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Marija Grech, *Spectrality and Survivance: Living the Anthropocene* (Lanham, Maryland: Littlefield and Rowman, 2022), 184 pp.

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As anyone working in the environmental humanities can attest, there is perhaps no conceptual framework at once as ubiquitous and as contested as the Anthropocene. Obscure outside of Earth science just twenty years ago, the Anthropocene's meteoric rise has inspired countless essays, books, conferences—even entire journals. Predictably, dismantling the Anthropocene concept has emerged as its own subindustry: for every study proclaiming the utility of the Anthropocene for humanists, there is another that exposes flaws in the Anthropocene. In this context, one might wonder: is the Anthropocene still useful? Marija Grech contends that it *is*—just not in the ways advertised by its earliest champions. As she explains in the opening pages of her monograph *Spectrality and Survivance*, declaring that we are in the Anthropocene is a gesture of “future-retrospectivity,” an act of anticipating what today's legacy will have been, as viewed by anonymous geologists many years hence. Televisual renderings of this scenario are often postapocalyptic; the camera pans empty landscapes, whose desolation (supposedly) startles the audience into pro-environment action. However, much as it is impossible to imagine what it is like to be dead, it is impossible consume the spectacle of “life after people” from a non-human viewpoint; thus, future-retrospection “does not open our eyes to something outside ourselves” but rather “holds up a mirror for us to continue to see ourselves in” (9). Worse, projecting the present onto an unknowable future “transforms this future into a reflection of the present, a reflection that serves to assert and affirm the significance and centrality of human presence upon the earth instead of radically challenging it” (10).

*Spectrality and Survivance* thus builds on materialist critiques of the Anthropocene's anthropocentrism. What differentiates *Spectrality and Survivance* from these studies is that it also utilizes deconstructive philosophy, drawing on Jacques Derrida to propose a materialist reinterpretation of the “rock record”—that is, the geologic strata laid down over billions of years from which today's geologic timescale is derived. This is a provocative gambit: ecocriticism has historically denounced poststructuralist theory as inattentive, or even hostile, to the more-than-human world, citing its dogmatic linguistic constructivism. However, Grech believes that Derrida's work “radically reconceptualizes notions of writing and textuality, pushing these concepts beyond any merely human, cultural, linguistic, or semiotic

frame of reference” (20). In this way, Derrida points toward a rereading of the Anthropocene focused not on determining humankind’s “signature [geologic] trace” but on geochemical traces themselves, “forms of non-human inscription that share a diffractive relationship with language and discourse—forms . . . that can and should be recognized as ‘having significance’ even though they may not *signify* anything at all” (106) from an anthropocentric perspective.

*Spectrality and Survivance* opens with an analysis of the “spectral times” we inhabit, an era in which the knowledge of our impending demise haunts the present. While forms of “*future-retro-vision*” (5) date to the nuclear age, this mode of thinking is exemplified by Anthropocene discourse, in which the present is always-already a future memory of itself. To put it in Derridean terms, the temporal present, like every form of presence, inevitably points to its non-presence, and is therefore constituted by a relation to something other than itself. Grech sees exciting potential in Derrida’s concepts of *différance* and the “trace”, ideas that invite a rethinking of presence and absence as these terms relate to time and to definitions of biological life. For Grech, Derrida’s famous observation that there is “nothing outside the text” does not mean material reality is constructed; rather, Derrida’s notion of *general textuality* explodes false binaries including nature/culture and human/non-human, thus paving the way toward a deconstructive materialism in which there is no separation between human language and the outside world, or between the living and non-living. A deconstructive method therefore unsettles conventional definitions of “survival”: as Grech explains, survival, or Derrida’s “survivance”, calls attention to the ways in which “internal cycles of life and death that exist *within* an organism are always entangled in *external* intra-active processes . . . through which the organism survives and maintains itself . . .” (96). These processes include non-living matter, such as the radioactive isotopes felt by most geologists to mark the start of the Anthropocene. Ultimately, Grech proposes that instead of serving a merely semiotic function, the lingering traces of nuclear technologies enact a survivance that is both similar to and bound up in biological processes. These isotopes are not alive—but neither are they “some dead inert mark that simply points back to what was” on Earth (118). As part of “entangled cascading mutations of decomposition and recomposition” engaged in their own ongoing acts of inscription “in and with their environments,” radioactive isotopes challenge us to rethink signification and difference, including the distinction between ‘animacy’ and ‘inanimacy’ that so often justifies the exploitation of natural resources, creatures, and even particular groups of humans (118).

*Spectrality and Survivance* is thought-provoking, and while some of it retreads territory covered by earlier studies, Grech’s application of deconstruction to Anthropocene discourse is innovative. She convincingly demonstrates that the linguistic turn can provide useful tools to materialist ecocriticism, and to ecocriticism in general. Also, *Spectrality and Survivance* is well-written: Grech’s explanations of Derridean thought, radioactivity, and other complex concepts are clear and efficient. If I have one quibble with this book, it is that Grech shies away from imagining how “modes of thinking, speaking, and writing that disrupt the concept of *presence* itself” might be disbursed outside the academy (130). To environmental humanists, the Anthropocene might seem passe or overworked—but, if my undergraduate students are any gage, many people are unaware of the word “Anthropocene”, let alone

scholars' internecine debates over when it started, what it means, and whether it can inspire global cooperation on decarbonization. I find intriguing Grech's vision of a world in which humans recognize the myriad "material, biological, and discursive entanglements" that we inhabit. I wonder whether there are, for example, experimental artists whose work points toward such a shift in values, or collective rituals that celebrate humans' entanglement in various biological and material realities. Still, Grech's argument is an important first step toward new habits of mind, and one that I anticipate other scholars will build upon.