of the “life of metaphor” and its literary theoretical history, see *Radical Animism: Reading for the End of the World* (Deer 18–21; 111–12).

⁴ We might think here of Levinas's recognition that “Metaphor shatters the signifying structures that do not always go from the human to [the material], in order to humanize the natural but vice versa [...]; and inversely, it can evoke the energetic and voluntary element of a rigorously material situation” (320).

understand brains, cities, economies and the Internet? How might the mindless complexity and emergent properties of mycorrhizal networks help us to understand the emergent effects of other complex adaptive systems in new and interesting ways, so that they become entangled with fungi in generative conceptual symbioses that work to transform our understanding of the world? Simard's comparison between mycorrhizal networks and brains not only changes how we think about fungi, but also makes salient the fact that *thinking*, no matter how supposedly abstract or analytical, is always a material, embodied, inter-active process, despite the fact that it is often represented to the contrary. Thinking fungally, then, is also always—and inevitably—*feeling* fungally, *being* fungally, in collaboration with a lively world.

Human language, like a mycorrhizal network, is a complex adaptive system that is so much more than the sum of its parts. Examining the human brain or the little inanimate entities we call words cannot account for what language is or does. We might think of words and verbal thoughts as the visible fruiting bodies—the mushrooms—of a vast and complex subterranean network of associations and connections that occur under the ground of conscious awareness, and that, like mycorrhizal networks, are not just passive conduits for meaning, but rather have a certain life or agency of their own. As has long been recognised, language is entangled with human relationships and actions, affecting and determining what we think and say—and determining what we *can* think and *can* say—and shaping our relationships with other beings and the world around us. At the same time, the vast body of language is underground, out of sight or out of (conscious) mind. When we think or speak or write in language each word has its own abyssal and ultimately untraceable history, and relies on an unfathomably complex web of relations with other words and meanings.⁵

Like spores that are emitted by the thousands to drift on air flows or stick to other beings in order to establish a new territory for fungi, words and ideas drift by the million, hitching a ride on our tweets or tongues, on the pages of novels or newspapers. One can never be sure which spores have established themselves until after the fact, nor reliably trace their origin. It is impossible to trace the origin and emergence of individual words in the semantic ecology of one's mind. Just as the study of mycorrhizal networks problematises notions of organism and species individuality, so too does an appreciation of the buried life of language trouble the possibility of claiming a thought, an idea, a choice as one's "own."

The Buried Life of *The Grassling*

Elizabeth-Jane Burnett's *The Grassling: A Geological Memoir* is not especially concerned with mushrooms or fungi (though a couple do crop up in its pages). But while this absence might make it seem a strange choice of text for an essay about fungi, it is actually key to what I want to convey. For I mean to demonstrate how we might think of *all* language as fungal, regardless of its subject-matter.

The Grassling is about human and earthly memory, about the earthliness of language and the languages of the earth. It is a book about being an embodied human

⁵ Deleuze and Guattari's description of language and books as "rhizomatic"—as heterogenous, multiplicitous, decentralised and interconnected assemblages—is important here (4, 11, 23).

animal, that inhabits particular soils and streams and hedgerows as much as a particular syntax and grammar. It is concerned with the ways in which human and nonhuman, verbal and nonverbal, conscious and unconscious traces entangle and cocreate. And it is attuned to the ways in which temporal and spatial connections—connections that are not always immediately visible to the human eye—form the weft of the present, the richness and complexity of which it is not possible to fully fathom. As such, *The Grassling* renders compellingly what I want to say about the buried life of language and its subterranean or invisible connectivities, its undoing of notions of individuality and centrality, its dispersed and incalculable mode of co-creation that troubles assumptions about human agency.

As its subtitle signals, the book is a “memoir”—the kind of text we usually take to be an autobiographical reminiscence. And, indeed, we find accounts of a time when, as her father lay terminally ill in bed, Burnett delves into the countryside surrounding the family home, exploring her father’s work (he “authored a local history of the village” (9)), and their family’s long-running connections to the local landscapes. Though Burnett was born and raised in Devon (a county in southwest England), her mixed British-Kenyan heritage causes some people she encounters to assume that she doesn’t belong. As with language and landscape, what is on the surface does not reveal all that is within. “While others see him [her father] as belonging, [...] they do not see that in me”; “my skin [...] seemed unfathomable” (47). But Burnett is not only alert to bodily and environmental traces of family history, she is also deeply interested in listening for and recording the ancient voices that live in language, and the voices of other beings: trees and birds, the grass and the soil.

Remarking on William Camden’s *Britannia*, an early 17th-century text that “explored the Celtic tribal areas within the counties’ boundaries,” Burnett notes that,

his methodology, a mix of archival and anecdotal research, is not so dissimilar to mine; though to his maps and records I add scribbled observations, feelings, phonemes: little edges of words that poke out from the landscape, that shoot up from the pit of language. For oral testimony, I start to wonder who else might be speaking. What might the grass tell of the ground? Or worms, of earth? Could the soil itself speak? (9)

Language is alive: “edges of words [...] poke out” or “shoot up” of their own accord, the emergent evidence of an extensive buried life that lies below the surface, like a mycelium. The image of language and landscape as the ground out of which words emerge (words emanate “from the landscape, [...] from the pit of language”), is, again, a metaphor that goes both ways. On the one hand, language itself becomes a domain, a field, with things going on both above and below ground, with landmarks to orient by and tangled thickets to get lost in, with well-trodden paths and deep sedimentations. On the other hand, the landscape becomes linguistic, has its own syntax and grammar, dialects and modes of expression; it has histories to recite, memories to tell. “I look at the speech of the field. [...] This is the pause in a conversation that is waiting for a reply. These are the sentences, lined along the ground, hoping to be heard. Here is a bank of memories, pulled from the back of the land” (Burnett 151–52).

In what follows, I show how Burnett listens and gives voice to the buried life of land and language, and how *thinking fungally* can transform how we think about language and our place within it. Like mushroom-hunters, we’ll need to engage a special kind of

attention in order to be able to find what we're looking for. Helen Macdonald writes that, when you are foraging, mushrooms "have an uncanny ability to hide from the searching eye. Instead, you have to alter the way you regard the ground around you, concern yourself with the strange phenomenology of leaf litter and try to give equal attention to all the colours, shapes and angles on the messy forest floor" (Macdonald). Or, as Anna Tsing remarks, "no one can find a mushroom by hurrying through the forest [...]. Inexperienced pickers miss most of the mushrooms by moving too fast, for only careful observation reveals those gentle heavens" (*Mushroom* 242).⁶ Likewise, to discover the linguistic life of *The Grassling* you have to (as Burnett herself does) go slow, get low, attune yourself to the various levels of textual operation: to the micrological shapes and sounds of individual letters or words, to the meshwork of personal and interpersonal associations, to the sediments of common usage, to the etymologies heaving under the surface—invisible to the untrained or hurried eye. If we read too quickly, we cannot see the words for the text. The strangeness of the experience—the way that words and grammar come *through* us, but not *from* us—is often obscured behind the illusion that we have of being conscious agents, authors of words and actions.⁷ *The Grassling* invites us to experience the ancient liveliness of language, to savour the taste and texture of human words and nonhuman traces, to attune ourselves to what lies below the surface of land, language and consciousness, and to thereby unravel some of our restrictive anthropocentrisms—anthropocentrisms that have engendered and exacerbated the environmental and social crises that today threaten the well-being of humans and other life forms.

Subterranean Connections: Under the Ground of Land and Language

Language connects us to minds beyond our time. Every word we speak, hear, read or write has been passed down to us through generations beyond number, far beyond written and recorded history. We look up the "definition" and "origin" of a word, and find out, for instance, that a "memoir" is "a written record of events in the past, especially one based on personal experience," or "a person's written account of his or her own life; an autobiography" (*Chambers*). We also discover that the word comes from the Latin *memor*, meaning "mindful," or "remembering," which is, says the *OED*, "perhaps a derivative of the Indo-European base of Sanskrit *smṛi*, to bear in mind." The "perhaps" in this etymology alerts us to the fact that we are already in murky waters, but even if we excise the uncertainty at this point, does the Sanskrit word really give us an *origin*, a starting point? This word too will have had its own deep history (or, rather, prehistory): countless utterances that, over millennia, conspired to endow this little vocable with a shape and a sense. Just as soil, as Burnett observes, bears the taste of "the softness of the rain of

⁶ It is perhaps no coincidence that both the authors I cite on foraging are female. As Keyser recognises, fungi themselves and the act of gathering of mushrooms both have something feminine and queer about them, something resistant to patriarchal systems (98–101). Similarly, Griffiths uses the challenge to biological individuality effected by lichen (a fungal-algal symbiosis) to critique heteronormativity and the prejudices it enables.

⁷ For an extended discussion about the externality of language see Clark.

hundreds of millions of summers” (84)—abyssal and unfathomable traces, the sediment of eons distilled into the indescribable aroma of a spoonful of soil—so too does each word we encounter hold within its diminutive confines a whole universe, coming to us as an ancient relic or rune, holding more secrets that we can hope to uncover. Language itself is a vast memoir: a repository of human thoughts and relations, each word with its own incalculable autobiography, each related—by finer or thicker threads, individual hyphae or aggregate cords—to all others in the language.

Burnett is keenly aware of this deep life below the surface of language, to the ways in which all words have these abyssal histories, connecting us to past times in fascinating and unfathomable ways. She muses on her father’s suggestions that the place name “Drewshill” might be a corruption of a “Druid’s Hill,” and “Churchills” naming not the hill of a church, but the hill of a *crich*, or burial mound (10, 13). These possibilities transform her relation to these places, imbuing them with a new and altered significance, but they also breathe life into these buried pasts, enabling them to live on. She reflects on how she has inherited a “family connection to the fields,” feeling drawn to places inhabited by her father, and drawn to the lively dynamism of the “fields themselves: what wild flowers are scenting, what animals grazing, what grasses growing” (70). But linguistic history and liveliness offer equal attraction and intrigue:

It is also something to do with words, this external current that draws me and draws him; an etymological mining, uncovering the past. How we see the Druid in Drewshill; how we glimpse the burial mound, *crich*, in Churchills field. And we both sense the importance of this looking, this tracing of the debris of words left in language. What will happen to these words if we don’t look closely enough at them? Where will they go? (70–71)

We can hear double meanings of the verb “draw” at work: Burnett and her father are not just drawn *to* “this external current” of words, but are also drawn *by* it. Their personalities, their personal narratives, are enriched, complicated, thickened, so that what “me” and “him” means is partially coloured, drawn or determined, by their shared attentiveness to land and language. But this is not a one-way process, it is a symbiotic relationship: if the words generate personal meanings for Burnett and her father, their attentiveness to language also sustains the life of these words. Without this act of remembrance (this geological *memoir*), the “debris of words” might erode away altogether, leaving the future to inherit a barren, lifeless landscape. “What will happen to these words if we don’t look closely enough at them? Where will they go?” Language is a symbiosis between present, past and future, all of which will suffer without this life-sustaining partnership: “The place without words is a dangerous place to linger. Where there are no words there is only rock to knock against. Where there are no words there is no join. Where there are no words there is nothing to bring it back” (181). Language makes “joins,” forms connections, builds relationships—between neurons, between people, between humans and the world around them—but it also grows out of these connections. And, as when looking at symbiotic relationships of living organisms, it is difficult (and unnecessary) to finally determine which entity is driving the process.

The word “Grassling” is and is not a word invented by Burnett. It appears to be the first instance printed in the English language, and her neologism—richly evocative as it

is—does a beautiful job of conjuring a lively little field-dwelling creature. And it does this by drawing on a complex web of etymological, homophonic, semantic and sonic relations. The suffix “-ling” has two distinct forms. First, forming nouns, it renders the sense of “a person or thing belonging to or concerned with” the noun to which it is appended (such as “groundling” or “nestling”), and also has “a diminutive force” (as in the case of words like “gosling” or “duckling”); second, forming adverbs, it is “expressive of direction or extent” (as in the case of “sideling”) (*OED*). The Grassling, then, is a little thing or ling of grass: belonging to, concerned with, being-toward grass. A little thing be-longing to or longing to *be* grass, to root into the ground, grassily grasping—I cannot hear “Grassling” without also hearing the “-ing” of a present participle, the “-ing” of things in process, of being and becoming, a Grassling *grassling*. The word “grass” comes from the Germanic root *grô-*, the same root as both “grow” and “green.” The Grassling thus embodies or incorporates not only the narrow sense of the low-growing, grazable green grasses so iconic of the British isles but also all that grows and greens, that grounds and grasps, gripping, grafting soil.

I said that “Grassling” is and is not a word invented by Burnett. The word “Grassling” appears in Old High German, as a word for the small bottom-dwelling freshwater fish we call, in English, a gudgeon, groundling (another “-ling”!) or goby, and that is found all over Europe, including in the River Exe that appears in Burnett’s text.⁸ This older, aquatic instance of the word is apt, for the Grassling of Burnett’s text also takes to the water, in dreams and in reality, and encounters there traces of the deep past and of an elemental relationality beyond species and beyond the present: “All the skin of me, the pigment, the falling dust, is called to the soil. All the water of me, the churning motion, is called to the fish: the bony lobe-fins, ancestors of dinosaurs and mammals, whose fossils remain in the Devon rocks” (73). Whether or not Burnett intentionally meant to invoke this older, alternate meaning of “Grassling”—or indeed the various associations I have identified in the previous paragraph—is not the point. Rather, it is a matter of attending to these chancy resonances, and recognising that the life of language is always beyond authorial intention and control. As Burnett suggests, “reading could be a many-layered thing, a digging thing: a harvest” (126).

As well as the vast inheritances of form and meaning that all words have, there are also meshes of personal associations, unique pathways—laid by individual experience—among words, objects and personal memory. Burnett recognises that language, like landscape, is not fixed and determined (as it sometimes appears to be), but dynamic and relational—a thing in process:

The earth has its own speed, slower than the eye. As you look at it, nothing seems to change. It has been that way always. The hills through the window. The slope of the wood, the same scattering of trees; even the sheep seem glued down.

But the landscape is a vast network of work: animal and plant, mineral and soil, and language too. The slope of the word, the same scattering of vowels, even the sense seems glued down. But it is a vast network and it is moving all the time. So that when I say “the daisies were beautiful,” I mean their shade matches the colour I brought you your first day out of hospital. You didn’t see them, but I brought them. “The daisies were beautiful” means

⁸ “Graßling, [...] eine im Oberdeutschen übliche Benennung des Gründlings [Graßling [...], a common name for Gudgeon in Upper German]” (Krünitz 693).

the outside came inside to show you what you couldn't see. "The daisies were beautiful" is running through the vase on the piano, down the walls you scrape past, nestling in the corner in the cobwebs. (54)

The phrase "the daisies were beautiful" relies on the innumerable utterances that have given sense to these words, a vast "network of work" spanning millennia that have made it possible for us to know what is meant by "daisy" and what is meant by "beauty." (You might know, too—consciously or unconsciously—that the word "daisy" comes from the Old English *dæges éage*, day's eye, named for the flower's sunlike golden anthers visible only in the daytime, protected by its closing petals at the fall of night.) But, as Burnett's passage shows, the phrase has its own weave of associations grounded in the context of visiting her father, so that words carry—as is so often the case—so much more than what is actually said. In this case they carry what *cannot* be said: a love and a pre-emptive mourning for a father already half-lost: a father that "didn't see them," a father that can no longer go outside ("the outside came inside to show you what you couldn't see"), a father that "scrape[s] past" the walls of the house. These deeper meanings remain underground. Burnett remarks that "every sentence of my mother's is its own story" (55), but this is true of every sentence, every word, in its weave and web of personal, interpersonal, individual and cultural meanings.

Such meanings are not always or even usually conscious, even when they seem to be. Nicholas Royle writes that "writing is not the activity of a subject, it is not what an author masterfully, consciously, deliberately *does*. It's more like what an author, without authority, lets happen or finds happening" (25). Or, to quote from an MRI study on poets at work, "the overall pattern associated with the generative phase of creative activity reflects a state in which spontaneous, self-generated behaviours [...] can unfold in the absence of conscious, attentional control" (Liu, et al. 3364). Thinking fungally about language and writing gives us a new way to understand the strangeness of the experience of speaking and writing language. Words emerge not from one's "self," but from the common ground of language. When one writes or speaks it is never really a case of spontaneous generation, even if one is the most "original" of authors. Rather it is a matter of tapping—always from one's singular personal and cultural context—into this vast, ancient, unfathomable repository.

One of the ways in which this strange externality is most evident is in dreaming. These cascading overnight narratives are products of our own minds, which therefore reveal just how much goes on below the surface of our conscious awareness. Sometimes we can trace dream images or narratives back to certain events from waking life, showing us that we have been thinking—consciously or unconsciously—about these events. But often things that appear in dreams seem to have come out of nowhere, and we cannot begin to fathom their provenance. Sigmund Freud recognises how there is always much which remains underground, ungraspable:

The dream thoughts that you come across in the course of the interpretation generally remain without closure; they extend out in every direction into the weblike entanglement of our thought-world. The dream wish emerges from a denser spot of this mesh, like a mushroom from its mycelium. (530; my translation)⁹

⁹Die Traumgedanken, auf die man bei der Deutung gerät, müssen ja ganz allgemein ohne Abschluß bleiben und nach allen Seiten hin in die netzartige Verstrickung unserer Gedankenwelt auslaufen. Aus einer

Freud's words underline the passivity, the lack of agency, of the dreamer in relation to the dream. You "come across" the dream thoughts quite by chance,¹⁰ and if you go out looking, like a forager, you can never be guaranteed of success. Dreams reveal the "weblike entanglement of our thought-world," the vast and complex underground network of meanings and associations that can never be fully apprehended. Just as mycelium is resistant to study—its ultra-fine and delicate strands so embedded in the soil that they cannot be excavated intact—so too does the subterranean world of the unconscious resist our probing. And while this is most evident to us in the strange night-time emergences of dreams, this unconscious, underground world is always there, whether we are aware of it or not. It is a reality that reveals just how far what you think of as your "self"—your sense of an authorial, individual "I"—is impossible to delimit and determine.

Early on in *The Grassling*, Burnett recounts a dream that renders how entangled and boundless the self really is:

I dream deeply of the earth: men in armour, women fading in and out of focus. I dream of boundary lines and farmers telling me which people belong to which earth. Whether it is one acre, or thirty, or hundreds, the sense of ownership is the same; the sense of self so deeply tangled in the soil that it is impossible to say who owns who. Pointing out the hedgerow and the channel of earth that runs beside it, the dream segues into another, earlier one I have had about swimming [...]. Submerged, I taste the water, the weeds and the soil in the water. There are people and fish I seem to know, swimming towards me. While we are from different species, other centuries, it's not too unsettling, just like meeting cousins you've only met once or twice, or relatives of your best friends. As I break the surface of the river and the dream I gasp: what fills my lungs is wider than breath could be. It is a place and a language torn, matted and melded; flowered and chiming with bones. (11)

This is a dream about going underground, underwater, submerging oneself under the surface of language or consciousness, and finding there inextricable entanglements of time, space and identity. The "boundary lines" attempt to delimit, to determine, but underground there can be no such confines: "the sense of self so deeply tangled in the soil that it is impossible to say who owns who." Likewise, when faced with "people and fish [she] seem[s] to know [...] from different species, other centuries," what is manifest is not their difference but a sense of relatedness or connection: it is "just like meeting cousins you've only met once or twice, or relatives of your best friends." These strangely familiar faces are foreigners within the self: they come both from "other species," "other centuries," but also arise from the depths of the dream, from Burnett's "own" subconscious ("it is impossible to say who owns who"). Just as our bodies are whole ecosystems of other species of bacteria and fungi, without which we could not survive, so too is our unconscious and our language densely populated with other lives. "As I break the surface of the river and the dream I gasp: what fills my lungs is wider than breath could be. It is a place and a language torn, matted and melded; flowered and chiming with

dichteren Stelle dieses Geflechts erhebt sich dann der Traumwunsch wie der Pilz aus seinem Mycelium" (Freud 530).

¹⁰ What I have translated here as "come across" is the German *gerät*, which comes from the infinitive *geraten*. This can mean "to get" or "to become," but often with a sense of passivity or loss of control, as in "*durcheinander geraten*" (to get confused or mixed up), "*außer Kontrolle geraten*" (to veer out of control).

bones.” The dream emerges from—or provokes—the revelation of how “matted and melded” our reality is, forever “flower[ing]” and “chiming” with the bones and relics of the past. Underground, underdream, the illusion of individuality so carefully constructed by our above-ground self is irrevocably ruptured, entangled, dispersed.

Surface Readings: the Soil of Language

Just as language forges connections with other places, people, beings and times, so too do words form connections between themselves, weaving lively webs within phrases and sentences, making ties on the basis of form, sound and rhythm. As Haraway writes, words are “thick, living, physical objects that do unexpected things” (200). The materiality of language is impulsive, compelling—driving, determining or shaping the way a writer presents their ideas, which words and syntax they choose. Because form and meaning, surface and depth, cannot be rigorously separated in language, to shape *how* something is said is also to shape *what* is said. And to shape what is said is to shape the sayer, to infect or inflect their personality, motives, dreams and desires.

One chapter that is particularly concerned with the compelling textures of land and language is called “Yslende” (Old English for “glowing,” from *ȳsle*, “glowing ash, spark, ember” (Borden 1604)). It opens with “a golden field [...] caught in the middle of a fold [of a map],” as if the phrase “golden field” has itself been folded up, crumpled into the word “fold”—as if one could take the compact little “fold,” open it out, smooth out its creases and find there a “golden field”: “You have to look deep into the fold to see what is there; it has been literally pressed down, so that a human hand has buried the land into the crevices of paper. You almost need to walk into the map to find it; to get out guy ropes and tack down the rugged paper” (Burnett 169). The chapter begins, then, with attention on surface, with how the surface of paper or earth or word is a textured thing, never a blank canvas or empty vessel for meaning or life forms, but always embroiled, folded, implicated in the weave of the world. One must read closely to apprehend such texture:

Here the land speaks through paper, weathered by centuries of waiting. But words have been pushing up all over the place lately: from soil, from wood, from stone; from all manner and matter of buried time. Records of earlier touchings of hand and earth; Old English tongues, Anglo-Saxon runes, are surfacing. I twist, dusted in gold, as the word *yslende* covers my lips. Glowing. My tongue has to feel its way into the word, like a bee to a flower, then out again, as the last push of its sound is whispered. *Yslende* glows the golden field, *yslende* all along the fold, *yslende* in between the hills. My petals pull apart. I spill. (169)

Words “have been pushing up all over the place lately: from soil, from wood, from stone; from all manner and matter of buried time.” Again, this is latently a fungal metaphor, for it is mushrooms and lichens that grow from soil, wood and stone, that emerge from all “manner and matter,” from the most unlikely of ground. The Old English word both emerges from and enriches the sensual experience of body and scene: tongue “feel[ing] its way into the word,” as eyes and hands feel into folds of fields, and mind feels into the shadows of language, of “Old English tongues, Anglo-Saxon runes.” The material shape of

yslende,¹¹ the way that the S, L, N and D cause the tongue to touch the alveolar ridge,¹² spills its splendour into the surrounding words: “*Yslende* glows the golden field, *yslende* all along the fold, *yslende* in between the hills. My petals pull apart. I spill.”

Dreamlike, we are transported from fold of map to fold of field, where Burnett is down on the ground, “lying still in the wheat”:

Sounds rise. A swallow. A swoop. A swallowing, swooping root. Layered in the hay, in the tightly bounded day, lightly woven. A netting barely visible: the skin starts to itch with each twitch of wheat.

Clover skin is tightly bound in pollen gusts, seeded dust, bursts of swallow in the hay swallowed swover. Words mix and swoop in the swallowing sway. My eyelids flutter. I swoon in the heat in the heart of a day in midsummer. [...] [T]he scent and the shape and the colour bursting and thirsting, swallowing, swovering, whooping and swooping. (169–70)

Hear how connections are woven between letters and sounds, that then seep or sweep into sense: “A swallow. A swoop. A swallowing, swooping root.” Airy puffs of Ws make the lips mime the swooping wingbeat of bird, air displaced as words take flight on the tongue, before verbs arrive to metamorphose bird and flight into the gulp of throat (for “swooping” is also a synonym for “swallowing” (*OED*)): sounds are drunk down, swallowed or consumed by the rooted Grassling. The next lines pass sounds back and forth in the warp and weft of words, as “layered” tolls in “hay” and “day,” “tightly” loosens into “lightly,” the “itch” a result of a “twitch,” and “gusts” bring “dust” and “bursts.” Is the “netting barely visible” the weave of words in these lines, or the textures of the day’s layers, earth and hay and swallow-swayed air? Sounds and shapes of words begin to transform each other, allowing alternate senses to emerge. “Words mix and swoop in the swallowing sway,” “in the hay swallowed swover.” Swal-loving sw-over: the loving of swallows swooping over? The loving of the swaving (loud singing) of birds, the shady nook or hollow of a “swale,” the swaling (or swaying) of the wheat in the wind (*OED*)? “I swoon in the heat in the heart of a day in midsummer”; a day that is perhaps also a little “swoly” (oppressively hot)? Other words and senses emerge unbidden—like mushrooms—from subterranean connections woven by letters and sounds.

In accordance with the text’s discarded title (“A Dictionary of the Soil”), *The Grassling* has short chapters arranged in alphabetical order (“Acreage,” “Burnett,” “Culm,” “Daffodil,” “Exe” and so on)—another way that the materiality of language asserts its agency, compelling the juxtapositions which create meaning in the flow of the text. Following the final numbered chapter (“Zygote”), there is one more entry, titled “After.” This “After” is perhaps an “afterword,” coming after the ABC of the main text, and it is also an “after death”: after the death of Burnett’s father, “now that there is nothing left to fear. It has already happened—the worst—and this is what’s left” (186). But this “after” is not only an “after.” Thanks to the alphabetic logic of letters (another inheritance from the past, each letter with its own, sometimes representational, origin¹³), a chapter title that starts

¹¹ The Old English *ȝ* is a long vowel pronounced like the “u” in “ruse.” The other consonants are pronounced as in Modern English, rendering something like: *oos-lenn-deh* (O’Donnell).

¹² These letters are all alveolar consonants, which are articulated with the tongue against or close to the superior alveolar ridge, behind the top front teeth.

¹³ For a description of the origins of the alphabet see Abram (93–136).

with an “A” also instigates a new beginning, a return to the start. It undoes the linearity of the A–Z progression, and instead inscribes a cycle of renewal, regeneration. And, indeed, the last words of “After” describe a sunrise: “I am all dew all field all hope. More than the day is beginning. Morning fire smudged to pastel, dusting over hedges. Sun-gasp. Electric orb fringed by field. That great sun going on. A perfect round, pulsing to skylark’s flight, unending light. That great continuing. Glow” (187). The wording re-invokes the description of dusk at the opening of the book: “More than the day is ending. Evening fire dulled to pastel, dusting over hedges. Moon-gasp. Electric orb fringed by firs. That great moon going on. A perfect round, pulsing to the bat flicker, trickle river. That great continuing. Glow” (3). This is a recycling of words and syntax, a decomposition that is also a regeneration, so that the pain of human death is cast within the endless renewal of night into day, winter into spring, Z back to A. Attending to the materiality of land and language precipitates the realisation that what is material does not end: it transforms, regenerates, gives rise to new beginnings. Mourning slides irresistibly into “new mornings” (159). Connections between words allow for new life to emerge.

After Words

Tsing writes that “*Human exceptionalism blinds us*. Science has inherited stories about human mastery from the great monotheistic religions. These stories fuel assumptions about human autonomy, and they direct questions to the human *control* of nature [...] rather than to species interdependence” (“Unruly Edges” 144, cursive in original). One thing often taken for evidence of human exceptionalism and mastery is language. As such we can be blind to its power and its agency. We are so immersed in it that we regularly fail to apprehend it at all, but when we do, it is often assumed to be just one more thing that is under our control, a tool to be manipulated. Yet this is not true. Language is before and beyond us, affecting, infecting and inflecting our lives in incalculable ways. Language is said to be “proper to humans.” But what if it goes the other way? What if humans are “proper to language”? It was fungi that enabled plants’ algal ancestors to leave the oceans and move onto land. Perhaps it was the chancy evolution of verbal language—also a product of evolution by natural selection, as Darwin himself recognised¹⁴—that enabled our primate ancestors to awaken into what we now call the “human” mind. Daniel Dennett writes that “just as the eukaryotic cell came into existence in a relatively sudden instance of *technology transfer*, in which two independent legacies [...] were united in a single stroke of symbiosis to create a big leap forward, the human mind, the *comprehending* mind, is [...] a product of symbiosis” (389, cursive in original): symbiosis between primates and verbal language.

As we have seen, it makes no sense to think of symbioses in terms of centrism (plant- or myco-centrism, or, indeed, anthropocentrism). Instead, we should think of

¹⁴ Darwin writes of language in the exact terms of his theory of organic life: “no philologist now supposes that any language has been deliberately invented; each has been slowly and unconsciously developed by many steps,” and the “survival or preservation of certain favoured words in the struggle for existence is natural selection” (Darwin 53, 58–9)

them as processes of temporally- and spatially-dispersed co-creation. Thinking fungally about language can help us to attend to its buried life—its infinite connectivity and complexity, its dynamism and agency—and thus help us to loosen our delusions of authorial intention and control. We may never be able to apprehend its full extent, nor be able to say, as Burnett recognises, “who owns who,” but we can begin by admitting that there is much that goes on underground.

Submission received 29 April 2022

Revised version accepted 29 August 2022

Works Cited

- Abram, David. *The Spell of the Sensuous*. Pantheon Books, 1996.
- Borden, Arthur R., *A Comprehensive Old English Dictionary*. University Press of America, 1982.
- Burnett, Elizabeth-Jane. *The Grassling: A Geological Memoir*. Penguin, 2020.
- Carroll, Lewis. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass*. Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Clark, Timothy. *The Theory of Inspiration: Composition as a Crisis of Subjectivity*. Manchester University Press, 1997.
- Darwin, Charles. *The Descent of Man*, vol. I. Appleton, 1872.
- Deer, Jemma. *Radical Animism: Reading for the End of the World*. Bloomsbury, 2020.
- Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by Brian Massumi, University of Minnesota Press, 1987.
- Dennett, Daniel. *From Bacteria to Bach and Back: The Evolution of Minds*. Norton, 2017.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 2–3. Imago Publishing, 1942.
- Griffiths, David. “Queer Theory for Lichens.” *Undercurrents*, vol. 19, 2015, pp. 36–45.
- Haraway, Donna. *The Haraway Reader*. Routledge, 2004.
- Keyser, Catherine. *Artificial Color: Modern Food and Racial Fictions*. Oxford University Press, 2018.
- Krünitz, Johann Georg. *Oeconomische Encyclopädie oder Allgemeines System der Land-, Haus- und Staats-Wirthschaft*, vol. 19. Joachim Pauli, 1780.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. “Notes on Metaphor.” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, vol. 20, no.3, 2012, pp. 319–330.
- Liu, Siyuan, et al. “Brain Activity and Connectivity During Poetry Composition: Toward a Multidimensional Model of the Creative Process.” *Human Brain Mapping*, vol. 36, no. 9, 2015, pp. 3351–72.
- Macdonald, Helen. “Sex, Death and Mushrooms.” *The New York Times Magazine*, 6 Nov. 2015. www.nytimes.com/2015/11/08/magazine/sex-death-and-mushrooms.html. Accessed 3 Jan. 2022.
- O'Donnell, Daniel Paul. “The Pronunciation of Old English.” people.uleth.ca/~daniel.odonnell/Tutorials/the-pronunciation-of-old-english. Accessed 3 Jan. 2022.
- Royle, Nicholas. *Hélène Cixous: Dreamer, Realist, Analyst, Writing*. Manchester University Press, 2020.

Sheldrake, Merlin. *Entangled Life: How Fungi Make Our Worlds, Change Our Minds and Shape Our Futures*. Random House, 2020.

Simard, Suzanne, et al. "Net transfer of carbon between ectomycorrhizal tree species in the field." *Nature*, vol. 388, 1997, pp. 579–82.

Tsing, Anna. *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton University Press, 2015.

---. "Unruly Edges: Mushrooms as Companion Species." *Environmental Humanities*, vol. 1, 2012, pp. 141–54.

Francesco Aloe's Climate Fiction: Ruins, Bodies and Memories from the Future in *L'ultima bambina d'Europa*

Anna Chiafele
Auburn University, USA
azc0039@auburn.edu

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ecozone.2022.13.2.4710>



Abstract

L'ultima bambina d'Europa (*The Last Girl of Europe*), written by Francesco Aloe, is a captivating example of Italian cli-fi. Inspired by Pulitzer-prizewinning American novel *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy, *L'ultima bambina d'Europa* narrates the story of a young Italian family traveling southbound in an exhausting voyage toward Africa, where, they presume the sun is still visible, the wind is softly blowing, and water and food supplies have not run out, at least, not yet. In this article, I will analyze some of the novel's main cli-fi *topoi* and connect them to the narrative and rhetorical construction employed by the author. Specifically, I will focus on the effect of estrangement, by which the novel engages readers in a non-anthropocentric gaze. I show how the perspectives of the main protagonists—mother, father and their daughter Sofia—might potentially enhance readers' awareness of the gluttonous nature of capitalism that functions only for a few. On their journey, these three characters traverse a barren and devastated landscape void of temporal and spatial references. However, in this unspecified gloomy future scenario, readers will recognize the ruins of our current society and of our petroculture, heavily influenced by the American model of consumerism. Sofia's parents seem to suffer from "petro-melancholia" (LeMenager, *Living Oil* 102), as they recollect nostalgically the petrochemical culture in which they grew up. This is in stark contrast to the perspective of Sofia, who has no recollection of a capitalist society. Finally, this analysis will underscore Aloe's prowess in situating death among the living, where its visibility reminds the reader the place where it rightfully belongs.

Keywords: Italian cli-fi, Anthropocene, estrangement effect, corporeality, petroculture, collapse.

Resumen

L'ultima bambina d'Europa (*La última niña de Europa*), escrito por Francesco Aloe, es un cautivador ejemplo de ficción climática italiana. Inspirada en la novela americana ganadora de un premio Pulitzer *The Road* de Cormac McCarthy, *L'última bambina d'Europa* narra la historia de una joven familia italiana rumbo al sur en un extenuante viaje hacia África. Supuestamente el sol todavía es visible, la brisa sopla suave, y el agua y las reservas de comida no se han agotado, por lo menos aún. En este artículo, analizaré algunos de los principales *topoi* de la ficción climática y los conectaré con la narrativa y la construcción retórica del autor. Me centraré, concretamente, en el efecto de distanciamiento mediante el que la novela anima a los lectores a aceptar una mirada menos antropocéntrica. A través de la perspectiva de los personajes principales—madre, padre y la hija de ambos, Sofía—los lectores pueden tomar conciencia de la naturaleza codiciosa del capitalismo que funciona exclusivamente para unos pocos. En su viaje, los personajes atraviesan un paisaje árido y devastado carente de referencias temporales y espaciales. Sin embargo, en este sombrío futuro escenario no especificado, los lectores reconocerán fácilmente las ruinas de nuestra sociedad actual y nuestra cultura del petróleo fuertemente influenciada por el modelo de consumo americano. Los padres de Sofía, quienes parecen sufrir de "petro-melancolía" (LeMenager, *Living Oil* 102), en ocasiones recuerdan con nostalgia nuestra cultura petroquímica en la que crecieron. Esto contrasta con la perspectiva de Sofía, ya que ella no tiene recuerdos de una sociedad capitalista. Además, este análisis hará hincapié en la destreza de Aloe para traer la muerte al lugar que le corresponde, entre los vivos.

Palabras clave: Ficción climática italiana, antropoceno, efecto de distanciamiento, corporalidad, petrocultura

Introduction

In the summer of 2016, Italian journalist and writer Bruno Arpaia published *Qualcosa, là fuori* (*Something, out there*). It was positively received by the Italian press and labeled as the first Italian cli-fi novel.¹ While this designation is not entirely accurate since authors such as Alessandra Montrucchio, Tommaso Pincio, and Antonio Scurati wrote cli-fi prior to 2016, Arpaia's novel definitely marks a new enthusiasm for cli-fi among Italian readers and reviewers.² In fact, after the publication of *Qualcosa, là fuori* other Italian novelists have been expressing their deep concern about climate change in the Anthropocene.³ *L'ultima bambina d'Europa* (*The Last Girl of Europe*), written by Francesco Aloe in 2017, is a captivating example of Italian cli-fi.⁴ Inspired by Pulitzer-prizewinning American novel *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy,⁵ this novel narrates the story of a young Italian family traveling southbound on an exhausting journey toward Africa; there, they presume, the sun is still visible, the wind is softly blowing, and water and food supplies have not run out, at least, not yet. Italians⁶ become travelers treading hundreds of miles towards the south; with no ID or Visa, they attempt to enter the African continent in order to save themselves. The main protagonists—mother, father and their daughter Sofia, the last existing little girl of Europe—are indeed referred to as “three immigrants” (42),

¹ Cf. Sabina Minardi, Carlo Rovelli and Redazione, *Il Libraio*.

² Online, numerous reviews in Italian discuss popular foreign climate fiction. The most addressed foreign authors include Amitav Ghosh, Margaret Atwood, Kim Stanley Robinson, Ian McEwan, James Bradley, and Cormac McCarthy. In Italy, the debate around cli-fi is strongly based upon foreign authors and their novels. Cf. Jolanda Di Virgilio, Marco Dotti, Sabina Minardi, and Emanuela Valentini.

³ Noteworthy writers utilizing the medium of fiction to express such concerns include Moira Dal Sito, Chiara Mezzalama, and Sara Segantin. Telmo Pievani and Mauro Varotto have written an engaging “unidentified narrative object” (Wu Ming 11) that spans between fiction and non-fiction, fiction and geography.

⁴ In Italy, bloggers and reviewers use interchangeably terms like “cli-fi”, “fantascienza climatica” (climate sci-fi), “narrativa ambientale” (environmental narrative), and “fantaecologia” (eco-sci-fi). Here I will use the term cli-fi to refer to a type of literature that deals with anthropogenic climate change and urges readers to reflect upon the social, political, and ethical repercussions of global warming.

⁵ At the end of the book, Aloe pays tribute to Cormac McCarthy and to *The Road*, a “masterpiece that encouraged me and that I have freely quoted throughout this book” (“capolavoro che mi ha spronato e che ho liberamente citato in questo libro”; 175). Further research could lead to an insightful discussion on quotations, allusions, and, in general, on the evident intertextuality between these two novels, *The Road* and *L'ultima bambina d'Europa*. Although this is not the scope of the present essay, I would like to acknowledge such a stimulating possibility. All translations from original Italian texts are my own.

⁶ With the term Italians, here I would like to include both Italian citizens and any other resident in Italy, independently of their legal status. I also want to acknowledge the feeble possibility that people from Northern Europe may be traversing Italy; however, due to the strenuous voyage, the constant perils and militarized closed borders, it is very unlikely that inhabitants of Northern countries succeed in reaching the Italian peninsula.

"refugees" (56) and "travelers" (104)⁷ in search of salvation. They are eco-refugees fleeing a devastated *Bel Paese* and hoping to set foot on an unknown better continent.⁸

The woman, the man, and their daughter Sofia are walking downward, from North to South, along the peninsula in order to reach Sicily where they plan to board a decrepit boat sailing off toward Africa. Europe has been ravaged by anthropogenic climate change and is by now deserted and uninhabitable. While the major events unfold on Italian soil, Sofia's father also relates stories about Northern European countries; these territories have been swept away by pollution and unimaginable disruption. Likewise, Italy is depicted as a wasteland where very few survivors, mainly male adults, fight daily for their lives while facing environmental threats, persistent lack of supplies, the Green Regiment soldiers' brutality and, overall, the savagery of any other remaining human being. In this post-collapse scenario, all social institutions have disintegrated. In reality, the main protagonists are not simply facing an environmental crisis, but a social one as well; indeed, they are enduring a socioecological meltdown that is intimately affecting their bodies and their lives. By now, all surviving humans are scavengers; some others are even rumored to be cannibals. Talking with her husband, the woman states that "[t]he entire world is dead or dying' [...] 'not only the humankind, but everything else [...]'" (13).⁹ In this *via crucis*, our protagonists witness unspeakable cruelties. The mother, far advanced into her pregnancy, drowns while traversing the short stretch of water separating the region of Calabria from that of Sicily. Father and daughter arrive miraculously on Tunisian shores where they are transferred immediately to Libya. In Libya, Sofia can see birds flying in the sky and a large gamut of colors for the very first time in her life. Only at the end of the novel, readers comprehend that in accompanying these three eco-refugees in their journey, they have actually been walking and heading toward our present civilization and lifestyle. The happy and peaceful conclusion that spares Sofia's and her father's life is, in fact, tainted with gloom and doom as there is no longer any safe place on earth; "in the era of global warming, nothing is really far away; there is no place where the orderly expectations of bourgeois life hold unchallenged sway" (Ghosh 26).¹⁰ Hence, no firm comforting binary opposition exists that can safeguard Western civilization, its lifestyle and its beneficiaries; through careful parsing, readers are encouraged to

⁷ "[T]re migranti," "profughi," and "viaggiatori."

⁸ On the last page of the book, Aloe explains what inspired him to write this novel: a picture of a little frail immigrant girl holding her teddy bear. Together with other 716 desperate human beings, she had traveled from Sierra Leone to Sicily in the summer of 2015. She was rescued with her father in Palermo. Like Sofia, the protagonist of the novel, this girl had seen her mother drown in the sea.

⁹ "Il mondo intorno a noi sta morendo' [...] 'non solo il genere umano, ma anche tutto il resto [...]'"

¹⁰ In his article "Of the Titanic, the Bounty, and Other Shipwrecks", Marco Armiero makes a valid point underlining that in the Anthropocene, class matters. The weakest in the world, i.e. the poor, will be affected more deeply than the rich. Referencing the shipwreck of the Titanic, he highlights that "75% of the first class passengers survived while only 25% of the passengers in third class made it out of the disaster" (52). Through this metaphor, Armiero argues that well-off people will have access to better options to cope with the challenges brought about by global warming. Unquestionably, this holds true. However, also in a relatively wealthy and industrialized country like Italy, climate change effects are becoming more palpable and visible for all. For instance, in July 2022, they recorded an excess of mortality among the population; due to continuous heat waves, the death rate increased by 21% ("Caldo, ministero della salute"). In the near future, as a result of climate change, human beings may face debilitating social divides within the same nation and that could lead to alarming social unrest.

challenge and dismantle obsolete and dominant dichotomies, such as human/inhuman, civilized/uncivilized, nature/culture, and native/foreigner.

In this essay, the main cli-fi *topoi* traceable in Francesco Aloe's novel will not be tackled exclusively; rather, these literary themes will be investigated in relation to the narrative and rhetorical constructions employed by the author. As Adam Trexler writes, "[c]limate change is not just a 'theme' in fiction. It remakes basic narrative operations" (233). In particular, I will focus on the estrangement effect, which, in this novel, is often prompted by temporal displacement. Through the estrangement effect, readers can adopt an "oblique gaze" (Wu Ming 26), i.e. a fresh unusual perspective that may foster critical insight into late capitalism or into consumerism more broadly. *L'ultima bambina d'Europa* encourages readers to embrace both a less anthropocentric and a less Eurocentric gaze in order to begin grasping the drastic ramifications of global warming and human impact on the environment. Accordingly, global warming is to be viewed as a hyperobject, an object "massively distributed in time and space relative to humans" (Morton 1). While an account of the various categories of "end-of-the-world fiction" lies beyond the scope of this article, an analysis of key tropes of Italian cli-fi is crucial to the present analysis. Italian cli-fi often challenges any linear notion of progress based primarily on mere economic factors, and instead induces readers to reflect on the gluttonous, schizophrenic nature of (late) capitalism that functions particularly for the few as "the patterns of life that modernity engenders can only be practiced by a small minority of the world's population" (Ghosh 92). What happens when we fall outside that small minority and are plummeted into dire destitution? Francesco Aloe's novel tells us in gruesome detail.

Ruins from the Future and Lingering Nostalgia

The narration takes place in an unspecified future; no specific dates, however, are ever provided throughout the novel. The father of this family often reminisces about a better past when food and drinks were bountiful. Within climate fiction, narrating from near, middle or far futures is a widely adopted literary device, a useful creative technique that promotes critical distance by transforming our present in an object of history. As Richard Crownshaw asserts, "[w]hat is remembered is an aetiology of the conditions that are imagined in the future but which are unfolding in the present of this literature's production and consumption" (890). By looking back on the present time, readers may recognize the drawbacks of late capitalism. Thus, climate change fiction is often preoccupied with "anticipated memory" (Craps 486), which is a memory oriented toward fictional future histories; according to Craps, "[m]aking sense of our existence in this day and age requires that we adopt a posthumous stance from which we can look back on our impending extinction as a species" (486). Therefore, a posthumous perspective promotes a well anticipated mourning; readers begin to mourn a lost civilization and the extinction of species, at times even the annihilation of *homo sapiens*.

The ruins of contemporary Western society and the debris of so-called progress prevail in the bleak and hostile landscape depicted in the novel: we read of houses that are falling apart, hotels and hospitals in disuse, rusted weathered bridges, burnt-down

gas stations and entire ghost towns of which, we are constantly reminded, it is better to steer clear. Traveling southbound, this fleeing family encounters the remains of our abundant and exuberant society based predominantly on rampant capitalism: a rusted shopping cart, discolored signs, an empty chip bag, broken strollers, Fiat, Renault and Toyota cars, non-functioning neon lights, useless lamps, a Coke ad sign, worthless electric flashlights and even a Boeing aircraft smashed on the ground. This airplane, also depicted on the book cover, epitomises humans' restless urge to overcome their own limits. It also reminds readers of the mythological figure of Icarus who, out of hubris, flew too close to the sun and drowned in the sea. Likewise, humans have recklessly pursued economic and material progress without taking the repercussions of their behaviors and forms of life into consideration. All the depicted debris are the remains of a lost civilization influenced by American culture and its model of consumerism. These are the vestiges of our current form of collective life. Through the estrangement process, which fosters an "unusual 'vision'" (Velotti 285), readers can look at these ruins and widespread waste and recognize in them our present shining buildings and glittering goods; in fact, these items require constant care in order not to decay and not to turn into trash. Waste, according to Greg Kennedy, "embarrasses and shames us because it confronts us with a reflection of our own shortcomings" (4); waste exposes our inability to care. A ravaged landscape thus proves how little we cared.

A consumer culture can prosper and flourish only if there is constant access to a cheap reliable and efficient power such as oil. However, as Buell argues, a fossil-fueled culture can be described as "an age of exuberance [...] haunted by catastrophe" ("A Short History", 176). In fact, due to Earth's finite resources, this culture is doomed to vacillate as soon as its oil reservoir dwindles. This is exactly what happens in Francesco Aloe's novel. The father is always looking for oil or gasoline, but he cannot find any: in proximity of a car accident, "[h]e bent over the fuel tank and smelled. Then he walked off" (31).¹¹ On their journey, these three pilgrims run into stacks of immobile cars; some of them are burned-out carcasses, some are crashed piles of metal sheets, some others, instead, are intact, but cannot function on an empty tank. Sofia is fascinated by her father's search for a running vehicle; at the same time, she cannot comprehend what cars are for. It is through Sofia's eyes that readers experience an acute sense of estrangement. As she struggles to understand her parents' past lifestyle, her innocent and fresh perspective helps to uncover our own faults. Hence, the father has to explain to her that, just a few years before, cars allowed people "[t]o move faster from one place to the other" (32).¹² Her mother steps in the conversation to underscore that this was possible "[...] without any toil' [...]" (32).¹³ Cheap oil replaced hard labor; therefore, it freed human beings from their ties to nature and warded off their physical exhaustion. Among these three eco-refugees, Sofia is the only one who cannot recollect ever being inside a car. In reality, as a toddler, she moved around in a car and even had her own seat. Her mind, though, cannot bring back such memories. Therefore, she cannot miss traveling by car. Despite being a young eight-

¹¹ "Si chinava all'altezza del bocchettone della benzina e annusava. Poi passava oltre."

¹² "Ad andare più veloci da un posto a un altro'."

¹³ "[...] senza far fatica' [...]."

year old and extremely frail girl, she keeps moving and treading mile after mile. On this tiring journey, Sofia takes care first of her feverish mother and then of her delirious father; she keeps walking in search of food and medication. Both her parents have to lean physically on her at times. When her father gets sick, for example, she cares for him for over twenty-one days. Here, roles are inverted and Sofia becomes her parents' caring guardian. Within the narrative, cars have become prosthetic extensions of human bodies; without them, walking takes a real toll on human beings, who have become inured to moving quickly and with little effort between destinations. Sofia appears to be the least affected by the lack of transportation. Sofia's mother often wishes for a car and when one arrives, they all ride in it; with George in the driver seat, "[t]he woman looked out the car window. [...] Despite the monotony of grey landscape, it was pleasant to see the road passing by while your feet stood still" (66).¹⁴

This future memory stimulates a deeper understanding of our times; however, ironically, it may also engender a persistent, subtle tension between repulsion toward and mourning for these times as bygone ways of life. Our petrochemical culture is allegedly one of the fundamental causes of global warming; nevertheless, in this novel, our forever-lost Western lifestyle, fueled by oil, is recollected nostalgically at times, especially by Sofia's parents. Walking on a deserted highway, the father realizes how, just a few years before, everything seemed and felt smaller:

Italy was a country you could cross in a few hours, on a highway exactly like that one, seated comfortably in a *Punto* car with the air conditioning against your legs. He had the impression of still tasting the flavor of coffee at the Autogrill [...]. Back then he hated the traffic, the sound of horns, the line of cars at the toll booth. (15-16)¹⁵

Now even traffic is mentioned with sorrowful melancholy. In fact, this "petromelancholia" engenders "the conditions of grief as conventional oil resources dwindle" (LeMenager, *Living Oil* 102). Likewise, as previously mentioned, Sofia's mother feels good while she is riding inside a car and sees the road passing by without her walking. Finally, after discovering an untouched package of chewing gum, the father, mother and girl take one piece each and start chewing: "They laughed, chewing with their eyes closed [...]" (17).¹⁶ All these recollections are highly mediated by the protagonists' strong dependence on fossilized fuels; the past is indeed commemorated through "libidinal attachments to carbon economies (and the life they fuel)" (Stef Craps e Rich Crownshaw 5). However, Sofia's perspective is essential to seeing our habits in a different light. Let's analyze one example in more detail. When Sofia's mother finds the intact chewing gum package, Sofia asks for an explanation since she has never seen such an object. Her mother tells her, adopting the American term, that it is "chewing gum" (16); immediately after, in an attempt to clarify, she states that it is "[g]um that can be chewed" (16).¹⁷ Promptly the

¹⁴ "La donna guardava oltre il finestrino. [...] Nonostante la monotonia del grigiore, era piacevole vedere la strada scorrere mentre i piedi rimanevano fermi."

¹⁵ L'Italia era un Paese che si poteva attraversare in poche ore, proprio su un'autostrada come quella, seduti comodamente su una *Punto* con l'aria condizionata tra le gambe. Gli sembrava ancora di percepire il gusto del caffè degli Autogrill [...]. Allora odiava il traffico, il suono dei clacson, le file al casello.

¹⁶ "Riserò, masticando con gli occhi chiusi [...]."

¹⁷ "Gomma da masticare'."

little girl affirms that it is not possible to chew rubber. Through a process of estrangement, readers can look at a very familiar object, such as a piece of chewing gum, with critical eyes. This is, after all, a piece of rubber, synthetic plastics, derived from petroleum. Our petrochemical culture extends its tentacles literally within our bodies, turning us into oily matter. Despite her unusual gaze, Sofia is also conquered by this piece of chewing gum and, inebriated, she rejoices at its sweet odor, which fills her nostrils (17). In her article, Serenella Iovino underscores the ubiquity and resistance of this “geologic agent” (241); in fact, the chewing gum becomes “the symbol of the resistance of matter” (242)¹⁸ within the Anthropocene. That an intact package of chewing gum is still present in this post-catastrophe scenario is perhaps unsurprising.

Throughout the entire novel, readers can grasp a persistent tension between love for and repugnance of our petrochemical civilization. As stated previously, Sofia's father is eager to find a functioning car and some gasoline; at the same time, he is repelled when he encounters a massive car accident where human corpses are entangled forever with metal plates. According to Mimi Sheller, we entertain a complicated affective relationship with cars that “is not only about pleasure-seeking, but also feeds into our deepest fears, anxieties and frustrations” (224). Indeed, cars can evoke both positive and negative emotions, such as a longing for velocity and a dread of death: “The stomach-turning feeling of witnessing a car crash or the terrors and permanent anxiety produced by being in an accident are the dark underside of ‘auto-freedom’” (Sheller 224). While speed symbolizes the victory of human beings over their own physical limits, a car accident embodies utter failure. In *L'ultima bambina d'Europa* no car accident is ever cleared; no ambulances or firefighters arrive swiftly to clean up the scene and thus to conceal our errors. On the contrary, bodies and cars are suspended in an eternal crash that exposes our faults and incapacities to handle technical progress. In fact, some collisions are caused by the drivers' lack of skills: “Desperate people fleeing stole whatever they could find and often it was buses, too difficult to handle” (30).¹⁹

Life is harder at a time when all social structures have collapsed. When the fabric of society crumbles, its physical infrastructures are exposed and left to decay as well. In Aloe's novel, houses, bridges, streets, tunnels and aqueducts are falling apart, wires hang exposed, running water is nonexistent and electricity is gone. Infrastructures symbolize progress and they are often taken for granted in Western society. According to Rubenstein, “[i]nfrastructure is supposed to go unnoticed when it's in fine working order” (576). Infrastructures propel our lifestyles; for example, they allow transportation of people and goods, they carry water, and they conduct electricity. At the same time, they conceal our strong dependency upon the nation-state and our deep entanglement with oil; thus, infrastructures cover up the ubiquity of petroleum in our society. However, when infrastructures fail, human beings' reliance on the state and its hypertrophic economic system is brutally exposed and humans' corporeality comes back impetuously to the foreground. Through oil, the modern state has subtly penetrated the life of all its subjects.

¹⁸ “[I] simbolo della resistenza della materia.”

¹⁹ “Gente disperata che durante la fuga rubava quello che trovava e spesso erano autobus di linea, difficili da governare.”

Consequently, humans have outsourced most of their subsistence to others and have not acquired basic survival skills; that is why, in a post-state and post-collapse scenario, most of them are depicted as succumbing slowly, even if they switch into survival mode.

This barren and ravaged scenario may prefigure a world with no humans, in which nature nonetheless triumphs by forming a favorable habitat for non-human beings, both flora and fauna. In the following passage, we can see how the novel portrays a ghost town: "The town was a swampland. Millions of liters of water prevailed over aqueducts. Once upon a time, the porous soil was rich with living roots that would pump rain into the trees, the flowers, every stem of grass" (43).²⁰ Despite this sketch, the hope for a new thriving world void of humans, but repossessed by plants and animals soon vanishes. In fact, a few lines later, we read that "[s]ince vegetation had perished water stayed there, the sun too pale to be able to absorb it and the rain leaked into the strata, filled sewers, sweeping away the cement" (43-44).²¹ Moreover, "[t]here had been a time when plants had begun to consume humans' construction. Then, something had killed the vegetation as well" (44).²² In his article, Ben De Bruyn reminds us that in post-apocalyptic literature nature often reconquers those spaces once occupied by human beings: "the earth will quickly reclaim the spaces our worlds have vacated" (779). This, however, does not happen in *L'ultima bambina d'Europa*, a novel that keeps representing a desolate and fragmented world where not only objects and buildings are falling apart but so too are human bodies, vulnerable, and made of flesh. After a diffuse meltdown, we are not returned to a soothing prelapsarian past of plenitude.

Decomposed Corpses and Perishing Bodies

In addition to ruins and arid landscapes, the three travelers daily run into decomposed bodies. Everywhere, putrefied human bodies lie unattended; mummified women rest in hospitals with their newborns' corpses "by now reduced to fossils of a world without salvation" (46)²³ and entire families are trapped in an eternal escape in their SUVs or RVs. The entire novel is filled with images of butchered and tortured bodies: mass graves, decapitated men and women, and even "a crucified body upside down" (81).²⁴ Through Aloe's clever use of the estrangement effect, readers obtain a cosmic perspective (Ginzburg 19) that prompts them to ponder their final hour: after all, as Ginzburg writes, "[e]verything, our death included, must be viewed like a general process of transformation and change" (19).²⁵ These corpses are often deprived of a proper resting place and lie abandoned, forgotten or disgraced. Hence, readers can look at them

²⁰ "La città era una palude. Milioni di litri d'acqua avevano avuto la meglio sugli acquedotti. Un tempo il terreno poroso era ricco di radici vive che pompavano la pioggia negli alberi, nei fiori, in ogni stelo d'erba."

²¹ "Da quando anche la vegetazione era morta l'acqua restava lì, il sole troppo pallido per poterla asciugare e la pioggia filtrava nelle falde, riempiva le fognature, spazzava via il cemento."

²² "C'era stato un periodo in cui le piante avevano cominciato a divorare l'opera degli umani. Poi, qualcosa aveva ucciso anche la vegetazione."

²³ "[O]rmai ridotti a fossili di un mondo senza scampo."

²⁴ "[U]n corpo crocefisso al contrario."

²⁵ "Tutto, compresa la nostra morte, dev'essere visto come parte di un processo generale di trasformazione e di mutamento."

and perceive their own corporeality. Overwhelmed by all these putrefied bodies and unaccustomed to such a stark perspective, Sofia's father expresses the desire to be buried in the ground if he dies before his wife or his daughter. Whenever possible, *en route* toward Africa, he even covers these deceased bodies with a sheet or blanket. For a Western person, all these exposed corpses appear to be in the wrong place, not hidden far away; in some instances, they are also perceived as contaminating, sticky and viscous waste. These corpses should belong to graves in cemeteries. Otherwise, they are looked on as "matter out of place" (Douglas 44) and therefore, according to Douglas' popular definition, as dirt. Thus, the father strives to accord dignity to some of the bodies encountered on his path. At the same time, he wishes to be treated similarly and to be assigned an appropriate eternal resting spot.

A few steps before entering a tunnel, the family has to climb over dozens and dozens of vehicles around and inside which there are corpses upon corpses. The three pilgrims stand in front of a "slaughterhouse of flesh and car plates" (33),²⁶ one the prosthesis of the other. At the entrance of the tunnel, they can smell a dense "stench of putrefaction" (34).²⁷ Once in the mountain's interior, the family has to trample on foul-smelling and decaying bodies: "The woman put one foot on a chest that opened up like a rotten melon. Black blood enveloped her ankle. The man and the child sank for a few seconds in the liquefied entrails of someone. A splatter of gas and pus reached them" (40).²⁸ At some point, due to the gasoline present in the gallery and a spark from a lighter in the hands of the man, these putrid bodies catch fire just "like flesh matches" (40)²⁹ and begin emanating "a strange azure flame. Corporeal gases flow in the air" (40).³⁰ The stench and the gas produced by these corpses is similar to the one that leaves the father breathless and gasping for air once, a few pages later, he opens the door of a refrigeration room in a hotel: here "a penetrating stench hit him like a brick in his face. His eyes filled with tears, he shut the door and threw up. [...] Kilograms of rotten meat" (50).³¹ Similarly, in Sicily father and daughter are barely capable of breathing because of "the malodorous gases in the air" (140).³² The entire novel overflows with pungent sensory cues that underscore the perishable essence of human beings. Odors morbidly prompt us to acknowledge that we are edible as well. After escaping from an execution, the three pilgrims can detect in the air "the smell of burned meat" (70);³³ this is indeed the smell of human flesh, since there are no other animals around that can be butchered and roasted.

Readers regularly witness brutal executions and bloodshed that reveal how quickly human beings can die. For example, George, originally from Africa, is now a

²⁶ "[M]acello di carne e lamiera."

²⁷ "[F]etore della putrefazione."

²⁸ La donna mise un piede su un torace che si aprì come un melone marcio. Sangue nero le avvolse la caviglia. L'uomo e la bambina sprofondarono per qualche secondo nelle viscere liquefatte di qualcuno. Li sfiorò uno schizzo di gas e pus.

²⁹ "[C]ome fiammiferi di carne."

³⁰ "[U]na fiamma azzurra. Gas corporei fluttuanti nell'aria."

³¹ "[U]n tanfo penetrante lo investì come un mattone in faccia. Gli occhi si riempirono di lacrime, chiuse la porta e vomitò. [...] Chili di carne andata a male."

³² "[G]as maleodoranti nell'aria."

³³ "[L]'odore della carne bruciata."

refugee running away from Rome. In the attempt to save the last girl of Europe, he bravely sacrifices himself. When he spots the soldiers of the Green Regiment approaching, he urges the family to run away immediately and hide. He instead charges his car against the soldiers and runs over three of them. Once in their hands, the soldiers brutally murder him with an ax. Hidden in a ditch with his family, the father is able to see “[a]n explosion of cerebral material and blood” (69).³⁴ Similarly, Sofia’s father shoots a man in the head and in a split second, half of his skull “exploded in a reddish cloud and pieces of cerebral matter and blood landed among puddles on the ground and other pieces fell onto the woman [...]” (106),³⁵ his wife.

Not only do we encounter corpses, but also human beings who are so fragile, vulnerable and suffering that we must ask how they can still breathe and be alive. Just a few pages into the novel, an old ragged man approaches the young family; he is “as thin as a dead one exhumed by the devil” (27).³⁶ The mother and daughter as well are extremely emaciated; at night the male protagonist makes sure that they are still breathing by listening to their feeble breath or by laying his hands on their rib cage. The mother’s face is hollowed (49) and her limbs are like “willow branches, straight and thin” (49).³⁷ The daughter Sofia is as light as “[a] feather that, bouncing off on the mattress, did not even mess up the blankets” (49).³⁸ With no supplies left, this family ends up ingesting cat food in order to survive. In *L'ultima bambina d'Europa*, bodies holding tenaciously onto life despite hunger, illness and wounds are effectively foregrounded. After all, as Stephanie LeMenager reminds us, “[t]he project of the Anthropocene novel is at best a project of paying close attention to what it means to live through climate shift, moment by moment, in individual, fragile bodies” (“Climate Change” 225). As the three characters struggle to meet their physical needs, readers may begin to consider their own bodies, and their physical needs as well. All these fragile bodies promote a reflection on our own materiality and subsequent and inevitable decay. In fact, we are all embodied and affected by the milieu in which we dwell. Human beings die and rot away just like any other living creature on earth. In the Anthropocene, “[t]he privilege of not thinking of oneself embodied, as matter overwritten and writing history, is a privilege lost to all humans, including those imagined to be white, in the era of climate change” (LeMenager, “Climate Change” 229). *L'ultima bambina d'Europa* slams death in our face. Since the 1930s of the last century, Alberto Maggi argues, death has been concealed away in hospitals and hospices (15); therefore, for decades, we have been neglecting the *ars morendi* and deluded ourselves into believing we are indestructible. Dwelling in the Anthropocene has made it both unthinkable and impossible to continue to overlook mortality, and Aloe’s novel embraces the challenge of bringing death back precisely to where it belongs, among the living.

³⁴ “Un’esplosione di materia cerebrale e sangue.”

³⁵ “[E]splose in una nuvola rossastra e pezzi di materia cerebrale e sangue finirono tra le pozzanghere del terreno e altri pezzi caddero sulla donna.”

³⁶ “[M]agro come un morto riesumato dal diavolo.”

³⁷ “[R]ami di salice, dritti e sottili.”

³⁸ “Una piuma che, rimbalzando sul materasso, non scompigliò neanche le coperte.”

Scattered Memories and Scant Words

Among all these fragmented buildings, broken objects, and putrefied bodies, Sofia's father struggles to keep his memories alive; in fact, the sight of a fractured world will challenge the self that is sustained by remembrance. Indeed, memories require objects if they are to persist. At the beginning of the narration, the wife often reprimands her husband for thinking about the past. In one instance, she affirms: "Your mind is not here with us. You are always thinking about how it used to be [...]" (11).³⁹ In fact, he often does. Caressing his wife's hair, for example, he smells it "remembering vaguely its old scent" (14).⁴⁰ Likewise, after sipping some wine, he feels a bit disoriented with his "palate sweetened, the mind escaping toward a perished world" (52).⁴¹ As the story proceeds, though, his memories become more and more feeble. Aware of this, he painfully urges himself: "*You cannot forget, he thought, focus. How was it? Say it to the child, how it was. Every day, from today on until the end of the days remaining to you*" (142; emphasis in original).⁴² His yearning to remember and narrate to Sofia underscores a stark chasm between father and daughter, which extends beyond the generation gap inevitably associated with parenthood; in fact, this father appears to be an alien in his daughter's world. His world does not exist anymore and, at times, he struggles to recover the words necessary to describe it. Sofia's father is living in survivalist mode; not only is his body physiologically changing in order to adapt to exterior stressors, but his mind too needs to recollect in order for him not to succumb. After all, as Scranton affirms, throughout the centuries, we carried and preserved "[o]ur greatest treasure and most potent adaptive technology, the only thing that might save us in the Anthropocene, because it is the only thing that can save those who are already dead: memory" (95). However, the father's memories are fragile and exposed to the same decay as the world he now inhabits.

Similar to memories, language also resists disappearance through an effort to avoid dissolution into aphasia. In fact, a crumbled world also produces devastating linguistic effects on its inhabitants. Throughout the entire novel, there are numerous dialogues; all of them are very short, follow a paratactic style and employ elementary grammar. Exhausted, this family can barely find the strength to converse and their exchanges are kept to the bare minimum, both in regard to syntax and vocabulary. It is worth noting that the narrator as well appears to experience challenges while giving voice to quiet characters and depicting a denatured world. Not surprisingly, even proper names begin to disappear; in fact, both Sofia's parents are unnamed throughout the narration. Unable to find adequate words to convey images of such unthinkable desolation, the narrator has to resort to metaphors or similes. That is why, just to provide a few examples, the stench is as heavy as a brick (50), Sofia's and her mother's eyes shine "like stars of a

³⁹ "La tua mente non è qui con noi. Pensi sempre a com'era prima [...]."

⁴⁰ "[R]icordandone appena il vecchio profumo."

⁴¹ "[P]alato addolcito, la mente in fuga verso un mondo scomparso."

⁴² "Non puoi dimenticare, pensava, concentrati. Com'era. Dillo alla bambina, com'era. Ogni giorno, da oggi fino alla fine dei giorni che ti restano."

welcoming galaxy" (52),⁴³ the grayness of the sky is "like an incurable hematoma" (79)⁴⁴ and the husband sits down trembling "like an abandoned puppy under the snow" (119).⁴⁵ Moreover, the rain is "tears from the sky" (5),⁴⁶ the blowing wind is a lament (43) and the hospital is a gigantic coffin (55) made of cement. Nobody has ever witnessed such a devastation; therefore, human beings are missing the proper language to portray it effectively. This prompts readers to ponder whether a new vocabulary may be needed in the Anthropocene. For example, are the water drops falling from the atmosphere still rain? In an attempt to narrate the unimaginable, Francesco Aloe chooses to use ample similes and metaphors, since "metaphorical projection involves understanding one kind of thing in terms of another kind of thing" (Lakoff and Johnson 171). Therefore, we can approach and grasp the unthinkable through these figures of speech. Furthermore, the persistent use of metaphors and similes highlights the hybridity of the world, with all its human and non-human vagrant creatures, with all its agentic vibrant matter;⁴⁷ throughout the narration, all illusionary divides between human and non-human, living and non-living beings are erased. Hence, a tree begs for mercy (10), entangled wires are exposed like veins (36), Mount Pollicino, covered in snow, resembles a piece of plastic, and embers are the Earth's open wounds (84). Finally, the portrayed desolation seems to affect the novel's narrative structure as well. If we exclude the final voyage toward Africa on a decrepit raft, everything that happens before can easily be re-ordered and arranged differently. Readers are provided with sketch after sketch devoid of strong temporal and causal connections; it really does not matter, for example, when this family meets George, Enea or the rugged beggar. Hence, it can be stated that the depicted fragmented world affects and seeps into both the sparse language and the structural framework of the novel.

Causes of Disaster: Time and Space in a Post-catastrophe Scenario

While Italy is portrayed as an impoverished wasteland, the novel's protagonists are unable to identify and to understand the triggering cause of this utter desolation. As already noted, Sofia's father often brings up memories that evoke a pleasant happier past when a simple croissant and cappuccino (7) would bring him joy. However, no clear elucidation is provided to explain the current widespread misfortune. In fact, in *L'ultima bambina d'Europa* there is no mention of any specific environmental catastrophe. There has not been any flood, earthquake, tornado or plague. Moreover, no atomic bomb has been dropped on Europe and there is no evidence of a possible nuclear accident similar to Chernobyl. Finally, no meteoroid has crashed on the earth. There is only one clear certainty: something has been lost, an entire civilization has crumbled and has vanished. Eight years before, when Sofia was born, Italy was still a beautiful and colorful country with a pleasant wind and with an enjoyable warm sun. Now, amidst material plights, the

⁴³ "[C]ome stelle di una galassia accogliente."

⁴⁴ "[C]ome un ematoma incurabile."

⁴⁵ "[C]ome un cucciolo abbandonato sotto la neve."

⁴⁶ "[L]acrime dal cielo."

⁴⁷ I am referring here to the vastly known work of Jane Bennett where she urges readers to perceive an energetic vitality within everything.

characters are also facing an epistemological puzzle. Who knows the truth and which information has been passed down to the population? It appears that the nation-state has shared little or no knowledge with its inhabitants. To her daughter's question "What happened to the world?" (148),⁴⁸ the father can only pronounce a confused and disheartening "I don't know" (148).⁴⁹ Likewise, also Enea, another eco-traveler in search of salvation with his family, states: "I have not yet understood what happened to the world [...]" (115).⁵⁰ Verily, our contemporary society is founded upon and embedded in numerous large-scale complex systems that "can no longer be easily understood or controlled" (Heise 145); therefore, it is extremely difficult to understand, foresee, and manage risks and outcomes affecting the socioecological milieu. This is even truer for common people, non-experts, such as Sofia's father and Enea. According to Antonia Mehnert, climate change creates "a crisis of thinking or imagining that distinguishes it from other environmental problems. While the effects of former eco-catastrophes were often clearly visible locally [...] the effects of global warming seem hard to grasp" (28). On the same note, Trexler writes that "[t]he very scale of climate change challenges people's capacity to understand it" (75). It is for these very reasons that readers, like Sofia's father, limp vicariously along searching for one unambiguous explanation that, in reality, does not exist. For example: one is left wondering what happened to the atmosphere. Everything is grey, no colors can be discerned, the sun does not shine any longer and the world appears clouded at all times. All the protagonists are powerless in front of what Rob Nixon has famously defined "slow violence" (2), i.e. a violence that "occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space" (2). In Aloe's novel, imperceptible slow violence is now visible to the naked eye; readers are witnessing the aftermath of a crucial tipping point, when environmental pollution actually becomes tangible, detectable and irreversible both locally and transnationally.

Just as it is difficult to identify the concurrent causes of this collapse, similarly, readers are unable to distinguish the exact time when the narration is unfolding. As already argued, the narrated events are clearly set in a near future in order to overcome "the imaginative difficulties created by the vast dimensions and enormous complexity of climate change, making this elusive phenomenon visible, tangible, legible, and morally salient" (Craps 484). Moreover, it is relevant to underscore that this is an unspecified future; in fact, no specific date is ever mentioned. Hence, the misfortunes of this family become the potential sorrows and tribulations of all humankind, and they acquire a universal value; with such uncertainty, the possible world here created subtly hints at a boundless time void of humans. The father feels "smashed by the enormity of time, by its indifferent and ceaseless flowing" (11).⁵¹ Moreover, the entire narration is punctuated by the daughter's persistent questions that convey timelessness through a repetitive rhythm. Throughout the novel, there are very few events husband and wife hold on to desperately in the attempt not to slide into the monotonous flowing of time: these are their wedding

⁴⁸ "Cos'è successo al mondo?"

⁴⁹ "Non lo so'."

⁵⁰ "Non ho ancora capito cosa è successo al mondo [...]."

⁵¹ "[S]chiacciato dall'enormità del tempo, dal suo scorrere indifferente e incessante."

and the birth of their daughter. They both occurred, more or less, seven years before their pilgrimage. The narrator warns readers that the world “started going crazy when [the girl] had not yet turned four [...]” (85).⁵² The main characters did not leave their home right away; instead, they departed for Africa only six or seven months prior to conceiving their second and never-born child (125). In sum, at the time of narration, these three pilgrims have been traveling southbound for six or seven months. These episodes, however, are by now quite loose anchors in their lives, as they witness the disappearance of objects, landscapes, and forms of life dear to them. These weak time referents do little to assist readers in navigating an uncertain and unspecified future. The mother suggests her husband and daughter eat her when she dies. She explains she had seen this in a movie a few years ago; there was an airplane crash in the Andes and “[t]here were survivors but the rescue troops could not find them. They remained stuck for weeks [...]. They were able to survive because they ate the bodies of those who had died in the crash” (84).⁵³ The mother seems to be referring to a real accident that happened on October 13, 1972. An American movie *Alive* from 1993 retells the gruesome story, makes it known, and brings cannibalism and hence our own materiality into our living rooms; this movie was also broadcast in Italy. Here we have a feeble temporal reference. Although in the entire novel there are no dates, this detail can help readers orient themselves and cope with the sinister foreboding that all this is indeed taking place in a disturbingly near future. If so, the narration is suggesting that a global cataclysm has already begun. As Frederick Buell argues convincingly, nowadays:

[e]nvironmental crisis is no longer an apocalypse rushing toward a herd of sheep that a few prophets are trying to rouse. It is not a matter of the imminent future but a feature of the present. Environmental crisis is, in short, a process within which individual and society today dwell [...]. (*From Apocalypse* 76)

As already noted, the ruins of the world depicted in the novel are in fact the images of our current lifestyle: streets, cars, traffic signs, dangling store signs, abandoned gas stations and useless light switches. What has collapsed is in reality our own abundant society and not a wildly futuristic, ultra high-tech, socioeconomic community. While the novel presents our civilization as crumbled, there is still something else, however, that holds fast:

The vaulted domes of Renaissance churches were intact. The palaces from the eighteen hundreds, cold but whole. Ancient medieval villages, indifferent to the devastation surrounding them. The man realized that mainly modern buildings were falling down. The past endured. (43)⁵⁴

Similar to time, space often lacks specificity in *L'ultima bambina d'Europa*. We know that this young family comes from northern Italy and is headed southward to Sicily

⁵² “[E]ra cominciato a impazzire quando non aveva ancora compiuto quattro anni [...]”

⁵³ “Ci furono dei sopravvissuti ma i soccorsi non li trovarono. Rimasero bloccati per settimane [...]. Riuscirono a salvarsi perché mangiarono i corpi di quelli che erano morti nell’impatto.”

⁵⁴ “Le cupole a volta delle chiese rinascimentali erano intatte. I palazzi dell’Ottocento, freddi ma integri. Antichi borghi medievali, indifferenti alla distruzione che li circondava. L’uomo notò che a venire giù erano soprattutto gli edifici moderni. Il passato resisteva.” It is worth noting that this is the only passage in the entire novel where readers can briefly encounter enduring historic buildings from the past.

through the regions of Puglia and Basilicata. Often they walk along the Mediterranean shores or in the middle of deserted roads. Occasionally, on the remaining street signs we can read the name of a town, the name of a tunnel or of a mountain. By now, these names are empty as they lack a referent; indeed, none of these places were able to preserve their distinctive features. In fact, the cities have turned into abandoned ghost towns suspended in time and serve to symbolize the failure of Western civilization. The family crosses various territories throughout Italy, all of which exhibit the same traits: cold and bare lands, desolate vineyards and olive tree groves, fires, a dull grey and oppressive sky, a landscape with no color, never-ending and unchangeable devastation. Only in the proximity of the Aspromonte, we read that “[t]he landscape was changing” (99);⁵⁵ here there are hollies, butcher’s brooms, eucalyptus, and agave. Despite the different flora, everything is dead or rotten, just like anywhere else. This barren scenario is indeed invariable. That is why the family appears to be going nowhere despite treading mile after many mile. Italy, a country well known for overflowing with ancient history, has lost its roots, turning itself into a “non-place” with no distinctive peculiarities. Not surprisingly, this family often stops and rests at sites that Marc Augé would label as “non-places”, i.e. places that “cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity [...]” (78-79). These are mainly the transit areas of our postmodernity and petromodernity, such as highways, hotels and gas stations. There, in fact, we often see the protagonists of the novel. According to Inger-Anne Sjøfting, in post-apocalyptic cli-fi:

place is no longer a vehicle of cultural specificity; there is no diversity, neither in terms of culture nor in terms of natural variation, to stamp its identity on the landscape; everywhere is the same. North and south, east and west, once ideologically laden concepts and important cardinal points, have ceased to matter. (706)

Wherever this family travels, it is more or less the same: a place of no escape or relief. As already noted, Sofia and her parents often walk along devastated roads filled with debris, remains of cars and corpses. Far from the ideals of freedom, roads become perilous sites of exposure; here, these three pilgrims can encounter zombie-like human beings that are striving to stay alive, one step after the other. Rapes, executions and cannibalism become ordinary acts in this post-catastrophe scenario. All this prompts persistent ontological questions about what it means to be human and what constitutes humanness.

This minimal temporal and spatial specificity, along with a cyclical repetition of almost identical events and places, conveys a universal and epic tone to the narration. The vicissitudes faced by this young Italian family become those experienced anywhere in Europe or across the globe where a widespread socio-economic and ecological collapse has occurred. At the same time, they can also compare to the distressing wanderings of entire populations throughout the centuries. In sum, this unspecified bare future may also resemble our deep past, when millions of people were forced out of their homes due to wars, droughts and starvation; likewise, it mirrors our present with thousands of eco-refugees pressing on the policed borders of the Western world. By the middle of the twenty-first century, the number of displaced people due to the dire effects of global

⁵⁵ “Il paesaggio stava cambiando.”

warming could reach two hundred million (Bell 136) and this prospect must promote transnational discussions about the duties of industrialized countries toward eco-refugees. The reversal of the more classic migration path from South to North is successfully employed by Francesco Aloe in order to encourage readers to cope vicariously with the plights and threats faced by eco-migrants. It is finally noteworthy to underscore the author's ironic and witty choice to have his two characters find a welcoming and rescue place in Libya. In fact, Amnesty International has repeatedly denounced that in Libya environmental migrants are trapped in "a litany of abuses", such as ill-treatment, killings, and enforced disappearances.⁵⁶

In the last pages of the book, the father and his daughter Sofia arrive in Tunisia. While traversing onto the African continent, the man is delirious due to a very high fever. Just before losing consciousness, he manages to recognize in the sky the constellation of the Big Dipper and to see "[c]olors and shades whose existence he had forgotten" (171).⁵⁷ Immediately transferred to Libya, the father rests unconscious for five days in a hospital bed. As soon as he wakes up and opens his eyes again, he scans his surroundings; he is attached to a heart-monitor. With a remote controller, a polite nurse changes the incline of his bed. Here, in Libya, his young daughter Sofia encounters, for the first time ever, a prosperous society that appears to be promising a better future for them both. Barefoot and clean, with a green dress and a necklace of pearls (172), Sofia takes her father outside to the hospital courtyard, and shows him a better and wealthier country toward which they have been traveling for months without ever losing hope. In this sought-after country, the sun is emanating a strong but pleasant light. Outside it is sunny and there are green healthy trees. Sofia is extremely happy and wants her father to see a flock of birds. At this point, we stop and perceive what is concealed beneath this reassuring scenario. In the hospital courtyard, in fact, Sofia's father recognizes grass and its green color; unlike Sofia, however, he also detects the traffic on the street (173). The cars on the street remind us of our rampant petrochemical culture and urge us to ponder whether it is indeed possible to find an uncontaminated safe place in the Anthropocene. In Africa, where Sofia is actually rejoicing, we can identify the tentacles of petroculture.

Conclusion

According to Scranton, in order to survive, humanity needs "to learn to live with and through the end of our current civilization" (22). Skillfully, Francesco Aloe prompts his readers to ponder what it means to dwell in the Anthrop-o(b)scene and, consequently, to die as individuals and, above all, as a civilization. *L'ultima bambina d'Europa* is a compelling novel that carefully discloses the shortcomings of Western culture and its own contradictions. It questions the deceptive notion of linear progress that, like a shot arrow, moves forward *ad infinitum* toward an imagined cornucopian abundance; instead, the

⁵⁶ *L'ultima bambina d'Europa* could also spur an interesting analysis about the persistent pathologization of human mobility within the Anthropocene. Although this is beyond the scope of the present article, I would like to acknowledge such an engaging possibility.

⁵⁷ "Colori e sfumature di cui aveva dimenticato l'esistenza."

prosperity of a few post-industrial countries is achieved through the exploitation of the poorest ones. This novel skillfully underscores the massive scale of global warming, which extends through time and space. Moreover, it brings to the foreground its deeply intertwined cultural and material origins; in fact, a culture with its dominant lifestyle affects the environment in which it flourishes. In global modernity, a culture can expand beyond its national borders and have an impact elsewhere. Above all, this engrossing cli-fi novel dismantles obsolete dichotomies on which Western thought is strongly based, such as human/nature, human/inhuman and even here/there. Finally, it challenges national borders and the concept of nation-state; in fact, despite militarized borders, European countries have not been able to protect themselves and to prevent this collapse. Consequently, this novel reiterates that global warming demands solutions addressing local, national and transnational agencies. *L'ultima bambina d'Europa* fits nicely into the current vigorous debate around climate change that has been unfolding in Italy; for example, recently, scientists have addressed a petition to Italian politicians to create a political agenda that incites ecological conscience, protects future generations, and aims at implementing equal and sustainable developments for all (Nadotti). Among the many signees, there are also artists and writers. Upon signing, the actor Stefano Accorsi stated that he wants to bring together global warming and scientists on a theatre stage (Cupellaro). This fermenting *milieu* proves not only the urge to address such global issues, but also, above all, the pressing need to include the humanities in such a debate, bringing down the sharp divide among disciplines, in order to foster well-informed and widely-spread resistance within the Anthropocene. Therefore, Francesco Aloe's *L'ultima bambina d'Europa* is a novel that must be read, taught and discussed to bring on such change.⁵⁸

Submission received 16 February 2022 Revised version accepted 6 September 2022

Works Cited

- Alive*. Directed by Frank Marshall. Performed by Ethan Hawke, Vincent Spano and Josh Hamilton. Paramount Pictures, 1993.
- Aloe, Francesco. *L'ultima bambina d'Europa*. Alter Ego, 2017.
- Amnesty International. "Libya: New Evidence Shows Refugees and Migrants Trapped in Horrific Cycles of Abuses." September 24, 2020. www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2020/09/libya-new-evidence-shows-refugees-and-migrants-trapped-in-horrific-cycle-of-abuses/. Accessed 12 Aug. 2022.
- Armiero, Marco. "Of the Titanic, the Bounty, and Other Shipwrecks." *Intervalla*, vol. 3, 2015, pp. 50-54.
- Arpaia, Bruno. *Qualcosa, là fuori*. Guanda Editore, 2016.
- Augé, Marc. *Non-Places. Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. Verso, 2005.

⁵⁸ In fact, the publisher of *L'ultima bambina d'Europa* would like to expand the readership of this novel; that is why Alter Ego Edizioni has been planning a potential graphic novel inspired by it (Bultrini).

- Bell, Derek R. "Environmental Refugees: What Rights? Which Duties?" *Res Publica*, vol. 10, 2004, pp. 135-152.
- Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter. A Political Ecology of Things*. Duke University Press, 2010.
- Buell, Frederick. "A Short History of Oil Cultures: Or, the Marriage of Catastrophe and Exuberance." *Journal of American Studies*, vol. 46, no. 2, 2012, pp. 273-293.
- . *From Apocalypse to Way of Life. Environmental Crisis in the American Century*. Routledge, 2003.
- Bultrini, Danilo. "Re: Alter Ego – Diritti in lingua inglese per *L'ultima bambina d'Europa*." Received by Anna Chiafele, 16 Nov. 2021. Email Interview.
- "Caldo, ministero della Salute: +21% di mortalità nella prima metà di luglio." *La Repubblica*, 9 agosto 2022, www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2022/08/09/news/caldo-ministero-salute-21-mortalita-dall-1-al-15-luglio-360982251/. Accessed 9 Aug. 2022.
- Craps, Stef. "Climate Change and the Art of Anticipatory Memory." *Parallax*, vol. 23, no. 4, 2017, pp. 479-492.
- Craps, Stef and Rick Crownshaw. "Introduction: The Rising Tide of Climate Change Fiction." *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 50, no. 1, 2018, pp. 1-8.
- Crownshaw, Richard. "Speculative Memory, the Planetary and Genre Fiction." *Textual Practice*, vol. 31, no. 5, 2017, pp. 887-910.
- Cupellaro, Fiammetta. "Stefano Accorsi: 'Porterò la battaglia in teatro, voglio anche gli scienziati sul palcoscenico'." *La Repubblica*, 9 Aug. 2022. www.repubblica.it/green-and-blue/2022/08/09/news/stefano-accorsi-appello-scientiati-clima-politica-360907. Accessed 10 Aug. 2022.
- Dal Sito, Moira. *Quando qui sarà tornato il mare. Storie dal clima che ci attende*. Edited by Wu Ming 1. Edizioni Alegre, 2020.
- De Bruyn, Ben. "Borrowed Time, Borrowed World and Borrowed Eyes: Care, Ruin and Vision in McCarthy's *The Road* and Harrison's Ecocriticism." *English Studies*, vol. 91, no. 7, 2010, pp. 776-789.
- Di Virgilio, Jolanda. "Climate Fiction: genere letterario a metà tra distopia, fantascienza e realismo." *Il Libraio*, 14 Dec. 2018, www.illibraio.it/climate-fiction-924253/. Accessed 6 August 2019.
- Dotti, Marco. "Cli-fi. Riscrivere il futuro del mondo con l'ecocritica." *Vita*, 16 Jan. 2017, www.vita.it/it/article/2017/01/16/cli-fi-riscrivere-il-futuro-del-mondo-con-leconarrativa/142126/. Accessed 30 November 2019.
- Douglas, Mary. *Purity and Danger. An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. 1966. Routledge, 2002.
- Ghosh, Amitav. *The Great Derangement. Climate Change and the Unthinkable*. The University of Chicago Press, 2016.
- Ginzburg, Carlo. "Straniamento. Preistoria di un procedimento letterario." *Occhiacci di legno. Nove riflessioni sulla distanza*. Feltrinelli, 1998, pp. 15-39.
- Heise, Ursula K. *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet. The Environmental Imagination of the Global*. Oxford University Press, 2008.

- Iovino, Serenella. "Il chewing gum di Primo Levi. Piccola semantica della resistenza al tempo dell'Antropocene." *MLN*, vol. 135, no. 1, pp. 231-254.
- Kennedy, Greg. *An Ontology of Trash. The Disposable and its Problematic Nature*. State University of New York, 2007.
- Lakoff, George and Mark Johnson. *Metaphors We Live By*. 1980. The University of Chicago Press, 2003.
- LeMenager, Stephanie. "Climate Change and the Struggle for Genre." *Anthropocene Reading. Literary History in Geologic Times*, edited by Tobias Menely and Jesse Oak Taylor, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017, pp. 220-238.
- . *Living Oil. Petroleum Culture in the American Century*. Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Maggi, Alberto. *L'ultima beatitudine. La morte come pienezza di vita*. Garzanti, 2017.
- McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. Picador, 2006.
- Mehnert, Antonia. "Climate Change Futures and the Imagination of the Global in *Maeva!* by Dirk C. Fleck." *Ecozon@*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2012, pp. 27-41.
- Mezzalama, Chiara. *Dopo la pioggia*. Edizioni E/O, 2021.
- Minardi, Sabina. "Climate fiction, gli scrittori raccontano la Terra malata." *L'Espresso*, 26 Apr. 2016, <http://espresso.repubblica.it/visioni/cultura/2016/04/14/news/climate-fiction-gli-scrittori-raccontano-la-terra-malata-1.260092>. Accessed 2 December 2019.
- Montrucchio, Alessandra. *E poi la sete*. Marsilio, 2010.
- Morton, Timothy. *Hyperobjects. Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*. University of Minnesota Press, 2013.
- Nadotti, Cristina. "Gli scienziati vogliono che la politica affronti la crisi climatica: firma la petizione." *Green&Blue*, 3 Aug. 2022. www.greenandblue.it/2022/08/03/news/appello-scientiati-clima-politica-360186726/. Accessed 8 August 2022.
- Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard University Press, 2011.
- Pievani Telmo and Mauro Varotto. *Viaggio nell'Italia dell'Antropocene. La geografia visionaria del nostro futuro*. Aboca, 2021.
- Pincio, Tommaso. *Cinacittà. Memorie del mio delitto efferato*. Einaudi, 2008.
- Redazione. "L'umanità sopravviverà ai cambiamenti climatici? Arriva in Italia la "climate fiction"." *Il Libraio.it*, 8 May 2016. www.illibraio.it/arpaia-fantaecologia-cambiamenti-climatici-338424/.
- Rovelli, Carlo. "Europa, il futuro che ci chiude fuori." *Il Corriere della Sera*, 28 Apr. 2016, www.corriere.it/cultura/16-aprile-28/libro-guanda-bruno-arpaia-qualcosa-la-fuori-rovelli-001062d6-0d58-11e6-9053-86a90bf524d0.shtml.
- Rubenstein, Michael, Bruce Robbins and Sophia Beal. "Infrastructuralism: an Introduction." *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 61, no. 4, 2015, pp. 575-586.
- Scranton, Roy. *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene. Reflections on the End of a Civilization*. City Lights, 2015.
- Scurati, Antonio. *La seconda mezzanotte*. Bompiani, 2011.
- Segantin, Sara. *Non siamo eroi*. Fabbri Editori, 2021.

- Sheller, Mimi. "Automotive Emotions. Feeling the Car." *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 21, no. 4/5, 2004, pp. 221-242.
- Søfting, Inger-Anne. "Between Dystopia and Utopia: The Post-Apocalyptic Discourse of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*." *English Studies*, vol. 94, no. 6, 2013, pp. 704-713.
- Trexler, Adam. *Anthropocene Fictions. The Novel in a Time of Climate Change*. University of Virginia Press, 2015.
- Valentini, Emanuela. "Climate fiction, come il global warming ha modificato la fantascienza." *Wired.it*, 15 Mar, www.wired.it/play/libri/2018/03/15/climate-fiction-global-warming-fantascienza/. Accessed 6 January 2020.
- Velotti, Stefano. "Straniamento." *Dizionario di estetica*, edited by Gianni Carchia and Paolo D'Angelo, Laterza, 1999, 285-286.
- Wu Ming. *New Italian Epic. Letteratura, sguardo obliquo, ritorno al futuro*. Einaudi, 2009.

San, le primere princese más que humane¹

Nerea González Calvo
Universidad Politécnica de Madrid, España
nerea.gonzalezc@alumnos.upm.es

Atxu Amann Alcocer
Universidad Politécnica de Madrid, España
atxu.amann@upm.es

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ecozone.2022.13.2.4412>



Resumen

San es le protagoniste de la película de animación *La princesa Mononoke* (1997) de Hayao Miyazaki (Studio Ghibli). La interpretación intelectualizada de un personaje de ficción paradigmático y poliédrico como San, y su calificación como poshumaniste, permite introducir una serie de términos—activismo, ecología, performatividad y red—que son el resultado de situaciones del film traducidas en clave de género. San es de este modo entendide como una realidad encarnada; es una *figuración* poshumanista de un ensamblaje teórico ambicioso que incorpora los enfoques y las prácticas de un buen número de autoras que alimentan cada uno de los aspectos que definen a le princese activiste, ecofeministe y más que humane, en una narración alejada definitivamente de los cánones del humanismo y su imaginario dual. Desde este enfoque, este artículo hace uso de la práctica de contar historias como estrategia para compartir un conocimiento situado de la realidad. Plantea la necesidad de crear relatos de ficción que se alimenten de un pensamiento cuidado para dar acceso a la ciencia a una comunidad importante de receptores. Asumiendo que la supresión de lo habitual puede ser una poderosa forma de conocimiento, presenta como caso de estudio una pieza del cine de animación, donde el discurso gráfico animado dota de agencia a todo tipo de elementos que habitan territorios conflictivos como ámbito arquitectónico de experiencias humanas y no humanas. Mediante una lectura de *La princesa Mononoke* desde discursos poshumanistas que perciben la vida dentro de redes de cuidados y fuera de los límites de la otredad humana, este artículo muestra cómo desde esta práctica narrativa se consigue hablar contra el capitalismo, el extractivismo, el colonialismo y las necropolíticas a través de un cuerpo en medio de un proceso de industrialización, de generalización del trabajo asalariado y de expansión de las violencias heteropatriarcales.

Palabras clave: Narrativa especulativa, agencialidad más-que-humana, colonialismo, feminismo poshumano, ecoanimación

Abstract

San is the main character of the 1997 epic fantasy film *Princess Mononoke* written and directed by Hayao Miyazaki and animated by Studio Ghibli. The intellectualized interpretation of a paradigmatic and polyhedral fictional character like San, and their qualification as post-humanist, allows us to introduce a series of tropes (activism, ecology, performativity and network) that are the result of situations translated into a gender sense. San is in this way understood as an embodied reality: they are a post-humanist *figuration* of an ambitious theoretical assemblage that incorporates the approaches and practices of many authors who feed each of the aspects that define this activist, ecofeminist and more than human princess, in a narrative that is definitely far from the canons of humanism and its dual imaginary. From a gender

¹ Como práctica situada, el estudio emplea el género no binario en referencia a San, a les animales y a la idea del “nosotres”, abordando con ello la cuestión poshumana.

perspective, this article uses the practice of storytelling as a strategy to share situated knowledge of reality. It raises the need to create fictional stories that feed on careful thinking to give access to science to an important community of receivers. Assuming that the suppression of what is habitual can be a powerful way to knowledge, it shows a piece of animation as a study case, where the animated graphic development gives agency to all kinds of elements that inhabit conflictive territories as an architectural field of human and non-human experiences. By means of a reading of *Princess Mononoke* from post-humanist discourses that perceive life within care networks and outside the limits of human otherness, this article shows how from narrative practices it is possible to talk about activism against capitalism, extractivism, colonialism and necropolitics through a body in the midst of a process of industrialization, in the generalization of wage labor and in the expansion of hetero-patriarchal violence.

Keywords: Speculative narrative, more-than-human agency, colonialism, posthuman feminism, ecoanimation

El rol constructivo de la narrativa especulativa a la hora de promover cambios de pensamiento político

La cotidianidad está llena de enredos que nos afectan y que incluyen nudos que mutan y fluyen desde y con corporalidades diversas. En particular, las marañas feministas, parciales y situadas que existen a través de redes, hacen ostensibles las íntimas conexiones de las ecologías ensambladas; las relaciones que tejen, se producen entre entidades que son múltiples y progresivamente se alejan de lo humano, aunque en realidad nunca fueron sólo humanas.

En la contemporaneidad, el esencialismo de lo humano va desapareciendo a la vez que el *Hombre de Vitruvio* de Da Vinci se difumina en las narrativas. Hasta ahora, como apunta Manuela Rossini, las interpretaciones y los juicios de distintas obras canónicas por parte de los académicos humanistas han mostrado complicidad en las definiciones discriminatorias sobre la condición humana, reproduciendo codificaciones opresivas de períodos anteriores (27). Es entonces cuando la recodificación se hace necesaria, bajando a los infiernos como decía Foucault, para decir lo que nunca ha sido dicho. Así, el “story telling”, este contar otras historias es, según Haraway, una práctica compleja para narrar esos nudos y entrar en los agujeros negros; no es en sí misma una *art practice* (“A Game of Cat's Cradle” 63), sino un modo de verbalizar, de liberar vivencias densas y violentas, adentrándose en territorios turbulentos y apenas trazados, que atienden tanto a humanos como a no humanos en sus experiencias de vida y en sus interacciones.

María Puig de la Bellacasa añade que estos relatos se alimentan de pensamiento-con cuidado en mundos más-que-humanos y devuelven al destino común a todas las formas de vida con devenires sociotecnológicos. La autora pone de ejemplo la práctica de Haraway y su compromiso al contar historias para resaltar las relaciones no inocentes, que apoyan la regeneración continuada de una política del cuidado como un modo ordinario, que rechaza los preceptos morales que la limitan al amor inocente o a dar seguridad a quienes se encuentran en situación de necesidad (párr. 4). El pensamiento aliado del cuidado, en términos no antropomórficos, es aquel que hace públicas las redes manifiestas, o entredichas, u ocultas, y las conexiones posibles entre los distintos agentes

implicados, que no son solo humanos. Es un pensamiento que invita a una reflexión afectuosa, y acompaña hacia las zonas de “fricción”, de las que habla la antropóloga Anna Tsing al narrar su periplo por los bosques guiada por la supervivencia en la maleza a través del hongo matsutake: un conocimiento ensamblado de prácticas desde/con las cuáles *enchuclarnos*.² Esta política del cuidado hace que nos replanteemos, desde un enfoque ético, crítico y más que humano: ¿qué clase de afectos y qué mundos hacen que las vidas multiespecies sean vivibles?

Obviando a las narradoras y a los mensajes, desde el punto de vista de quien recibe la narración, la estrategia de la narrativización puede ser puesta en práctica para hacer la ciencia potencialmente accesible a un público mayor; según Rossini, el contenido tecnocientífico puede y debe integrarse en las narrativas para volverse más transparente y llegar a una audiencia más amplia. Es entonces cuando aparece la relación entre la tecnociencia y la ficción, no como ámbitos separados sino como un espacio intermedio en el que las narrativas se sitúan; la distinción entre la visión científica y la del mundo de la imaginación es—como Haraway dice respecto a la ciencia ficción y la realidad social—una *ilusión óptica* (Rossini 24–25). Precisamente sobre la relevancia de la ficción, añade Carmen Flys Junquera, que es “su verdad imaginativa” la que puede disolver el dualismo humano/naturaleza, permitiéndonos ver el potencial comunicativo y la capacidad de acción de lo no humano, y por tanto replanteando las relaciones con el mundo (27–28).

Sin embargo, contar historias no puede entenderse como una práctica para aleccionar, sino como una práctica que permite generar vínculos: contar es compartir historias y, para ello se requiere, como apunta entre otras autoras Le Guin, de una escucha-con cuidado. En este sentido, pensar-con cuidado puede significar acercarse tanto hacia el género biográfico y autobiográfico como a ciencias como la Geología, que cuentan una historia a través de la Historia y también la Historia en sí misma: “No me acaban mucho los libros muy abstractos o teóricos. (...) Se me olvida todo. Yo necesito que sea como una historia, si es una parábola sí que me acuerdo” (Le Guin y Naimon 74).

Es en esta aproximación hacia ciencias “pensando-con-cuidado” donde Karen Barad introduce la noción de “intra-acción” (intra-action) tratando de hacer un ejercicio de extrañamiento de lo familiar, de la interpretación de causalidad como creencia metafísica, donde uno o más agentes preceden y producen un efecto. Mediante la intra-acción, que nos lleva a cuestionar, qué importa y qué se excluye de la materia, se activa una perturbación de la semiótica que pone en evidencia la existencia de determinados agentes, entidades, tiempos y lugares constituidos previamente.³ No es que se trate de distribuir la agencia entre las formas no humanas y humana, lo que está en juego es una nueva reconfiguración de la materialidad, abandonando la categoría *humano* como referencia para incluir una gama completa de posibilidades y dimensiones del

² Enchuclarnos, de “enchuclaje, enchuclarse”, define a un término que en el habla de la Ribera de Navarra se emplea popularmente para nombrar la acción de pringarse, por ejemplo, con barro, o bien, ensuciarse al comer. Palabras asociadas a hacer algo e implicarse, con ahínco, y a consecuencia de ello mancharse.

³ La semiótica se encarga de analizar la producción de signos y las relaciones que constituyen sus significados en los diversos procesos de representación y comunicación. Entendemos la semiótica ensamblada a lo material, por lo que sería preciso apuntar a una semiótica material, de la que, de una forma u otra, están hablando extensamente estas autoras.

funcionamiento de la agencia. De este modo, la agencia que no puede ser designada como atributo de objetos o sujetos, se produce *haciendo* o *siendo*, (Barad 178) como le ocurre a San, le protagonista de *La princesa Mononoke* (1997), cuando niega insistentemente su naturaleza humana y actúa en función de ello.

Es cierto que es más complicado pensarnos en términos de agencias e interacciones de múltiples especies que imaginar esos relatos caricaturescos del Antropoceno basados en el “Hombre” transhistórico a los que estamos acostumbrados (Kuznetski y Alaimo 139).

Cohabitar la complejidad, y es desde ahí donde comienza la tarea esperanzada de plantear conjuntamente, de un modo radical, herramientas necesarias para sobrevivir dignamente junto-con los agentes multiespecies. En efecto, hablamos de elaborar propuestas desde los enfoques especulativo-afectivos situados en alternativas feministas más que humanas. En el acto y el arte de narrar historias por parte de autoras, como Braidotti, Haraway, Zylynska o Colebrook está siempre presente el repensar el Antropoceno (Ferberda 21). Se trata de visiones de Antropocenos más complejas que se completan al conectarse con cómo las escritoras feministas de ficción especulativa, como el caso de Atwood o Winterson, emplean sus narrativas para abordar los espectros del Antropoceno (Ferberda 102).

Conviene señalar que llevar a cabo una visualización del futuro, es decir, imaginarlo, no lo crea per se; su importancia radica en el poder generativo de aquel para promover proyectos de cambio sobre la constitución presente de la realidad (Ferrando 269). En este sentido, nos hayamos inmersas en procesos intermedios, transescalares, entre la distopía y la utopía; algo que Margaret Atwood resuelve a través de la idea de “ustopía” (párr. 10–11).⁴

Estas prácticas no son nuevas y en ellas llevan décadas, entre otras, ciertas producciones enlazadas a los campos de la ecología y el género, de la ciencia ficción feminista, y a diversos estudios literarios de ecocrítica y de lo queer, a quienes podríamos pensar que Haraway dedica su última obra recordando que la fermentación de estos compostajes de supervivencia más allá de lo humano, requieren de la práctica cotidiana de “seguir con el problema” y de no abandonarse a la figura del héroe humano salvador (20).

La (eco)animación como herramienta para superar los dualismos

Ciertamente, se puede llegar al conocimiento desde la ciencia ficción, llevando a cabo procesos creativos que dinamicen otras formas de imaginación más que humana, y que tienen la diversidad como una de sus principales señas, donde la imagen de género lo más amplia posible e inclusiva, sintoniza con ese potencial ilimitado del escenario poshumano natural-cultural (Ferrando 269).

⁴ “Ustopía” un mundo inventado por Atwood que combina utopía y distopía, la sociedad imaginada perfecta y su opuesta. Un lugar cartografiado que es también un estado de ánimo.

Así ocurre en el ensayo de Ursula K. Heise *Plasmatic Nature: Environmentalism and Animated Film* (2014); la autora reflexiona sobre la relevancia del cine de animación como género en movimiento, cuyas estrategias estéticas dotan de agencia y de vitalidad a entornos naturales o artificiales, traspasando la idea de los objetos como materiales inertes, y situando este escenario como una posible alternativa a la estética moderna donde proliferan ecosistemas vivos y poblados por todo tipo de agentes no humanos (303).



(Figura 1. Varios kodamas, espíritus de los árboles y de los bosques. *La princesa Mononoke*)

La animación dice Heise, “puede entenderse como un marco de trabajo estético, en el que jugando se han explorado estas visiones de la agencia no humana, desde antes de que surgieran las nuevas teorías materialistas” (308). La autora, atribuye a esta práctica lúdica de lo animado, la experimentación creativa de lo material, gracias a la elaboración arquitectónica de mundos gráficos, sonoros y virtuales. A este respecto, como apunta Braidotti, los estudios sociales de la ciencia no son ni los únicos, ni los instrumentos más útiles de análisis de los fenómenos complejos que rodean los tecnocuerpos posantropocéntricos del capitalismo avanzado (123).

Además la animación impulsa una plataforma especulativa práctica desde donde experimentar con los legados animistas de distintas voces, como concretamente a través de las prácticas sobre la configuración de mundos de las comunidades indígenas, del encuentro de la filosofía animista de Val Plumwood, de la que da cuenta Deborah Bird Rose en *Val Plumwood's Philosophical Animism: Attentive Interactions in the Sentient World* (2013), o como refiere Shoko Yoneyama, gracias al “animismo crítico” del propio Miyazaki. El director de *La princesa Mononoke* abre una nueva perspectiva de respuesta a las crisis climáticas del Antropoceno, a juicio de Yoneyama, esta propuesta llena el vacío dejado por el “nuevo animismo” ya que se forma, dentro de la Modernidad como una crítica a ésta y desde aquellos que observan realmente, la epistemología, la ontología y las prácticas animistas (257).

En ese sentido, el enfoque crítico animista como principio de las películas de Miyazaki, es una cuestión reconocida ampliamente por distintos investigadores (e.g. Ogiwara-Schuck; Jensen and Blok; Harvey; Mumcu and Yilmaz; Yoneyama ctd. en Yoneyama 253), por los seguidores de sus films y por el propio Miyazaki. Su posición animista reside en una percepción de la naturaleza a través de lo espiritual y la vida invisible, y a juicio de Yoneyama, se da gracias a tres claves: la extensa y brillante representación de la naturaleza dotada de agencia (Miyazaki ctd. en Yoneyama 253), cuya ilustración característica serían los *kodama*, seres con espíritu que aparecen en *La princesa Mononoke*, quiénes en ese algo invisible que hay en el bosque, simbolizan el mundo espiritual de ésta. La segunda clave es la derivada de la posición de Miyazaki respecto al sintoísmo, como un ejemplo sofisticado de animismo, para Clammer, reflejando lo que la Unesco define como patrimonio cultural inmaterial; es decir, las diversas formas de creencias populares, que tienen lugar en lo “intensamente local” (Clammer ctd. en Yoneyama 253-54). La tercera, la negación de los binarios, o la crítica de lo que Val Plumwood llama la “hiperseparación” de los binarios occidentales (Rose ctd. en Yoneyama 254).

De hecho, el interés por el cine de animación como objeto de investigación, desde los estudios históricos, estéticos y políticos, comenzó a finales de 1990 (Heise 301), casi simultáneamente a la eclosión de la figura del “ciborg”. Haraway llevaba nombrándonos el ciborg desde principios de los años ochenta, como ese artefacto irónico, un avatar feminista crítico en los mundos de la interfaz y la mediación con el que poder cuestionar la ontología y los valores occidentales del sujeto humano moderno.

Es por ello, que observamos cómo el *anime* activa un híbrido que lo acerca irremediabilmente al ciborg; quizá la figuración ciborgiana, bebe de esta práctica cinematográfica de principios del XX, que entrelaza asuntos urgentes, a juicio de Heise, con estilos visuales distintivos de la ficción animada: la alegría, el sentido del humor y el humor satírico en la relación cuerpo-máquina asociados a la raíz histórica del género (304).

No obstante, la ciencia ficción, el *anime* o el manga, pueden ofrecer ideas e inspiración, pero sus contribuciones están lejos de ser inocentes.⁵ Desde una perspectiva de género, no es sorprendente ver cómo estas producciones poshumanas, no solo mantienen intacto el paradigma hegemónico, sino que sirven activamente como medios culturales para perpetuar los estereotipos sociales (Ferrando 271). En ese sentido, la elección de *La princesa Mononoke* (1997), y su relectura a través de la figura de San, cuestiona esa narrativa hegemónica, tomando el enfoque de Flys Junquera, que recoge el testigo del llamamiento de Val Plumwood a la superación de la lógica de la “hiperseparación” de los dualismos occidentales, donde las estrategias contrahegemónicas nos ayudan a disolver nuestras falsas dicotomías y nos permiten recordar nuestro arraigo ecológico, “reubican al ser humano en la biosfera y reaniman la naturaleza” y aportan una respuesta ética al mundo no humano (36).

⁵ Manga: Historieta gráfica general, con estilo propio originario de Japón.

La representación de la agencia, la vida de los distintos cuerpos, se produce, según cuenta Heise, en las tres modalidades principales del cine animación—cel, *stop-motion* y animación digital—a través de dos estrategias sustanciales: los actores no humanos y los cuerpos sobrenaturalmente flexibles tienden a desempeñar un papel destacado, resonando así el pensamiento ambientalista.⁶ Además, los cuerpos animados, humanos y no humanos, son conocidos por su habilidad aparentemente infinita para expandirse, contraerse, estirarse, abultarse, aplanarse, implosionar, explotar, fragmentarse y poder volver a sus formas originales, mostrando lo que el cineasta ruso Sergei Eisenstein llamó la cualidad *plasmaticness* de las figuras animadas (Eisenstein ctd. en Heise 303–304).

La princesa Mononoke

La histórica película animada *La princesa Mononoke* (1997), creada por Hayao Miyazaki del Studio Ghibli, presenta una ficción fantástica inspirada en la era Muromachi, un periodo Medieval del Japón en su etapa de colapso. Toma para la creación de la historia, entre otras formas, la isla de *Yakushima* (Kamiyaku-cho y Yaku-cho, Prefectura de Kagoshima Kumage-gun, Japón) que fue declarada Patrimonio de la Humanidad por la Unesco en 1993, el primero que obtuvo Japón.

La sinopsis ampliamente difundida de la película centra su argumento en el Japón del medievo, siglos XIV-XV, donde el joven Ashitaka, futuro jefe del clan Emishi, tras ser atacado por un jabalí convertido en demonio, que asalta a su pueblo, parte en busca del dios ciervo, El Espíritu del Bosque, ya que solo le ciervo puede liberarle de la maldición causada por el jabalí. Recordemos que los bosques están protegidos por dioses animales. En su periplo el joven es acogido por los Tatara, un clan de herreros que habitan en una fortaleza, Ciudad del Hierro, dirigida por Lady Eboshi, una mujer que usa armas de fuego contra los samuráis y contra la princesa Mononoke. Ashitaka descubre cómo los animales del bosque luchan contra los humanos que están dispuestos a destruir la naturaleza para extraer recursos. Los dioses son dirigidos por San, un joven humano criado por lobos, su madre es el dios lobo Moro, que comienza una amistad con Ashitaka, quien intentará no posicionarse a favor de ningún bando, algo sumamente complejo.

Parafraseando a Heise, *La princesa Mononoke* se materializaría como un *blockbuster* de Miyazaki que aborda de un modo explícito las crisis ambientales contemporáneas (302) en una trama fabulada propia de la ciencia ficción. Y aborda un tema que sigue siendo presente: cómo bajo la premisa humanista de progreso moderno, se produce una expansión antropocéntrica, colonialista, extractivista, heteronormativa, capitalista y violenta que no comprende al resto de entidades del ecosistema; es decir, la expansión de una semiótica que no atiende a las *interdependencias ecosistémicas*.

Una de las características que define el cine de Miyazaki en los casos de *La princesa Mononoke* (1997) y *El viaje de Chihiro* (2001) es la capacidad de aglutinar y transformar multitud de referencias que se cruzan, se retroalimentan y mutan para convertirse en una

⁶ Cel: animación de dibujos realizados a mano sobre lámina. Stop-motion: animación de figuras u objetos. Digital: animación realizada a través de *softwares* específicos.

narración única con múltiples niveles de lectura (Montero 55). Este carácter entretejido, fluido y vitalista, permite comprender aquellas contradicciones del sujeto *zoe-centrado* (Braidotti 169), abre una formidable gama de oportunidades, y sitúa a esta animación en el flujo creativo de relaciones con múltiples otros.

San, le feministe poshumane que habita un mundo animado más allá del Antropoceno

Una relectura de *La princesa Mononoke*, desde un enfoque de lo poshumano, o más que humano, adentrándonos en el mundo virtual del film en un viaje de inmersión desde/con la figura ciberfeminista de San, nos permite plantear las siguientes reflexiones: ¿en qué se está convirtiendo San? ¿en qué nos estamos convirtiendo “nosotres”?

Retomamos la propuesta de Karijn Van der Berg, cuando en su ensayo reúne a Latour, Haraway y Colebrook para reflexionar desde la conversación sobre la idea de un “nosotres” (we) ensamblado a trío, donde los textos significan en tanto en cuanto se establecen relaciones entre ellos. A su juicio, una lectura diferente de lo pos-, permite no solo pensar la Modernidad, lo humano o el Antropoceno, sino proponer una lectura diferente del “nosotres”, abriendo esa posibilidad de pensar más allá de lo humano. Este “nosotres” que no es fijo, ni se da por sentado, no supone una especie unificada moderna y humana contrapuesta a los demás modos de existencia (11–12).

En efecto, podemos comprender a San como un personaje, que entra en diálogo con nosotres mismas, y que habita una complejidad más que humana. Tomando a Haraway, a nuestro protagonista le crecen tentáculos con los que situarse y relacionarse junto a los otros seres, y esto se produce gracias a las conexiones con las que de un modo divergente, San evoluciona, desarrollando tres alianzas clave: el activismo por la justicia ambiental, los cuidados y su ontología poshumana, que nos ayudan en la tarea de imaginar y construir mundos desde el encuentro, como un entendimiento abierto y plural, en términos más que humanos.

San, activiste por la justicia ambiental

San percibe la vida en términos de redes de afinidad: vive-con y piensa-con los demás, interrelacionándose de un modo constante con fuerzas situadas fuera de los límites de la otredad humana, cohabitando con su familia de lobes, y abriendo de este modo las fronteras a otras relaciones. San es una joven que se resiste a ser absorbida por el sistema de producción capitalista. El bosque es un compañero más; no es un terreno que posee como humano dispuesto a ser exterminado. Elle nos muestra que es posible evitar sobrevivir en términos de posesión, separación y clasificación, y lo hace gracias a un amplio despliegue del vivir como ese proceso complejo de prácticas situadas e interdependientes.

San se detiene a pensar en aquellas dos insoslayables dependencias que según Yayo Herrero sostienen materialmente la vida: la *ecodependencia*, que supone la obtención de lo necesario para la vida de la naturaleza de la que somos parte “¿por qué

cortan los árboles?” le pregunta San a Moro (1:26:04) y la *interdependencia* que se ve encarnada en la vulnerabilidad de los diversos cuerpos (281). Después de que su madre, el lobo Moro, ha quedado malherido, tras la lucha con los vecinos de Ciudad del Hierro, San intenta curarle la herida junto al humedal, succionando y escupiendo su sangre; a su vez, se siente observada.



(Figura 2. San curándole la herida a su madre, Moro. *La princesa Mononoke*)

Marisol de la Cadena habla de los *bienes comunes* (*commons*) como posibilidad de alianza compartida; estos comunes son la expresión y la representación de un mundo en muchos mundos ecológicamente relacionados por su divergencia constitutiva, que constantemente emergen de los bienes no comunes como fundamento de la negociación política de lo que sería el interés común. Se perturba así el acuerdo que constituyó el “anthropo-not-seen”, el invisible antropológico y la dinámica invisible destructiva basada en una fuerza moral humana que decía sostenerse en una fuerza constructiva; se plantea la legitimidad de su guerra contra los que cuestionan tal reparto; se cuestiona la mismidad, “inaugurando una práctica totalmente distinta de la política: una que medie la divergencia” (De la Cadena 262).

Ese *commons* recuerda, de alguna manera, al de los *bienes comunales*, desarrollado por Federici en su obra *Calibán y la Bruja* (2004); para ella, en la Europa precapitalista, la subordinación de las mujeres a los hombres había estado atenuada por el hecho de que tenían acceso a las tierras comunes y a otros bienes comunales, mientras que en el nuevo régimen capitalista, las mujeres mismas se convirtieron en bienes comunes, pues su trabajo fue definido como un recurso natural, que quedaba fuera de la esfera de las relaciones de mercado (148).

San afronta ese cisma, *anthropo-not-seen*, la destrucción de los mundos y su resistencia a ello y evidencia ese *commons*, en el conflicto que se genera entre su práctica ontológica relacional y el desarrollo de las acciones capitalistas.

En tiempos de *urgencias*, siguiendo la terminología de Haraway, San participa situándose desde el activismo y la heroicidad compartida que en buena medida desarrolla guerreando-junto a le diose lobe Moro. Éste es un activismo que podría entenderse en términos de autodefensa; las acciones de le joven representan *líneas de fuga*, una salida hacia otros posibles (ver Deleuze y Guattari y Guattari) no sólo dentro de la maquinaria del capitalismo, sino también en un conflicto que se evidencia en la primera aparición de San en escena cuando elle y les lobes irrumpen, descendiendo colina abajo en una noche lluviosa, provocando la caída de la comitiva, que dirigida por Lady Eboshi, transporta enseres y comida hacia la Ciudad del Hierro, ciudad fortaleza donde los trabajadores se dedican a la fundición de hierro para construir armas; arrasan el bosque talando árboles que usan como combustible y extrayendo el mineral. San y les lobes rompen así con el imaginario occidental que tiene al lobo con un animal solitario y a la mujer como un ser destinado a emparejarse.



(Figura 3. ¡Ahí vienen, les lobes! *La princesa Mononoke*)

Le joven San en muchas escenas nos muestra que lo que está en riesgo es el hecho de vivir. En el mismo sentido que en Latinoamérica numerosas mujeres luchan en defensa de unas condiciones dignas de trabajo en un medio ambiente no tóxico, destacan en el movimiento de Soberanía Alimentaria y participan de los nuevos movimientos indígenas que buscan preservar sus tierras ancestrales escandalosamente destruidas por la minería, la deforestación masiva, la contaminación con agrotóxicos y los megaproyectos comerciales. Actúan en un espacio en el que disentir exige mucha valentía y puede llevar a la muerte (Puleo 19–20).



(Figura 4. San a punto de morir. *La princesa Mononoke*)

Al igual que ellas, San habita en medio de un proceso de industrialización, de generalización del trabajo asalariado y de expansión de las violencias heteropatriarcales. Paradójicamente, en una inmersión de los roles de género, pero reproduciendo las mismas diferencias: recordemos que Lady Eboshi, la patrona de Ciudad del Hierro aspira a colonizar y explotar las tierras del bosque, mientras San piensa en la continuidad del mundo natural y en la cercanía de los otros seres, vivos o no, en el parentesco y en la similitud. San favorece el desarrollo conjunto de la razón y la emoción y abandona lo que el ecofeminismo ha llamado *lógica del dominio* (Puleo 17).

San, cuidadore

Le princese poshumaniste no desempeña un trabajo asalariado dentro del modelo económico capitalista, pero sí realiza una actividad económica de cuidados y bienestar, esa gran riqueza invisible de las economías modernas, según cuentan María Mies y Vandana Shiva es una actividad llevada a cabo por muchas mujeres que trabajan invisiblemente para mantener a sus familias y comunidades, en su mayor parte sin contrapartida salarial (16). San parece formar parte de esa nueva clase social emergente que Durán denomina “cuidotoriado”. En este sentido, para Silvia Federici, resulta de suma importancia traer a escena la ingente precariedad a la que determinados cuerpos están sometidos en el sistema capitalista, fenómeno conocido como “feminización de la pobreza” (*Revolución en punto cero* 108).

San trabaja por salvaguardar la vida compartida, y lucha porque acaben las intrusiones capitalistas, extractivistas, colonialistas y necropolíticas que en el film se materializan en forma de tala de árboles, quema, extracción de minerales, fabricación de armas y construcción de muros.⁷ Elle defiende a su vecindad: el bosque y aquellas fuerzas agenciales fuera de la otredad humana con quienes cotidianamente convive. Y es que en palabras de Amaia Pérez Orozco la ganancia capitalista siempre se ha hecho en base a la depredación ecosistémica y, ahora más que nunca, cuando el (neo)extractivismo es una clara materialización de este conflicto capital-vida (55–56).

La presencia de San, le princese más que humane, es sumamente política al materializar una figura que implosiona y fagocita al mítico *Robinson Crusoe* (Daniel Defoe,

⁷ Ver Mbembe para más detalles sobre “necropolítica”.

1719) de una ficción humanista, protagonizada por un personaje hegemónico de sobra conocido en los entornos de estudio de la economía. Para Pérez Orozco, desde su perspectiva crítica decolonial, Crusoe no muestra una figura inocente, sino el cuerpo oculto del sujeto heroico del desarrollo, que descubre que tiene una tierra desconocida a explorar, a conquistar y a dominar, donde poder generar, él solo, civilización, crecimiento y progreso (58). Frente a él, San no coloniza, ni se apropia, ni domestica, ni domina. Es parte del bosque, se sincroniza y camufla con el entorno en una relación de interdependencia y de cuidados compartidos y recíprocos.



(Figura 5. San, les lobes, las rocas, las estrellas y los árboles. *La princesa Mononoke*)

El movimiento de San y su manada es continuo y se da a lo largo de todo el *anime*; está íntimamente vinculado a la idea de desplazamiento forzado como expulsión e infinita búsqueda de refugio. Aunque la manada de San es reducida se puede entender que son los supervivientes de una comunidad previa existente de lobes, normalmente de entre 5 y 10 individuos; es importante su carácter nómada, no mostrando nunca ningún tipo de hábitat estable que se pueda relacionar con el término humano del “hogar” sino con el entendimiento del bosque completo como su “guarida”, durmiendo al aire libre bajo el cielo raso y evitando la asociación de la mujer a la casa.

Saskia Sassen aborda esta cuestión de las expulsiones que no son espontáneas sino hechas, producidas a través de una serie de instrumentos que van desde políticas elementales hasta instituciones, técnicas y sistemas complejos que requieren conocimiento especializado y formatos institucionales intrincados. Uno de los casos que ella desarrolla es el de los contratos que permiten a un gobierno soberano adquirir vastas extensiones de tierra en otro Estado nacional soberano como una especie de extensión de su propio territorio—por ejemplo, para producir alimentos para sus clases medias—expulsando a la vez de esas tierras a pueblos y economías rurales locales. Otro caso es el de aquella brillante ingeniería que permite extraer de forma segura lo que se quiera de

las profundidades del planeta, desfigurando de paso la superficie (11–12). Para Sassen, en conjunto, las dinámicas globales de pobreza extrema, desplazamientos masivos, desastres ambientales y conflictos armados han creado niveles nunca antes vistos de expulsión social, especialmente en el Sur global, que ahora han comenzado en el Norte global, aunque a través de acontecimientos diferentes (77). Parece esta última situación la que se relaciona con la actividad de la Ciudad del Hierro; de hecho, San fue criada por lobes, debido a la aniquilación de su padre y de su madre, quiénes en su huida la dejaron en el bosque.

San, poshumane

San es le princese Mononoke. San permite ser leíde como un ser poshumanista, que engloba unas características específicas como un cuerpo más que humano. San habita sole pero vive conectade a una comunidad de seres diversos humanos y no humanos, entroncándose explícitamente en esa subjetividad poshumana situada, que emerge de pertenencias múltiples, de tener constancia de las interconexiones entre las diversas corporalidades. La pluralidad del devenir como un proceso en el que le individue aprecia la experiencia de ser autónome ser junto con el otre y ser híbride en conjunto (Deleuze y Parnet 10, 84 ctd. en Oktan y Çon 796). La subjetividad de San, cargada de crítica, se reconoce conformada por una ética creativa de propuestas que articulan de forma transversal una relacionalidad más que humana.

Desde una “ética afirmativa” en términos de Braidotti, le princese muestra el enlace de tensiones y el ensamblaje de una comunidad discursiva. Como dice Katherine Hayles, este proceso corpóreo de inmersión, que se materializa, en este caso, en una suerte de *metamorfosis*, es un transcurso emocionante que admite salir de algunas de las viejas categorías y abrir nuevas formas (285): una propuesta artefactualista, crítica y difractiva que interpela; un viraje desde el mundo material físico, donde no hay una naturaleza externa sobre la que simplemente se actúa (Kuznetski y Alaimo 139). En efecto, esta ética ambiental poshumana niega el sentido de separación de las acciones interconectadas y mutuamente constitutivas de la realidad material y anima a narrativas evolutivas (Alaimo 157).

En el análisis sobre el desarrollo de la subjetividad poshumana en el cine de animación, llevado a cabo por Oktan y Çon, aluden que en el caso de *La princesa Mononoke* los personajes animales se sitúan entre diferentes formas de seres entre le animal, le diose, le demonie, etc. Estos investigadores consideran que todos esos devenires luchan de forma justa contra la dominación y la destrucción humana (800). Su argumento da cuenta de la capacidad del film para descentrar, no sólo lo humano, sino lo animal, y embarca a los distintos personajes en rutas de transformación, de conexión o de diálogo.

San impulsa redes de afecto más que humanas. Su comunidad afectiva es una manada de lobes, les animales, las deidades y el bosque, experimentando la subjetividad poshumana. Belén Martín Lucas analiza las comunidades afectivas poshumanas imaginadas por la escritora Nalo Hopkinson desde un enfoque interseccional, en la novela distópica *Midnight Robber* (2000). Según Martín Lucas, Tan-Tan, joven protagonista de la

novela, puede considerarse, en su estrecha afinidad con los *douens* y los *hintes* de su nueva familia, como otra figura que se convierte en animal, y que ahonda en la crítica de Hopkinson al humanismo eurocéntrico. Madhu Dubey al contextualizar las obras de Hopkinson junto a las de Octavia Butler expone que la ciencia ficción de mujeres afrodiáspóricas y euroamericanas explota el tropo de volverse animal, no solo para explorar las implicaciones de las personas negras y las mujeres, al ser identificadas con la naturaleza animal, sino para cuestionar las oposiciones dualistas entre la naturaleza y la cultura, la magia y la ciencia, el animal y el humano, el cuerpo y la mente, lo femenino y lo masculino, lo europeo y lo africano, etcétera. Del mismo modo que otras escritoras de ciencia ficción, Butler y Hopkinson emplean el tropo de la mujer convirtiéndose en animal para desfamiliarizar el discurso occidental moderno sobre lo humano (Dubey, ctd. en Martín Lucas 111–112).

Retornando hacia San y su comunidad afectiva de dioses animales: ¿quiénes son esos seres que no son ni animales ni humanos? Nuestro protagonista que corre junto con los lobes, se presenta como una figura, que no se siente humane, recordemos las icónicas escenas en la que dice por un lado a Moro, y por otro, a Ashitaka, “¡Odio a los humanos!” (1:26:11) y “¡soy un lobo, ¿me oyes?” (1:55:47), y hace públicos sus afectos más que humanos. Entre le joven y los lobes no existe jerarquía, reflejando una relación interespecies, en cambio, si la encontramos con la percepción que ciertos animales como los mones, agrupados en su propio clan, si tienen de San y los lobes, rechazan esas corporalidades intermedias, como redes de conexiones más que humanas. En la recta final de la película tiene lugar una escena en la que los mones le gritan a San, a uno de los lobes y Okkoto, le diose jabalí, “¡Vosotros traéis las desgracias, los seres que no sois ni animales ni humanos!” (1:40:08), ante la dificultad de comprender ese mundo más que humano no dual.

San activa los afectos y los lazos bajo la premisa de la amistad. La suya es una relacionalidad expandida que cuestiona el amor nuclear. Independientemente de sus sentimientos, que posiblemente ni sabe nombrar ni identificar como Ashitaka, elige proteger su maraña de parientes diversos, es decir, su comunidad, y despedirse de él. Y es esta afectación y visibilización de los procesos de *interdependencia ecosistémica* frente a la normalidad, la que sitúa a le joven como una incipiente figura poshumana crítica, posantropocéntrica y múltiple.

San implosiona los muros heteronormativos, en una decisión ampliamente disruptiva, pues no está subyugada y presenta una identidad compleja y poliédrica. Su performatividad nos permite repensar la domesticidad relacional que entendemos como ese espacio/cuerpo/tiempo desde/para el cual se producen las relaciones afectivas en términos de agencialidad e intra-acción. Elle cohabita en los espacios fronterizos, parafraseando a Donna Haraway, la red amistosa y familiar de San se compone del entrelazado de parentescos raros (*Seguir con el problema* 21). Admite ese amor que para bell hooks se construye sobre la gratitud, el cuidado, la responsabilidad, el compromiso y el conocimiento mutuo, entendiendo que no puede haber amor sin justicia. Siendo consciente de ello, comprende que el amor tiene el poder de transformar y dar la fuerza

para oponer resistencia a la dominación, en palabras de hooks que elegir la política feminista es elegir el amor (133).

Pese a que habitualmente los estudios del personaje la muestran como una chica, para esta propuesta San se despliega como una heroína cuir, ya que opera desde lo no binario poshumano. Como cuerpo fluido, recordando las palabras de Paul B. Preciado, podríamos considerar a San por lo argumentado a lo largo del artículo, como una disidente de los procesos de normalización y exclusión social encuadrados dentro del binarismo de género. San, cuyo significado es triple, toma su nombre de su adre le lobe Moro que siendo una niñe le acogió en su manada, San se convirtió en su tercer cachorro; comparte su vida con un corolario de tribus animales, seres vivos y deidades que transgreden el imaginario dualista humano. Le joven también es conocida como *Mononoke*, que en la mitología japonesa viene a ser el término empleado para denominar a las criaturas sobrenaturales o los espíritus vengativos que habitan las entidades, también lo extraño, lo enigmático y que en nuestro imaginario mediterráneo occidental representan esas formas fantasmales o monstruosas. San es entonces le princese de las criaturas más que humanas, de los monstruos, de las bestias y por ello requiere de un atuendo característico: un vestido, una capa con capucha, unas botas y numerosos accesorios tales como una lanza, un puñal, una máscara, pendientes, una diadema, un par de tiras en los brazos y tres marcas rojas pintadas en la cara.

San representa a un cuerpo encarnado, una figuración. Como reflexiona Remedios Zafra, las *figuraciones* que conforman nuevas “figuras de dicción” son una de las más potentes y productivas formas de hacer el arte feminista, susceptibles de ser apropiadas para la acción creativa y la intervención social en el ámbito de las tecnologías; conforman prácticas creativas inspiradas en la ciencia ficción, que en el contexto feminista tecnológico han tenido influencia en el ciberpunk y en la ideación de figuras nuevas de dicción político poéticas sobre la tecnología. Zafra nos recuerda que Haraway las llamó “figuraciones alternativas” (*Simians, cyborgs, and women*), caso del ciberno y Braidotti las nombró como “sujetos nómades” (102–103).

Conclusiones

Como hemos visto, las narrativas especulativas y feministas estimulan nuestra atención en las interacciones y las experiencias de vida más que humanas, ayudándonos a habitar la complejidad, y a “seguir con el problema”, a través de reflexiones afectuosas basadas en estrategias ético-creativas y críticas que logran descentrar la figura de lo humano. Estas artes de pensar con cuidado narran la diversidad y amplían las visiones sobre el Antropoceno, empleando la imaginación para disolver el binomio humano/naturaleza, así como visualizando un futuro próximo de transformación del presente narrativo de las historias y las entidades.

Reflexionando sobre la práctica de lo animado, una estrategia lúdico material que elabora arquitecturas gráficas, sonoras y virtuales que nos permiten repensar mundos desde una agencialidad más que humana, decidimos centrarnos en la ecoanimación, y específicamente en el caso de *La princesa Mononoke* (1997), porque afronta la

“hiperseparación” de los dualismos occidentales y reanima la naturaleza, abordando éticamente las relaciones entre entidades múltiples.

San, le protagoniste, problematiza una triada de sinergias, como son el activismo por la justicia ambiental, los cuidados y la subjetividad poshumana. San es la ficción encarnada de un ensamblaje teórico que incorpora los enfoques y las prácticas de autoras referentes fundamentales en el presente alimentando una narración alejada de los cánones del humanismo y de su imaginario.

Le protagoniste traspasa los límites antropocéntricos, tratade por ello como una enemigüe por los habitantes de la extractivista y colonialista Ciudad del Hierro y como una extraña para alguno de les animales. San como cuerpo queer y nómada, trae a escena tanto lo que estamos dejando de ser, como la semilla de lo que está en proceso de devenir. Se incita a leer inconscientemente a San como un mapa lleno de vida, conformado por capas de redes cuya potencia figurativa poshumana permite considerarle como una entidad compleja, entretejida, liminal, feminista situada, múltiple y relacional.

Este artículo también trata de recuperar, desde un enfoque de género, la práctica de contar historias como táctica para compartir un conocimiento situado de la realidad. Plantea la necesidad de crear relatos de ficción para dar acceso a la ciencia a una comunidad amplia e importante de receptores. Mediante el extrañamiento de lo cotidiano y la supresión de lo habitual como estrategia de conocimiento, presenta como caso de estudio una pieza del cine de animación, donde el discurso gráfico animado dota de agencia a todo tipo de elementos que habitan territorios conflictivos como ámbito arquitectónico de experiencias humanas y no humanas. Poniendo la atención en le princese Mononoke nos podemos ver envueltos en un entramado de discursos poshumanistas que perciben la vida dentro de redes de cuidados y fuera de los límites de la otredad humana, consiguiendo hablar del activismo contra el capitalismo, el extractivismo, el colonialismo y las necropolíticas a través del cuerpo de una princese en medio de un proceso de industrialización y destrucción de la naturaleza.

Artículo recibido 6 de julio de 2021

Versión final aceptada 7 de septiembre de 2022

Referencias citadas

- Alaimo, Stacy. *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*. Indiana University Press, 2010.
- Åsberg, Cecilia, Thiele, Kathrin y Van der Tuin Iris. “Speculative Before the Turn Reintroducing Feminist Materialist Performativity”. *Cultural Studies Review*, vol. 21, no. 2, 2015, pp. 145–172. DOI: doi.org/10.5130/csr.v21i2.4324
- Atwood, Margaret. “Margaret Atwood: the road to Ustopia”. *The Guardian*. Web. 14 oct. 2011. www.theguardian.com/books/2011/oct/14/margaret-atwood-road-to-ustopia. Acceso 20 de jul. de 2022.
- Barad, Karen M. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Duke University Press, 2007.
- Braidotti, Rosi. *Lo posthumano*. Traducido por J. C. Gentile Vitale, Gedisa, 2015.

- Butler, Judith. *El género en disputa: el feminismo y la subversión de la identidad*. Traducido por M. A. Muñoz García, Paidós, 2017.
- Butler, Octavia. E. *La parábola del sembrador*. Traducido por S. Moreno Parrado, Capitán Swing Libros, 2021.
- De la Cadena, Marisol. "Naturaleza disociadora". *Boletín de Antropología Universidad de Antioquia*, vol. 31, no. 52, 2016, pp. 253–263, doi: [10.17533/udea.boan.v31n52a16](https://doi.org/10.17533/udea.boan.v31n52a16).
- Deleuze, Gilles y Guattari, Félix. *Mil mesetas: capitalismo y esquizofrenia*. Traducido por J. Pérez Vázquez y U. Larraceta, Pre-Textos, 2015.
- Durán, María Ángeles. *La riqueza invisible del cuidado*. Universitat de València, 2018.
- Federici, Silvia. *Revolución en punto cero: trabajo doméstico, reproducción y luchas feministas*. Traducido por C. Fernández Guervós y P. Martínez Ponz, Traficantes de Sueños, 2013.
- . *Calibán y la bruja: mujeres, cuerpo y acumulación originaria*. Traducido por V. Hendel y L. S. Touza, Traficantes de Sueños, 2010.
- Ferrando, Francesca. "Of Posthuman Born: Gender, Utopia and the Posthuman". *Handbook on Posthumanism in Film and Television*, editado por C. Carbonell, M. Hauskeller y T. Philbeck, Palgrave MacMillan, 2015, pp. 269-278. DOI: doi.org/10.1057/9781137430328_27
- Ferwerda, Susanne M.A. *Narrating the Anthropocene. Threading Contemporary Feminist Theory and Fiction in a Human-Dominated World*. Master Thesis. Utrecht University, 2016. studenttheses.uu.nl/handle/20.500.12932/22207
- Flys Junquera, Carmen. "Dissolving the false divide: literary strategies for re-situating humans ecologically and non-humans ethically". *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses*, no. 63, 2011, pp. 21–38, riull.ull.es/xmlui/handle/915/12505
- Guattari, Félix. *Líneas de fuga: por otro mundo de posibles*. Traducido por P. Ires. Cactus, 2013.
- Haraway, Donna J. *Seguir con el problema: generar parentesco en el Chthuluceno*. Traducido por H. Torres, Consonni, 2019.
- . "A Game of Cat's Cradle: Science Studies, Feminist Theory", *Cultural Studies Configurations*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1994, pp. 59–71. DOI: [10.1353/con.1994.0009](https://doi.org/10.1353/con.1994.0009).
- . "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century". *Simians, cyborgs, and women: the reinvention of nature*. Routledge, 1991.
- . "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective". *Feminist Studies*, vol. 14, no. 3, 1988, pp. 575–599. DOI: [10.2307/3178066](https://doi.org/10.2307/3178066).
- Haraway, Donna J. y Segarra, Marta. *El mundo que necesitamos: Donna Haraway dialoga con Marta Segarra*. Icaria, 2020.
- Hayles, N. Katherine. *How we Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*. The University of Chicago Press, 1999.
- Heise, Ursula K. "Plasmatic Nature: Environmentalism and Animated Film", *Public Culture*, vol. 26, no. 2 (73), 2014, pp. 301–318. DOI: [10.1215/08992363-2392075](https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-2392075).

- Herrero, Yayo. "Miradas ecofeministas para transitar a un mundo justo y sostenible". *Revista De Economía Crítica*, vol. 2, no. 16, junio de 2021, pp. 278–307. revistaeconomiacritica.org/index.php/rec/article/view/334.
- hooks, bell. *El feminismo es para todo el mundo*. Traducido por B. Esteban Agustí, L. T. Lozano Ruiz, M. Sofía Moreno, M. Puertas Romo y S. Vega González, Traficantes de Sueños, 2017.
- Kuznetski, Julia y Stacy Alaimo. "Transcorporeality: An Interview with Stacy Alaimo". *Ecozon@: European Journal of Literature, Culture and Environment*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2020, pp. 137–146. DOI:[10.37536/ecoazona.2020.11.2.3478](https://doi.org/10.37536/ecoazona.2020.11.2.3478).
- Latour, Bruno. *Reensamblar lo social: una introducción a la teoría del actor red*. Traducido por G. Zadunaisky, Manantial, 2008.
- La princesa Mononoke*. Hayao Miyazaki, Studio Ghibli, 1997. Netflix. Web. <https://www.netflix.com/es/title/28630857>.
- Le Guin, Ursula K. y David Naimon. *Conversaciones sobre la escritura*. Traducido por N. Molines, Alpha Decay, 2020.
- Le Guin, Ursula K. *Contar es escuchar: sobre la escritura, la lectura y la imaginación*. Traducido por M. Schifino, Círculo de Tiza, 2020.
- Martín Lucas, Belén. "Posthumanist Feminism and Interspecies Affect in Nalo Hopkinson's *Midnight Robber*". *Atlantis: Critical Studies in Gender, Culture, and Social Justice*, vol. 38, no.2, 2017, pp. 105-115.
- Mbembe, Achille. *Necropolítica: seguido de "sobre el gobierno privado indirecto"*. Traducido por E. Falomir Archambault, Melusina, 2011.
- Mies, María y Shiva, Vandana. *La praxis del ecofeminismo: biotecnología, consumo y reproducción*. Traducido por M. Bofill y D. Aguilar, Icaria, 1998.
- Montero Plata, Laura. *Biblioteca Studio Ghibli: La princesa Mononoke*. Héroes de Papel, 2017.
- Oktan, Ahmet y Çon, Gülsüm Büşra. "Posthuman Subjectivity and Implied Dreams in Animation Cinema". *SineFilozofi*, vol. 6, no. 11, 2021, pp. 792–811, DOI: [10.31122/sinefilozofi.889283](https://doi.org/10.31122/sinefilozofi.889283).
- Pérez Orozco, Amaia. "El conflicto capital-vida: Aportes desde los feminismos". *Revista Trabalho Necessário*, vol. 19, no. 38, 2021, pp. 54–66. [doi.org:10.22409/tn.v19i38.45907](https://doi.org/10.22409/tn.v19i38.45907).
- Puig de la Bellacasa, María. "Pensar con cuidado", parte III, *Revista Concreta*, 09, 2017. editorialconcreta.org/Pensar-con-cuidado-Parte-III. Acceso 30 de mar. 2021.
- Puleo, Alicia H. *Ecofeminismo para otro mundo posible*. Cátedra, 2011.
- Rossini, Manuela. "Figurations of Posthumanity in Contemporary Science/Fiction: All Too Human(ist)?" *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses*, no. 50, 2005, pp. 21–35. riull.ull.es/xmlui/handle/915/18872. riull.ull.es/xmlui/handle/915/18872.
- Sassen, Saskia. *Expulsiones: brutalidad y complejidad en la economía global*. Traducido por S. Mastrangelo, Katz Editores, 2015.
- Van den Berg, Karijn. "Never modern, never human, always post-Anthropocene? Latour, Haraway and Colebrook: assembling conversations (as) becoming knowledge". *Pulse: A History, Sociology & Philosophy of Science Journal*, no. 4, 2016, pp. 44–56.

- Yakushima. *Unesco. World Heritage Convention*. Web. whc.unesco.org/en/list/662/. Acceso 30 de mar. 2021.
- Yoneyama, Shoko. "Miyazaki Hayao's Animism and the Anthropocene". *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 38, no. 7-8, Dec. 2021, pp. 251-266. DOI:[10.1177/02632764211030550](https://doi.org/10.1177/02632764211030550).
- Zafra, Remedios. "Arte, Feminismo y Tecnología. Reflexiones sobre formas creativas y formas de domesticación". *Quaderns De Psicologia*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2014, pp. 97-109, DOI: [10.5565/rev/qpsicologia.1212](https://doi.org/10.5565/rev/qpsicologia.1212).

Editorial Creative Writing and Arts

The Postcolonial Nonhuman

Elizabeth Tavella
University of Chicago
ecozona.arts@gmail.com

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ecozona.2022.13.2.4908>



Mni Wiconi. This is the chant that echoed in 2016 on the land of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe in opposition to the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline and as a reminder to the world that *Water Is Life*. As oil began making its way through the pipeline, the so-called United States agreed to remaining locked into a fossil fuel-based economy exacerbating climate change and causing health hazards with consequences for already vulnerable populations, both of and beyond the human. The DAPL is just one of the innumerable environmental injustices that Native peoples have faced, consisting of treaty rights abuses and military-style operations against nonviolent water protectors. Making sense of these events, entails coming to terms with a history of settler colonialism, “an ideology of white supremacy and a policy of genocide and land theft that has included massacres, military occupation, torture, removal from ancestral lands, and the removal of children from their families” (Wiltenburg Todrys 9). At the core of this issue of Ecozon@ devoted to “The Postcolonial Nonhuman” is the acknowledgment that the legacy of this ideology lives on, and that the physical and cultural resistance to its brutality needs to be embraced through a relational framework rooted in multispecies solidarity and mutual support, mindful of nonhuman agency and subjectivity.

It is no coincidence that I begin this editorial with water. Over the last few weeks, a series of water disasters took over the news: more than one third of Pakistan is underwater due to deadly floodwaters, leaving over thirty-three million people displaced; the entire island of Puerto Rico is devastated by a hurricane and left without power or potable water; south-western Japan was battered by Typhoon Nanmadol, one of the worst storms the country has ever seen; in Jackson, Mississippi, a historic flooding damaged a major pump, leaving over one hundred thousand of the city’s mostly Black residents without access to clean water; just to name a few. Within this context, turbulent waters become the manifestation of a language of resistance that refuses to submit to extractive and exploitative forces fueled by capitalist culture and to what Farhana Sultana calls “the unbearable heaviness of climate coloniality.” However, we must not make the mistake of interpreting the unruliness of water as just a metaphor. In fact, water is in our bodies, water connects us, and water keeps us alive. Water is alive. And just as bodies carry vestiges of trauma, so do bodies of water. From this perspective, water must thus be understood as a bearer of stories, that is, as a collaborator helping to bring afloat the

(hi)stories of multispecies erasure and silencing initiated by colonial violence. The six artists, whose work is included in the Creative Writing and Arts section of this issue, all collaborate with water in various ways to tell stories of ecological destruction and renewal, of intergenerational pain and healing. By “tak[ing] seriously the vitality of nonhuman bodies” (Bennett viii), space is thus created for a radical reimagining of human-nonhuman relationality within the context of a postcolonial world.

The *Serpent River Book* by Carolina Caycedo, which opens the section, represents the perfect realization of this potential. In fact, with this artwork, Caycedo aims to expose the slow violence of extractivism, particularly within the context of the industrialization and privatization of river systems in Colombia, Brazil, and Mexico (Caycedo). As illustrated by the installation view of the book at the 2021 exhibition, *El momento del yagrumo*, in Puerto Rico, the assemblage into an accordion fold artist-book of archival images, maps, lyrics, satellite photos and the artist’s own images and texts, is meant to visually simulate the ever-changing shape of a river. By rejecting the static nature of the physical book, and instead creating opportunities for multimodal configurations – either partially or fully unfolded or bringing closer the pleats on the pages to visualize parallel ongoing narratives – the artist animates the unpredictable and nonlinear ways in which rivers flow on the material page. As Cleo Wölfle Hazard keenly reminds us, “rivers inscribe the land with evidence of alternative (hi)stories and hint at latencies that their flows might awaken” (8). By inviting an interactive engagement with the book, viewers are thus offered the ideal conditions to participate in the dynamic unfolding of the temporalities and histories lying in the underflows of the river.

This type of interaction is also encouraged through the cover image, which, thanks to its horizontal orientation intended to disrupt the expected order of fruition, forces us to move, to adapt the direction of our gaze, and to question normative ways of looking, in order to fully grasp its meaning. While the imagery of the Black Snake has notoriously been associated to the pipeline at Standing Rock by the Indigenous peoples in the area, Caycedo is relying on ancestral Amazonian mythology and cosmological iconography that alludes to “the Amazon River as the terrestrial Anaconda and the Milky Way, the supernatural and creative Anaconda” (Navarro 150). The visually inseparable essence of snake and river highlights the overlapping destinies and symbiotic relations that connect all living things: the book becomes the snake that becomes a river that becomes the snake. Just like a living archive, then, the book itself becomes a vessel of knowledge with the power to decolonize imaginaries that destructively frame not only rivers as commodifiable resources but also all those communities across species affected most severely by the ripple effects of colonial violence.

In continuity with the thematic thread of water and, more specifically, of alternative visualizations of postcolonial histories connected to rivers, the second contribution is an excerpt from the volume of poetry *Teardrops on the Weser* by Amatoritsero Ede, an international award-winning Canadian poet born in Nigeria. This book is structured into a series of twenty-six poems whose titles follow the order of the alphabet and that trace, with an epic tone, the poet’s stream of consciousness, in addition to memories evoked by his view from an apartment window of the Weser River of Lower

Saxony, Germany. In the selected extract, from *t* to *w*, the “sluggish” German river recalls “the nightmares of the brackish tides” of the Niger River Delta, thus evoking past memories of the poet’s native home. Through vivid imagery, he then denounces the pollution brought by the oil company Shell in Nigeria as well as its complicity in the 1995 execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa, leader of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People. Finally, Ede ties the slave trade into the narrative, “that trafficking of black souls / in rotten ship holds / across the cursed atlantic.”

As the letters on the page sinuously take the shape of a flowing river, water in this context becomes the vessel of racial and colonial history bursting from the rumbling tides of rivers located in geographically distant—yet deeply linked—places. The lack of punctuation and the consistent use of lowercase letters contribute on a graphic level to enhancing the overall sense of fluidity and continuity meant to resemble not only a body of water but also the entanglement of histories and memories. The “teardrops” in the title, then, composed of salt water and thus reminiscent of the “cursed” sea, represent a bodily trace of the intergenerational trauma caused by colonial violence. Yet, through this powerful poetic act they may become a sign of healing for both the writer and the readers.

While the third contribution continues to navigate the realm of rivers, the poem *Questions* by R. Sreejith Varma takes advantage of the synesthetic qualities of language to enter into dialogue with the nonhuman. This bilingual poet, who writes in English and Malayalam, is also a renowned translator, particularly of *Mayilamma: The Life of a Tribal Eco-Warrior* (translated in collaboration with Swarnalatha Rangarajan in 2018), which chronicles the life of the Adivasi woman who led the Plachimada anti-Coca-Cola campaign in Kerala, India. In the guise then of nonhuman translator, the poet “tr[ies] to translate / the riverspeak / in silence.” In this poem, dreamscapes blend with reality and all elements are embedded with personhood, which is invigorated by embracing personal pronouns and personifications: “the earth changes her scent,” “the river crawls / on all fours.” Consequently, the poet manages to capture the sensory vibrancy that stems from reciprocal conversations with nature. As colors spill into rivers and unanswered questions enliven the ecological dialogue, Varma gets to the core of the question that continues to be at the heart of academic debates concerning nonhuman agency, that is, can the postcolonial subject speak? Yes, it can, and it does.

Within the fourth contribution, the voice of the nonhuman majestically emerges in all its strength. The extraordinary poem *The Raven* is written by Uchechukwu Peter Umezurike, who has a poetry collection forthcoming in 2023 and whose research interests span from African and African Diaspora literatures and creative writing to gender and sexuality. As he writes in the abstract, “this poem presents the raven as a seer who instigates a dialogue with the speaker to contemplate the confluence of human-engineered problems, ranging from ecological plunder, global warming, species die-off, and migrant deaths, amid the enduring legacy of colonial violence.” Within the sequence of stanzas characterized by a fluctuating number of lines, a multispecies conversation is enacted, during which the raven takes on multiple roles: that of storyteller, of kin offering premonitory advice, of keeper not only of intergenerational knowledge, but also of the human interlocutor’s childhood memories: “the raven cuts me short with a song my

mother used to sing.” The poet manages to effectively transcend the humanism that still populates postcolonial discourse (Fayaz Chagani) as well as the institution of speciesism by engaging with the subjectivity of the raven beyond the metaphorical history that has been conferred to them as a species.

As the exchange unfolds, the personal flows into the coral, with images of blackened rivers and bones dispersed in the Atlantic carrying painful traces of “the power of dreams that care nothing of earth.” The peculiar merging of temporalities in the poem mirrors the blurring of the individual/collective dichotomy as well as of the human-nonhuman artificial barrier, thus troubling both linear logic and hierarchical structures glorified in western culture. Once again, water tells a story, a submerged History that, as the poet reminds the raven, “shall rise again.”

With a similar purpose of exposing alternative histories, the three poems by Manuela Palacios take us on a journey across time of human-whale relationships, offering a poetic historical account of whales and whaling from the perspective of the oppressed: the *Eubalaena*, considered “the right” whales to capture due to their being slow swimmers and more likely to float once killed. The first poem retraces four main stages in Galician whaling activities, serving as a testament of a violent past deeply tied to colonial domination: from “the first Galician / written record of whale / hunting” and Sven Foyn’s introduction of the modern harpoon cannon, to the development of industrial capitalism with the launching of the Caneliñas factory and the sinking of two whalers in Vigo, Spain carried out by the militant direct-action organization Sea Shepherd. The second and third poems shift to individual stories of women and whales grounded in ecofeminist principles. In *Hospitable bellies*, the subjectivity of a stranded whale, whose “rotting” body is turned into a spectacle by curious onlookers attracted by her “mother cry,” is slowly reduced to “no more than stale film decor” as a result of the colonial gaze. In *Penelopes*, while uncovering whale fossils in Wadi-al Hitan, we encounter a girl who “inspects / the dissection / of her own body as / piece by piece / the whale is dismembered.” This visceral trans-species connection rooted in bodily affinity unearths not only stories of cruelty against our marine kin but also histories of enduring systemic injustices that cross the species barrier. While the three poems can stand alone, if read as a triptych, they invoke untamed futures with “no more sailors’ tales / of heroic adventure,” thus turning the reader into a witness with the ability to refuse to be a bystander and instead to actively contribute to building those desired futures.

With the last contribution, Rosanne van der Voet brings the dialogue full circle by making tangible the intimacy of human and nonhuman matter through the networks of relations that water sustains. In *Living as Water*, the writer adopts a unique multimodal approach that blends creative and academic writing styles and genres. As we follow the tide of the words moving through “watery worlds,” “watery thinking,” and “watery skin,” an exciting journey begins into a possible non-anthropocentric phenomenological experience. By forcing us to think beyond our limited comprehension of consciousness, van der Voet mimics the movements of jellyfishes on the page, thus bringing us closer to not only imagining, but actually sensing what it must feel like to “swim in a watery way,” or “to become liquid.” What does it mean, then, to live as water? According to the writer,

jellyfishes can teach us. In fact, the poetic re-creation of the flowing character of water embodied by the jellyfish initiates a process of remembrance in the readers who are reminded that they “have always been watery.” Relearning this visceral, ecological connection to water, inevitably leads to recognizing that the creatures inhabiting the seas are our relatives, our ancestors, a reality that positions the current degradation of ocean ecosystems into a whole different light.

As Jewett and Garavan point out, “stories are like rivers. They have many beginnings and multiple sources that come together and grow stronger in their telling and then flow outward into the sum of all stories” (43). In a similar spirit, the creative voices included in this issue come together to denounce the epistemic and corporeal violence against the nonhuman through an intersectional and decolonial framework, while also promoting collective healing through art, which includes dismantling entrenched and highly defended western cultural and economic practices. Echoing Juli Berwald’s concluding reflections in her book devoted to jellyfishes: “We can protect this stunning planet we all share if we grow a collective spine. And we can” (304).

Works cited

- Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Duke University Press, 2010.
- Berwald, Juli. *Spineless: The Science of Jellyfish and the Art of Growing a Backbone*. Riverhead Books, 2017.
- Caycedo, Carolina. “Serpent River Book.” <http://carolinacaycedo.com/serpent-river-book>. Accessed 24 September 2022.
- Chagani, Fayaz. “Can the Postcolonial Animal Speak?” *Society & Animals*, vol. 24, 2016, pp. 619-637. [10.1163/15685306-12341421](https://doi.org/10.1163/15685306-12341421).
- Jewett, Chas, and Mark Garavan. “Water is Life – an Indigenous Perspective from a Standing Rock Water Protector.” *Community Development Journal*, vol. 54, no. 1, 2019, pp. 42-58. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cdj/bsy062>.
- Navarro, Alexandre Guida. “Ecology as Cosmology: Animal Myths in Amazonia.” *Ecosystem and Biodiversity of Amazonia*, edited by Heimo Mikkola, IntechOpen, 2020, 147-158. [10.5772/intechopen.94177](https://doi.org/10.5772/intechopen.94177).
- Sultana, Farhana. “The Unbearable Heaviness of Climate Coloniality.” *Political Geography* (March 2022). In press, corrected proof. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2022.102638>.
- Wiltenburg Todrys, Katherine. *Black Snake: Standing Rock, the Dakota Access Pipeline, and Environmental Justice*. University of Nebraska Press: 2021.
- Wölfle Hazard, Cleo. *Underflows: Queer Trans Ecologies and River Justice*. University of Washington Press, 2022.

Serpent River Book (Excerpts)

Carolina Caycedo
Artist, Colombia/United Kingdom/United States
carocaycedo@gmail.com

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ecozone.2022.13.2.4898>

©All rights reserved



View of the exhibition, *El momento del yagrumo*. Museum of Contemporary Art of Puerto Rico, San Juan, 2021. Courtesy of the museum.



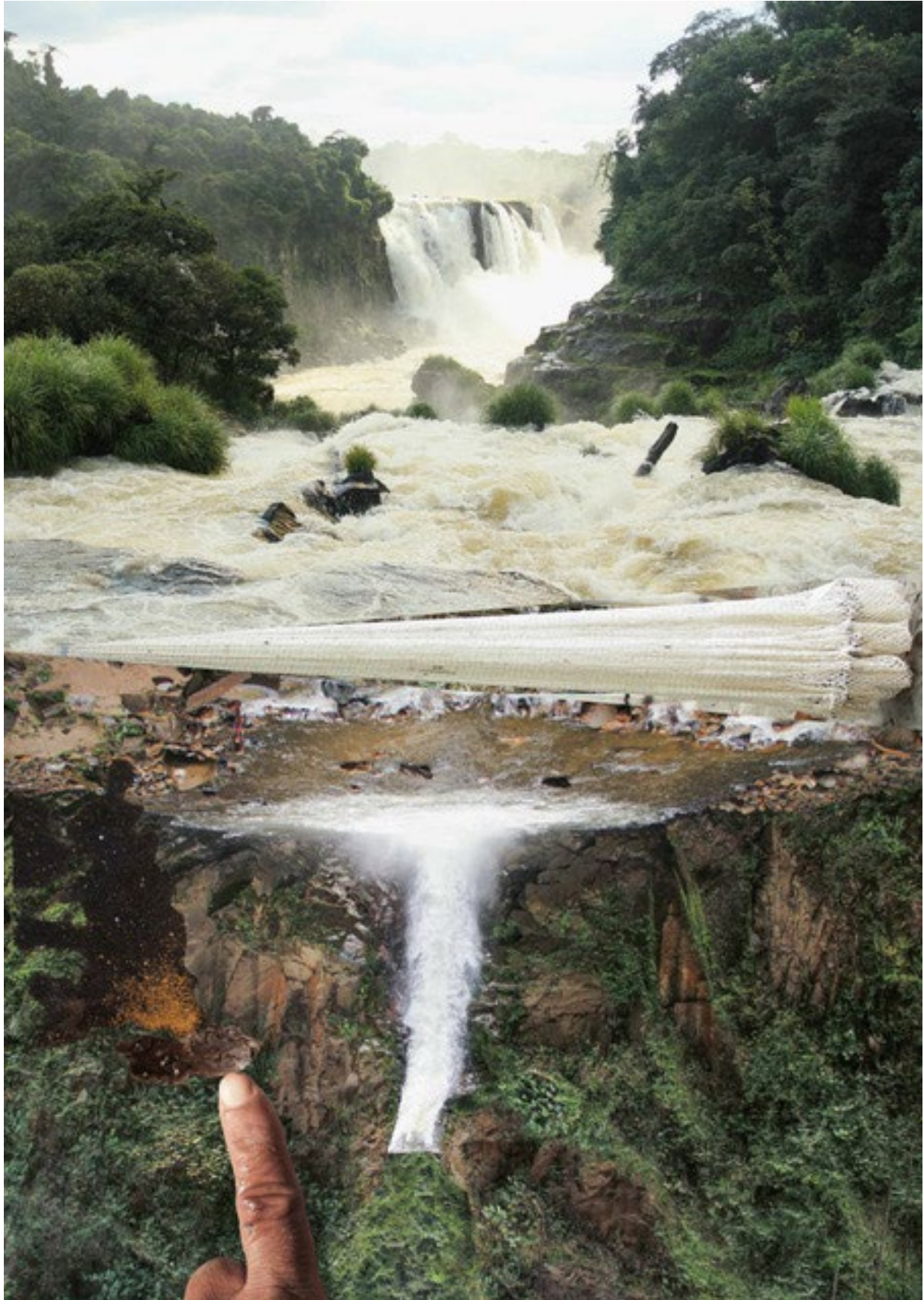
Soy el níquel, desde 1983 me llevan explotando en Cerro Matoso, Córdoba, Colombia, la cuarta mina de níquel a cielo abierto más grande del mundo. Y mientras Cerro Matoso, de propiedad de BHP Billiton, es una mina rica que produce 90.000 toneladas anuales de hierro-níquel, los pueblos que la rodean, Montalbano y La Unión Matoso, son pueblos pobres, en donde las volutas de la minera arrojan la escoria y el polvo sobrante de mi purificación.

JUSTICIA
pectoralis Jacquin
var. *streptophylla Leonard*

Extract 1



Extract 2



Extract 3



Extract 4

Credits for extracts 1, 2, 3 and 4: *Serpent River Book*, 2017. Artist Book. Courtesy of the artist.

Teardrops on the Weser (Excerpts)

Amatoritsero Ede
Artist, Canada
aede@mta.ca

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ecozone.2022.13.2.4893>

©All rights reserved

t
the morning after
the day is hungover
the river dull drunk

from so much liquid

languid
immobile and
dead of current

the weser's inner engine
broken
life sapped

from the water
maiden
soggy from much weeping

already a wretched sop
the night before
as the tired river floated

devoid of current

like a thing dead
belly up
in the dark

lit only by port
lights
from docked boats

the hanseat
das schiff
admiral nelson –

that river restaurant
rollicking and gay in daylight
this boat
decked out
by decked-up folks
and forks

but at night
when the sky shuts heavy brow
upon its lower earthly lid

it is a dark ghostly hulk
and wooden silhouette
made more hoary

by shadowy port lights
dancing
on the greasy oil-like flow

beautiful
nightmare
on brackish tides

u
the day is shrunken
to a squeezed rag
after yesterday's high

my window
now picture-dull
becomes sober lens

for refracting
and re-framing
the scene

to
minimalist fractions
of larger or smaller

human designs

behind this once postcard façade
of church architecture
opposite

at eye level

oblong frosty windows
ranged regularly
painted on the brown church walls

in a children's picture book

high above them
church tower and gothic spire
sharp triangular

and atop the dizzy zenith
a lone shiny brass weathercock
standing on one leg

etched
against the clouds
crowing in silence

into the four winds
in turn
as it turns eyes tinsel neck

and glossy head

north-west-north
east-south
west-south-west-east

v
this hung morning
the immobile
weser is

sluggish with memories
of dead water
on the niger river delta

in nigeria

after shell shat
shocked oil impurities
in it

till choked full
of poisoned fish
and algae

the creek reeks
of dead things
and people

like the ogoni
nine

a hung boat nation
unable to swim
pollution and politics

and thus was
strung short and
hung from killer nooses

the vertical nine

were long dead
long before the long drop

by the life-stained hands
of abacha's henchmen hangmen
hitlerites

nine necks cracked
life's spine popped, broken
nine lives shell-ed

the niger delta
shell-shocked
into haunted silence

stifled wailing
along waterways and
amongst mangrove swamp

and fauna

muffled wailing
unlike
the silence on the weser

a portentous silence
the quiet of still graves
sunk real deep

w
german waters
not unlike
the niger or benue

which slaked
saro-wiwa's
infant thirst ...

did maria rilke
that master poet
with the most girlish of names

ever from the weser drink?
like another capital poet
who pines for the ethiope

singing his thirst

“go water
go rivering
where the eyes that look

becomes a brook...”

the niger and the benue

both
troubled nigerian waters
flowing together

as one into the atlantic

like
the fulda and the wera
into the weser and the rhine

...the fulda and werra
both differently
plumbed
by time

not roughly charted
but deep in different degrees
and not discovered

from far away
by a stranger from england
called mungo park

not waterways
to ferry and ship black bodies
to a europe-poisoned new world

that trafficking of black souls
in rotten ship holds
across the cursed atlantic

Questions

R. Sreejith Varma
Vellore Institute of Technology, India
sreejithvarma@rocketmail.com

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ecozone.2022.13.2.4704>

©All rights reserved

I look at
the forest's indigo
fall into the river
& translate
the riverspeak
in silence.

She asks:
Why do you daydream so much?

Now, now,
don't you know
I never ask:
why the thunder cracks
like a rough joke
you climb up the steps
like a snake dance
a lone bird hatches
the stars in the night-sky;
the river crawls
on all fours
upon drinking
the first rain;
the earth changes her scent
in a moment
& how all questions
just cease to exist?!

(The
rain
drips
some
more.

My dreamscape swaddled in gauzy cloth.)

This scheming silence
strokes my hair
like the choppy breeze
in my dream the other day.

That I still remember
because
that's my favourite one –
we first met
in that dream!

The Raven

Uchechukwu Umezurike
University of Calgary, Canada
umezurik@ualberta.ca

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ecozone.2022.13.2.4895>



I stand alone in the field,
among the debris of a farmers' market,
disregarding the heat warning,
the faint wildfire smoke in the air,
watching the sun pale in the sky,

when a raven strides over to me and says:
 Draw white circles around your eyes,
 chew a pinch of *nzu*,¹
 smear your teeth with *ose oji*,¹
 and peer into the womb
 of dreams.

I snort at the raven:
 Some men engineer dreams that collapse bridges,
 disfigure homes and blacken rivers.
 Other dreams despoil communities as though
 besieged by explorers pursuing new frontiers of gold.
 Such is the power of dreams that care nothing of earth.

The raven nudges me with her left wing:
 Dip your left hand then your right
 in the womb and pry it open.
 The entrails of dreams bear glimpses
 of what is to come, what can be birthed anew.

I recall aloud the song my father liked singing:
 Ala yearns for new yams. *What becomes of the old?*
 River Urashi longs for new flesh. *What becomes of the old?*
 The crossroad craves new kola nuts. *What becomes of the old?*

¹ In Igbo culture, *nzu* and *ose oji* are used in ceremonies and rituals. *Nzu* is an edible clay or chalk that pregnant women sometimes chew and native doctors or *dibia* wear around either one or both eyes. *Ose oji* is also known as alligator pepper and is sometimes served with kola nuts to guests as a token of hospitality.

The delta murmurs about new bones. *What becomes of the old?*

The raven cuts me short with a song my mother used to sing:

That smoke far afield is not grass burning.
That red in the river is not the dye off clothes.
That flesh on the shore is not a body of fish.

Consider the crab. Consider its legs.
Consider the snail. Consider its tentacles.
Consider the chameleon. Consider its skin.

I pick up when the raven stops singing:

Mother Crow teaches her daughters to eat grass,
the better to beguile the world of flesh.
Father Rooster bears his weight on one leg,
the better to beguile the world of bones.
Elder Hare has learned to look both ways,
the better to beguile the world of blood.

The raven nods and says:

Tell your restless children,
Europe is the rainbow men chase across the dry.
Europe is the rainbow men chase across the wet.

There is no pot of gold in the rainbow
Because salvation is the Sahara of bones.

Salvation is the Atlantic of bones
Because Europe remains the vault of bones.

Smiling, I remind the raven:

Dead bones shall rise again. *Hallelujah!*
Dead bones shall rise again. *Hallelujah!*

But the raven sighs:

Dead bones shall rise again — but whose bones?

Three Poems about Whales and Whaling

Manuela Palacios
Universidade de Santiago de Compostela, Spain
manuela.palacios@usc.es

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ecoazona.2022.13.2.4291>

©All rights reserved

A Story of Whaling

The old stone age: the whale ensemble
at Tito Bustillo cave has since
conjured up
marine mammals haunting
the artists' imagination.

For the first Galician
written record of whale
 hunting
we'll wait
until the thirteenth century

–a nation of whalers
for seven hundred more years.

Eubalaena was their game
from Azores to Iceland,
from Galicia to Ireland.
Tithing for the Church,
baleen framing human bodies,
oil lighting up new
thriving ports...
 until extinction.

Sven Foyn, a philanthropist,
resurrected whale
 hunting
with his exploding harpoon
– nineteenth-century modernity.

1924: Caneliñas factory
and Galician shores dotted
with sundry factory

ships in a frenzy until
the impasse of the Civil
War.

The chase
resumed in the nineteen fifties, our trains
anointed,
Asian delicacies
–two hundred whales
per year in Caneliñas.

On an April morning
of 1980, Sea Shepherd
sank two whaling ships,
staging the advent
of the nineteen eighty-six
redemption.

Hospitable bellies

after Sinéad Morrissey, Doireann Ní Ghríofa, Victoria Kennefick and Caitríona O'Reilly

A rotting stranded whale makes mother cry
–her own body deteriorating after so many pregnancies.

A crowd of hushed onlookers surveys the shore in puzzlement
while the young woman dreams of whales' hospitable bellies

where women come together, unleashing suppressed desire.
Elsewhere, a pod of fifty pilot whales strays into a lough

a spectacle for the spontaneous multitude. A second coming
gone unheeded. The whale, soon, encoded as alien cipher, recorded song,

a display of skulls, jaws, backbones, rib cages, ambergris, baleen,
harpoons, blubber hooks, mincing knives, chains, try-pots, wooden toggles...

The whale now converted into a camouflaged barge
its world no more than stale film decor.

Penelopes

after Luisa Castro and Ana Román

Ana's visionary travels transport us
to Wadi-al Hitan
where whale fossils
tell of the passage
from land to ocean.
Wanderlust.

A whale's voyage through time and
oceans, which ends
on a Galician shore,
on the esplanade of a whaling
factory.
A girl inspects
the dissection
of her own body as
piece by piece
the whale is dismembered.

Ana dreams of ferocious sailings
propelled by untamed
cetaceans.

Luisa, on her part, exacts
retribution
no more plundering
no more sailors' tales
of heroic adventure.
Her wounded
cetacean body
will be expecting them
when they anchor to
the masked island.

Living as Water¹

Rosanne van der Voet
University of Sheffield, United Kingdom
rosannevdvoet@gmail.com

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ecozona.2022.13.2.4420>

©All rights reserved

I. Buoyancy

Watery worlds envelop continents, masses of blue and grey containing land, liquidising its edges. Creating a viscous in-between, liquid worlds permeate low-lying coastal areas inhabited by millions. At the tip of the European continent lies a flat land without horizon, coated in a perpetual fog, where cities are built on circling waterways, creeping alleyways, the smell of stagnant water constantly in the air. Concentric canals growing ever narrower, denser, a bottomless trough of slimy brown water at their centre. Air of fog, droplets descending on canal side railings, bicycles, on pavements and doorknobs. Cities such as Amsterdam float on watery worlds, its buildings infused with the watery presence. Buoyed by water, cities are held by the force they are trying to master, domesticating watery worlds, liquidising. Eternally slippery surface of cobblestone, liquid permeates thinking, informs cultures and decision-making processes. Fog floating into human heads, it is not just cities that are buoyed by water, so are governments. In fear of watery intrusion, water is given more space (Ministry of Public Works and Water Management 6). Planned retreat, managed flooding to prevent watery worlds from encroaching on solid worlds, from dragging them into viscosity. Conceding, so water may not take (Ministry of Public Works and Water Management 6). Planning, reports and assessments must prevent water from suddenly running over areas deemed dry land, ruining crops and livelihoods, necessitating widespread evacuations. This is living with water – watery thinking at governmental level, thoughts

The Netherlands is synonymous with water.

(Ministry of Public Works and Water Management 1; my translation).

The essence of the new water policy is easy to explain, but perhaps more difficult to understand. We are going to give water the space that it needs, before it takes it itself. This has positive consequences, such as more nature in our direct surroundings. But sometimes the effect will not be positive, because we will have to move or might not be able to live and work in places we would like to as easily as before.

(Ministry of Public Works and Water Management 6; my translation)

If I dive into the water, if I plunge into it, if I let myself sink in it, I experience no discomfort, for I do not have any fear whatsoever that I may dissolve in it; I remain a solid in its liquidity. If I sink in the slimy, I feel that I am going to be lost in it; that is, that I may dissolve in the slime precisely because the slimy is in process of solidification.

(Sartre 610)

Have you noticed that Amsterdam's concentric canals resemble the circles of hell? The middle-class hell of course, peopled with bad dreams. When one comes from the outside, as one gradually goes through those circles, life – and hence its crimes – becomes denser, darker.

(Camus 13)

¹ I would like to thank my funders, the White Rose College of the Arts and Humanities, Prins Bernhard Cultuurfonds and Hendrik Muller Vaderlandsch Fonds, for supporting my research.

Stacy Alaimo defines her concept of buoyancy as "a sense that the human is held, but not held up, by invisible genealogies and a maelstrom of often imperceptible substances that disclose connections between humans and the sea" ("States of Suspension" 478). She researches the potential of origin stories linking humans to oceanic ecosystems and the far-flung effects of human practices to create human awareness of marine ecological crises. According to Alaimo, humans are thus 'buoyed' by these connections, and an awareness of this can contribute to contemporary ocean conservation. More widely applied, her concept can be interpreted creatively, inviting experimental and symbolic explorations of buoyancy.

Nematocyst: specialised cell containing a venomous coiled thread that can be projected in self-defence or to capture prey.

Sessile polyp: larval jellyfish attached to a surface.

Ephyra: a free-swimming larval jellyfish post separation from the polyp.

Planula larva: free-swimming larval jellyfish, pre-polyp-stage, covered in minute hairs enabling swimming.

informed by fog encroaching on urban canals. Policies buoyed by watery worlds just beneath them, barely concealed. Politics held by streams of water running under coastal cities, skyscrapers and lopsided houses bobbing metres below sea level. Domesticated by water, cities and governments float collectively, toil in fear of the day buoyancy becomes drowning, living with water turns into becoming water, overflowing all carefully researched government planning.

Within watery worlds far removed from floating cities, fearful buoyancy is replaced by a deeper sense of buoyancy. Watery creatures buoyed by ocean currents, invertebrate bodies as liquid as saltwater, not held by water, but within it, bodies nearly absorbed in their surrounding element (Alaimo, "Jellyfish Science" 143). An abundant pelagic being drifts along, a scalloped bell, eight-lobed, lamented tentacles extending from under a hood of jelly (Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Lion's Mane"). The centre of the body sometimes orange, yellow, even deep crimson, yet somehow still transparent, coiling entrails exposed through layers of crystalline skin. The largest of such individuals are entwined with the Arctic Ocean, quietly swimming through ice-cold waters, humanless. Enormous bells several metres in diameter, seven metres of tentacles rippling out beneath them (Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Lion's Mane"). Predatory agent, tentacles enhanced with nematocysts, stinging cells immobilising zooplankton, small fish, ctenophores. Enormous cannibalistic gelatine-blob, small members of its own species are entangled in lethal tentacles, dying a slow, suspended death of paralysis. Oral arms, specialised tentacles, transporting the prey into the mouth at the centre of the bell, paralysed jelly enveloped in orange jelly-entrails, digested into willowy tentacled movements, into pulsing swimming motions (Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Lion's Mane"). Wavy yellow mass of gelatinous matter, constituting the bestowal of its name, human-given. Lion's mane fluttering in the wind, terrestrial animalisation of amber-yellow liquid body-centre hovering, pulsing. Muscular contractions like a beating heart, a blinking eye, nudging the liquid body gently forward. Minute sessile polyps budding off the bodies of young medusae, asexually, ephyra growing into males or females, or changing

Write! and your self-seeking text will know itself better than flesh and blood, rising, insurrectionary dough kneading itself, with sonorous, perfumed ingredients, a lively combination of flying colors, leaves, and rivers plunging into the sea we feed.

(Cixous, Cohen and Cohen 889)

sex as they grow. Or fusion of egg and sperm creating an embryo, brooded in transparent guts, set loose, becoming a ciliated planula larva, miniscule hairs enabling locomotion. Alive for merely a year, the pelagic being starts as larva, becoming polyp, ephyra, medusa (Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Jellyfish"). Relying on ocean currents to drive its immobile body forward, assembling in sheltered areas toward the end of its life, it is washed up by the tides onto rocks and beaches, a suffocated oozy mass (Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Lion's Mane").

Pulse, extend. Stretch out, small currents are felt through long thin appendages. Straight through them, they become like waves, slowly dancing, within, not through water. Every movement a wave. Currents pulsating, bulbously liquid centre of body powerfully contracting. This is swimming in a watery way, no terrestrial limbs, unwebbed digits. Instead becoming watery, body transparent, muscular yet layers of thin skin, delicate, lucent. Watery skin absorbing oxygen from water, transparency metabolising seawater. Soft body is a strong body in the ocean, when beached a weak blob of jelly, useless, stepped upon, torn with the smallest movement. Flowing out of mother-body, my consciousness slowly floats into me, elementary tentacles waking, coiling delicately. I start a small papule of the ocean, a speck against dark waters, snap-shot of jelly-life eternalised in a photographic image. Descending through the water column, I grow my polyp-roots, adhering. Expelled further into waves, I roll off my skin, gently. A current grips onto me, severs me from my body. My own body like mother, stack of selves swaying on the seabed. I utter no goodbyes to mother jellies, I float into them, they are my sea. This is how life starts, flowing on ocean currents. A medusa is not a destination, it is becoming liquid. My feelings always drift slightly behind my body, sense-endowed tentacles creating a small halo of perception around me, responsive, alert. I cannot flee, lithe but immobile body, I do not really swim. I am swim, I am sea, saltwater is within and without my body, enveloped. A vague outline all that makes me animal, oceans are buoyed within me.

"Ah, there's her sea," he will say as he holds out to me a basin full of water from the little phallic mother from whom he's inseparable. But look, our seas are what we make of them, full of fish or not, opaque or transparent, red or black, high or smooth, narrow or bankless; and we are ourselves sea, sand, coral, sea-weed, beaches, tides, swimmers, children, waves More or less wavily sea, earth, sky- what matter would rebuff us? We know how to speak them all.

(Cixous, Cohen and Cohen 889)

Blood, bile, intracellular fluid; a small ocean swallowed, a wild wetland in our gut; rivulets forsaken making their way from our insides to out, from watery womb to watery world:

we are bodies of water.

(Neimanis 1)

II. Watery Thinking

There is no direct path from gelatinous aesthetics to a blue-green environmental politics, however. As we have seen, most portrayals of jellyfish abstract them from their environment, as they pose one creature against a black background. This portrait-like style encourages a sense of encounter with a distinctive creature but it discourages an understanding of the animal's habitat. As aesthetic and taxonomic purposes converge in this style, the sea itself disappears, rendered transparent rather than substantial.

(Alaimo, 'Jellyfish Science' 158)

In saltwater zones, icy and elusive, jellyfish such as the lion's mane dwell. They float there beyond human comprehension, in a realm where science and aesthetics interweave in baffling ways (Alaimo, "Jellyfish Science" 139). No scientific description of the gelatinous beings seems possible without reference to their unknowable elegance, their bodies like works of art. Perhaps flimsy and superficial, jellyfish-images inspire brief moments of wonder, contemplation of watery otherness (140). Gelatinous zooplankton, bodies so fragile in air yet so agile in water, can mean something for aquatic environmentalism. Radical images of nonhuman otherness, Gelata cannot easily be anthropomorphised. No faces are suggested in bells of jelly, no cuteness emerges from creeping tentacles. Fluid, nearly invisible in dark oceans, jellies soon become unrecognisable as life. A mere nebulous glow in the distance, white edges enveloping nothing, in human imaginations jellyfish are lost at sea (140). Jellyfish are like the element they float in, hovering indistinguishable from the watery realms they inhabit (143). Translucence impossible to fully capture, unappreciated by the light-dependent human eye. See a completely black background, a white ghostly appearance drawing near the camera, jelly photographically removed from its environment (152). A flimsy skeleton, so soft it is barely there, it may as well not be. Or tentacles flowing, not apprehending what they are, a stinging apparatus, but so much more. If any comparison is made it is the analogy with the plastic bag, floating and destroying, likewise ingested by beloved sea turtles (Marland 2). Tales of overabundance of jellyfish are easier to tell than ecosystem-tales, than a kaleidoscopic sense of the lion's mane right there, its role in its ecosystem, slowly making its way through icy seas (160). In search of something, connected to more than a sterile black background, it flows elusively.

The turtles are, in a sense, eating a metaphor. However, their "error" suggests that we humans may be seeing too much difference: while we may view the plastic waste as inert, dull matter in comparison with the vital, living forms of the jellyfish, and so assume that any connection between the two is coincidental and largely figurative, the turtles appear to recognize and respond to material correspondences of pattern, texture, and movement. For the turtles, the relationship between the two material phenomena is more-than-metaphorical.

(Marland. 2-3)

To avoid misunderstandings: in the future, too, we cannot make do without pumping stations, dikes, and dune reinforcements. Human safety determines the limits of the space that water is granted. But moving along with the natural development of brooks, rivers and the sea is the only way to keep our head above water in the future.

(Ministry of Public Works and Water Management 6; my translation)

Gelatinous mass like water, a jellyfish appears as life at its minimum. Aqueously uncanny, outlines of a ghost, it unsettles human worlds buoyed by repressed watery systems just underneath cities. Radical watery antagonist, stinging tentacles constitute human fears, buoy human ideas of otherness. With their minimalist mode of being, jellyfish break down categories, simultaneously exposing them (Alaimo, "Jellyfish Science" 151). The lion's mane, photographed and contemplated, opens up a small window for consideration. Its limbs of jelly coil into human thinking, become a dancing thought floating into the margins of anthropocentrism. An opening between watery worlds and terrestrial worlds of air, tentacles reach out. Appealing to imaginations, inviting contemplations of living as water, of what it means to perceive in water as water (153). Lion's mane's orange-hued oscillating motions nudge perception, pulsate toward strange frameworks transcending the human as the default of condition. Dancing gelatinous spirit in watery depths, jellyfish agency is as strange as it gets, promotes flowing ideas to replace old, rigid ideas of rationality, of subject-object. It renders them extraneous, unworthy of their axiomatic status, buoyancy slowly falling away. Foundation undermined by long stinging tentacles, paralysing history of ideas, streaming out into a watery void at the centre of concentric canals, into oceans and realms of pelagic gelata. Anthropocentric ideas float unbuoyed, held by cemented myth. Inflexible foundation, like cities built on sand and water, slowly sagging, sinking back into swamp, ideas easily unmasked, liquidised by the movements of the lion's mane jellyfish. By bodies writing water, thinking water, being water, presenting a liquid buoyancy so integrated there is no exterior. The lion's mane lives within its ecosystem, is constituted within saltwater rather than by it, inviting watery thinking. A photograph of a whitely glowing jelly-skeleton against a black background seems to show everything in transparency, see-through sea and jelly, its true meaning remaining withdrawn (155). It is within apparent translucence, within the perceived flimsiness of the jellyfish, the infinity of the salty blackness, that buoyancy hides. The sum of all these parts, the void between them, constitutes the enmeshment between sea and jelly, a liquid buoyancy as a productive force of life.

To be astounded or astonished is to be unmoored, cut loose from an established order of things, to find oneself floating somewhere as yet unmapped, where unexpected, unrecognizable forms of life seem to demand some sort of recognition and response.

(Alaimo, "Jellyfish Science" 151)

Jellyfish – being watery – exist at the edge of the "visible, the sayable, and the thinkable," barely distinct from the seas that surround them, existing as flowing, pulsing, gelatinous, and just barely organized bodies. Jellies somehow live as the very element that surrounds them. (How does this make sense? How do they make sense?)

(Alaimo, "Jellyfish Science" 153)

But crucially, this watery gestationality is also decidedly posthuman, where human reprosexual wombs are but one expression of a more general aqueous facilitative capacity: pond life, sea monkey, primordial soup, amphibious egg, the moist soil that holds and grows the seed. (...) We are literally implicated in other animal, vegetable, and planetary bodies that materially course through us, replenish us, and draw upon our own bodies as their wells: human bodies ingest reservoir bodies, while reservoir bodies are slaked by rain bodies, rain bodies absorb ocean bodies, ocean bodies aspirate fish bodies, fish bodies are consumed by whale bodies – which then sink to the seafloor to rot and be swallowed up again by the ocean's dark belly.

(Neimanis 3)

The motor tissue in these Medusae is of the simplest kind, and consists, in most cases, simply of bands of the granular substance just described. (...) I have paralysed one side of a Rhizostoma Aldrovandi, whose disk measured more than a foot across, by removing with a scalpel the bands of that half, whilst the other side contracted and expanded as usual, though with more rapidity, as if the animal was alarmed or suffering.

(Forbes 3)

Glide, contract, let body ripple. Feeling soft self upheld by soft water. Liquid, a creature of gentle movements. Predatory, tentacled extensions ever ready. No ambush, I am too slow. I float, in green-blue light. Jelly-body without clear edges, a ghostly spirit, a faint otherworldly glow. Float, buoyed by ocean currents, is a way of being. I am not going, I do not make my individual way through oceans. I pulsate, subtly suggesting direction. Liquid within and without me decides where I emerge, never to stay, passing through. Stretching out, elastic tissue expanding, condensing into a ball. Immediately disbanded, think anew, entrails are coloured. Do I see them, I do not know a lion's mane. I am pure symmetry, body composed from a centre point, roundness makes me. Layers in circles, concentrically, the same all around. Senses placed on tentacles, like eyes, feeling pressure, orientation, smell. I think roundly, in circles, single orifice at my centre. Thinking like water, liquid thoughts ripple out over tentacles. Angular thinking, instilled in hard calcium bones and rugged bodies, is impossible. Thinking is connecting, flowing, not severing. I am flow, depth, an antidote at the centre of fearful buoyancy's flipside. I await not far from the void beneath politics, the feigned buoyancy of air, treacherous. Perhaps a link, a little liquid connection, circular perspective on cities floating next to seas and under them. Think of me waterily, liquidise brains already bathed in strange liquids. Let them seep in, let flowing begin, let go. Of a body mild and stiff, become a flow to me, abandon individual direction, you have always been watery.

They <Medusae> are members of the lowest section of the Animal Kingdom, (...) They are active in their habits, graceful in their motions, gay in their colouring, delicate as the finest membrane, transparent as the purest crystal. (...) They have the power of emitting light, and when on a summer's evening the waves flash fire as they break upon the shore, or glow with myriads of sparks as they curl and froth around the prow of the moving ship or under the blade of a striking oar, it is to delicate and almost invisible Medusae that they chiefly owe their phosphorescence.

(Forbes 1)

III. Orbicularity

The future future and the strange stranger are the weird and unpredictable entities that honest ecological thinking compels us to think about. When we can see that far into the future and that far around Earth, a curious blindness afflicts us, a blindness far more mysterious than simple lack of sight, since we can precisely see so much more than ever. This blindness is a symptom of an already-existing intimacy with all lifeforms, knowledge of which is now thrust on us whether we like it or not.

(Morton, *Hyperobjects* 124)

When a creative scientist, artist or philosopher has been for some hours or days intent on his work, his mind often takes on an almost physical character. That is, his mind becomes his real body. His over-mind becomes his brain.

(H.D. 18)

Cities floating on watery worlds, a politics of aquaphobia bobs at the surface, anxious movements rippling out through oceans, into realms of jelly. Suspend fear, buoy cities on currents inhabited by aqueous lion's manes flowing, a more balanced world emerges. Circular in nature, informed by round watery thinking like a jellyfish which is swim, is water, is a flow making sense of the world. Erasing rugged shapes, sharp corners, smoothening anthropocentric edges. Concede to human intimacy with strange things, which was always already there, though restricted by rigid structures, rationalist labels, systems of organisation claiming nothing slipped through the net. Yet water always does, always has, it is permeation, resistant to linear logic. It has always rendered daily things strange, rounding off rectangular corners, uncanny presence dripping from damp railings. Orbicularity was already there in sound, strange melodies from other worlds slipping through the cracks of the water-buoyed city, the rush of a lion's mane's slimy tentacles acoustically nearer than assumed, nonhuman presences droning into cities. Sound rounding spaces, a room upheld by watery worlds becomes round like a globe (Vian 112). Night emerges from a small round centre, core of light, developing in small concentric ripples, symmetrically like a jellyfish, retreating when the glow of dawn creeps through windows (Vian 111). Round windows on crooked circular canal sides, snaking around, thoughts, movements, governments meandering. To think roundly is to float like water in water, to think like a cloud of fog slowly floating into a human head. To let go of oblivion, for a thought to be a viscous tentacle reaching out into circling waterways, gripping onto sticky liquidity, entangling organic matter for metabolization into watery movement.

At the spot where a river joins the ocean there is a barrier that is very difficult to navigate. Wrecked ships dance helplessly in the great eddies of foam. Between the night outside and the light of the lamp, memories flowed back from the darkness of the past, banging against the light and, immersed in its glow, gleaming and transparent, flaunting their white fronts and their silver backs.

(Vian 112)

I open my hands, I want to let go of the slimy and it sticks to me, it draws me, it sucks at me. Its mode of being is neither the reassuring inertia of the solid nor a dynamism like that in water which is exhausted in fleeing from me. It is a soft, yielding action (...) it lives obscurely under my fingers, and I sense it like a dizziness; it draws me to it as the bottom of a precipice might draw me. There is something like a tactile fascination in the slimy. I am no longer the master in arresting the process of appropriation.

(Sartre 609)

Ecological awareness is a loop because human interference has a loop form, because ecological and biological systems are loops. (...) The loop form of beings means we live in a universe of finitude and fragility, a world in which objects are suffused with and surrounded by mysterious hermeneutical clouds of unknowing.

(Morton, Dark Ecology 6)

The swing from normal consciousness to abnormal consciousness

It is to be a body, even human, conceding to floating, absorbed into true buoyancy within watery worlds. Body is a realm of water, within realm of water, become a nebulous outline against a black background. Become the gaps between a spooky white frame and black water, integrate what is withdrawn into self, for the jellyfish is not just withdrawn from human onlookers, an elusive part of it remains forever withdrawn even from itself (Morton, *Hyperobjects* 62). Let body pulse, feel flow of water within and without, trembles in stomach just like the wavy movements of a jelly, a lion's mane flapping in underwater currents. Skin non-crystalline, but translucence can be a thinking process, of becoming watery in thought. Let cities be buoyed, not on fear, but on watery collaborations. Let water saturate land, terrestrial mud and cemented cultures becoming a viscous in-between. Solid-liquid world of extended coastal area, think in intertidal zones inhabited by saline smells, rush of wind, thick-stemmed samphire, salt marsh. Rounding off continents naturally, interzone of sandflats buoys cities better than seawalls do, nudging them into circular futures. Lion's mane pushes perception, so can watery human thoughts, if attention is paid, if angularity slowly flows, loosely, becoming orbicular, developing concentrically from a centre of buoyancy, in symmetrical layers of consideration. In watery writing, a human body often floats, this is always toward orbicularity, an understanding of the human body as a body of water within a body of water, indistinguishable like a jelly. Loop-formed water world inhabited by water-humans and water-jellies, equally liquid, this is living as water, giving space without conceding, for there is no non-watery space to begin with. There is no solid ground in orbicular watery worlds, there is no need for solid foundations if we are buoyed in floating.

Watery world, absorb me. Simultaneously depth and surface, ungraspable space continually reproduced by mobile molecules, absorption is not synonymous with disintegration (Steinberg and Peters 252). Watery world as an event of bodies and their meanings intermingling, challenging hierarchies, binaries (Idema 56). Oceans wavy at the surface, storms raging far within, never once the same, never once pinned down. Dividing watery worlds into rectangles for industrial exploitation cannot

If I could visualise or describe that over-mind in my own case, I should say this: it seems to me that a cap is over my head, a cap of consciousness over my head, my forehead, affecting a little my eyes. Sometimes when I am in that state of consciousness, things about me appear slightly blurred as if seen under water.

(H.D. 18)

It is a fluidity which holds me and which compromises me; I can not slide on this slime, all its suction cups hold me back; it can not slide over me, it clings to me like a leech.

(Sartre 609)

That over-mind seems a cap, like water, transparent, fluid yet with definite body, contained in a definite space. It is like a closed sea-plant, jelly-fish or anemone.

(H.D. 18-19)

In that over-mind, thoughts pass and are visible like fish swimming under clear water.

(H.D. 19)

is accompanied by grinding discomfort of mental agony.

- to continue this jelly-fish metaphor -

these stood in the same relation to the nervous system as the over-mind to the brain or intellect

extend out and about us; as the long floating tentacles of the jelly-fish reach out and about him.

They are not of different material,

The super-feelers are

super-mind,

be done straightforwardly, water and watery beings do not follow terrestrial paradigms of space, of boundaries. Watery worlds that envelop me suggest nonlinear, immeasurable notions of time (Steinberg and Peters 255). Of time loop-formed, circular, spiralling out in subcurrents, through oceans and urban waterways. A time of orbicularity, my jelly-centre is a bell-shaped human head, my arms are tentacled, nematocyst-enhanced. My thoughts are like body, bell-shaped bubbles of air emerge from single orifice at my centre, multiplying, creating bubble-webs, reaching out, forming long bubble-tentacles buoyed by watery currents. Tentacle translucent, a glow of white against a black background, nerve-endings sensitive to temperature, to touch. Willowy white limb reaches tentatively into water, into viscous solid-liquid worlds connecting to floating cities. Sense-endowed details dotted on white transparency, my tentacle curls through concentric canals, feels human feet hurrying over quaysides of cobblestone, feels the tremble of urban ferries droning through water-bodies. My symmetrical liquid body formed concentrically around a point of buoyancy, I flow in a direction, pulsing and contracting. Round air-thoughts, bubbling up slowly, to surfaces of water which buoy cities bobbing under the sea.

long feelers reached down and through my body

set of super-feelings

My spherical mind emerges from my water body, from a body of water, evaporating thoughts into terrestrial worlds, liquidising. Becoming water, rounding off rugged edges, creating cities buoyed within watery worlds, liquid within and without. All is swept on current, canals and salt marsh.

extraneous to the gray matter of the directing brain.

Agile like a fish, life as water emerges elastically from and within taps, estuaries. Slowly terrestrial thinking decomposing language, nearly destroyed

part of the

bending. Words become crooked solidly meaningless. Words are watery are swim and flow,

pulsate stretch out. Extend letter write in wave. Write liquidly like jelly

non-logos language of circle-flow. Become a flow to me to me jelly, pulse, contract. Translucence in wordless thought.

as the jelly-fish feelers are the jelly-fish itself

Do not go not individually be swim
be sea be nebulous cloud looming.
elongated Until slowly, like falling asleep, liquid jelly within
and without. Rounding away,
into
flow pulse extend suggest direction
like tentacle bubble-formed loop rippling out in fine
as water threads.
(H.D. 19)

Works Cited

- Alaimo, Stacy. "States of Suspension: Trans-corporeality at Sea." *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, vol. 19, 2012, pp. 476-493.
- . "Jellyfish Science, Jellyfish Aesthetics: Posthuman Reconfigurations of the Sensible." *Thinking with Water*, edited by Cecilia Chen, Janine MacLeod and Astrida Neimanis, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013, 139-164.
- Camus, Albert. *The Fall*. Penguin Books, 1963.
- Cixous, Hélène, Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen. "The Laugh of the Medusa." *Signs*, vol. 1, no. 4, 1976, pp. 875-893.
- Encyclopaedia Britannica. "Jellyfish". *Encyclopaedia Britannica* www.britannica.com/animal/jellyfish. Accessed 7 April 2021.
- Encyclopaedia Britannica. "Lion's Mane Jellyfish". *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. www.britannica.com/animal/lions-mane-jellyfish. Accessed 5 April 2021]
- Forbes, Edward. *A Monograph of the British Naked-Eye Medusae with Figures of all the Species*. Ray Society, 1848.
- H.D. *Notes on Thoughts and Vision & the Wise Sappho*. City Lights Books, 1982.
- Idema, Tom. "When the Levees Break: global heating, watery rhetoric and complexity in Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl*." *Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism*, vol. 24, 2020, pp. 51-63. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14688417.2020.1752509>
- Marland, Pippa. "'You see the difference': Reading the Stories of Matter Through the More-Than-Metaphorical." *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 2020, pp. 1066-1088. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isle/isaa116>
- Ministry of Public Works and Water Management, *Nederland Leeft met Water*. Habo DaCosta, 2002.
- Morton, Timothy. *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*. University of Minnesota Press, 2013.

---. *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence*. Columbia University Press, 2016.

Neimanis, Astrida. *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2016.

Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness*. Routledge, 2003), p. 610.

Steinberg, Philip and Kimberley Peters. "Wet ontologies, fluid spaces: giving depth to volume through oceanic thinking." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2015, pp. 247–264. <https://doi.org/10.1068/d14148p>

Vian, Boris. *Froth on the Daydream*. Rapp & Carroll, 1967.

Developing Empathy Towards Other-than-human Animals through Cultural and Literary Representations

Katsiaryna Nahornava
Universidad de Granada, Spain
mosqui@correo.ugr.es

Margarita Carretero-González, editor. *Spanish Thinking About Animals* (East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 2020), ix+205 pp.

Wojciech Małecki, Piotr Sorokowski, Bogusław Pawłowski, and Marcin Cieński. *Human Minds and Animal Stories: How Narratives Make Us Care About Other Species* (New York and London: Routledge, 2019), 190 pp.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ecozona.2022.13.2.4399>



We are living in the geological period unofficially denominated Anthropocene, which is characterised by the overwhelmingly ubiquitous influence of humanity on the ecosystem and geology of our planet. In a relatively brief period of time on a biospheric time scale, in just five thousand years, our planet, which was mainly inhabited by wild animals and covered by unspoilt landscape, has turned into a world completely dominated by humans, domesticated animals and urban areas.

Since the origins of humanity, our population has been steadily increasing, yet it has noticeably skyrocketed especially in the last century, growing from 1.6 billion people in 1900 to almost 7 billion people in 2010 (Smil 613). Not only has human population grown, but also its associated domesticated zoomass. Currently, humans, livestock and pets make up to 97.11% of the world's mammalian biomass (Riechmann xi). Such accelerated change in biomass dynamics has had dire consequences for the planet as a whole. For the first time in history the planet has become dominated by one single species, which has brought about a radical transformation of the Earth's ecosystem - the number of wild animals, both terrestrial and marine, has declined dramatically, unspoilt nature has almost completely disappeared and instead, pastures, croplands, urban and industrial areas have relentlessly spread all over (Smil 628). Nowadays, as Ellis and Ramankutty (2008) pointed out, nature is embedded within human systems, since it is either dominated or affected by human activity. That is to say, in the attempt to satisfy our needs of accommodation, transportation and feeding, to name just a few examples, humans (un)intentionally destroy natural habitats of many other-than-human animals, which eventually leads to biodiversity loss—the extinction of both animal and plant species—altering natural equilibrium. Apart from all these dire effects of the Anthropocene, one of the main challenges is the anthropocentric worldview, which gives human benefit and

wellbeing utmost importance, as well as it allows and justifies the (mal)treatment of the more-than-human world and other-than-human animals. Anthropocentrism creates an artificial nature/culture dichotomy, where humanity is perceived as independent from the natural world and as a superior species that is allowed to dominate it. Nevertheless, such positioning and its consequent mastery of nature are counterproductive, since, as it has been widely discussed and demonstrated by scholars, “we are part of adaptive systems (ecosystems) [...], where everything is connected to everything else with multiple feedback loops, [...] originating a cause-effect-cause” pattern (Riechmann xi-xii). Consequently, greater human domination not only means the deterioration of the natural world, but also lower quality of life for humans themselves and their eventual demise, since we are an inseparable part of the natural world (Dubos 277). Therefore, a gradual turn towards a less anthropocentric positioning may be crucial in order to find a solution to the ecological crisis, which is why it should be addressed urgently.

Both *Spanish Thinking about Animals* edited by Margarita Carretero-González and *Human Minds and Animal Stories: How Narratives Make Us Care About Other Species* by Wojciech Małecki, Piotr Sorokowski, Bogusław Pawłowski, and Marcin Cieński study our morally unacceptable treatment of other-than-human animals and point at the need to change both the way we think about and relate to them. These two books call for the development of an “ecology of the mind” and the extension of our ethical circle which should definitely include other-than-human animals, thus putting an end to the idea of human exceptionalism and moral superiority, and developing a relationship of partnership, instead of one of dominion, exploitation and control (Riechmann xvi). Both books agree that the only way human-inflicted violence towards other species can be stopped is, first and foremost, by means of gradually abandoning our anthropocentric worldview and changing our attitude of domination towards them, since in morally relevant aspects they are no different from humans.

Although it is true that a lot has been achieved in the fight for animal rights in the last two centuries, animal abuse is still a wide-spread practice occurring systematically all over the planet (Singer and Mason; Foer; Singer *Animal Liberation*; Carretero-González). *Human Minds* suggests that the reason for this might be that the general public simply remains ignorant of all the suffering inflicted upon other-than-human animals, which gives licence to such phenomenon to linger. What both *Spanish Thinking About Animals* and *Human Minds and Animal Stories* aim at is finding a way to stop human occupation and monopolization of the Earth and to improve the relationship between human and other-than-human animals. In order to do so, both agree that it is crucial to change the way we think about other species, bringing light to the current deliberate and unnecessary animal abuse and violence and “expanding the circle of our moral concern” (Małecki et. Al. 7).

Human unacceptable instrumental treatment of animals seems to be normalised, and although more and more information about the current practices engaged in experimentation on animals, factory farming, use of animals for entertainment, etc. is widely available, there is still a vast majority who unfortunately decides to turn a blind eye on the issue. Argumentative persuasion seems to fail to change our treatment of

other-than-human animals, because human moral attitudes are strongly tied to our unconscious intuition, which is extremely reluctant to implementing changes through logical argumentation (Rorty 167–201; Haidt; Aaltola; Elżanowski). A different approach should be taken, and both *Human Minds and Animal Stories* and *Spanish Thinking About Animals* point at the power of narratives to influence our attitude to other-than-human animals. Not only can literature extend our environmental awareness and connect us “vicariously with [the] experience, suffering, [and] pain ... of nonhumans” as Laurence Buell highlights (2), but it also “might eventually have an impact on environmental laws and policies and on the daily behavior, even on the conscious and unconscious worldviews, of other members of society” (Slovic 140).

Spanish Thinking About Animals takes a traditional qualitative approach to study representations of other-than-human animals through Spanish literature and other discourses. Not only does it analyse the way other-than-human animals are treated by ordinary humans on a daily basis, but it also approaches the issue from historical and legal perspectives, which has not been done before. *Human Minds and Animal Stories*, on the other hand, studies the impact of narratives on the behaviour of humans towards other species through an innovative empirical method, combining instruments from experimental social sciences and environmental humanities. Therefore, both volumes approach the study of animals from interdisciplinary perspectives, not only through a literary framework, but also through the lenses of history, law and social sciences, thus complementing each other.

It is true that the nineteenth century movement of sentimental liberalism already promoted the use of narrative persuasion in order to improve attitudes towards other species, and even today many environmental and animal rights organisations rely on striking stories of animal abuse and suffering to try to awaken the public’s sensitivity to the problem. Nonetheless, as *Human Minds and Animal Stories* highlights, no matter how wide-spread and accepted the belief in the power of narratives is, it “does not rest on much more than historical evidence, speculation, and anecdotal reports [...] it does not rest on statistically relevant empirical data, which is a serious drawback from a scholarly point of view” (Małecki et al. 12). Therefore, the main objective of this book is to test this common assumption scientifically.

With this idea in mind Wojciech Małecki, Piotr Sorokowski, Bogusław Pawłowski, and Marcin Cieński conducted over a dozen double-blind controlled experiments with more than three thousand randomly selected subjects, who were given a variety of literary narratives depicting other-than-human animals and who did not know what the real purpose of the study was. In each study the subjects were divided into a control group, who read non-animal related narratives, and an experimental group, who were asked to read a narrative dealing with other-than-human animals, which was expected to affect the readers’ attitudes towards other species. Interestingly, the process and the findings are presented in a rather different book format, unusual for an academic work. Even though the volume includes all the necessary elements of an academic book and clearly states the hypothesis, research questions, methodology, results and conclusions, it is worth highlighting that the study itself is presented in the form of a narrative. The

authors tell the process of their research as if it were a detective story, and they also reveal some frustrating moments during their research and how they overcame them, potentially engaging the ordinary public along with scholars, and making the reading much more gripping.

Throughout the study not only was the main hypothesis tested, but also a set of secondary hypotheses in order to figure out what kind of narratives (fictional or non-fictional, narrated in first or third person, different species animal protagonists, etc.) are better suited to change humans' attitudes towards other-than-human animals. The outcomes of the study point at the fact that narratives with animal content do influence our thinking about other species, regardless of the narratives being perceived as clearly fictional (part of a novel) or non-fictional (a newspaper report, for instance), but the strength of the influence may indeed rely on the protagonist's species, since those narratives starring species which are perceived to be more akin to humans are likely to leave a greater mark on the reader, whichever age and sex they are. Another promising finding is a relatively lasting character of this influence, from two weeks to two months after exposure to the narrative. Moreover, stories depicting human cruelty and severe other-than-human animal suffering are more likely to have a longer and stronger impact on readers. Although the study was carried out in Poland and the results may indeed be culturally biased, and therefore cannot be generalized yet, these outcomes are really promising, since they suggest that a regular exposure to stories with animal-related content may well lead to a greater awareness of the issue and eventually change not only the way we think about other species, but also the way we relate to them.

Margarita Carretero-González *Spanish Thinking About Animals*, which is another brilliant contribution to The Animal Turn series, provides an interdisciplinary glance at the animal question in Spain, where many popular festivities unfold around cruelty towards a great variety of animals, such as bulls, horses, pigs, etc., and where abandonment and abuse of pets has been and still is a huge structural problem. No wonder, statistics put Spain in the spotlight as "the country with the cruellest behaviour toward animals in the EU" (Carretero-González xxi). Yet, a great majority of Spaniards have been questioning such unnecessary cruelty, which has led to the abolishment of bullfighting and some other festivities involving other-than-human animals in some parts of Spain and to a huge change in the legal status of animals, from being considered "objects" to "subjects". The book invites its readers to glance at the animal question in Spain through an antispeciesist lens and aims at finding a way to improve interspecies relationships and to put an end to human ubiquitous occupation and monopolization.

The book studies representations of animals in Spanish literature and culture, and highlights the human tendency to instrumentalise other-than-human animals both in artistic representations and in real life. The book is divided into four parts: "Animals in Literature", "Animal Ethics and Aesthetics", "Huma/nimal Bodies and Violence" and "The Fight against Speciesism". The three chapters of the first part of the book reveal that, in medieval texts, other-than-human animals were used as topoi to fulfil a particular role, likewise, in fables, they were assigned anthropomorphic qualities with a focus on human vices and virtues and not on exploring or emphasising animal worth and individuality.

Furthermore, the second part “Animal Ethics and Aesthetics” shows that, apart from being used as a literary device, as a metaphor for human behaviour, other-than-human animals are also instrumentalised for aesthetics purposes in artistic representations, like painting, photography, films, etc. Such a reduction of other-than-human identity to a mere object of beauty is just another example of human imposition of their own view on others, and therefore, yet another indication of human mastery over them and a reinforcement of the idea of other-than-human animals as nothing but beautiful creatures to look at, creatures to work on, the ones to eat, etc. Nonetheless, Verónica Perales Blanco, in the concluding chapter of this part, “*Wear My Eyes: Driving Empathy through Artistic Creation*”, states that not all aesthetic representations should be abandoned or rendered harmful, since a deep aesthetic vision of other-than-human animals, not a merely superficial one, could indeed play a crucial role in extending our circle of ethical concern and combatting our instrumental relationship towards other species. She suggests that through a technique of animal transposition we could eventually “place our feelings in [animals’] bodies, [...] represent them as significant elements in the biosphere, and, thus, [...] generate empathy” (102). Such a shift from a human perspective to a nonhuman one would allow humans to see animals as free individuals, who are not born to serve humans, but have their own purpose in life. The two concluding sections of the book, “Huma/nimal Bodies and Violence” and “The Fight against Speciesism”, present the animal question from ecofeminist, philosophical and legal perspectives, uncovering the interrelationship between the different forms of domination (males over females, or humans over animals) and point at an important shift in the Spanish thinking about animals as ‘subjects’.

Human Minds and Animals Stories as well as *Spanish Thinking about Animals* suggest that a balanced and respectful coexistence between human and other-than-human animals is possible. A huge handicap to such coexistence is a lack of awareness among the general public of all the atrocities that other species face in order to satisfy human whims. It is remarkable that both books are written in a rather simple, non-technical language, which makes them interesting and easily accessible not only for different scholars, such as ecocritics and other experts in the fields of environmental humanities and animal studies, but also for general non-specialist readers, who may still remain ignorant of the animal issue and thus might benefit from these eye-opening texts. What both works seem to demonstrate is that cultural representations of animal suffering, abuse and instrumentalization are essential in order to raise awareness about the animal question and are likely to promote a crucial change in human’s treatment of animals—from a domineering monological relationship towards an egalitarian dialogical one. Both books call for the urgency to abandon the ideology of human exceptionalism and extend our familiar ethical circle, including other-than-human animals in it, and are hopeful that this shift can be achieved by means of artistic representations of the animal question.

Works Cited

- Aaltola, Elisa. "Animal Ethics and the Argument from Absurdity." *Environmental Values*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2010, pp. 79–98. doi:[10.3197/096327110X485392](https://doi.org/10.3197/096327110X485392).
- Buell, Lawrence. *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture, and Environment in the U.S. and Beyond*. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001.
- Carretero-González, Margarita, editor. *Spanish Thinking About Animals*. Michigan State University Press, 2020.
- Dubos, René. *Un Dios Interior*. Salvat, 1986.
- Ellis, Earl C., and Navin Ramankutty. "Putting people in the map: Anthropogenic biomes of the world." *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment*, vol. 6, 2008, pp. 439–447.
- Elżanowski, Andrzej. "Moral Progress: A Present-Day Perspective on the Leading Enlightenment Idea." *Argument*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2013, pp. 9–26.
- Haidt, Jonathan. "The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail: A Social Intuitionist Approach to Moral Judgment." *Psychological Review*, vol. 108, no. 4, 2001, pp. 814–34.
- Małecki, Wojciech, et al., editors. *Human Minds and Animal Stories: How Narratives Make Us Care About Other Species*, Routledge, 2019.
- Perales Blanco, Verónica. "Wear My Eyes: Driving Empathy through Artistic Creation". *Spanish Thinking About Animals*, edited by Margarita Carretero-González, Michigan State University, 2020, pp. 101-111.
- Riechmann, Jorge. "Foreword". *Spanish Thinking About Animals*, edited by Margarita Carretero-González, Michigan State University, 2020, pp. ix-xx.
- Rorty, Richard. *Truth and Progress. Philosophical Papers*. Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Singer, Peter. *Animal Liberation: The Definitive Classic of the Animal Movement*. Ecco Book/Harper Perennial, 2009.
- . *The Expanding Circle: Ethics, Evolution, and Moral Progress*. Princeton University Press, 2011.
- Singer, Peter, and Jim Mason. *The Ethics of What We Eat: Why Our Food Choices Matter*. Rodale, 2006.
- Slovic, Scott. *Going Away to Think: Engagement, Retreat, and Ecocritical Responsibility*. Reno, University of Nevada Press, 2008.
- Smil, Vaclav. "Harvesting the Biosphere: The Human Impact." *Population and Development Review*, vol. 37, no. 4, 2011, pp. 613-636.

Michael O'Krent
Harvard University, USA
okrent@g.harvard.edu

Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 296 pp.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ecoazona.2022.13.2.4718>



When a single work by a scholar becomes field-definingly canonical, that scholar's legacy can become tied inextricably to that work to the extent that their previous contributions become secondary in the reception of their scholarship. One need only think of Fredric Jameson, whose nearly mythical *Postmodernism: Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1990) has in effect demoted his earlier works such as *The Political Unconscious* (1981) and *The Prison-House of Language* (1972). Likewise, Chakrabarty's 2009 essay "The Climate of History: Four Theses" has become an unmissable in the environmental humanities, and Chakrabarty's latest book is no less (and no more) than a conscious attempt to lean into its influence by expanding its ideas into a postcolonial theory of climate change. While Chakrabarty has continued to explore the implications of the 2009 essay in fora such as his 2015 Tanner Lectures, *Planetary Age* (2021) is the true crowning achievement of Chakrabarty's work in this area—perhaps to the extent that his earlier books such as *Provincializing Europe* (2000) risk the same fate as *The Political Unconscious*. However, the caveat that *Planetary Age* might introduce to Chakrabarty's previous work is only a testament to its significance; even more than "Four Theses," it has the potential to become a keystone reference in the environmental humanities for many years to come.

Chakrabarty's argument about what postcolonial studies has to offer the environmental humanities goes well beyond the established appeals to inequality that constitute climate justice discourse. Postcolonial thought has contributed to the discipline of history by expanding the timescales in which modernity develops to include a half-century of colonial history whose effects echo and indeed are even compressed into the present. Postcolonial thought can also repeat this broadening of temporal horizons in the environmental humanities, enabling us to see, analyze, and operate on mutually overlapping but incommensurable timescales. The original "Four Theses" essay (reprinted with some elaboration in the first chapter of *Planetary Age*) argued for the end of the distinction between the timescale of natural history and the timescale of human history. In *Planetary Age*, Chakrabarty urges us to think through additional variations on natural and human historical time.

Chakrabarty accomplishes this project by developing a distinction between the global and the planetary, based on the understanding that "The word *globe* as it has

appeared in the literature on globalization is not the same as the word *globe* in the expression *global warming*" (71). Different historical timescales implicate different spatial conceptions of the Earth, and the book develops formidable analytical tools that become available whenever we ask whether planetary or global consciousness underlies any given statement or ideological position. The global is a discourse that sees the earth as the teleological horizon of human expansion from local origins (globalization), focuses on human systems, treats history as the study of narratives of the human past, is fundamentally concerned with values and governance, and handles ecological issues from the perspective of sustainability. The planetary takes the earth as one planet among many (planetary science), focuses on ecological systems, creates historical narratives of which human beings are never the primary subject, concerns itself with empirical reality without jumping to normative conclusions, and handles ecological issues from the perspective of habitability.

The manner in which Chakrabarty develops the global-planetary distinction can unfortunately be difficult to follow at times, especially in the third chapter. This is because Chakrabarty starts by defining two separate senses of globe, only to then retroactively christen one of them "planet" instead. One is left wishing he had simply assigned two different words to these two different points of view instead of muddling them by focusing on their divergence from a historical common ground. Chakrabarty also touches on the term "earth," but for unclear reasons declines to use it as a name for the common category to which the global and the planetary belong.

Once grasped, however, the planet-globe distinction has substantial progressive implications for the environmental humanities. Namely, it obviates the need to speak of decentering humanity in historical narrative, as to call for decentering is to begin from an anthropocentric viewpoint. The planetary provides an alternative starting point by shifting the emphasis from the subject who speaks to the spatial scope that bounds narrative. Humanists may appreciate the particularly aesthetic quality of this solution: instead of focusing on identitarian questions of who speaks, Chakrabarty encourages a critique of unmentioned assumptions that traverse multiple positionalities. Viewed in the history of postcolonial scholarship, which has developed in the tradition of Gayatri Spivak's needling question, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", this is quite a remarkable development.

Chakrabarty has developed a manner of engaging with environmental issues that can be productive in numerous disciplines. Methodologically, there is something for everyone here: his examples blend textual analysis of diverse historical sources (speeches by Jawaharlal Nehru; one man's social media posts and suicide note; the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, and so on) with more concrete analysis of changing social trends (e.g., the popularity of air conditioning). Chakrabarty advances the environmentalist conversation holistically by dialoguing with thinkers such as Ursula Heise, Bruno Latour, and Slavoj Žižek, responding to criticisms of his own work (mostly "Four Theses") while firing back a few barbs at targets such as Amartya Sen's Capabilities Approach and climate justice viewpoints that treat environmental degradation as primarily a problem of interpersonal

justice. As such, this book comes highly recommended for anyone working in the environmental humanities.

Works Cited

- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Provincializing Europe*. Princeton University Press, 2000.
- . "The Climate of History: Four Theses." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 35, no. 2, Jan. 2009, pp. 197–222.
- . *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*. University of Chicago Press, 2021.
- . *The Human Condition in the Anthropocene*. The Tanner Lectures in Human Values, Yale University, 2015.
- Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism: Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Duke University Press, 1990.
- . *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Cornell University Press, 1981.
- . *The Prison-House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism*. Princeton University Press, 1972.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, Macmillan Education, 1988, pp. 271–313.

Georgiana Bozintan
Babes-Bolyai University, Romania
georgiana.bozintan@ubbcluj.ro

Marcus Axelsson and Barbro Bredesen Opset, eds., *Fortellinger om bærekraftig utvikling. Perspektiver for norskfaget* [Narratives of Sustainable Development. Perspectives for the Norwegian Subject], (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2021), 192 pp.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ecoazona.2022.13.2.4810>



Scandinavian countries are well-known for promoting nearness to nature as a social value and for advocating green politics even beyond their national borders. The concept of sustainable development, popularized by the Norwegian prime-minister Gro Harlem Brundtland's report *Our common future* from 1987, has gradually been integrated in the Norwegian educational system as well. In 2020, the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training took the decision to implement 'sustainable development' as one of the interdisciplinary topics in the national curriculum for primary and secondary education, along with 'health and life skills' and 'democracy and citizenship' as the other two themes (Utdanningsdirektoratet). This is the context in which the volume *Fortellinger om bærekraftig utvikling. Perspektiver for norskfaget* [Narratives of Sustainable Development. Perspectives for the Norwegian Subject] was published at the end of 2021, with the aim of providing a framework for working with this topic inside the Norwegian language and literature classroom.

Edited by Marcus Axelsson and Barbro Bredesen Opset, the book is directed toward students and researchers in the field of literature and didactics, practicing teachers and, largely, toward anyone interested in sustainable development, as the editors state in the introduction (9). Written by scholars with a significant background in literary studies and pedagogy, the eight chapters of the book examine a range of texts including contemporary climate fiction, canonical works, children and young adult literature, as well as non-fiction texts. Thus, the volume seeks to outline the ways in which literature and the humanities can contribute to a critical reflection on sustainable development.

Opening the discussion, Reinhard Hennig reviews the context in which the concept of sustainable development was initially used in connection to the UN's environmental politics and was then integrated in the UNESCO's educational programs. In Norway, sustainable development was first introduced in educational curricula as part of the natural science disciplines. Hennig shows that the development of environmental humanities and the rich literary tradition engaging with ecological issues and climate change in Norway provides the necessary context to put in practice an ecocritical teaching pedagogy in the humanist disciplines as well. Importantly, however, he emphasizes that

ecocritical pedagogy should avoid essentializing the debate by reinforcing the duality between nature and culture. Ecocritical teaching practices, as Hennig suggests, should rather invite students to a critical reflection around the entanglements between these concepts. Anje Müller Gjesdal puts forward a different perspective that similarly stresses the importance of a critical approach to environmentalism and sustainability. Employing methods from corpus linguistics, Gjesdal shows that, in parliamentary debates, the expression ‘sustainable development’ has been used statistically more often in connection to economic and social terms than in relation to the environment. From this vantage point, Gjesdal argues that humanities and, particularly, ecocriticism have the role to displace the anthropocentric perspective that seems to be at the heart of political discourse on sustainability.

Following these introductory discussions on the subject matter of the book, the next chapters provide insight into literary texts that deal with the theme of sustainable development. Per Thomas Andersen and Sissel Furuseth contribute with ecocritical readings of contemporary works of fiction. In his analysis of Øyvind Rimbereid’s long poem “Solaris korrigert” (“Solaris Corrected,” 2004), Andersen suggests that reading this type of literary works elicits readers’ understanding of the implications of the impending ecocatastrophe and incites them to imagine forms of solidarity necessary for dealing with such dystopic scenarios as the one depicted by Rimbereid. In a similar fashion, Furuseth sheds light on the didactic dimension of the internationally acclaimed series by Maja Lunde: *Bienes historie* (*The History of Bees*, 2015), *Blå* (*Blue*, 2017), and *Przewalskis hest* (*Przewalski’s Horse*, 2019). Throughout her examination of the three novels, Furuseth shows how the dilemmas they encompass can enhance fruitful discussions with students on the topic of climate change, lack of resources, and environmentalism.

Moving from contemporary texts to canonical works of Norwegian literature, Mads B. Claudi revisits Henrik Ibsen’s *Vildanden* (*The Wild Duck*, 1884), showing how one can go beyond Ibsen’s symbolism when interpreting the play. The literary theorist employs synecdoche, and not symbol, as the key for reading Ibsen’s drama from an ecocritical perspective. In this way, he sheds light on the characters’ attitudes toward animals and the preservation of natural resources. Claudi’s thought-provoking analysis is thus mostly valuable in that it calls attention to how ecocritical reading practices reveal that older, classical texts can be relevant for today’s environmental debates.

The last three chapters of the volume focus on children and young adult literature. Camilla Häbler and Marion Elisenberg outline an ecocritical theoretical framework for reading children’s picture books. Through their analysis of Stian Hole’s *Garman trilogy* (2006-2010) and Kari Stai’s *Jakob og Naikob. Stormen* (*Jakob and Neikob. The Storm*, 2019), they further lay out the possibilities to build a critical, nature-oriented reading method for the younger readers. In her discussion of young adult literature, Barbro Bredesen Opset draws on ideas from sociology (Ulrich Beck’s cosmopolitanism) and ecocriticism to put forward the concept of ‘ecocosmopolitan empathy,’ which “calls attention to feelings of empathy and solidarity for the well-being of everyone on the planet, not just humans” (170). Focusing on Simon Stranger’s *Verdensredderne* (*The Rescuers of the World*, 2012), the chapter thus emphasizes the need of utilizing literary

texts for young adults in schools as a point of departure for discussions regarding how younger and older generations relate to the environmental issue.

Among the discussions on children's literature, Marcus Axelsson's contribution throws light on the possibility of converging the fields of translation studies and ecocriticism. With a case study on Helen Wells' *Vicki Finds the Answer* (1947) and its renderings in Norwegian and Swedish, Axelsson attentively iterates the role a translation has in conveying an ecological message. This perspective, not yet very common among ecocritical scholars, seems nonetheless to offer new understandings of the representation of nature and the environment in different cultures.

Viewing sustainable development as a concept which entails many complex dilemmas, every chapter of this book points out how literature provides the necessary context for teachers to approach sustainable development in the classroom. *Narratives of Sustainable Development. Perspectives for the Norwegian Subject* creates a bridge between academic research in environmental humanities and the pragmatically oriented and pedagogical dimension of teachers' work with students. This open-access volume can thus be an inspiring and guiding resource for teachers interested in integrating the sustainable development theme in their classes, but also as a significant reference for Scandinavian ecocriticism, to be used by scholars and researchers interested in this topic.

Works Cited

Utdanningsdirektoratet, "Interdisciplinary topics." 2019, www.udir.no/lk20/overordnetdel/prinsipper-for-laring-utvikling-og-danning/tverrfaglige-temaer/?lang=eng, Accessed 15 Jan. 2022.

Uwe Kuchler
Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen, Germany
uwe.kuechler@uni-tuebingen.de

Elin Kelsey, *Hope Matters: Why Changing the Way We Think is Critical to Solving the Environmental Crisis*. (Vancouver/Berkeley: Greystone Books, 2020), Kindle, approx. 228 pp.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ecozona.2022.13.2.4784>



Upon first examination, an insistence on doom, gloom, or catastrophe in (almost) all environmental matters seems a *fait accompli*. In her book *Hope Matters* (2020), Elin Kelsey takes up the baton from Rebecca Solnit's *Hope in the Dark* (2005). Solnit took up this issue in an attempt to embrace uncertainty rather than fear it. Kelsey is an accomplished U.S. scientist and conservation biologist, and an award-winning environmental writer, who publishes successful children's and young-adult literature. Her work centers on questions of hope and resilience in the context of environmental changes. To encourage others to share their success in marine biology, she coined the Twitter hashtag #OceanOptimism. Kelsey argues that there is plenty of support for hope as a better mindset through which to approach environmental aspects and narratives. *Hope Matters* takes up that concern. She points out the many detrimental effects of all-pervasive crisis talk, catastrophe journalism, and disaster pedagogy:

The vast scale, complexity, urgency, and destructive power of biodiversity loss, climate change, and countless other issues are real. Yet assuming a fatalistic perspective and positioning hopelessness as a foregone conclusion is not reality. It is a mindset, and it's a widespread and debilitating one. It not only undermines positive change, it squashes the belief that anything good could possibly happen. (Kelsey 317–374)

Kelsey's arguments show to what extent the perception of environmental issues suffers from problematic mindsets, language use, and narratives. People have been so enthralled by catastrophe that they cannot bring themselves to project a more optimistic, desirable vision for a future in which they also have agency. Reasons for environmentalists' persistent reluctance to fully embrace hope-and-success stories may lie in the fear of further inciting destruction by offering an excuse for complacency or shirking one's responsibilities.

In her opening chapters, Kelsey lays the foundation for working toward a more positive, hopeful mindset, while the later chapters of the book dive into concrete details on how to find solutions, or how people can become more active environmental agents. Kelsey argues, "By focusing our attention so heavily on what's broken, we are reinforcing a starting-line fallacy that makes it feel as if nothing useful has ever been accomplished and that all the hard work lies ahead" (113–116). The book makes the case for optimistic, resilient, diversified, and action-oriented mindsets that collate and present conclusive evidence from different disciplines, such as psychology, sociology, and philosophy. By

leaving behind despair or helplessness, readers could develop greater awareness for positive achievements that have an empowering, motivating, and almost “contagious” effect (593) on other people and communities.

Too often, learners associate environmental change with deep fear, rage, frustration, or desperation. This exposes just how dysfunctional communication about the environment has become: most mass media—yet also political motions and scientific findings—persistently confront people with negativity, behavioral reproaches, and moralistic questions. Kelsey’s first chapter, therefore, offers evidence and explanations of how people’s thoughts, attention, and perceptions shape their lives. Kelsey explores psychology and human-behavior studies in establishing the basis for a discussion on hope and despair (Chapter 1). Human psycho-emotional protective mechanisms function in such a way that people are pushed to desensitize themselves or outright deny (environmental) problems when relentlessly exposed to seemingly impossible challenges. Kelsey further explores the destructiveness of doom-and-gloom stories (Chapter 2). Although strong emotions may motivate action in the short term, they wear off quickly and leave behind bitterness. With this knowledge in mind, the proliferation of dystopian visions in our culture (and in school curricula and teaching materials) seems extraordinarily disconcerting. Therefore, Kelsey follows with assertions about the power of positive mindsets (Chapter 3). She shows that hope can nourish a sense of self-effectiveness rather than overpowering paralysis, thereby promoting individual agency as well as communal and societal changes. The recent surge of environmental activist movements across the globe must be seen as a case in point. The hope invoked here is not of the spiritual, helpless kind; instead, its positivity creates a “meaningful present” (880). Kelsey invokes a concept of hope that directs people toward their larger goals, despite seemingly insurmountable challenges—a hope that restores one’s value system and sense of community. Where the more traditional doom-and-gloom stories trigger anxiety and apathy, Kelsey demonstrates that hope-and-success stories can spread motivation, innovative narratives, and a sense of agency and activism. Yet, as Kelsey reminds us, at the same time, hope requires that people give up denial and “look truth in the eye” (898), which may seem particularly challenging in a historical moment like ours.

Kelsey explores the ways we tell stories about the environment, and she explains the ways in which gruesome metaphorical or iconographic images of environmental destruction can normalize despair (Chapter 4). Retelling the same doom-and-gloom stories through the dominant obsession with dystopian narratives or alarmist, anxiety-mongering cultural products motivates taking a narrow perspective on hopelessness. Kelsey insists that this lopsidedness of popular culture must be counteracted by a greater diversity of arguments, examples, and multi-perspectival narratives.

Many of the book arguments touch upon the question of scale. Profound changes to the environment are difficult to perceive, as they often occur over long periods or in restricted areas or populations. Understanding, contextualizing, and narrating these changes is a greater challenge, yet Kelsey succeeds impressively. The book is full of examples that beautifully illustrate significant changes and build enthusiasm for Kelsey’s turn towards the hopeful. Her work moreover argues that the digital transformation can

be put to positive use by connecting it with the environmental movement: digital apps allow for detailed observation of individual animals, thereby invigorating environmental protection. Kelsey also discusses research by indigenous groups and reliance on indigenous epistemologies, as well as innovations to international legal systems—for example, on behalf of non-human agents in the environment. Relying on other, more diverse perspectives on environmental issues would drive home the need for further exploration of biodiversity and the manifold entanglements of humankind with all other life forms, including the symbiotic bacteria in and on our bodies. This may include understanding forms of existence, previously overlooked, as active agents in this great web of being (Chapters 5 and 6). The growing demand for mindfulness and compassion, not only within human relationships but also within environmental movements, could help overcome societies' reluctance to adapt to environmental changes more swiftly and underscore the comprehensive cultural changes needed (Chapter 7). Several trends are sketched out that could ring in a new era of environmental thought. They include resorting to new (vegan) food supplies, managing waste or plastics differently, revamping transportation infrastructure, and further greening and re-wilding neighborhoods.

I cannot help but notice that many of Kelsey's concrete suggestions have recourse to technological fixes after all. Yet, I reckon that storytellers, journalists, humanities researchers, and, most importantly, educators and schoolteachers—the lens through which I have read this book—will have to bear the brunt of such work of change, inciting more positive, forward-looking, and activist mindsets, and encouraging learners to build their own hopeful, active lives and careers. As one of the many suggestions for accomplishing this, Kelsey refers to the rise of *solutions journalism* (2352), a line of reporting that gives attention to environmental success stories. Would it not be helpful to expand that notion to teaching and education? What would that look like? The task ahead, it seems to me, is for educators to become positive agents in the quest to find solutions to environmental problems, particularly when it comes to the language we use or the stories we tell about the environment and ourselves.

Sean Singh Matharoo
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, United States
smath006@email.unc.edu

Marco Caracciolo, *Narrating the Mesh: Form and Story in the Anthropocene* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2021), 240 pp.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ecoazona.2022.13.2.4856>



Marco Caracciolo's tour-de-force *Narrating the Mesh: Form and Story in the Anthropocene* eschews the empathy discourse informing neoliberal discussions about Anthropocenic climate crisis (Elvia Wilk) in favor of form. By demonstrating the tractability of affective patterning through human-nonhuman enmeshment in exquisite close readings of a diversity of speculative fiction, this deeply researched and meticulously argued book generously contributes to the ongoing project of rendering reality open to creative transformation.

Narrating the Mesh meets the urgent phenomenological call to “translate science into the human-scale embodied language of everyday perception” by defending the thesis that “narrative has the tools to perform such work of translation—and that these are, fundamentally, formal tools: strategies at the level of plot dynamics, character, consciousness representation, and metaphor, that mirror or integrate contemporary science in order to unsettle the primacy of the human-scale world” (12). Caracciolo's book is a rigorous defense of narrative form when confronting Anthropocenic climate crisis, a scientific and logical abstraction that is scalarly distinct from mundane experience. However, it brings these levels into asymmetrical correspondence, so it will be of interest to environmental humanities scholars. The author has done a great service by gifting us three powerful heuristics—nonlinearity, interdependency, and multiscale— that can be mobilized and augmented to grasp the causes and effects of Anthropocenic climate crisis as they manifest in narrative form. The book lays a solid foundation for future experiments in the burgeoning field of econarratology (see, for example, Erin James and Eric Morel's 2020 volume *Environment and Narrative*).

For instance, after engaging with it, I wonder about staging a dialogue between econarratology and ecosemiotics through a rehabilitation of French structuralism, the latter of which Caracciolo mentions in the excellent introduction, which primes readers to appreciate the value of reading narrative form today. I also wonder about bringing these tools to bear on the study of pareidolia, metonymy, and jouissance in French and francophone literature from a variety of historical periods and in a variety of methodological modes. Indeed, *Narrating the Mesh* achieves an admirably open accessibility amenable to realizing such possibilities. This openness is due in part to the author's neatly conceived, theoretically sophisticated, and utterly comparative method, which focuses on the links between narrative form, affect, and semiotics. Caracciolo explains, “the form of narrative is the configuration of emotionally charged circumstances created by the telling” (5). The formal textual strategies in which he is interested—

themselves based in neuroscientific and psychological development—modulate this configuration in novel ways. A key interlocutor is Timothy Morton, whose idea of enmeshment between human and nonhuman phenomena provides Caracciolo with a poetic figure for reading relationally outside the self/other binary.

Following the introduction is a theoretical chapter, “Complex Narrative in the Anthropocene,” devoted to understanding narrative form vis-à-vis complex systems. Caracciolo’s examples—which encompass literary fiction and contemporary film and comics—qualify the importance of fictional narrative in sensitizing people to the complexity of Anthropocenic climate crisis, which authorizes the apprehension of it as the “emergent agency of industrialized societies under a capitalist system” (93), prompting, hopefully, a push to dismantle the structures—for example, anthropological difference—responsible for generating it. The two chapters of Part I focus on nonlinearity and climate anxiety. Chapter 2, “The Form of the Butterfly,” contains beautiful readings of Julio Cortázar’s and Ted Chiang’s science-fictional short stories and Dale Pendell’s experimental novel *The Great Bay: Chronicles of the Collapse* (2010) that emphasize circular logic and discontinuous sampling, respectively, to challenge the psychological bias of linearity that forecloses responses to climate change that would not reiterate notions of technological and economic progress. This chapter should be of interest to scholars of science fiction studies and the fantastic. Chapter 3, “Negative Strategies and Nonlinear Temporality in Postapocalyptic Fiction,” examines Emily St. John Mandel’s *Station Eleven* (2014), Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006), and Colson Whitehead’s *Zone One* (2011) that emphasize negation in superimposing temporalities of the pre- and post-apocalyptic (story)worlds. As Caracciolo summarizes, such strategies “conflate the imagination of something and the poignant awareness of its absence” (81). Following Sartre’s psychology of imagination, he carefully delineates the experiential ramifications of this conflation, which involves a movement through any negation’s affirmative counterpart. This chapter should be of interest to scholars of apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic studies, in addition to theorists of negativity.

The two chapters of Part II focus on interdependency and enmeshment. Chapter 4, “Five Ways of Looking at Nonhuman Actants,” is a brilliant meditation on Algirdas Julien Greimas’s actantial narrative model of character, whose high structuralism Caracciolo convincingly critiques for remaining locked into a conception of language whose possibility condition is the subject/object binary. Thinking beyond the transitivity elevated by Greimas, Caracciolo moves toward enmeshment by upscaling Andrew Goatly’s ecolinguistics through the evacuation of the human subject, reciprocity, place qua character, and nominalization and abstraction in narrative progression in examples of contemporary fiction, including Jim Crace’s *Being Dead* (1999), Jeff VanderMeer’s Southern Reach trilogy (2014), and Kurt Vonnegut’s *Galápagos* (1985). Anticipating the possibility of a critique that nonhuman actants in narrative are simply metaphors, Caracciolo suggests nonhuman realities actually resist metaphorical (and anthropomorphic) appropriation, an idea developed in the next part. This chapter is of interest to scholars dedicated to problematizing the structuralism/poststructuralism binary. In Chapter 5, “Minding the Anthropocene,” Caracciolo studies three examples of the neuronovel—Richard Powers’s *The Echo Maker* (2006), Rivka Galchen’s (astonishing) *Atmospheric Disturbances* (2008), and Bruno Arpaia’s *Qualcosa, là fuori* (2016)—and evokes the ways in which human-nonhuman enmeshment surfaces in characters’

consciousnesses through internal focalization and first-person narration. Against the semantic (and metaphysical) oppositions constitutive of Greimasian structuralism, Caracciolo stresses the “human mind’s intrinsic attunement to nonhuman patterns” (117), a nonrepresentational attunement that foregrounds embodied, enactivist, and extended cognition. The stakes here are ontological inasmuch as the human/nonhuman binary is exhaustively problematized. This chapter should be of interest to scholars of the neurohumanities and of new materialisms.

The two parts of Part III focus on multiscalarity and metaphor. The sixth chapter, “Metaphorical Patterns in Anthropocene Fiction,” is a refreshing and heady collaboration between Caracciolo, Andrei Ionescu, and Ruben Fransoo. Combining computer-aided quantitative and qualitative methods, the authors analyze Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* (2003), Jeanette Winterson’s *The Stone Gods* (2007), and Ian McEwan’s *Solar* (2010), highlighting irony, looping temporality, and the grotesque, respectively, extending the scope of conventional interpretation. This chapter should be of interest to scholars of the digital humanities. Chapter 7, “Metaphor, Scale, and the Value of Conceptual Trouble,” locates metaphor’s value in its creation of emergent meanings by considering the consolidation of source and target in Le Guin’s “Vaster than Empires and More Slow” (1971) and Jonathan Lethem’s *As She Climbed across the Table* (1997). This chapter contains an insightful examination of Lambros Malafouris’s concept of isomorphic projection and Derek Woods’s concept of scale variance, which Caracciolo applies to make the remarkable argument that metaphorical language’s bidirectionality, in blurring distinct semantic domains, asymmetrically approximates the complex feedback loops of Anthropocenic climate crisis. This chapter should be of interest to ecocritics invested in language and matter.

The coda consists of a reading of excerpts from an interview conducted by Susannah Crockford with a writer and former environmental activist as a part of NARMESH, the European Research Council-funded project that helped generate *Narrating the Mesh*. The haunting interview focuses on deep time, metaphor, and embodiment, leading Caracciolo to surf the conceptual instability of the mesh, and its attendant affects. Thinking with and beyond literary form, on the last page, he ponders the project’s and book’s ambitions: “Literature can train readers to conceptualize with nuance their position with respect to more-than-human realities: if we could find ways to maximize the effects of this training on the collective imagination of the nonhuman in schools and other public contexts (a big ‘if,’ of course), we would have a powerful case for the ecological value of literary form” (186). From this reader’s perspective, the book’s scientific faith in the power of form successfully meets these lofty ambitions by pointing the way to an ecosemiology that would study the social function of living signs, leading us back, at last, to the philosophical problem of meaning under the sign of Anthropocenic climate crisis. A milestone of the environmental humanities, *Narrating the Mesh*, like the most interesting Weird fiction, confronts us with increasingly abstract formalisms before returning us to the mundane with a greater appreciation for narrative’s power to enact responsibility.

Works Cited

- Goatly, Andrew. "Green Grammar and Grammatical Metaphor, or Language and the Myth of Power, or Metaphors We Die By." *Journal of Pragmatics*, vol. 25, no. 4, 1996, pp. 537-60.
- Greimas, Algirdas Julien. *Sémantique structurale : recherche de méthode*. Larousse, 1966.
- James, Erin and Eric Morel, editors. *Environment and Narrative: New Directions in Econarratology*. The Ohio State University Press, 2020.
- Malafouris, Lambros. *How Things Shape the Mind: A Theory of Material Engagement*. MIT Press, 2013.
- Morton, Timothy. "Thinking Ecology: The Mesh, the Strange Stranger, and the Beautiful Soul." *Collapse Volume VI*, edited by Robin Mackay, Urbanomic, 2010, pp. 195-223.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. *L'imaginaire: Psychologie Phénoménologique de l'imagination*. Gallimard, 1940.
- Wilk, Elvia. "Trauma Machine: Rewiring empathy with virtual empathy." *Death by Landscape: Essays*, edited by Elvia Wilk, Soft Skull Press, 2022, pp. 192-208.
- Woods, Derek. "Scale Critique for the Anthropocene." *Minnesota Review*, vol. 83, 2014, pp. 133-42.

Vol.13, no. 2

Mission Statement

This journal of ecocriticism, founded in 2010, is a joint initiative of GIECO (Ecocritical Research Group in Spain) and EASLCE (European Association for the Study of Literature, Culture and Environment) and is published by the University of Alcalá as of 2014. Its principal aim is to further the study, knowledge and public awareness of the connections and relationship between literature, culture and the environment. As a virtual space, it provides a site for dialogue between researchers, theorists, creative writers and artists concerned with and by the environment and its degradation. Its pages are open to contributions on all literatures and cultures, but its special mission is to reflect the cultural, linguistic and natural richness and diversity of the European continent.

Contributions, which are subject to double-blind peer review, are accepted in five languages, in order to increase visibility and broaden the participation of scholars who are not part of the English-speaking world. *Ecozon@* publishes original research articles, in addition to creative writing, visual arts and book reviews. Publication is open to scholars interested in ecocriticism from around the world. We recommend membership of EASLCE to our contributors and readers, but it is not a requirement for either.

Ecozon@ is currently indexed in MLA, OAI, DOAJ, ERIH PLUS, Latindex, Dialnet, ISOC and EBUAH, the institutional repository of the University of Alcalá.

Editorial Board

Editor in Chief

Carmen Flys Junquera, Universidad de Alcalá, Spain

Associate Editor

Heather I. Sullivan, Trinity University, USA

Managing Editor

Gala Arias Rubio, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Spain

Guest Editors for Special Section Vol. 13, no. 2, 2022

Cajetan Iheka, University of Idaho, USA

Erin James, University of Alabama, USA

Juan Ignacio Oliva, Universidad de La Laguna, Spain

Book Review Editor

María Isabel Perez Ramos, Universidad de Oviedo, Spain

Book Review Assistant Editor

Sean Matharoo, University of North Carolina, USA

Creative Writing and Arts Editor

Elizabeth Tavella, University of Chicago, USA

Secretary

Irene Sanz Alonso, Universidad de Alcalá, Spain

Assistant Editors

Giulia Disanto, University of Salento, Italy

Madeleine Hugai, University of Augsburg, Germany

Margot Lauwers, University of Perpignan Via Domitia, France

Sofie Schrey, Northumbria University, UK

Louise Squire, University of Portsmouth, UK

Assistant Editor for Communications

Alejandro Rivero Vadillo, Universidad de Alcalá, Spain

Assistant Editor for Technological Assistance

Beatriz Lindo Mañas, IE University, Spain

Graphics Editorial Assistant

Ana Flys Junquera

Advisory Board

Dr. Hannes Bergthaller, National Chung-Hsing University, Taiwan

Dr. Margarita Carretero González, Universidad de Granada, Spain

Dr. Juan Carlos Galeano, Florida State University, USA

Dr. Catrin Gersdorf, Universität Würzburg, Germany

Dr. Terry Gifford, Universidad de Alicante / Bath Spa University, United Kingdom

Dr. Axel Goodbody, University of Bath, United Kingdom

Dr. Christa Grewe-Volpp, Universität Mannheim, Germany

Dr. Ursula K. Heise, UCLA, USA

Dr. Isabel Hoving, University of Leiden, Netherlands

Dr. Serenella Iovino, University of Torino, Italy

Dr. Richard Kerridge, Bath Spa University, United Kingdom

Dr. Lorraine Kerslake, Universidad de Alicante, Spain

Dr. Timo Maran, University of Tartu, Estonia

Dr. José Manuel Marrero Henríquez, Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Spain

Dr. Imelda Martin Junquera, Universidad de León, Spain

Dr. Sylvia Mayer, Universität Bayreuth, Germany

Dr. Serpil Oppermann, Hacettepe University, Turkey

Dr. Christopher Oscarson, Brigham Young University, USA

Dr. Stephanie Posthumus, McGill University, Canada

Dr. Luis I Prádanos, Miami University, USA

Dr. Roland Racevskis, University of Iowa, USA

Dr. Francisco Sáez de Adana Herrero, Universidad de Alcalá, Spain

Dr. Catriona Sandilands, York University, Canada

Dr. Scott Slovic, University of Idaho, USA

Dr. Diana Villanueva Romero, Universidad de Extremadura, Spain

Dr. Alexa Weik von Mossner, University of Klagenfurt, Austria

Issue published 29 October 2022

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ecozona.2022.13.2>

Reviewers for issues 13.1 and 13.2

Jada Ach, Arizona State University, USA
Santiago Acosta, UC Davis, USA
Başak Ağin, TED University, Turkey
Roman Bartosch, University of Cologne, Germany
Kylie Crane, University of Rostock, Germany
Simon C. Estok, Sungkyunkwan University, South Korea
Gabriele Dürbeck, Universität Vechta, Germany
Richmond Eustis, Nicholls State University, USA
Daniele Fioretti, Miami University, USA
Carolyn Fornoff, Cornell University, USA
Steve Gadet
Jennifer Garcia Peacock, Davidson College, USA
Erika Gault, University of Arizona, USA
Axel Goodbody, University of Bath, United Kingdom
Louise Green, Stellenbosch University, South Africa
Christa Grewe-Volpp, Universität Mannheim, Germany
Felicity Hand, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain
Kwame Harrison, Virginia Tech, USA
Cajetan Iheka, University of Idaho, USA
Moritz Ingwersen, Universität Konstanz, Germany
Erin James, University of Alabama, USA
Rebecca Jarman, University of Leeds, United Kingdom
Oliver Kautny, Universität zu Köln, Germany
Lorraine Kerslake, Universidad de Alicante, Spain
Kathryn Jo Kirkpatrick, Appalachian State University, USA
Ursula Kluwick, Universität Bern, Switzerland
Tatiana Konrad, University of Vienna, Austria
Montserrat López Mújica, Universidad de Alcalá, Spain
Martin Lütke, Freie Universität Berlin, Germany
Imelda Martin Junquera, Universidad de León, Spain
Sylvia Mayer, Universität Bayreuth, Germany
Emily McGiffin, University College London, United Kingdom
Caitlin McIntyre, the State University of New York, USA
John Melillo, University of Arizona, USA
Stephen Mexal, California State University, USA
Brendon Nicholls, University of Leeds, United Kingdom
Juan Ignacio Oliva, Universidad de La Laguna, Spain

M^a Isabel Pérez Ramos, Universidad de Oviedo, Spain
Aaron Pinnix, Universität Konstanz, Germany
Esther Pujolràs, Universitat de Lleida, Spain
Alejandro Rivero Vadillo, Universidad de Alcalá, España
Irene Sanz Alonso, Universidad de Alcalá, Spain
Scott Slovic, University of Idaho, USA
Heather I. Sullivan, Trinity University, USA
Theresa Summer, Universität Bamberg, Germany
Otilia Teodorescu, Universität Konstanz, Germany

Copyright Notice

Authors who publish with this journal agree to the following terms:

- a. Authors retain copyright and grant the journal right of first publication with the work simultaneously licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution License](#) that allows others to share the work with an acknowledgement of the work's authorship and initial publication in this journal (CC BY-NC for articles and CC BY-NC-ND for creative work) unless author requests otherwise.
- b. Authors are able to enter into separate, additional contractual arrangements for the non-exclusive distribution of the journal's published version of the work (e.g., post it to an institutional repository or publish it in a book), with an acknowledgement of its initial publication in this journal.
- c. Authors are permitted and encouraged to post their work online (e.g., in institutional repositories or on their website) prior to and during the submission process, as it can lead to productive exchanges, as well as earlier and greater citation of published work.

Cover image: Carolina Caycedo .

©All rights reserved

Published by



Sponsored by



Institutional Address

Carmen Flys Junquera
Editor in Chief
Instituto Franklin

Colegio de Trinitarios
C/ Trinidad, 1
28801 Alcalá de Henares
Madrid (Spain)