# Entangled Existence: Posthuman Ecologies in Nathaniel Rich's "Hermie"

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## Abstract

The posthuman shift signaled by what Latour in *Down to Earth* refers to as "The New Climatic Regime" (91) requires that we sober up to the entanglement of our existence and to its irremissible dependency on the triumph of other actors in the non-human world. Considering the extent of the anthropogenic climate disruption, this shift indicates a deeper ontological change from the primacy of the *cogito* that has dominated our relations to the non-human world to its immanence or, in other words, a giant, backbreaking leap from human to posthuman ecologies. Departing from a holistic approach to environmental crisis and different theoretical topologies associated with Latour and new materialism, I will first examine the transformative nature of this shift, while also broaching new ethical imaginaries that may be required by the imperatives of our changing climate. The affective evasions and resistances this shift inevitably produces will then be explored through Nathaniel Rich's short story "Hermie" (2011) that focuses on bad faith with regard to climate crisis, its demands within the academic community and its commitment to biocentric change. In order to develop an alternate ecological reading of the story, I will use Kristeva's conceptual repertoire as well as the alternative economies of Deleuzoguattarian thought that will help me reveal the extent of self-deception climate emergency elicits in order to maintain the authorship of the *cogito* and the imperatives of our economic existence. Rich's short story reveals just how impossible the ontological change we face appears to be and how ingrained and jealously kept our prerogatives are. And yet, it is precisely these prerogatives that will have to give way to the new demands of our entangled present.

*Keywords:* Ecocriticism, entanglement, the non-human, ecoethics, becoming-animal.

## Resumen

El cambio poshumano señalado por lo que Latour en *Down to Earth* se refiere como "El Nuevo Régimen Climático" (91) requiere que seamos conscientes del entramado de nuestra existencia y de su irrevocable dependencia del triunfo de otros actores del mundo no-humano. Considerando el alcance de la perturbación climática antropogénica, este cambio indica una transformación ontológica más profunda de la primacía del *cogito* que ha dominado nuestras relaciones con el mundo no-humano, a su inmanencia o, en otras palabras, un salto gigantesco y oneroso de ecologías humanas a ecologías poshumanas. Partiendo de un enfoque holístico de la crisis ambiental y de diferentes topologías teóricas relacionadas con Latour y el nuevo materialismo, primero examinaré la naturaleza transformadora de este cambio, abordando nuevos imaginarios éticos que pueden ser requeridos por los imperativos de nuestro clima cambiante. Las evasiones y resistencias afectivas inevitablemente producidas por este cambio se explorarán a través del cuento "Hermie" (2011) de Nathaniel Rich, que se centra en la mala fe con respecto a la crisis climática, sus demandas dentro de la comunidad académica y su compromiso con el cambio biocéntrico. Para desarrollar una lectura ecológica alternativa de la historia, utilizaré el repertorio conceptual de Kristeva, así como las economías alternativas del pensamiento Deleuzoguattario, que me ayudarán a revelar el alcance del autoengaño provocado por la emergencia climática por mantener la autoría del *cogito* y los imperativos de nuestra existencia económica. El cuento de Rich revela cuán imposible parece ser el cambio ontológico al que nos enfrentamos y cuán arraigadas y celosamente conservadas están nuestras prerrogativas. Y, sin

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embargo, son precisamente estas prerrogativas las que tendrán que ceder ante las nuevas exigencias de nuestro abigarrado presente.

*Palabras clave*: Ecocrítica, entramado, lo no-humano, ecoética, devenir animal.

> *The Earth—the Deterritorialized, the Glacial, the giant Molecule—is a body without organs. This body without organs is permeated by unformed, unstable matters, by flows in all directions, by free intensities or nomadic singularities, by mad or transitory particles.*
>
> (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*)

The fact that the ecological impact of our collective existence since the industrial revolution has been so extensive that it has affected the geological history of our planet to the point of irreversible change is one of today's most exigent expressions of modernity and its failure. In Latour's terms, our time is now characterised by a new "wicked universality" that frames all of our projects and it "consists in feeling that the ground is in the process of giving way" (8, 9). Latour's metaphor, however, is intimately related with the abusive nature of modernity and the increasing risks associated with the arrogative demands of late capitalism that powers our relentless charge towards planetary exhaustion. Producing unsustainable desires that feed on their own hungers, global capitalism, as Clark argues in *Ecocriticism on the Edge*, has now reached "a threshold of self-destruction but also of self-deception, as the accelerating conversion of all natural entities into forms of human capital becomes more and more patently in denial of ecological realities and limits" (2). However, as Morton suggests, this "denial [is] understandable" since global warming fundamentally undermines and "pose[s] numerous threats to individualism, nationalism, anti-intellectualism, racism, speciesism, anthropocentrism, you name it. Possibly even capitalism itself" ( 21). I will argue that this denial has its foundation in the hubris of human cognition that persistently disavows its own objectivity or the fact of its own inscription in the world it regards as a playground for its endless colonizing projects. What climate emergency makes manifest, however, is not only the irremissible entanglement of our existence but also the "wicked," auto-immune logic of our own prerogatives that belie the fact that we are the object of our own denial. What is sorely needed is a posthuman shift that desacralizes the human subject.[1] Instead of departing from the authority of our cognition, we need to depart from the fact of its immanence, from the concession that the human subject is neck-deep in the world it towers above.

[1] In Braidotti's terms, this shift also constitutes a "qualitative leap" towards a different subject of knowledge, developing on the heels of "convergence of […] posthumanism on the one hand and post-anthropocentrism on the other," where "[t]he former focuses on the critique of the humanist ideal of 'Man' as the allegedly universal measure of all things, while the latter criticizes species hierarchy and human exceptionalism" (31–32).



 

Proceeding from environmental holism and Nathaniel Rich's (2011) evocative short story "Hermie," I intend to explore the nature of this shift, focusing, in particular, on the extent of self-deception it entails in order to maintain the ecological disruption produced by the imperatives of our economic existence.[2] In order to develop an alternate understanding of our resistance to the ecological demands of the present, I will first focus on the entanglement of our existence with the non-human world[3] and on its implications for our notions of agency and human freedom. Mobilizing Latour's register of destratified agentic regimes as well as the implicit topologies of new materialism, I will also consider the corrosive significance of human privilege in terms of its ecological implications while, at the same time, broaching new ethical imaginaries required by the demands of what Latour refers to as "the New Climatic Regime" (91).

The theoretical mainstay of my approach will provide me with a productive departure point to both reaffirm the significance of the posthuman shift and critically consider our resistance to its exigency. Valorising regimes of the developed world have historically determined non-human existence as passive and possessible, justifying its appropriation as instrumental to the prerogatives of human desire while denying its inherent intelligence and agentic capacity.[4] The new regime of climate emergency, however, requires us to sober up to the fact that agency is not exclusively ours but is instead extended horizontally across the entire plane of entangled existence where our own vulnerability is dependent on the triumph of other non-human actors. In order to better understand our reluctance to accept the challenges of the new climate realities articulated in Rich's short story, what the article will thus examine first is the nature of this entanglement that reveals both our frailty and our dependency on the non-human world while also considering new ethical concerns

[2] Economic growth is tethered to environmental trauma because it is incompatible with the notion of conservationism and because it can never offset its impact and pay its debt through mitigation policies since growth is limited by the regenerative capacity of our planet. The limit stress, furthermore, is structurally inherent to capitalist forms of production where excess value is attained through production of limits and scarcity. Depletion of resources, in fact, both increases demand that powers capitalism and revitalises capitalist entrepreneurial strategies to create new desires that create new exploitable markets. Economic growth is, thus, reliant on depletion and trauma.

[3] This entanglement, as Barad argues in "Troubling Times/s and Ecologies of Nothingness," is already present in the forgotten etymological indices of our jealously guarded categories that only ostensibly signify our separation from non-human world: "Landscapes," they write, "are not stages, containers, or mere environments form human and non-human actors. Landscape is not merely visually akin to a body; it is the skin of the earth. Land is not property or territory; it is a time-being marked by its own wounds and vitality […] Etymological entanglements already hint at a troubling of assumed boundaries between allegedly different kinds: Earth, *humus* (from Latin), is part of the etymology of *human*, and similarly, *Adam* (Hebrew: [hu]man[kind]) derives from *adamah* (Hebrew: ground, land, earth), giving lie to assertions of firm distinctions between human and nonhuman, suggesting a relationship of kin rather than kind […]" (238).

[4] The fact that matter and other non-human actors could all be considered as *active* participants in a self-regulating, complex system of energy flows and intentional molecular agents all working collectively in order to run a tight but unpredictable operation called *life*. Cf. also, Diana Coole in *New Materialisms*, where she argues that "a common sense, naturalistic attitude which takes for granted a natural world 'out there' as an essentially given collection of objects" is far from the only way to relate to physical realities that are "saturated with the agentic capacities and existential significance" (92).

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that will have to take the full measure of our entangled present into account. Indeed, as Barad suggests, our "entanglements require/inspire a new sense of a-count-ability, a new arithmetic, a new calculus of response-ability" ("Quantum Entanglements" 251).

The holistic focus on the objective mesh of our existence and on the need for posthuman ontologies in the first part of the article will also implicitly account for the resistances they produce despite our cognitive awareness of their necessity. These resistances will be explored through Rich's short story, "Hermie," that focuses on complicities and self-deceptions of our academic communities, understood to pursue biocentric change. I will focus on bad faith, in particular here, or our inability to tolerate the phenomenological sincerity of our own frailty,[5] which is implied by the very fact of our entangled existence, our being riveted to the world we presume to transcend.

Rich's short story reflects the depths of our self-deception in this regard as well as the inherent incapacities of scientific community and knowledge alone to effect the necessary change. The acute awareness of climate emergency—and the overdue concession that its causes reside in the fact that our rights far exceed our duties—is not sufficient today if we are not, at the same time, emotionally engaged with its associated risks. The same scientific detachment that provides us with the accurate estimates of pre-industrial and current levels of PPM, of rise in global average temperatures and sea levels, of anthropogenic disruptions to carbon cycles, habitats and ecosystems, also produces an apparent dissonance between our cognitive and affective engagement. The dragging temporality of climate change coupled with the non-linear fallout of its impact that perhaps disables our emotional commitment is also what enables our self-deception regarding the persistent incapacity to see our own exceptionalism as only one, small intersection in a vast mesh of non-human agencies that determine our existence. Through its use of magic realism that opens up a zone of indiscernibility between our fantasies and our realities, the short story articulates affective incursions of abject realities into the symbolic assemblages of scientific knowledge. In order to disengage a chunk of this affective material that emerges in the story, I will use Kristeva's conceptual strategies as well as the alternate economies of Deleuzoguattarian thought that will provide me with the necessary critical foothold to leverage alternate ecological readings of the story. Although not always explicitly concerned with ecological traumas and their implications for the recent developments in eco-critical theory, their writing can yet be leveraged to

[5] Considering the disproportionate impact of climate change, frailty, as Nixon rightly argues in *Slow Violence*, has to be considered in terms of intersectionality, since poor and BIPOC communities, the "people lacking resources" both in the Global south and north, are "the principal casualties of slow violence" (4) that characterises environmental degradation and the current policies of "off-loading [environmental] risk onto 'backword' communities that are barely visible" (66). However, frailty, here, is seen in eco-phenomenological terms and refers rather to the blindness of the human subject to the pre-reflective entanglement of its being with the non-human world. The fact that it should be understood as "a relational embodied and embedded, affective and accountable entity and not only as a transcendental consciousness" (Braidotti 31).



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further develop the ongoing discussions about the need for an alternate understanding of the non-human world. With its theoretical focus on the demands of our entangled present and a subsequent close reading of their imaginative expression in "Hermie," the article thus aims to contribute to the established legitimacies for posthuman ontologies, while also broaching different possibilities for thinking about global responsibility in the time of climate crisis.

**The Demands of the Entangled Present**

Our commitment to climate change today seems to rely on countless scientific reports testifying to the systematic anthropogenic eviscerations of our global ecological resilience that, in most respects, still fail to engage our affective life.[6] "What we desperately need," as Morton argues, "is an appropriate level of shock and anxiety concerning […] *the* ecological trauma of our age, the very thing that defines the Anthropocene as such" (8-9; emphasis added). Indeed, this absence of emotional engagement, the fact that my heart and soul have not been mobilised despite my increasing awareness that they should be, may also account for my unwillingness to commit to the exigencies of climate change. After all, the same scientific confidence that tells me to stop at the precipice, to reassess and change my oblivious ways is the very same that has led me headlong to the precipice. The imperatives of modernisation, of historical progress and the growth dogmas of our ideologies that focus on the economic valorisation of the biosphere call for a clear detachment from the non-human existence in order to make it available as a resource for the infinite ventures of our expanding economic narratives. But, with each new headline of biophysical degradation and each new epiphany of our own increasing vulnerability, the impossibility of this detachment is made more apparent. If the non-human existence no longer resides outside our own or, as Latour suggests, no longer constitutes "the framework for human action, it is because it *participates* in that action" (42). And yet, what we know and what we feel has never been farther apart. Kerridge sees this particular loss of pathos in our commitment not to die intestate but to leave something behind as a defence mechanism he refers to as "splitting":

> the sort of 'intellectualization' that separates 'abstract awareness of the crisis from real emotional engagement.' Individuals use splitting as a coping-response, while the public culture of industrial society uses it to suppress our awareness of material connections […] [*For*] *to think about climate change, really, would [have to] be transformative*, and the conditions of palpable emergency that would force the transformation have not yet arrived. ("Ecocritical Approaches" 364; emphasis added)

[6] In *Living in Denial: Climate Change, Emotions, and Everyday Life*, Kari Norgaard associates this affective numbness in our relation to climate change with "double reality" (5) that increasingly characterises our lives. "In one reality," there is the familiar, "the collectively constructed sense of normal everyday life" while in the other, half-suppressed and unfamiliar, there is "the troubling knowledge of increasing automobile use, polar ice caps melting, and the predictions of future weather scenarios" (5). Climate disruption, then, as she suggests, "becomes both deeply disturbing and completely submerged, simultaneously unimaginable and common knowledge" (xix).

To interiorise the traumas of climate change fully, in other words, may require more than just my faith in technological antidotes, which, in the end, only constitute our global strategies to stabilise capitalism and enable consumerism to continue unchecked. What may be required is the new reanimated earth, where the debris of colonialism reflected in endless pursuits of territorialities and stratified regimes of privilege that produce and determine our relations with the non-human world have been displaced and reconsidered. This change, however, would have a profound significance for our assemblage of the human subject that has been able to emerge as a category capable of agency and self-determination only against the negative foundation of its exploitable non-human other. Our entangled present, however, testifies precisely to the impossibility of self-determination or the fact that our agency is determined by our immanence to non-human constituencies of our existence. What constitutes the condition of possibility for human freedom, in other words, is also what disables its exercise. Rather than manifesting freedom, our entangled present, as Latour argues, manifests instead "the newly rediscovered value of dependency" (83). The fact that non-human ecologies, far from constituting a mere backdrop for exercise of our freedom, participate *equally* in production of life, calls for a reassessment of dominant ontological regimes and for a global redistribution of agencies. It is time to reanimate the planet:

> If the composition of the air we breathe depends on living beings, the atmosphere is no longer simply the environment in which living beings are located and in which they evolve; it is, in part, a result of their actions. In other words, there are not organisms on one side and an environment on the other, but a coproduction by both. *Agencies* are redistributed. (76; emphasis in original)

The new reanimated earth that Latour calls for articulates suppressed enunciations of abject or feral realities,[7] where agencies are no longer limited to territorial expressions of anthropocentric divisions, but are metonymically distributed across the entire plane of existence. For Latour, however, the redistribution of agencies is also a pragmatic concern, exigent both in terms of our need to sober up to the entanglement of our existence and, by the same token, to its irremissible dependency on other actors that the phenomenology of climate change makes explicit. "Terrestrials," as Latour refers to the new "earthbound" humanity,

> have a very delicate problem of discovering how many other beings they need *in order to subsist*. It is by making this list that they sketch out their *dwelling places* [...] and this [list] applies to workers as well as to birds in the sky, to Wall Street executives as well as to bacteria in the soil, to forests as well as to animals [...] We are not seeking agreement among all these overlapping agents, but we are *learning to be dependent on them*. (87; emphasis added)

[7] This articulation of suppressed non-human agencies is precisely what Ghosh, in *The Great Derangement*, identifies as the 'environmental uncanny' (30–33). Our planet has turned strange and menacing, although it is old and familiar and should not cause us anxiety because of our familiarity with it, because we have already established a meaning for it that we rely on. But our old Mother Earth, as it is usually referred to in patriarchal imaginaries, has now acquired a doubleness and uncertainty that puts in question our previous mastery of her rituals.



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Our dependency on global cycles and fragile imbrications of earth systems, however, is only another articulation of our unconditional inscription in the mesh of interobjective relations.[8] The fact that the gradual disappearance of bees as pollinators and indispensable agents in nitrogen and carbon cycles can lead to a whole-scale collapse of entire ecosystems and eventually to mass extinctions due to reduced levels of oxygen is an indication of both the precariousness of life and the fact that life is always-already consigned to another in a fragile terrain of non-human relations that make it possible. The fact that global carbon concentrations are to a large extent determined by the Amazon rainforest which, in turn, is regulated by the ocean temperature that is directly related to carbon emissions whose increasing levels contribute to its depletion indicates our own dependency on the self-regulated (a)biotic systems working tirelessly to enable a small but wonderous enterprise that we consider as our own existence. Our own inscription in the Amazon rainforest is also manifested directly through our aggressive deforestation practices to secure monocultures that are used in food manufacturing and cosmetics. These practices, in turn, decimate local biodiversity and the indigenous lives dependent on it, bulldoze natural habitats and established ecosystems, causing indiscriminate congestion of species that ultimately leads to more frequent outbreaks and pandemics, while also releasing extensive quantitates of sequestered carbon that affects the ocean temperature which regulates the vigour of the Amazon rainforest. In other words, from the innermost depths of the soil to the highest reaches of the atmosphere, it is all one interobjective system in which our dependency on the triumph of others is irremissibly entrusted.

What we have persistently disavowed in order to survive is, in fact, what constitutes the condition of our survival. The non-human existence is the end, rather than the means to an end. Nature, or the 'natural world,' as it were—as if there were another 'world' separate from mine, one which I am not a part of, and then my world, towering in transcendence above it—has always been considered as a 'resource' or a *means* of support, be it as a source of comfort and solace in the Romantic and patriarchal imaginary, or as a primary commodity, in the imaginary of progress that has dominated all other narratives since the Enlightenment. After centuries of reification, however, what is required is a concession of there being only one reanimated 'world' to which I am *immanent* and in which I am the 'resource' or a *means* of support. The imperatives of this new imaginary, in other words, require a posthuman shift from the privilege or transcendence of my being to its immanence. Evernden's suggestion that "we are not *in* an environmental crisis, but *are* the environmental crisis" (134; emphasis in original) implies not only the anthropogenic nature of climate change but also, and, perhaps, more crucially, its ontological aspect.[9]

[8] A system of interrelated objects that *includes* intersubjectivity as only one of its local expressions. The integrative relations constituting this mesh, however, are not always linear or unambiguous but often indexical and phenomenologically erratic. See also Morton 83.

[9] For Evernden, it is the sovereignty and the separation of the positing subject or the "I" that "defines relationship to nature out of existence" (134, 135).



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It is us. It is who we *are*. It is thus not a question of yet another regime of being to be embraced in order to bail out a dead planet and ensure the continuity of our economic existence, but of transformative ontological change towards immanence that would enunciate the new reanimated earth and introduce new relations of ethical commitment where our responsibility for the other's finitude also includes non-human existence. As Worster claims in *The Wealth of Nature*:

> We are facing a global crisis today, *not because of how ecosystems function but rather because of how our ethical systems function*. Getting through the crisis requires understanding our impact on nature as precisely as possible, but even more, it requires understanding those ethical systems and using that understanding to reform them (27; emphasis added).

The reanimated, entangled world of posthuman ontologies has to count on a new, reformed ethics, where the "other," to whom I am indebted beyond my finitude, to paraphrase and go beyond Levinas, is not exclusively human but extends across the entire terrain of feral agencies, from the forest floor and the organic matter in the soil to the thin blue glow that cradles the planet and sustains life. Entanglement, as Barad suggests, is not just an "intertwining of separate entities, but rather [an] irreducible relation of responsibility. There is no fixed dividing line between 'self' and 'other'," they write. "Cartesian cuts are undone." The other "is irreducibly and materially bound to, [as in] *threaded through*, the 'self'" ("Quantum Entanglements" 265; emphasis added).

In "Writing Home," Llewelyn argues that a "way must be found to include nonhuman beings among the others to which ethical responsibility is owed" (176). A way that can begin is by acceding to what he refers to as "blank ecology," which "restrict[s] ones' attention temporarily only to existents *as such*" rather than their predicates, "allowing ourselves [thus] to be struck by the consideration that for any given existent its existence is a good […]" (177; emphasis in original). Blank ecology could thus open an alternate route towards a posthuman ethics that takes the implications of our entangled present into account and departs instead from deterritorialized ontologies enunciated at the limits of human privilege. To be struck by the full measure of the present is to be struck by one's own immanence.

The realisation of our own frailty, however, that places in question the dominant ontological regimes indigenous to our social and economic existence will inevitably produce resistances and affective evasions that also enable our self-deception. Rich's short story, "Hermie," that I will now discuss, exposes the depths of our blindness in this regard while also revealing the tenacity of our birthrights and our dominant imaginaries that continue to shape the horizons of our present.

**The Mesh of Being and its Disavowal**

Although literature could often be seen as a howling and transformative response of imagination to the exigencies of the human condition, in *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh argues that there is a missed encounter in present-day literary

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awareness between the significance of our imaginative response and the gravity of the threat we face: "[T]he mere mention of the subject," he suggests, "is often enough to relegate a novel or a short story to the genre of science fiction. It is as though in the literary imagination climate change were somehow akin to extraterrestrials or interplanetary travel" (7).[10] In Ghosh's terms, this inability of imaginative resources to produce the realities of climate change within the constituencies of fictional realism would thus be symbolic of our general inability to consider climate change as other than fantastic or "extraterrestrial," something out of this world rather than something agentic in it. To this extent, fictional narratives that represent the "improbability" of climate change in canonised tropes of (post)apocalyptic accounts and dystopian fictional futures, participate in the reproduction of the denialist imaginaries they may have set out to challenge. If the majority of the narratives that can articulate the extent of ecological trauma emerge from an ecopoetics focused solely on the "improbable" and the "unreal," then the reality of climate emergency that enjoins us to reconsider the significance of all human enterprise may be just as "improbable" and "unreal," part of extravagant, hallucinatory future, a caveat at best, that consolidates our detachment and sustains our hubris.

Posthuman ecology, however, requires a genuine capitulation to the imperatives of the new ontological regimes that climate emergency has made manifest, calling into question not only the extractivist fantasies of petro-modernity but also its cohort assumptions of human agency and individual freedom as historical signifiers of privilege.[11] Our salvation presupposes, in fact, the opposite: a global transition from egology to ecology and an ethical audacity of submission to break free from a human place of infinite rights to a posthuman place of infinite responsibilities. The cost of such collective self-abnegation, however, may be too high to justify, which may also account for the current paralysis of ecopolitics reflected in the impasse between our extensive knowledge concerning climate change and our simultaneous ethical ambivalence with regard to it.

In light of this, Rich's short story "Hermie" articulates precisely this lack of transitivity between our intimate knowledge of climate disruption and our ability to act with respect to it. Departing from Ghosh's terms, "Hermie," however, is both "improbable" and "unreal," in its use of narrative repertoires of magic realism that manifest the impact of climate disruption, and overwhelmingly "real," in its vivid

[10] However, the missed encounter I am referring to in Ghosh's work may be partially due to literary critics and readers themselves, since many writers have—unwittingly, no doubt—responded to Ghosh's call. Climate anxiety is explicitly present in Jenny Offill's *Weather* (2020), for instance, deep ecology in indigenous writing of Louise Erdrich's *The Night Watchmen* (2020) and the work of Leslie Marmon Silko, but, also, Helon Habila's petrofiction, *Oil on Water*, published prior to *The Great Derangement*, in 2010, or Ken Saro-Wiwa's work that both deal with the environmental and political impact of petro-imperialism in the Niger Delta. Ghosh is, thus, painting this encounter between literature and ecology with rather broad brushstrokes and should be understood in these terms.

[11] I see agency as a historically human capacity to transcend its material conditions of existence. It is, in the end, what sanctifies the human subject *as* free. Our entangled existence, however, places this conception of agency in question together with the historical privilege it confers. See also, Stephanie LeMenager's *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century* here, for an immersive discussion regarding the extent of our petrofilia and just how saturated our lives are in oil.



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externalisation of climate anxiety. Like me, the nameless narrator of Rich's short story doesn't feel the fire and, yet, as a marine biologist, it is all he thinks about. Suffering from severe anxieties related to public speaking, he is, nevertheless, about to give a talk on the "sustainability of coastal environments" at "the Eighteenth International Conference of Limnology and Oceanology in Salzburg" (96, 91). While in a restroom to regain composure before his talk, he unexpectedly encounters a long-repressed imaginary friend Hermie, a speaking hermit crab from his childhood summers spent on Sarasota beach in Florida. As a climate refugee, driven away from his natural habitat, Hermie is desperate for a new home that he hopes the narrator will be able to provide.

The elegiac story Hermie relates to appeal to his old friend's innocence and generosity testifies to a harrowing sense of loss accrued by the environmental changes and their impact on the marine biome. The coastal ecosystems of the Florida beach, where Hermie and the narrator used to play "The King's Castle" and "Man-buried-alive" (94) in the white, paradisiac sands of Siesta Key, have now been conquered by the aggressive urban development: "Turtle Beach—it's completely gone […] They tore it up. Exploded the beach and inserted columns. They put up an apartment building much too close to the water. This was some time after you left" (95). The marine life has been devastated by rising sea levels, ocean acidification, extreme weather patterns and accelerating erosion that "swallowed up the beaches whole" (95), resulting in an extensive loss of habitat and a raging torrent of defenceless non-human refugees, pouring further inland, looking for shelter. Hermie's intimate companions the narrator refers to as "the rest of the old gang […] Stella the Starfish, Ernie the Urchin [and] Gulliver" (96) have also all succumbed to revenue obsessed vagaries of human desire. "They're [all] dead," Hermie tells us. "Long dead. Every last one of them. Clammy and all her daughters too. I found Clammy myself. Her shell—it's too horrible to say […] Her shell had turned green. She had been poisoned" (96). Hermie's story of defeat, of course, mirrors the narrator's own and behind the nostalgic exchange of their encounter resides the familiar loss of innocence and sincerity. This loss, however, is further compounded by the hypocrisy of the narrator's present commitments that, as we shall see, seem to engage in vanities of academic acceptance and self-congratulatory abstractions far removed from the ecological realities they are intended to change.

Apart from the apparent ecocide of Florida's marine life and the inability of its coastal environments to sustain extensive anthropogenic intrusions, the story is also concerned with the affective disengagement from climate disruption and the latent disavowal of its urgency. What Kerridge has identified as "splitting" (364), where what we know has become so estranged from what we do, is also present in the narrator's professional commitments that, in contrast to most of us, are single-mindedly focused to reveal the very evidence of climate disruption. As a marine biologist, he "stud[ies] coastal regions for a living" (Rich 94) and is deeply aware of Hermie's predicament. He is "actually working on this very issue. The sustainability of coastal environments. Erosion. Rising sea levels" (96). The title of his conference

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paper, "Differential seed and seedling predation by coenobita: impacts on coastal composition" (96), also testifies to the significance of seed predation by crabs for diversity of coastal seedling recruitment. And yet, the punch of the narrative resides in the narrator's indifference as he refuses Hermie's appeals for safety and shelter. In fact, one of the reasons he cannot provide accommodation for Hermie is because his "wife is allergic to shellfish" (97), which further implies that the only visceral relation the narrator has ever had to marine life is gastronomic. Hermie may be a withered climate refugee, but he is still a delicious one.

Another significant aspect that further drives the wedge between epistemology and ethics and, by the same token, between the narrator and Hermie, is the elusiveness and inaccessibility of scientific discourse. Having disclosed the title of his conference paper in order to reassure his troubled friend that he, indeed, understands, Hermie "didn't seem to know how to respond" (96). After what could only be a humiliating pause or a lacuna signifying also in temporal terms the qualitative difference between knowledge and experience deeply felt, Hermie finally replies: "I have no place to go, old friend" (96). To those affected by the impact of climate change, complex, pseudoneurotic terminology, masking the pervasive anxieties of the narrator, is, at best, insignificant, if not offensive. This, in fact, relates to the challenge of the Anthropocene to all epistemic abstractions: the insipid but necessary restraint of all knowledge and its relation to the tragedies of lived experience. The discontinuity between the two, articulated in the story as the lacuna between the narrator and Hermie, only reasserts the difficulties of eliciting affective commitment in relation to climate change. The general tardiness of our affective life to catch up with the established certainties of our cognitive knowledge in order to enable conviction in what we do seems thus pervasive even if that knowledge is unassailable and unequivocal in terms of its implications. In fact, the attitudinal irony the narrative sets up in relation to the narrator's inability to see his own performative contradiction is based on this tardiness or, to be more specific, on the discontinuity between affect and judgment, which, in Norgaard's terms, leads to "the failure to integrate… knowledge into everyday life or to transform it into social action." At this point, "knowledge itself" is irrepressible and is "not at issue," as she suggests, "but doing the 'right' thing with the knowledge [is]" (11).[12] In terms of the story, this disjunction is even more pronounced and, apart from hinting at the duplicity of scientific communities, it also reveals the limits of knowledge alone to effect any significant change.

While the narrator's affective life seems to have been aligned with his cognitive in the innocence of his childhood, which may also have allowed for the externalisation of his desires in Hermie as his imaginary friend, such externalisation would now be considered socially and subjectively inadmissible. Hermie can thus only return as the

[12] Norgaard argues that our apathy does not proceed from our disavowal of knowledge itself but rather of its implications: "What is minimized is not information, but the 'psychological, political or moral implications that conventionally follow'" (11).

repressed other[13] and, considering that he remerges from the subterranean waste systems of sewage pipes and draining assemblages in the restroom, he also reappears as the *abject* other or that which, in Kristeva's terms, humiliates identity as the unclean, dirty part of oneself that has long since been disavowed, but that now returns and, in case of Hermie, literally appeals to be taken in and reintegrated in the affective life of the narrator. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva identifies abjection "above all [as] ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it—on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger" (9). Abjection, in other words, is panic brought on by the possibility of being revealed as the physical filth one is. The abject, then, is the disavowed, expelled materiality of one's existence, the corporeal reality buried alive in the symbolic order. It is ambiguous, as Kristeva further explains, "because abjection itself is a composite of judgment and affect, of condemnation and yearning, of signs and drives" (9–10). Hermie reappears in order to bridge the lacuna between inside and outside, between affect and judgement, between the trappings of scientific discourse that epitomises the symbolic order and the narrator's failure to disassemble its abstractions and reveal its metalanguage in *lived* experience. As an aborted expression of affective material, opening at the limits of the narrator's symbolic engagements, Hermie questions his old friend's performative realities in order to align judgement and affect and commit his endeavours beyond mere cognition. His sudden appearance during the conference is carved out of the narrator's performative indiscretions, where abstruse scientism and symbolic commitment are used as a subterfuge for evasion of a deeper transformative change.

As the phenomenological residue of continuous anthropogenic assaults on the marine biome, Hermie represents also the new agentic materiality, risen from the depths of its repression to resist the scientific narrative of domination where it has been objectified for utilitarian projects since the Enlightenment while also revealing a new vitalism of physical existence claiming its due—the fact that life, in contrast to Descartes, is *not* detachable from its embodiment.[14]

The abject, furthermore, is situated outside the symbolic order, as that which is violently cast out, the "abominable real" (9),[15] and facing it, can open up delirious states and intensities of becoming, in Deleuzian terms. In *Essays: Critical and Clinical*, Deleuze considers delirium as "a displacement of continents" (4). In a delirium, bodies

[13] Indeed, Hermie, could also be seen as the spectre of climate crisis, that, according to Morton, appeared right after the world ended "in April 1784, when James Watt patented the steam engine" (7), or more specifically, as a spectre of white eco-hauntology that now stalks our present.

[14] The fact that materiality, since Descartes, has been considered as "sheer exteriority" ontologically distinguished and separate from the *cogito* that legitimates our authority over nature is also "what sets it free for modernity's secular and technoindustrial projects, thereby granting to Cartesian discourse an efficacy in regard to matter's subsequent adventures […]" (Coole 94, 95). Worth considering is that non-human biotic life is also included within the realm of our authority, since it lacks both soul and self-awareness and is thus, at most, a mechanistic bundle of inevitability and predetermined reactions to external stimuli and environmental pressures. See also, Bennett in this respect, *New Materialisms*, especially 58-60.

[15] "[W]hat is abject," as Kristeva further explains, "the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses" (2).



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and identities are deterritorialised. Totalities surpass and exceed their own limits, repossessing and differentiating other totalities, while themselves being recolonised and dispossessed of their own core significations. In a delirium, limits become thresholds that constitute centers of intensities where totalities are potentialised beyond themselves as they escape their own conceptual constraints. Delirium, in other words, enunciates a disintegration of a territorial subject. Instead, identities are filled with intensities, as they pass towards their limits and towards surpassing of their own assemblages, assuming new forms and relations outside their established categorisations.

The fact that the narrator has a delirious exchange with an imaginary hermit crab from his early childhood testifies not only to the bad faith of his professional life, but also to the threshold zones of Deleuzian "becoming,"[16] capable of disorganising established forms of being. The narrative stages the delirium of what Deleuze and Guattari would call 'becoming animal,' where new possibilities of life are pursued whose expression is emancipatory insofar as it breaks forms, disrupts familiar styles or regimes of being and produces new significations of physical existence.[17]

Becoming-animal, or indeed, "becoming-flower or rock," that Deleuze and Guattari write extensively about in *A Thousand Plateaus*, is a deterritorialising process of disassemblage or "desubjecti[fication] of consciousness" (134). Humans colonise and repurpose the creative forces of nature and corporeal existence in the interests of their own anthropocentric narratives that manage, "select, dominate [and] overcode them" (155). Non-human existence, in other words, has significance to the extent that it can be managed to serve the teleological ends of our own secular projects or adventures of being. In becoming, however, an "an inversion" (155) of forces occurs that decolonises hierarchies and established regimes of being which overcode non-human existence, opening up new economies, where thresholds of being are surpassed, agencies overturned and "zones of indiscernibility" (280) entered. In becoming-animal, as Deleuze and Guattari explain, "we think and write for animals themselves. We become animal so that the animal also becomes something else. The agony of a rat or the slaughter of a calf remains present in thought not through pity but as the zone of exchange between man and animal in which something of one passes into the other" (*What Is Philosophy?* 109). Surpassing of limits is inclusive of both me and the animal. I take upon myself the agony of the animal while the animal decolonises my birthrights. "Becoming is always double, and it is this

[16] As Smith explains in his "Introduction" to *Essays: Critical and Clinical*: "The notion of becoming does not simply refer to the fact that the self does not have a static being and is in constant flux. More precisely, it refers to an objective zone of indistinction […] that always exists between any two multiplicities […] In a becoming, one term does not become another; rather, each term encounters the other, and the becoming is something between the two, *outside the two*" (xxx, emphasis added).

[17] "It is a question of composing a body with the animal, a body without organs defined by zones of intensity or proximity" (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* 274). See also, David Abram's *Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology* here, for a more animistic understanding of physical existence and sensory expereince, where the notion of "becoming-animal" is used phenomenologically in order to revitalise our preobjective "empathy with the living land" (7) and make us aware of "the intelligence of our sensing bodies" (15).



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double becoming that constitutes the people-to-come and the new earth" (109). Becoming-animal reveals *the mesh of my being* or the fact of my subjectivity's inscription in agony of others.

However, every deterritorialisation, as a passage to the limit and a becoming that surpasses it in becoming-other, resets the reterritorialising objectives of organising structures to reestablish dominion. Being, in ontological terms, reasserts its weight over becoming. Conjunctions of flows ossify and become forms or properties of being. Becoming-woman becomes transgender, becoming-animal becomes masochism, multiplicity of life, its "irreducible dynamism," (*A Thousand Plateaus* 237) becomes appropriated by reductive coding machines that assign properties and static forms, bringing "the flows under the dominance of a single flow capable of overcoding them" (220). In case of "Hermie," the reterritorialisation of human properties and anthropocentrism represented by the narrator's disavowal of becoming-animal is explicit. After Hermie's nostalgic appeals that clearly articulate the destruction of a coastal biome in the interests of wanton capitalist ventures and predatory real estate practice, the narrator politely, yet firmly, excuses his inability to accommodate his friend's request. And despite Hermie's "incalculable sadness" (97), the Cartesian distinction that safeguards the human from the non-human is reasserted through the aggressive metaphor of border control. "First of all," the narrator insists, "there's no way that airport security would let you through […] I'm sorry, Hermie" (97–98). Borders of privilege, always jealously protected against unwanted arrogations and claims of the other, work also as symbolic reterritorialisations of anthropocentrism, reinstituting, in this case, the legitimacies of the human subject threatened by disassemblage. Indeed, as Derrida argues in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, this border control that rests at the very limits of epistemology, may, after all, be the one against which the meaning of the human can emerge: "As with every bottomless gaze, as with the eyes of the other, the gaze called 'animal' offers to my sight the abyssal limit of the human: the human or the ahuman, the ends of man, that is to say, the bordercrossing from which vantage man dares to announce himself to himself […]" (12). The very same gaze the narrator faces after his defensive reference to border security that reconstitutes Hermie as an animal the narrator is *not*: "He stared at me, his eyes fixed like little black stones. But I realised he couldn't possibly be crying. There are no tear ducts on a hermit crab's eyestalk" (98). The Cartesian binaries are now reestablished to block the possibilities of becoming while forms and fantasies of conceptual certainties are also reconstituted by a reference to objective time that reintroduces the symbolic order and overcodes the internal ruptures of being: "I glanced […] at my phone. Two minutes left" (98).

As one last courtesy, however, the narrator offers to carry his old friend to the toilet, since his shell, having been exposed to marine pollutants and toxic waste has become too oppressive and too brittle, "giv[ing] off a faint, metallic scent, like flaked rust" (98). In one last sentimental sigh, evoking the rushing tide of the waves threatening the King's Castle in the yellow sands of Turtle Beach, the narrator flushes Hermie back to the subterranean grids and underground systems that drain away the



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abject waste upon which *cogito* is built: "Then it was gone. I lowered the lid. It seemed like the right thing to do" (99). Only, it's not gone, there is no "away," as Morton argues, when discussing the "viscosity" or stickiness of hyperobjects such as climate change, which "seriously undermine the notion of 'away'":

> For some time, we may have thought that the U-bend in the toilet was a convenient curvature of ontological space that took whatever we flush down it into a totally different dimension called *Away*, leaving things clean over *here*. Now we know better: instead of the mythical land Away, we know the waste goes into the Pacific Ocean or the wastewater treatment facility. Knowledge of the hyperobject Earth, and of the hyperobject biosphere, presents us with viscous surfaces from which nothing can be forcibly peeled. There is no *Away* on this surface, no *here* and no *there*. (36, 31; emphasis added).

Nothing, in other words, is external to anything else, "we are always inside an object" (17). What we flush away wells back up in the kitchen sink as we turn the tap on, mounts and races through the gullet, behind the trachea and heart, passes through the diaphragm and empties into the gut to be soaked up by the bloodstream. This is what entanglement means in this case: our immanence to systems and feral ontologies that we pompously tower above. The fact that Hermie is "flushed" away, bringing "back with sudden clarity" (99) the narrator's memories of becoming, is also significant in psychoanalytic terms. "Flushing away" and putting "the lid on" may articulate his apparent disavowal of the non-human but what is repressed is never gone. It is buried alive, like a carbon bomb under our feet.

The narrator's imaginary encounter with Hermie is thus an aborted exchange with wildlife itself as a witness. Hermie, who seems to have crossed the threshold that separates the human from the feral, speaks, testifies and pleads for help but is denied and flushed back across threshold: "I lowered the lid. It seemed like the right thing to do" (99). The ontological binary that safeguards the meaning and the authorship of the *cogito* is reestablished through denial. However, it is also "right" to lower the lid, as the narrator intuitively seems to know: "It seemed like the right thing to do." It is imperative to "lower the lid," to relegitimate the human subject, reassert its birthrights and reinstate the fantasy of authorship. The non-human world, after all, constitutes the negative foundation of human exceptionalism. For Derrida, this is not just one disavowal among others: "It institutes what is proper to man, the relation to itself of a humanity that is above all anxious about, and jealous of, what is proper to it" (14). To leave the lid open would be to unblock for new proximities to form that could question our prerogatives and displace our birthrights.

Or is Hermie an emissary of fire, the impending collapse of the biosphere from which there is no escape and against which we can only seek refuge in bad faith and self-deception? The closing paragraph testifies to this possibility, as the narrator, not unlike me, revels in the vanities of his own profession, which only further reveals the depth of his blindness while also pointing towards deeper complicities of climate scientification and its detachment from the physical realities of immeasurable loss: "If I can say so myself, I think the paper was a success. I might just submit it to the *Hydrobiology Review*. I didn't even feel nervous when I delivered it. There were nearly



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twenty-five people in attendance and later, at the cocktail hour, no less than four of them offered me their compliments" (99). This blindness is perhaps also what Žižek had tried to account for when, in an interview, he suggested that this was, indeed,

> the way many of us, in the developed world, relate to our global predicament. We all know about the impending catastrophe—ecological, social—but we somehow cannot take it seriously. In psychoanalysis, this attitude is called a fetishist split: I know very well, but [...] (I don't really believe it), and such a split is a clear indication of the material force of ideology which makes us refuse what we see and know. How did we end up here? ("Conversations with Slavoj Žižek")

Perhaps because we still believe in the detachment of the object that also constitutes its abiding charisma. Like Morton's metaphor of our experience in a swimming pool: "Everywhere," he writes, quoting Levi Bryant, "we are submersed within the pool, everywhere the cool water caresses our body as we move through it, yet we are nonetheless independent of the water" (55). Despite our increasing awareness that we are *inside* the object, that we constitute an integral part of its intelligence networks we cannot oversee because of our immanence, the arrogative projects of our desires to colonize it persist. Perhaps, Hermie, then, is the externalised articulation of desire that, undeterred by our awareness, continues unabated. Like a flash of shame that exposes its indiscretions naked despite our best efforts to hide them. In a public restroom, where we are half-revealed to the world, the narrator is ambushed by his own sincerity that causes a kind of internal haemorrhage where he is carried away alienated from himself by the gaze of the non-human that shifts the world from its owner's hands for an instant. Lowering the lid ensures that this doesn't happen again. It ensures that the old economies keep turning while the old earth keeps burning.

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