Editorial 15.1

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In the Anthropocene, some plants are rapidly moving north or south, some are going extinct, and some are going rogue. Rogue, mobile, weedy, invasive, resistant, and even radioactive: the lives of plants have always been dramatic as they feed us all and shape our local systems but their drama is taking new forms, and the arts are formulating new responses to them in our climate-changed, asphalt-covered, globally interconnected world of plantations, urbanization, and industrialized landscapes whether monoculture green or oil-spill brown. Those vegetal beings that we humans deem of value to us are stripped of fertility and torture-cultivated to be free of their entanglements with insects and fungi but tolerant of poison, whereas those we deem to be pests, "weeds," or "invasive" are declared to be interfering with our rather haphazard reconstruction of ecosystems. We strip the world of much of its biodiversity and curse at the forms that nevertheless resist and emerge. Eager green lives will always spread and engage in lively exchanges with other beings in the forms of flowers, fruits, volatile organic compounds, or underground, fungal-based webs of connection; these facts might be considered a sign of vegetal agency, though defining anything other than the humans as having agency is also all-too-often deemed problematic unless in ecocriticism, fairy tales, and children's or youth tales. Indeed, literature, film, and other media story forms created for children and young adults often retain the animist magic/reality of our active, vibrant world. One issue for ecocritical study is thus the question of how vegetal life is presented in the texts that remain broadly open to the possibilities of animism such as children's and youth literature. Do plants in anthropocene texts appear as sustaining, gentle, collaborative, and beautiful beings, or as rogue, invasive, weedy, and resistant pests? What kind of plant-human relations are portrayed and emphasized? Finally, how does the vegetal function as metaphor/s in these texts for younger readers of today?

The special section of *Ecozon@*'s volume 15.1 on "Plant Tendrils in Children's and Young Adult Literature," guest edited by Melanie Duckworth (Østfold University College), Lykke Guanio-Uluru, (Western Norway University of Applied Sciences), and Antonia Szabari (University of Southern California, USA) includes seven essays focusing specifically on the variety of both material and metaphorical portrayals of plants in children's and young adult literature with an emphasis on plant growth, disruptive behaviours, and vegetal communication forms. The first essay, "Seeds of Change: Negotiating Hierarchies in Seed Picturebook Stories," by Lizao Hu addresses "the entanglement of seeds and children" in picture books emphasizes the agency of

both children and plants. The other six essays consider young adult literature, including Samantha Hind's discussion, "'The Trees Got Their Own Ways to Hurt Us': Entangled Bodies and Fragile Flesh in M.R. Carey's *The Book of Koli* (2020)," which portrays trees gone rogue and becoming flesh eaters. In the ecofeminist study by Sara Pankenier Weld, "Survival, Sustenance, and Self-Sufficiency: Taking a Plant-Based Perspective in Jean Hegland's *Into the Forest*," imagines a postapocalyptic world from which the protagonist flees to begin a new a life in the redwood forest with a more positive take on interactions with trees. In the fourth essay, Sushmita Pareek continues the positive and ecofeminist portrayal of tree-human relations and a coming of age story in: "Unlikely Friends in Patriarchal Lands: An Ecofeminist Reading of 'Sonal Bai' and Sandalwood Tree." While continuing with the postapocalyptic scenarios, Cynthia Zhang's "To See with Eyes Unclouded: Nonhuman Selves and Semiosis in *Princess Mononoke*" features, as the guest editors note, "Hayao Miyazaki's legendary anime to explore the ability of the fantasy genre to expand understandings of interspecies communication—including between plants and human and nonhuman animals."

Turning to ever more optimistic possibilities, Lykke Guanio-Uluru's "Seeds of latent hope: The figurative entwinement of children, adolescents, and plants in Maja Lunde's *The Dream of a Tree*," attends to climate-change fiction with an emphasis on hopeful vegetal metaphors of growth and development for the future. Finally, the seventh essay, Lydia Kokkola's "Living and Dying as Compost in the Torne Valley Mires" studies the Swedish novel, *Som om jag inte fanns* [As though I wasn't there] by Kerstin Johansson i Backe (1978) in terms of both Donna Haraway's "compost" theory and Robin Wall Kimmerer's indigenous perspectives on plant-human relations. The seven essays open a wide spectrum of vegetal views across continents and traditions in the Anthropocene, thereby providing important insights into our understandings of non-human agency and entanglements of which we are all part.

The general section of Volume 15.1 features a full six essays, including two in Spanish, one in French, and the rest in English. Several of the essays readily connect to the special section's focus on the non-human vegetal lives and cli-fi. The first essay, "'Grump Mountain': Viewers' Attributions of Agency to a Climate Fiction Film," is by Heidi Toivonen, Unversiteit Twente, Netherlands, and Cymene Howe, Rice University, USA. The authors consider viewers' responses to a short trailer for the climate-change documentary, *Not Ok: A Little Movie about a Small Glacier at the End of the World*, assessing how and if viewers attribute agency to the volcano, and how the discussion of the trailer impacts their responses. The essay provides important data for affect theory in ecocriticism, noting how films present special opportunities especially when combined with discussion. Within the context of a "structured interview" with viewers about their experience of the short trailer, the authors conclude that "such a video can trigger constructions of complex agency that exceed traditional, simpler representations of the nonhuman environment as either threatening natural force or sublime source of divine experiences" and that longer, more complex stories and conversations might be even better for greater ecological awareness. In other words,

large-scale environmental education about the non-human, whether plants or volcanoes, is essential for situating climate stories and their implications. Stories can make a significant difference, but the impacts are stronger with broad cultural contextualization (including education and conversations). And the second essay, "Narrating Loss in James Bradley's *Clade* (2015); or, Introducing Arrested Narrative in Climate Fiction," by Karoline Huber and Geoff Rodoreda, both from University of Stuttgart, Germany, also focuses on narrative strategies for creating empathy in climate fiction. They argue that the Bradley's portrayal of characters with arrested development "parallels a sense of environmental loss evoked at the level of storied content," combining the loss of a character arc with the loss of species, biodiversity, and environmental health. Furthermore, they note: "the sudden disappearance of character-story imitates the sudden erasure of species, landscape and lived experience." While Huber and Rodoreda insightfully focus on the human trajectories reflecting environmental systems, Toivonen and Howe seek, in turn, a greater understanding of how non-human agency reflects human cultural responses. Such different approaches to reciprocity greatly enrich the volume.

The next two essays address poetic possibilities for environmental writing as well as potential insights offered by poems and "cosmo-poetical" paths. First is Juan Ignacio Oliva's Spanish-language contribution, "Permeabilidades rizomáticas en la nueva poesía de la Partición india," which discusses a number of female poets from India in terms of how their poetry presents both the "biological reality of the corporeality of territories and their inhabitants" on the one hand, and the "entropic kinetics of tense bodies and their holistic and rhizomatic permeabilities," on the other. Betrand Guest, Université d'Angers, France, then expands the focus to a "cosmo-poetic" view of how words can "freely reinvent the world" in his French-language contribution, "Cosmo-poéthique et écologie de la parole. Sur Erri De Luca et Jean-Claude Pinson"

The last two essays in the general section also connect to the special section's focus on the non-human but in very different ways: Jonathan Sarfin's (University of Bern, Switzerland) contribution, "Then We Build a System to Deal with It": Waste, the Technological Sublime, and the Abject in Don DeLillo's *Underworld*," recontextualizes human bodies not in terms of plants or geological bodies but rather in terms of waste and the "technological sublime" that disrupts any possible boundaries while also reinscribing the very boundaries that it seeks to override in a time of global change and planetary scales expressing: "the finitude of the embodied human, the abjection that accompanies the awareness of our relative powerlessness, enmeshed amongst the world around and in us." Our human bodies are, in short, fully enmeshed with technological, cultural, linguistic, and biological, ecological, and vegetal activities. Finally, Julia Ori's (Universidad Complutense de Madrid/GIECO-Franklin-UAH, España) Spanish-language essay, "Ruptura con la Tesis de la excepción humana en novelas francesas del siglo XXI: Chevillard, Message y Brunel," evaluates three contemporary French novels in terms of animal studies, maintaining the focus on the

non-human and the important contextualization of human lives within our broader ecological frames.

In the Creative Arts section of volume 15.1, Arts Editor Elizabeth Tavella, University of Chicago, USA, introduces the two marvelous narrative contributions, each appearing with their own illustrations by noting the power of the vegetal not only to nourish our bodies but also our stories and imaginative works in all forms. Even as many plants go extinct or are transformed into exploited resources, Tavella suggests that plants continue to dominate as our powerful, photosynthetic allies, our plant kin, whose lives and agentic capacities continually inspire. Looking at both "western" views on plants as well as indigenous ideas such as the work of Robin Wall Kimmerer, Tavella describes how the artists offer us "stories with plants" rather than just being "about" them. The cover image is from Trace Balla, whose "cartoon-style drawings" whimsically speak to the volume's focus on children's and young adult's literature but also to the need to contextualize human beings in the larger and life-giving context of the vegetal beings. The first tale is authored by Wendy Wuyts; she has translated and retold a Flemish folktale featuring nettles in a manner reinscribing their identity as cooperative, resilient, and agents of "mutual care" rather than as "invasive." Included within this ecofeminist tale presenting active, agentic plants, are three powerful illustrations by the Belgian illustrator, Yule Hermans, who depicts the nettle spinner surrounded by the vegetal with an aesthetic frame of nettles surrounding her. The second tale is Bijal Vachharajani's piece that also focuses on human-plant entanglements, this time in Shajapur, India, a tale opening with the author having a dialogue between herself and houseplants as "co-protagonists." The humor of the story also evokes the pain of loss both personal and ecological, with the plants perspectives and bodies allowing the significant leap in scale from local to global. Illustrations for this introspective text are from Rajiv Eipe, who gives the talking plants beautiful bodies engaged in conversation such that we see all of the vegetal beings but just half of the human participant.

Ecozon@ 15.1 also includes eight book reviews of recent environmental humanities works with an wide-ranging array of topics and traditions including climate-change fiction, ecofeminism, rethinking "nature," mourning in the Anthropocene, the blue humanities, and animal studies. The section opens with a review essay by Kate Judith, University of Southern Queensland, Australia, presenting two recent books on climate change: Justina Poray-Wybranowska's *Climate Change, Ecological Catastrophe, and the Contemporary Postcolonial Novel* (Routledge, 2020), 236 pp.; and Russell McDougall, John C. Ryan, and Pauline Reynolds, eds. *Postcolonial Literatures of Climate Change* (Brill, 2022), 408 pp. Second is Tom Hertweck's review of Peter Remien and Scott Slovic, Eds., *Nature and Literary Studies* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge UP, 2022), 418 pp. The third review is by Alejandro Rivero-Vadillo, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid / GIECO-FRANKLIN-UAH, España, looking at Ignacio Quintanilla's and Pilar Andrade's, *Los cien ecologismos. Una introducción al pensamiento del medioambiente* (Ediciones Encuentro, 2023), 294 pp. Fourthly, Julia Kuznetski (née Tofantšuk), Tallinn University, Estonia, reviews Terry Gifford's *D. H.*

Lawrence, Ecofeminism and Nature (London, New York: Routledge, 2023), 193 pp. The fifth review is by Paromita Patranobish, Mount Carmel College, India, who reads Joshua Trey Barnett's *Mourning in the Anthropocene: Ecological Grief and Earthly Coexistence* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2022), 473 pp. Sixth, Eleonor Botoman, New York University, discusses Killian Quigley, *Reading Underwater Wreckage* (London, United Kingdom: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023), 184 pp. In the seventh review, Akshita Bhardwa, English and Foreign Languages University, India, comments on Dominic O'Key's *Creaturely Forms in Contemporary Literature* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), 206pp. And the eighth and final review by Jacob Abell, Baylor University, USA, reads Liam Lewis, *Animal Soundscapes in Anglo-Norman Texts* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2022) pp. 197.

Plant Tendrils in Children's and Young Adult Literature.
An Introduction

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The articles in this first issue in *Ecozon@* dedicated to the analysis of children's and young adult (YA) literature all explore how plants are entangled in and with stories for children and young adults. As a collection, the articles in this issue examine the fictional worldings shaped and made possible by metaphors drawn from the life cycles of plants at many levels—from seeds, tendrils, and rapid new growth, which can be either hopeful or threatening, to ancient trees, falling leaves, and the afterlife of plant matter in compost and decay. The plant metaphors examined in the stories presented here are sometimes reused tropes but may also form part of stories that highlight and respect the unique materiality of plants. Often, the bodies and minds of children and young adults are depicted as permeable to, or emblematic of, a plant-like flourishing.

The articles in this special issue may be considered reflections and reverberations of, as well as contributions to, the "vegetal turn" in the environmental humanities, most significantly coalescing in the developing field of critical plant studies, where recent botanical research focussing on plant capabilities has led to the re-examination and revaluation of the roles played by plants in philosophy, history, literature, and the arts. Growing rapidly, the cross-disciplinary field of critical plant studies has been propelled by key researchers and writers such as Anthony Trewavas, Matthew Hall, Michael Marder, John Charles Ryan, Stefano Mancuso, and Monical Gagliano.

Under the umbrella of critical plant studies, several volumes dedicated to exploring the presence and representation of plants in literature have been published, notably *The Poet as Botanist* (2008) by M. M. Mahood, *Plants and Literature: Essays in*

Critical Plant Studies (2013), edited by Randy Laist, and *Radical Botany: Plants and Speculative Fiction* (2019) by Natania Meeker and Antónia Szabari. At present there are two specialized international anthologies dedicated to the investigation of plants in the study of of children's and young adult literature, namely *Plants in Children's and Young Adult Literature* (2021), edited by Melanie Duckworth and Lykke Guanio-Uluru, which collects contributions by authors from 13 different countries and *Storying Plants in Australian Children's and Young Adult Literature: Roots and Winged Seeds* (2023), edited by Duckworth and Annika Herb, which focusses on Australian literature and engages with intersections between Indigenous, colonial, and post-colonial perspectives on plants. The articles in this special issue engage with, and develop, theoretical perspectives introduced in these two anthologies.

In the introduction to *The Language of Plants: Science, Philosophy, Literature* (2017), Monica Gagliano, John C. Ryan and Patrícia Vieira note how "works of poetry and prose in the Western tradition tend to represent plants as part of the landscape and as the backdrop for human and, on occasion, animal dramas" and how "[f]or many writers, plants become, at most, the correlatives of human emotions, eliciting feelings of pleasure and displeasure, triggering memories, and reflecting human states of mind" (x). Studies on plants in children and YA literature so far support the observation that plant presence in literature frequently is metaphorical and often a comparison of children and adolescents to plants is rooted in the (adult) view that they must all be nurtured and tended to grow *right*. Such a connection between childlikeness and vegetal life can be found in the myths of many cultures—for instance in William of Newburgh's haunting 12th century story of two mysterious green children, who emerge from the earth, green hued, and eat only broad beans.

In *Exploring Literary Conceptualisations of Growth* (2014), Roberta Seelinger Trites discusses more in depth how writers of childhood and adolescence tend to employ growth metaphors. Drawing on cognitive psychology, she comments that "our brains tend to create metaphorical structures in terms of the embodied experiences we have lived, we structure our thoughts in ways that replicate physical experience" (66). Trites' observation might help explain the ubiquity of plants in language, since plants make up approximately 80 % of the biosphere (Bar-On et al. 6507). Entangled in our embodied experience, plants appear as integral to our thinking and emerge for instance in the form of language- and family trees, as figures of philosophy (like Deleuze and Guattari's 'rhizome') and as often fruitful poetic and linguistic figures. In literature, the vegetal model may also provide an escape from societal norms and expectations, as in the seventeenth-century author Cyrano de Bergerac's proto-sci-fi tale, *Voyage to the Moon* (1902), in which cabbages capable of seeding multiple planets, potentially starting new societies, are pitted against the strict norms upheld by fathers in patriarchal societies. Vegetal presences might thus also be cast as disruptive.

While there may be cognitive reasons for the ubiquity of plants in linguistic figures and for their presence in literature, the agency of the plants themselves might further account for their influence on our thinking and our storytelling practices, as

well as for the noted tendency of many writers to weave references to plants into their fiction when portraying human emotion. Many plants use pheromones, or chemical signatures, to communicate, and these pheromones may affect humans—a recognition of this fact is, for instance, the fundamental premise of aromatherapy, and studies of plant chemistry is the foundation of modern pharmacology. Plant chemistry and its effects on human and animal lives has also been a topic of interest for biologists. In *The Triumph of Seeds* (2016), Thor Hanson discusses how plants "repel attackers with alkaloids, tannins, terpenes, phenols, or any of the many other compounds invented by plants" (139) and notes how many of us are addicted to stimulating plant chemicals—be they the mental pick-me-up of the caffeine in coffee or the pungent attacks of the anti-fungal capsaicin of the chili (139, 140, 151). Says Hanson: 'It's only a slight exaggeration to call us servants of our food plants, diligently moving them around the world and slavishly tending them in manicured orchards and fields' (184). Such perspectives bring into focus the non-metaphorical power of plants, their oft-overlooked agency, that appears readily translated into literary metaphor.

The various contributions to this special issue each in their own way engage with the material or metaphorical presence of plants. The issue is structured so that the only contribution analysing children's literature is featured first, followed by the remaining contributions that are discussing texts for young adults. While the first contribution revolves around the entanglement of seeds and children conveyed by the words and images in three picturebooks, the next four essays in various ways engage with works in which young adolescents find themselves in entangled relationships with trees and forests. In the sixth essay, trees are mostly present as what Ryan has termed "botanical traces" (2017), since in the fictional world of this climate fiction (cli-fi) novel, forests are all but extinct. The seventh and final article reflects on the function and metaphor of compost, thus highlighting how vegetal matter is part of self-sustaining natural cycles. The remainder of this introduction briefly outlines the seven articles in some detail.

In "Seeds of Change: Negotiating Hierarchies in Seed Picturebook Stories", Lizao Hu analyses the verbal and visual representations of seeds and their poetic entanglement with children in three stories featuring seeds. Drawing on Jane Bennet's concept of "vibrant matter" (2010), Hu argues that the three seed stories, by highlighting the entanglement of seeds and children, help reveal the agentic power of both, thus countering a view of both seeds and children as vulnerable and controlled.

Plants in literature are not necessarily benevolent, as discussed by Samantha Hind in "The Trees Got Their Own Ways to Hurt Us": Entangled Bodies and Fragile Flesh in M.R. Carey's *The Book of Koli* (2020). Hind develops the term *plant flesh*, denoting both the vegetality of flesh and the fleshiness of the vegetal, tracing how genetically modified plants wreak havoc in Carey's YA novel. In *The Book of Koli*, the modified plants mimic the human desire for control and consumption—turning into what T.S. Miller (2012) aptly termed "monster plants." Plant flesh thus functions as a term of indistinction, encompassing transformations of plant matter from passive

resource to living bodies and from human bodies into flesh vulnerable to violent attacks by the dystopian, rapacious plants. It is this vulnerability that the adolescent hero needs to recognize and navigate.

The significance of plants, and particularly trees and forests, to the development of young adult protagonists is highlighted in Sara Pankenier Weld's essay "Survival, Sustenance, and Self-Sufficiency: Taking a Plant-Based Perspective in Jean Hegland's *Into the Forest*". Drawing on ecofeminism, Weld shows how an increasingly intimate knowledge of, and relationship with, giant redwoods on the part of the novel's protagonists in Hegland's post-apocalyptic tale leads to great self-sufficiency, not least through the embodied practices of gardening and foraging, albeit in a future that is equal parts utopian and completely outside a modern consumerist lifestyle.

In "Unlikely Friends in Patriarchal Lands: An Ecofeminist Reading of 'Sonal Bai' and Sandalwood Tree" Sushmita Pareek investigates, through interpretive commentary, the metaphorical representation of a girl's coming of age through her relationship with a Sandalwood Tree. The tale "Sonal Bai" is rooted in the prevalent '*katha*' culture of oral storytelling in India where women exercise freedom of voice through singing and narrating tales within all-female groups, and Pareek discusses the tale as an encoded moral lesson for Rajasthani teenage girls.

An important aspect of YA fiction is to provide steppingstones toward futures and worlds not possible or not easily accessible in the mainstream social spaces governed by late-capitalist economies. Dystopian outcomes, including destruction and war, can provide prompts in YA fiction for characters to develop and grow with others, in new social formation and bonds. Cynthia Zhang in "To See with Eyes Unclouded: Nonhuman Selves and Semiosis in *Princess Mononoke*" ventures into Hayao Miyazaki's legendary *anime* to explore the ability of the fantasy genre to expand understandings of interspecies communication—including between plants and human and nonhuman animals—and thus offer tools for respecting the personhood of nonhuman living beings. Zhang shows that anime as a medium allows for visionary access to the semiosis of the forest (personified as Forest Spirit) in ways that humans cannot fully perceive, because of our status as a particular animal or specific "nature", to use the term that Zhang borrows from multinaturalism.

Like fantasy, cli-fi envisions (often dystopic) future worlds. In "Seeds of latent hope: The figurative entwinement of children, adolescents, and plants in Maja Lunde's *The Dream of a Tree*", Lykke Guanio-Uluru, drawing on theorizations of climate fiction and perspectives from critical plant studies, shows how the child and adolescent characters in Lunde's most recent cli-fi are embedded in figurative patterns associating them with growth and hope in ways that she argues rhetorically serve to shift Lunde's dystopian climate quartet towards a more utopian resolution.

Finally, reflecting on the life-sustaining interdependence of plants, people, animals, and soil, Lydia Kokkola turns to Donna Harraway's concept of "compost" in her essay "Living and Dying as Compost in the Torne Valley Mires". To live as compost means to live with an awareness of and proximity to death—our own and that of

others. Kokkola draws on Indigenous scholars, most significantly the work of Robin Wall Kimmerer, and on critical plant studies, to bring into focus the life of moss in the liminal space of the mires. She reads *Som om jag inte fanns* [As though I wasn't there] by Kerstin Johansson i Backe (1978), a Swedish novel for young adults set amongst mossy and treacherous mires, as a meditation on the possibilities and the dangers of living as compost.

In times of climate and ecological crises, met by lagging and inadequate responses within late capitalist regimes in economic, social, and cultural domains, texts for and about young people respond by experimenting with plant-based narratives and perspectives. Doing so, they contribute to a questioning of the boundaries of the self, by encouraging reflection on the interdependence of different life forms, offering hope, and food for thought, while bearing witness to the shapes of plants and their storying.

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"The Trees Got Their Own Ways to Hurt Us": Entangled Bodies and Fragile Flesh in M.R. Carey's *The Book of Koli* (2020)

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Abstract

There is a post-apocalyptic England teeming with violent plants, where one break in the clouds could wake the trees around you, condemning you to become sustenance for thirsty roots. This is the speculative future of M.R. Carey's young adult novel, *The Book of Koli*, where humans struggle to adapt to their new role and plants pose an ever-growing threat. The novel follows teen protagonist, Koli Woodsmith, as he is exiled from his village of Mythen Rood and left to journey through the deadly wilderness with the company of Monono Aware, a form of artificial intelligence inside a music player. Together, they encounter vengeful villagers, religious cannibals, and flesh-hungry plants. In this article, I analyse how *The Book of Koli* engages with, what I term, "plant flesh," through the analogous transformations of humans and plants. Plant flesh is a development of Michael Marder's "grafts," where he suggests that grafts are an expression of proliferation for both plants and flesh. With grafts, Marder illustrates the vegetality of flesh; with plant flesh, I illustrate both the vegetality of flesh *and* the fleshiness of the vegetal. Plant flesh, then, becomes a term of indistinction (as per Matthew Calarco), where, through plant flesh, we can begin to trace the ways that humans and animals are *like plants.* In *The Book of Koli*'s young adult context, plant flesh's indistinction captures the shared and necessary – but oftentimes violent – transformation of flesh, as teen protagonist – Koli - transitions into adolescence alongside genetically modified plants and their evolution into speculative monstrosities. Through theoretical discussions and close readings, I argue that explorations of plant flesh in *The Book of Koli* serve to demonstrate both the shared, violent transformations of plant and human flesh and the indistinction that such transformations encourage between the adolescent Koli and the ever-evolving plants. *The Book of Koli*'s speculative young adult journey, then, with its botanical threats and adolescent transformations, makes apparent the indistinct zones that can emerge, when we tend to the entangled bodies and fragile flesh of both plants and humans.

Keywords: Plants, flesh, speculative fiction, indistinction.

Resumen

Hay una Inglaterra post-apocalíptica repleta de plantas violentas, donde una ruptura en las nubes podría despertar a los árboles a tu alrededor, condenándote a convertirte en sustento de raíces sedientas. Este es el futuro especulativo de la novela de literatura juvenil de M.R. Carey, *The Book of Koli*, en la que los humanos luchan por adaptarse a su nuevo rol y las plantas representan una amenaza cada vez mayor. La novela sigue al protagonista adolescente, Koli Woodsmith, cuando es exiliado del pueblo de Mythen Rood y abandonado para viajar a través del desierto mortal con la compañía de Monono Aware, una forma de inteligencia artificial dentro de un reproductor de música. Juntos, se

encuentran con aldeanos vengativos, caníbales religiosos y plantas hambrientas de carne. En este artículo, analizo cómo *The Book of Koli* se relaciona con lo que yo llamo "carne vegetal", a través de transformaciones análogas de humanos y plantas. La carne vegetal es un desarrollo de los "injertos" de Michael Marder, donde sugiere que los injertos son una expresión de proliferación tanto para las plantas como para la carne. Con injertos, Marder ilustra la vegetalidad de la carne; con la carne vegetal, ilustro tanto la vegetalidad de la carne como la carnosidad de lo vegetal. La carne vegetal, entonces, se convierte en un término de indistinción (según Mateo Calarco), donde, a través de la carne vegetal, podemos comenzar a rastrear las formas en que los humanos y los animales son como las plantas. En el contexto de un joven de *The Book of Koli*, la indistinción de la carne vegetal captura la transformación compartida y necesaria, pero a menudo violenta, de la carne, mientras el protagonista adolescente, Koli, pasa a la adolescencia junto con las plantas genéticamente modificadas y su evolución hacia monstruosidades especulativas. A través de discusiones teóricas y lecturas detalladas, sostengo que las exploraciones de la carne vegetal en *The Book of Koli* sirven para demostrar tanto las transformaciones violentas y compartidas de la carne vegetal y humana como la indistinción que tales transformaciones fomentan entre el Koli adolescente y las plantas en constante evolución. El viaje especulativo del *The Book of Koli* hacia la adultez, entonces, con sus amenazas botánicas y transformaciones adolescentes, hace evidentes las zonas confusas que pueden surgir cuando atendemos a los cuerpos enredados y la carne frágil tanto de las plantas como de los humanos.

Palabras clave: Plantas, carne, ficción especulativa, indistinción.

Things We Want to Eat Fight Back

From the cavernous hollows of the pitcher plant that trap and ingest passing prey, to the mucilage-covered tendrils of the sundew which capture and absorb sugar-hungry insects, carnivorous plants have evolved to utilise their floral capabilities to feast on the flesh of fauna. Their carnivorous capabilities are being explored by researchers—Ulrike Bauer, Kenji Fukushima, and Tanya Renner—to determine the possibility and viability of "conferring carnivorous plant-like traits by single-gene transfer" (Bristol Mechanical Ecology Lab), in order to make edible crops more resilient to insects, improve their nutrition, and reduce the reliance on pesticides in arable agriculture. Research into edible crop resiliency is crucial for the future of food security, since, as Chris Gilligan notes, "pests and diseases remain one of the biggest threats to food production, increasingly destabilising food security and livelihoods across climate-vulnerable regions around the world" (Goodyear). Bauer, Fukushima, and Renner suggest that the solution to these food security problems—the botanical techno-fix—can be harvested from the genes of carnivorous plants.

Insect-repellent surfaces and viscoelastic trapping fluids are among the carnivorous plant traits that the research team are interested in. If the wetness-activated surfaces of the pitcher plant were transferred to edible crops, they suggest, it would "give access to beneficial insects such as pollinators and predators during the day," but it would facilitate their dispersal, when it rains, ensuring that insects have less continuous access to edible crops (Bristol Mechanical Ecology Lab). While the team aim to use a "novel spray-on method for transient genetic transformation"

to eliminate "the risks and environmental concerns generally associated with transgenic plants" (Bristol Mechanical Ecology Lab), during their research, this—even temporary—alteration of plants' genes speaks to anxieties surrounding the future of plant capabilities and the consequences of manipulating plants for human aims. This botanical techno-fix, therefore, is haunted by the speculative possibilities of genetically modified, carnivorous plants.

M.R. Carey's speculative young adult novel, *The Book of Koli*, explores the possibilities of the botanical techno-fix. From choker seeds that take root inside living human flesh to waking trees that crush their victims between creaking limbs, Carey's speculative plants extrapolate the anxieties and consequences of creating genetically modified, carnivorous plants. Like the carnivorously altered crops of the research project, *The Book of Koli*'s plants were genetically modified to improve their survival in an increasingly inhospitable environment. These plants cultivate a dystopian environment, where humans survive in isolated communities, perpetually fearful of the outside world. Lamenting about—what adolescent protagonist Koli refers to as—"the old times," he notes that "there was a time when there wasn't hardly no trees at all. They had all died" (Carey 16). Representative of a near-future Earth, the inhospitable landscape of "the old times" becomes a haunting prognostication of the world that could soon emerge, if we continue to degrade the environment and disregard plant life. Like Bauer, Fukushima, and Renner's research, the scientists of "the old times" aim to tackle these ecological problems, through a botanical techno-fix, making plants more resilient and improving their access to nutrition.[1] Koli recalls that the scientists used "genetic triggers" that "made the trees that was there already change their habits. Made them grow faster, for one thing. And made them take their nourishment in different ways, so they could live even in places where the soil was thin, which by that time was most places" (Carey 16).

The genetically modified plants of "the old times" take on a new vitality in arid landscapes, technologically adapting to these new conditions; they speak to Tessa Laird's claim that "we figure the loss of plants as the end of all hope, and the miraculous growth of plants in hostile environs as hope's beginning" (63). As fast-growing, thirsty plants repopulate the Earth, they appear to offer a tendril of hope. However, the scientists' genetically modified trees do not remain as "hope's beginning" or a promise of futurity; instead, these carnivorous trees speak to T. S. Miller's suggestion that "the monster plant may point to a deep unease about the boundary between taxonomic kingdoms" (461), signalling a disruption of the hierarchical fixity of human-plant relationships.

The trees' genetically modified growing speeds and alternative nourishment sources enter predatory territories, with limbs reaching for flesh instead of sunlight

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[1] As well as the botanical techno-fix, the novel also details other forms of futuristic technology, such as weaponry, entertainment consoles, computers, and artificial intelligence. Like the initial aims of the botanical techno-fix, the remnants of these other forms of technology are regarded as beneficial for their human users, even if they often struggle to understand how to use them successfully. As with the botanical techno-fix, these other forms of technology grant power to their user—whether human or plant—increasing their protection and agency in the novel's inhospitable landscape.

and roots drinking blood instead of water. What began as an attempt to create more resilient plants evolved—in accordance with anxieties surrounding the future of plant capabilities and the consequences of manipulating plants for human aims—into a monstrous rendering of genetically modified plant life. Like their speculative predecessors—John Wyndam's Triffids and *Little Shop of Horrors*' Audrey II—Carey's genetically modified, flesh-hungry forests turn upon their human co-habitants, taking sustenance from their flesh and disrupting the hierarchical fixity of human-plant relationships. As Koli notes,

> When the trees first took it on themselves to move, they wasn't hunting. They was just reaching for the sun, which was the most of their meat and drink. But as soon as they moved, creatures of all kinds got trapped between them and crushed. And the trees liked the taste of the dead beasts and the dead men and women. They relished the nourishment them dead things brung with them. There was already plants and flowers a-plenty that had that craving, sundews and flytrappers and such. Now the trees got it too. And being changed so much already, by the hand of human kind, they took it on their own selves to change some more. They got better at knowing where the beasts was. Better at trapping them, and killing them, and feeding on what was left. (Carey 16-17)

As if pertaining to the research into plant carnivory, Koli recalls the carnivorous plants—the sundews and flytrappers—of "the old times" that are already adapted to actively trap and consume flesh, alongside a reiteration of plant life being transformed by human hands. With innocuous intentions, the trees utilise the "genetic triggers" that the scientists activated, becoming the resilient flora they intended. However, they soon continue down this evolutionary trail, extrapolating the movements and nutritional capabilities of the scientists' modifications. As they push the scientists' utopian vision into a dystopian reality, *The Book of Koli*'s plants become fantastical renderings of the monster plant, transforming scientific innovation into evolutionary nightmare. In the end, they become more resilient, predatory, and better able to survive than even the scientists could have imagined, even if their survival is predicated on hunting flesh for food.

   The Book of Koli begins to trouble our reliance on and support of botanical techno-fixes, extrapolating our anxieties about genetically modifying plants and altering their capabilities, through speculative strategies that infuse the wetness-activated surfaces of edible crops with the deadly trappings of the novel's trees. The spectre of the carnivorously transformed edible crop haunts the novel's floral characters; as Koli states, "things we want to eat fight back" (Carey 13).

Grafts and Plant Flesh

   As carnivorous genes transform edible crops and speculative trees, they speak to and realise the anxieties surrounding the future of plant capabilities and the consequences of manipulating plants for human aims. Through the "single-gene transfer" of the research project, parts of one plant are infused into another, and, through the "genetic triggers" of *The Book of Koli*'s fictional scientists, plants are

transformed from within. In these genetic modifications, plants transform one another's materiality (instigated by the pressure of human interference). Exemplifying a transformative vegetality, these genetic modifications engage with Michael Marder's theorisation of "grafts."

Plant grafting involves inserting a graft—the shoots or twigs of a plant—into the slit of a tree. As their sap bleeds into one another and the plants co-exist with or take on the qualities of the other, "the host is no longer the same as it was before" (Marder, *Grafts* 15). For Marder, grafting—often, violently—exposes a transformative vegetality: "grafting, therefore, foregrounds the plasticity and receptivity of vegetal life, its constitutive capacity for symbiosis and metamorphosis, its openness to the other at the expense of fixed identities (even the identity ensconced in genetics) revealed, by their very vitality, as illusory" (Marder, *Grafts* 15). Grafts, then, violently expose the transformative ability and fluid identity of plant life, whereby plants can become part of one another, fused and growing together as modified tendrils. Building on the grafting of plants, Marder opens up the multi-species entanglement of grafts, noting that

> grafts are not circumscribed to plants. They can also name a surgical procedure, whereby living tissue, most often skin, is transplanted from one part of the body to another, or from one body to another. When they are successful, that is to say, when the organism does not reject the tissues grafted onto it, these operations disclose the vegetal character of corporeality: of flesh proliferating on flesh. (Marder, *Grafts* 15)

Through surgical grafts, therefore, Marder seeks to capture the ways flesh engages with vegetal modes of existence; there are moments of transplantation and propagation, endless growth and proliferation, porosity, infinite wholeness, and fluid identity. In other words, human flesh expresses the transformative vegetality of flesh. As Marder continues, "the very fact that grafts can refer to animal or human tissues as well as to plant parts testifies to the word's and the practice's quiet rebellion against the strictures of identity" (Marder, *Grafts* 15). When viewed through Marder's "graft" rubric, then, these genetically modified plants offer us an opportunity to explore the vegetal fleshiness of plants.

Developing Marder's theorisation of "grafts," I propose the term "plant flesh," in order to further articulate the multi-species entanglements of grafting, whereby plant flesh captures both the vegetality of flesh *and* the fleshiness of the vegetal. Plant flesh creates a theoretical graft, fusing the vegetality of flesh of Marder's grafts with the indistinct fleshiness of Matthew Calarco's indistinction approach; theoretical sap bleeds into one another to cultivate plant flesh. In Calarco's indistinction approach, he proposes flesh—and its inherent edibility—as a facilitator for human and animal indistinction (57). Through this shared fleshy edibility, Calarco suggests, we arrive at an alternative ethical possibility—indistinction—which no longer maintains distinct ontological and ethical boundaries between humans and animals; indistinction requires speculating on what we all—humans and animals—might become, when we embrace our shared, fleshy edibility. As Calarco states, "to acknowledge oneself as inhabiting a shared zone of exposed embodiment with animals is to recognize that we

are in deep and fundamental ways *like animals*" (58). Developing Calarco's position to more explicitly account for plant life, plant flesh encourages us, as humans, to recognise that we are in deep and fundamental ways *like plants*, too.[2] Dawn Keetley comments on this relationship between plants and humans, noting that plants "are the utterly and ineffably strange, embodying an *absolute alterity*" (9), yet "there sometimes glimmers into view the unsettling sense that maybe we are also *like plants*" (16). As humans begin to acknowledge how they are *like plants*, plant flesh exposes the indistinctions between humans and plants, while being aware of plants' unique capabilities—for example, their ability to die in parts and live in others (Marder, "Resist Like a Plant" 30) and their indistinct sense of "inside" and "outside" (Marder, "The Life of Plants" 263). Plant flesh, then, entails rethinking our relationship *to* plants and our relationship *with* plants, where we become open to the speculative ethical possibilities that arise from this rethinking, in order to see how we are *like plants*.

As such, plant flesh, as argued in this article, develops Marder's theorisation of grafts and Calarco's indistinction approach, expands the field of critical plant studies, and enhances the analysis of plant life in *The Book of Koli*. While Monica Gagliano et al. argue that "the predominant literary discourse on plants renders their lives symbolic or figurative, as organic referents for animal meaning" (xi), plant flesh allows us to engage in, what they term, a "phytocentric—or, preferably, biocentric—form of literary criticism," which "would seriously regard the lives of plants in relation to humankind in terms that would look beyond the purely symbolic or "correlative" dimensions of the vegetal" (xi). As such, through plant flesh, we can acknowledge the plant with(in) us, begin to consider what it means to be plant flesh, and speculate about ethical forms of *being with* plants.

Exploring plant flesh in *The Book of Koli*, I argue that plant flesh demonstrates both the shared, violent transformations of plant and human flesh and the indistinction that such transformations encourage between the adolescent Koli and the ever-evolving plants. As I explore depictions of plant flesh in the novel, the carnivorous trees move from explicitly monstrous to implicitly indistinct, where moments of disturbing consumption and instrumentalisation are reframed as sites of ethical reconfiguration. *The Book of Koli*'s speculative young adult journey, then, with its botanical threats and adolescent transformations, makes apparent the indistinct zones that can emerge, when we tend to the entangled bodies and fragile flesh of both plants and humans.

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[2] Aristotle explored the idea of being *like plants*, through the vegetative soul as the foundation of plant, animal, and human life. However, as Matthew Hall argues, through the vegetative soul, "Aristotle constructed a hierarchy of life with plants placed firmly at the bottom" (7). Plant flesh, on the other hand, aims to deconstruct these anthropocentric hierarchies, while cultivating a shared ontological state, through indistinction.

Plants in Young Adult Literature

Speculative young adult literature, like *The Book of Koli*, is a particularly fruitful medium for exploring the indistinction of plant flesh, since, as Lykke Guanio-Uluru and Melanie Duckworth note, "Children's and YA literature emerge as spaces of encounter with the vegetal world—spaces of engagement and transformation" (12), where "the notion of kinship with plants has long been approached" (3). These speculative YA texts, therefore, create environments, where human and plant flesh constantly encounter, engage, and transform one another, challenging the ontological and ethical fixity of hierarchical human-plant relationships. Speaking to nonhuman relationships more broadly, Zoe Jaques suggests that "children's literature can offer sophisticated interventions into debates about what it means to be human or non-human and offer ethical imaginings of a posthuman world" (5). Therefore, with explorations of plant flesh fuelled by the speculative ethical imaginings of indistinction, YA literature's transformative narratives cultivate environments that offer alternative ethical and ontological possibilities. Building on this relationship between YA literature and emerging scholarship in critical plant studies—such as plant flesh—Lydia Kokkola argues that the increasing inclusion of human-plant relations "suggests that the thinking that underlies critical plant studies is being made accessible to young readers" (277). In other words, these YA texts are actively engaging in speculative ethical thinking about plants.

With increasing popularity from scholars and readers alike, *The Book of Koli* joins an ever-growing body of speculative YA literature interested in plant-human relationships and transformations, where texts, as Monika Rusvai suggests, are "rife with putting the non-human into focus" (88). Despite the increasing popularity of botanical characters, Rusvai comments that "the more formulaic texts in the genre hardly ever aim to challenge anthropocentric thinking through focusing on the non-human other" (88). However, Rusvai highlights Naomi Novik's *Uprooted* (2016) as a "notable exception" to this claim (89); a novel which, like *The Book of Koli*, "problematizes the vegetal other" (89). With trees that capture and consume villagers, both Novik's *Uprooted* and Carey's *The Book of Koli* seem to share an interest in the violent and complex representations of human-plant relationships and transformations. However, unlike the arboreal characters of *Uprooted*, *The Book of Koli*'s plants do not animate or challenge the ontological and ethical fixity of human-plant relationships through anthropomorphism. Instead, the plants extrapolate the capabilities of carnivorous plants, through the fictional scientific intervention of the botanical techno-fix, bringing the indistinction of human and plant flesh into focus, through shared, violent transformations.

The Trees Got Their Own Ways to Hurt Us

Through their materiality, Susan McHugh notes that "plants appear in the pages of virtually every literary text" (para 1)—either physically as paper;

symbolically, through the recollection of paper in technology; or textually as characters and environments. As you thumb through the pages of *The Book of Koli*, you encounter plant flesh in both its speculative narrative and in its papery materiality. Fictional human flesh is crushed by waking plant flesh, while plant flesh is crushed between human flesh fingertips. Fern tendrils—like the titular tendrils of this special issue—curl around the paperback's spine, waiting to feel the transformative sensation of human flesh.

These transformative qualities of *The Book of Koli*'s flesh-hungry forests confirm McHugh's suggestion that "forests have long served as transformative zones in literary traditions of cultures rooted in arboreal regions of the world" (para 33). As they trap and feast on fauna, the carnivorous, genetically modified trees push these transformative zones into violent territories, while also encouraging moments of imaginative experimentation. Since, as Koli states, "the forest wasn't a place that liked us much at all, except as meat" (Carey 208), the children work through these dangers using imaginative play, transforming violent realities into playful speculations. In the game "Forest Wake," the children "pretended the house was a wilderness we was exploring, or we played forest-wake, where all the chairs and tables was trees and if we touched them they would wake and whelm us" (Carey 23). Tip-toeing around wooden chairs and avoiding the legs of tables, cured wood is reanimated by the children, taking on a previously denied liveliness that reinscribes the wood with both a renewed danger and a reinforced passivity. Even as the children feign terror, they—and we—know that this wood cannot feast on their flesh.

Unfortunately for Koli, "Forest Wake" does not remain a childish game; instead, it becomes a daunting reality. After Koli is exiled from his village of Mythen Rood—he, like the plants, is seen as a newly powerful threat to the villagers and their way of life—he is forced to navigate the forest. As playful speculation becomes violent reality, once again, Koli plays "Forest Wake," but, this time, the threat of being whelmed is real. Koli comments that

> The trees loomed right in front of me there, stretching up into the sky, shouldering each other aside, or so it seemed, to get a look at me. That was only my fear, though, and not a real thing I was seeing. The trees was sleeping the dull day away and give no sign they even knowed I was there. Don't be such a coward, Koli, I says to myself. Think of them men and women of the before times, that had such knowing of trees they could tell them what to do and when to do it. Imagine you're one of them men of old, and be brave. Imagine the trees bowing down in front of you, like you're their king. (Carey 208-209)

Paranoid, rather than comforted, Koli's childish imaginings transform into taunting anxieties; in this game, his flesh is at stake. Like the wooden furniture, Koli reanimates the dormant trees, picturing them waking and whelming him, as they compete for a chunk of his flesh. Without the safety of Mythen Rood's walls or the playful speculations, Koli is at the mercy of the trees, as well as his imagination. Despite his paranoid imaginings, Koli does, once again, return to the playful speculations of "Forest Wake" to comfort his fear: he imagines himself as the people of "the old times."

Instead of competing for his flesh and clutching him between their limbs, the trees' movements become a vision of antiquated submission—they bow down to the boy of the old times, who has the power to tell them what to do and when.

As they loom in children's nightmares and imaginations, with vicious tendrils and craving roots, *The Book of Koli*'s trees are not so easily instrumentalised, posing a mortal threat to those who get caught in their limbs. However, these deadly consequences do not bring an end to the instrumentalisation of plants; instead, humans reconfigure their approach, ensuring that harvesting plant flesh does not result in the loss of human flesh. In the village of Mythen Rood—Koli's home village—villagers are trained as "catchers," hunting trees under the cover of clouds, while they are less able to defend themselves. When they set out on a hunt for chunks of plant flesh, the humans catchers are also on the hunt for revenge against these powerful trees, performing the vestiges of human dominion, through devious lacerations. Trained as a "woodsmith," Koli partakes in these hunts, able to "catch wood from a live tree without getting myself killed, how to dry it out and then steep it in the poisonous soup called stop-mix until it was safe, and how to turn and trim it" (Carey 4). As a woodsmith, Koli is already bound, by name and profession, to plant flesh, in charge of violently transforming it from lively flesh to stiff, deadened flesh, with the help of the chemical stop-mix. Previously animate and autonomous plant flesh is rendered into useable pieces of wood:

> The fresh-cut wood was stacked in the yard outside the house so it could dry, and the stacks was so high they shut out the sun at noon-day. We wasn't allowed to go near the piles of fresh wood, or the wood that was steeping in the killing shed: the first could strike you down and the second could poison you. Rampart law said you couldn't build nothing out of wood unless the planks had steeped in stop-mix for a month and was dead for sure. Last thing you wanted was for the wall of your house to wake up and get to being alive again, which green wood always will. (Carey 5)

Following their capture, a new form of butchery awaits the fresh-cut wood: a slow, forced feast of poison. In the killing shed, their flesh is reinscribed with the distinctions and instrumentalisations that thrived in "the old times"; each cut and chemical soak becomes a marker of humans' (regained) control. However, even as the trees are stripped of their flesh and deadly capabilities, they threaten to reanimate, forming a forest of skinned trees within the walls of Mythen Rood; they are able to die in parts and live in others. Furthermore, in the killing shed, as human, plant, and chemical combine, the butchering and curing processes expose the shared, violent transformations of both human and plant flesh. While Koli shares the dangers of getting too close to either the fresh or steeping wood, the indistinctions between human and plant flesh emerge: 1) in the same way that the planks of fresh-cut wood—and, indeed, the trees in the forest—threaten to "strike you down" for sustenance, the catchers actively strike down limbs of the dormant trees for raw material, transforming living flesh into consumable flesh; and 2) likewise, the stop-mix, which renders the wood into useable material, also threatens to poison human flesh, too, transforming both plant and human flesh through infection. The killing shed,

therefore, purported as a marker of human control, ontological and ethical distinction, and plant flesh butchery, is exposed as a site of indistinction, where plant and human flesh become indistinct, through the shared, violent transformations of fresh-cuts and poisoning.

The killing shed is not the only place, where plants are butchered and fed a poisoned diet of stop-mix; out in the forest, humans poison the soil, exploiting the trees' genetically enhanced resilience and diversified nutrient intake. As Koli recalls,

> I seen that the trees was dead, though they still stood as high as ever. Their trunks was hollowed out partly, and they didn't have no leaves on their branches, while all the other trees still had a few reds and yellows left to fall. I marvelled at this. What could kill a tree? (Carey 262)

Despite his experience killing and steeping fresh-cut wood as a woodsmith, Koli is in disbelief at the sight of dead and dying trees. While the catchers are only able to capture branches—chunks of plant flesh—the humans who poisoned the soil have slaughtered entire trees. To ensure their effectiveness, this poison, like the stop-mix, infects the trees, before hollowing out their flesh from within; only their bark—their skin—remains. From leaves to trunk, each marker of liveliness has been stripped, with their structure remaining as a signifier of the powerful trees that once lived. In the same way that catchers butcher trees to seek revenge for the trees butchering humans, the trees appear to be hollowed out with poison to seek revenge for the germination practices of one of the novel's most infamous inhabitants: the choker trees.

During a choker spring, which happens every four to five years, the choker trees disperse their seeds, breaching the borders of Mythen Rood and lodging themselves indistinctly inside soil and flesh. With their accelerated growth and seed dispersal, the choker trees epitomise the resilience that the scientists of "the old times" sought to achieve through genetic triggers:

> choker trees growed fast and tall, and they growed in any ground. The onliest way to keep them back was to uproot or burn out every seed that fell. If a seed landed in the ground, and no one seen it, it would be three feet high by lock-tide and taller than a man come morning. (Carey 16)

Even as saplings, the choker trees capture the ferocity of the genetically modified, carnivorous trees, planting fear inside the walls of Mythen Rood; their dispersal reinforces the idea that the settlement of Mythen Rood—and the human flesh it contains—is always conditional, always on the edge of being whelmed by flesh-hungry trees. However, this ferocity and power is accompanied by a vulnerability, as choker saplings are plucked from the soil by fearful, angry villagers. Like the choker seeds, Koli, too, is plucked from Mythen Rood as an adolescent—a sapling—by fearful, angry villagers, after he "wakes" a piece of technology and threatens to expose the corruption of Mythen Rood's leaders. He, like the choker seeds, quickly plants his idea in the foundations of the village; the (supposed) danger he poses must be "uprooted

or burnt out." The villagers do not want to encounter these choker trees—or Koli—in fully-grown form.

Marder comments on the inherent vulnerability of plants, stating that "proliferating from pure loss, plants offer themselves with unconditional generosity. Silently, they extend themselves in space, exposing their vegetal bodies in utter vulnerability to being chopped off or plucked, harvested or trimmed" ("Vegetal Anti-Metaphysics" 479). Therefore, as choker seeds germinate inside the walls of Mythen Rood, they expose their plant flesh vulnerability; as Koli walks in the forest outside the walls of Mythen Rood, he, too, exposes his human flesh vulnerability—each is vulnerable in the clutches of the other. Rather than viewing this shared vulnerability as a cause for continuous retaliation, the novel opens up these spaces of indistinction, which offer alternative ways of understanding *being with* plants. The novel's development of indistinction is bound to adolescence, to the continued growth and vulnerability captured by both Koli and the plants. Once again, through these moments of shared, violent transformation, there lingers the speculative possibility of more ethical relationships between humans and plants.

Developing these moments of shared, violent transformations, the choker seeds do not only germinate within human villages; instead, they germinate within human flesh. As Koli laments,

> of all our mortal threats, I was most mightily afraid of the choker seeds, because they attacked so fast and was so hard to fight. If a seed fell on your skin, you had only got a few seconds to dig it out again before the roots went in too deep. After that there wasn't nothing anyone could do for you save to kill you right away before the seedling hollowed you out. (Carey 14)

In the same way as their rooting in the soil, the choker seeds quickly bury themselves inside human flesh, taking root in the iron-rich tissue. As they hollow out humans and take root within their bones, they speak to the ways that "plant growth always breaks what seeks to contain it, transgressing borders meant to confine and define" (Keetley 13). The once distinct borders—both physical and ontological—between choker sapling and human villager, between plant flesh and human flesh, are transgressed by choker roots, becoming porous and permeable. During this transgression of borders, plant flesh and human flesh engage in a modified version of the grafting process, layers of flesh violently transformed by one another. In this modified graft, rather than plant fleshes being grafted onto one another or human fleshes being grafted onto one another, during the choker seed germination, plant flesh is grafted onto human flesh, so that "the host is no longer the same as it was before" (Marder, *Grafts* 15). In other words, this graft produces the indistinction growing within plant flesh.

Like the choker seed germination, grafts are predicated on a shared, violent transformation and exposed vulnerability between the grafted fleshes. As Marder comments,

> Membranes, tissues, liquids, and surfaces must be exposed to one another in all their nudity for a graft to work, to exercise its transformative influence. But this exposure is, itself, something exceptionally difficult to achieve and to sustain, which is why it

> calls for procedures that appear to be violent. Only at the price of a prior, semi-forgotten violence can the sense of seamlessness and continuity be maintained. (*Grafts* 17)

Despite their fleshy exposure, Marder emphasises the necessity of an *apparent* violence for a successful graft; flesh cannot seamlessly graft without a shared, violent transformation, but this violence must be contained to the past for the graft to be sustained. Therefore, as plant flesh violently ruptures human flesh, in the choker seed germination, the violence takes on a new meaning, one of speculative indistinction. However, the villagers do not uphold the semi-forgotten violence of the graft, halting the process and plucking the choker sapling from its hollowed out host. Despite the physical failure of the graft, the choker seed and human graft *does* succeed in highlighting the indistinction between plant flesh and human flesh; through the shared, violent transformation and exposed vulnerability, both the seed and the villager will no longer be the same as they were before, endlessly changed and connected by this germinated graft.

Alongside this modified grafting process, the choker seed germination also speaks, once again, to the extrapolated behaviours of current plants achieved by the scientists of "the old times": they utilise animals as seed carriers. Known as epizoochory, plant seeds attach themselves, most frequently to "furry terrestrial mammals," using "spines, hooks, claws, bristles, barbs, grapples, and prickles," which cling "tenaciously to their carriers" (Britannica para 7). Some seeds even "lodge themselves between the hooves of large grazing mammals" (Britannica para 8). As choker seeds hook and bury themselves into human flesh, they partake—more explicitly violently—in epizoochory, utilising animals as seed carriers. After demonstrating the choker trees' effective epizoochory, the novel makes a surprising revelation about an animal that escapes—continuously—from the rooting of the saplings: rats. Now as large as domesticated dogs, the rats eke out an existence in the forests, rarely making their way into Mythen Rood. While out hunting, the catchers often notice that the rats seem to pass by the trees unnoticed and their skin is left unbroken by choker seeds. After asking the Rampart's database (a piece of technology like an electronic encyclopaedia), the villagers learn that, as well as poisons, there are other secretions that protect faunal flesh from the seeds of the choker trees. The rats, for example, "had got something inside them that sweated out onto their skin when the sun come out and kind of stopped the choker trees from closing tight on them, or choker seeds from breaking open on them and growing down into their bodies" (Carey 15). The rats and the choker seeds, therefore, engage in a traditional form of epizoochory, with the seeds hooking onto the fur of the rats without burrowing down into their flesh; instead, they will be carried and dispersed further around the forest.

As secretions protect exposed and vulnerable faunal flesh, the humans of Mythen Rood are perturbed by the rats' evolutionary advantage, devising a plan to steal their sweat-covered flesh for themselves:

> there was a plan put together and voted on to make cloaks out of dead rats' skins so hunters could go into the forest even on sunny days. It got so far as Molo Tanhide

> making one of these cloaks with skins some hunters took after a fight. But he refused flat-out to put it on and try it. (Carey 17)

Unable to manufacture the rats' sweat, the villagers slaughter, butcher, and skin the rats for their raw material—their skin—like they do with the fresh-cut wood in the killing shed. Made from hundreds of rats, these sweat-covered skins transform the human hunters' access to both plant flesh and animal flesh; with their skinned cloaks, they hide under hides, transformed into even more violent hunters, in both action and appearance. Disturbed by his creation, even Molo Tanhide, Mythen Rood's tanner, will not wear the skinned cloak, afraid of who he might become. Through the violent transformations of animal flesh and application of human flesh, once again, a moment of violent exposure operates as a modification of the grafting process. This time, sweat replaces sap and flesh hides flesh, rather than hollowing it out. However, unlike with the choker seeds, it is not immediately apparent what violent transformations await the humans; the rats seek their revenge through teeth and claw:

> For a while after that we had trouble with the rats. They knowed we killed some of theirs, and would attack our hunters in the woods every time they seen them. Nobody died, that I remember, but men and women would come back with rat bites on their arms or shoulders, or their legs gashed with rat claws. It got so fresh meat was scarce for a year or more. (Carey 18)

Like the humans who refuse to forget the violent transformations of the choker seed grafts, the rats refuse to forget the violent transformations of the humans' rat skin grafts, inflicting wounds on the humans' flesh as a re-inscription of the butchery they performed on the rats. The rats, rather than transforming the humans into even more violent hunters, through their skinned flesh, transform the humans into impotent hunters, instead, preventing them from capturing fresh meat or fresh-cut wood. The price to pay for skinning and butchering the rats is flesh.

The rats confirm the shared, violent transformation necessary for both grafts and indistinction—if the humans will not willingly transform their flesh, the rats will perform it for them. Therefore, as these modified, multi-species grafts—human, animal, and plant—are performed, they expose both the vegetality of flesh *and* the fleshiness of the vegetal, inherent in the concept of plant flesh. In doing so, they reaffirm, once more, the ontological and ethical indistinctions made possible through explorations of plant flesh. Through moments of shared, violent transformations and exposed vulnerability, we begin to explore the speculative indistinctions between humans, plants, and animals.

Like Plants

The Book of Koli cultivates carnivorous, genetically modified plants that challenge our thinking about the instrumentalisation of plants and botanical techno-fixes (like those of the carnivorous single-gene transfer). Throughout the novel, the characters—human, plant, and animal—are haunted by the speculative possibilities

of genetically modified, carnivorous plants *and* plants' current capabilities; every genetically modified behaviour is an extrapolated version of current plant capabilities. With their speculatively amplified awareness and hunting prowess, Carey's captivating plants support Katherine Bishop's claim that "this profusion of plants in popular culture, especially in sf, suggests at least an uneasy acknowledgment that plants have capabilities that we humans neither share nor yet fully comprehend" (2). As plant capabilities enter the botanical territories of *The Book of Koli*, my analysis demonstrates that Carey's plants also invite reflection on plants' current capabilities, as well as their capabilities post-genetic modification. Furthermore, these extrapolated capabilities also open up space for exploring the concept of plant flesh and the speculative ontological and ethical indistinctions that the term encourages.

While the characters in *The Book of Koli* often try to turn away from the plant-human indistinction that shared, violent transformations cultivate, it is not so easy for us, as readers, with plant flesh crushed between our fingertips, to ignore these indistinctions and the speculative ethical thinking that accompanies it. With its vulnerable saplings, butchered skins, and modified, multi-species grafts, the novel sows the seeds for less violent interactions between humans and plants, encouraging us to witness plant instrumentalisation differently and reconsider the ontological and ethical distinctions between plants and humans. As such, the novel actively opens up a zone of indistinction, where we can begin to acknowledge the plant flesh within us and speculate about ethical forms of *being with* plants, while appreciating their— speculatively extrapolated—capabilities. Therefore, through explorations of plant flesh, my analysis of the novel generates the speculative ethical thinking necessary for thinking about a future where "the tress got their own ways to hurt us" and where "the things we want to eat fight back" (Carey 13), by encouraging us to see how we are *like plants*.

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Seeds of Change:
Negotiating Hierarchies in Seed Picturebook Stories

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Abstract

How tiny seeds are represented in children's literature has long eluded critical attention, although they are frequently foregrounded in the words and images of children's picturebooks. Drawing upon critical plant studies, new materialism, and Kathryn Parsley's notion of "plant awareness disparity", this article analyzes three contemporary seed picturebook stories, namely Jory John and Pete Oswald's *The Bad Seed* (2017), Cristiana Valentini and Philip Giordano's *Stay, Little Seed* (2020), and Jen Cullerton Johnson and Sonia Lynn Sadler's *Seeds Of Change: Planting a Path to Peace* (2011). With a focus on the verbal and visual representations of seeds and their poetic relationship with children, the analysis of the three seed stories reveals the empowering nature of seed narratives which represent seeds as anthropomorphized characters or symbolic motifs, but most essentially, as agentic beings with vibrancy. These stories exhibit the poetic entanglement of seeds and children in an agentic assemblage of collective vulnerability, which not only blurs the line between the human and vegetal, but also negotiates power hierarchies embedded in the world ruled by adults. Thus, I argue that seed stories reveal the agentic power of seeds by crafting various forms of poetic entanglements between seeds and children. Although the child-seed entanglement may not entirely deconstruct an asymmetry between adults and innocent children as well as between matured plants and tiny seeds, this study offers an alternative perspective that counters the perception of seeds and children as vulnerable and controlled.

Keywords: Seed stories, critical plant studies, new materialism, agency, plant awareness disparity.

Resumen

La crítica ha eludido durante mucho tiempo cómo aparecen representadas las semillas diminutas en la literatura infantil, aunque suelen ocupar un primer plano en las palabras e imágenes de los libros infantiles ilustrados. Recurriendo a los estudios críticos sobre plantas, al nuevo materialismo y a la noción de "disparidad en el conocimiento sobre plantas", este artículo analiza tres historias ilustradas sobre semillas, concretamente *La mala pipa* (2017) de Jory John y Pete Oswald, *Stay, Little Seed* (2020) de Cristiana Valentini y Philip Giordano, y *Seeds Of Change: Planting a Path to Peace* (2011) de Jen Cullerton Johnson y Sonia Lynn Sadler. Centrándose en la representación verbal y visual de las semillas y de su relación poética con los niños, el análisis de las tres historias sobre semillas revela la naturaleza empoderadora de las narrativas sobre semillas que representan a las semillas como personajes antropomorfos o como motivos simbólicos, pero, más esencialmente, como seres con agencia y vitalidad. Estas histrias muestran la implicación entre semillas y niños en un ensamblaje de vulnerabilidad colectiva, que no sólo desdibuja la línea entre lo humano y lo vegetal, sino que también negocia las jerarquías de poder que subyacen en el mundo gobernado por los adultos. De esta forma, sostengo que las historias de semillas revelan la pdoerosa agencia de las semillas al crear diveras formas de implicación poética entre semillas y niños. Auque esta implicación puede que no deconstruya completamente una asimetría entre adultos y niños inocentes, así como entre plantas maduras y semillas diminutas, este estudio ofrece una perspectiva alternativa que se opone a la percepción de las semillas y los niños como vulnerables y bajo control.

Introduction

In his book *The Triumph of Seeds* (2015), Thor Hanson highlights the pervasive presence of seeds in various aspects of our lives: "From our morning coffee and bagel to the cotton in our clothes and the cup of cocoa we might drink before bed, seeds surround us all day long" (loc. 16). The recognition of seeds as the basis of human diets, economics, and lifestyles reveals the dominance of seeds on our planet. However, due to their small size or underground status, seeds often remain on the periphery of our consciousness in ways that are regularly unacknowledged and undervalued. Such a perspective limits our perception of seeds as merely sources or commodities and overlooks the agential role that seeds play in the process of creating our existence with the natural world, resulting in what Hanson laments: "We hardly recognize how utterly dependent we are upon them" (loc. 12).

In contrast to this, children's literature, particularly picturebooks with both verbal and visual narrations, provides a venue to explore, engage, and foreground the representation of seeds. For instance, in Dr. Seuss's ecology fable *The Lorax* (1971), an entire Edenic and pristine environment is devastated, leaving only the last Truffula seed tossed to a boy. The last remaining seed that the boy tries to catch not only represents a serious reminder of humans' reliance on the natural world, but also symbolizes a glimmer of hope and the final opportunity for regeneration under the regime of industrial modernity. Likewise, Eric Carle emphasizes the significance of seeds in his informational narrative, *The Tiny Seed* (1970). This story depicts an undersized sunflower seed's perilous adventure to a suitable spot for winter rest, spring germination, summer growth, and autumn dispersal. The portrayal of the tiny seed as a folk hero embarking on an Odyssean voyage underscores its agency and capacity to act independently and influence human beings. Furthermore, Ruth Krauss and Crockett Johnson's classic *The Carrot Seed* (1945) vividly captures the power and vitality of seeds. In this story, a boy dismisses all doubters and diligently cares for his seed, resulting in the emergence of a giant carrot larger than a wheelbarrow, "just as the little boy had known it would" (23).[1] In all these seed stories, seeds are thematically associated with the anticipation, ability, and power of growth, forging literal or figurative connections with children.

The convergence of the seeds, the growth motif, as well as the seed-child analogy, thus gives rise to the following research questions: With the thematic continuum, how are seeds rhetorically represented in contemporary seed picturebook stories? In seed narratives where the growth motif is pervasive, what are

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[1] Although usually there are no page numbers printed on picturebooks, for the convenience of indication, I numbered pages of the selected picturebooks from the start of verbal narrations to the end of them (excluding the title page, half-title page, and endpapers).

the relationships constructed between children and seeds? In what ways do these representations reinforce or deconstruct the established power norms surrounding seeds, plants, children, and adults? This study aims to address these questions by exploring the agentic power of represented seeds and their poetic entanglement with children in seed stories. This perspective aligns with the goal of critical plant studies, which seeks to reverse the centrality of humans (Kokkola 274), and draws on the insights of new materialism, which embraces the ethics of relationality among all creatures, including seeds, children, and the wider material world. (Iovino and Oppermann). In the context of critical plant studies, "seed stories" are understood as types of "plant narratives" (Griffiths) or "stories featuring plant narrators" (James). These narratives encapsulate stories we tell about botanical life as well as stories the seeds or plants tell us. In a new materialist sense, the "agentic power" is interpreted through Jane Bennett's concept of "thing-power", which recognizes all things, even imperceptible seeds, as agentic beings with vitality, capable of producing their own meaning and effects. Following a critical review that accounts for the ways in which seeds are overlooked as well as scholarly discussions on the poetic entanglement of seeds and children in terms of growth and agency, this study conducts a close reading of Jory John and Pete Oswald's *The Bad Seed* (2017), Cristiana Valentini and Philip Giordano's *Stay, Little Seed* (2020), and Jen Cullerton Johnson and Sonia Lynn Sadler's *Seeds Of Change: Planting a Path to Peace* (2011). These stories not only reflect various dimensions of seed-child entanglements in terms of growth, but also indicate various forms of inherent hierarchies within relationships involving seeds and plants, children and adults, as well as nonhumans and humans.

From Plant Blindness to Seed Representation

One possible explanation for the neglect of seeds in children's literature studies can be encapsulated in the term "plant blindness". Coined by James Wandersee and Elisabeth Schussler, this term describes modern humanity's tendency to overlook and undervalue plants, which leads to (a) "the inability to recognize their importance in the biosphere, and in human affairs"; (b) "the inability to appreciate the aesthetic and unique biological features of the life forms"; and (c) "the misguided, anthropocentric ranking of plants as inferior to animals" ("Preventing" 82). Terri Doughty expands on the concept of "plant blindness" by highlighting its implications for the recognition of human-plant interconnections. Additionally, the notion of "plant kinship blindness" is introduced, elucidating the lack of recognition of the genetic kinship between animals (including humans) and plants (Bouteau et al.).

Scholars engaged in critical plant studies within Euro-centric cultures often start their discourse by referring to the phenomena of "plant blindness" or "plant kinship blindness" to problematize our anthropocentric view of plants and our hierarchical relationship with plants. However, the notion of "plant blindness" itself is subject to debate. Situated in disability studies, Kathryn Parsley suggests that the term "plant blindness" utilizes a disability metaphor that "equates a disability

(blindness) with a negative or undesirable trait" (599). As an alternative, she proposes a new term "plant awareness disparity" to replace the original one that is associated with ableism. The shift in terminology clarifies that it is the *disparity* of our attention, attitude, knowledge, and relative interest between animals and plants that causes the *inability* to notice plants rather than a *disability*. Nevertheless, regarding the root of "plant blindness," which is that people with anthropocentric thinking rank plants as inferior to animals ("Toward a Theory" 3), the new term delimits the notion of "disparity" to the humans' differential attention towards animals and plants, without explicitly acknowledging the disparities among various plant species and their life cycles or forms. It is worth noting that Wandersee and Schussler originally defined "plant blindness" with specific reference to "flowering plants", stating that "the term is most appropriately used in reference to [this particular category]" ("Toward a Theory" 3). However, it seems that their followers have overlooked this taxonomic distinction, treating the entire plant kingdom as a single perceptual category and disregarding the differences among plant species. Furthermore, within the existing scholarship in literary studies of plants, there is a tendency to focus primarily on the representations of fully grown plants with distinct biological features, while neglecting plants in other life stages, particularly the foundational stage of seeds.

In Randy Laist's *Plants and Literature: Essays in Critical Plant Studies* (2013), the first book of the seminal anthology *Critical Plant Studies: Philosophy, Religion, and Culture*, many chapters employ the word "plants" loosely, while only a few delve into the dynamic life forms of plants. On the other hand, *Plants in Children's and Young Adult Literature* (2021), the first comprehensive compilation of plant representation in the field of children's literature, conquers the plant awareness disparity of different plant species. This collection encompasses a wide range of plants, including ferns, mulberry trees, gooseberry bushes, and chamomiles (Guanio-Uluru and Duckworth 12), thereby broadening the scope of plant awareness. Nevertheless, many essays in this volume primarily focus on mature plant forms presented in the texts, often overlooking the essential life cycles that each mature plant undergoes. Despite this, scholars of plant studies and children's literature (such as Li and Ryan; Duckworth and Herb) have alluded to the metaphor of seeds by titling their works with seed imagery.

The limited attention given to the topic of seeds in children's literature research can be considered a manifestation of "plant awareness disparity" when extending Parsley's concept to encompass not only the failure to recognize plants and our interconnections with them but also the failure to acknowledge the disparities among different plant species and their various life forms. Accordingly, this study focuses on seed stories in an attempt to address the conspicuous lack of critical examination devoted to the representation of seeds in children's literature, a genre featuring the growth motif and various forms of agency.

Seeds, Growth, and Agency

Etymologically, the English verb "to grow" with its Middle Dutch origin *groeyen* or *groyen*, meaning "to manifest vigorous life; to put forth foliage, flourish", has a denotation of plant growth (Trites 2). We understand what growth literally means as we witness the transformation of a plant from a seed to a mature plant in parallel to a person's physical, emotional, and cognitive development from childhood to adulthood. In Roberta Trites' metaphorical explanation, it is the mapping of "the spatial relationship of upwards growth onto the concept of maturation" (19). Seed stories then may involve recognizable narrative patterns of the *Bildungsroman* ("coming-of-age"), "the novel of transition from youth to adulthood" (Trites 4). However, Michael Marder finds the conceptualization of vegetal growth as a purely quantitative increase in extension "utterly reductive" ("The Sense" 89). Concerning the germination process of a seed, he explains:

> To grow is to extend oneself in different directions; to appear better, more fully; to keep giving something new to sight and to all the other senses; to become ampler, yet also to develop in concert with the environment … When a seed does germinate, it grows both up and down, sending roots and shoots, as it orients itself in lived space. ("The Sense" 89)

The differences between Trites' description of growth based on mature plants and Marder's illumination of growth based on seeds lie in the different philosophical interpretations of plants and seeds. For Aristotle, a fully developed plant is *energeia*, a complete activity or actual being, whereas a seed is *dynamis*, a potentiality for such activity (Fossheim 47). Although a seed holds the *potential* for growth, the outcome of its development is not guaranteed. If a seed grows, whether it grows as a healthy plant, a barren plant, a tap-rooted plant, a creeping plant, or any other form of plant is indeterminate. Its germination commences in the middle, within an "in-between" position containing multiple possibilities, as Michael Marder notes that a "seed yields the multiplicity it shelters even in the singular form" (*Plant-Thinking* 89). The possibilities of a tap-rooted and fascicular form of growth recall the tree-like and "rhizomatic" images of thoughts presented by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987). The former suggests a hierarchical structure, whereas the latter indicates an open and anti-hierarchical relation (Deleuze and Guattari 5-7).

Likewise, the growth of a child can also present a variety of states in children's literature. On the one hand, children are expected to grow in a tree-like form, following the norms of maturity defined by adults who typically have more socio-economic and political power (*Power* 8). On the other hand, children's books celebrate those who grow in a "rhizomatic" form against the norms and authority. The tension between different forms of growth is also embodied in the *Bildungsroman*, whose protagonist can only achieve his or her interior or spiritual growth after undergoing "painful soul-searching" and "accommodation to the modern world" (Buckley 18).

However, seeds are not just entangled with interior growth, but also with soil, water, sunlight, animals, and nature as a whole. Tracking the dispersion of seeds, Henry Thoreau builds a plant-animal mutualism argument to illuminate "the ancient and uneasy relationship" among seeds, plants, birds, rodents, insects, and all other agents in the forest (xvi). This kind of relationship aligns with Donna Haraway's "webs of kinship", in which "all earthlings are kin in the deepest sense, and it is past time to practice better care of kinds-as-assemblages (not species one at a time)" (103). The observation of the shared nature of all species resonates with Deleuze and Guattari's non-hierarchical "rhizomatic" interconnection (23), which also inspires new materialists' construction of a "flat ontology" that resists hierarchies between life and lifeless matter and assumes a "perfect equality of actants" (Bennett 104). Seen through a new materialist framework, agency, or the capacity to act as an agent, is not exclusively a human attribute, but a property possessed by any material inherently (or "vibrant matter" in Bennett's term). Further, Karen Barad recognizes that agency emerges through relationships among individual materials (33). Human individuals and societies are thus embedded parts of a larger material process of exchange and energy flow. In this light, she proposes to replace "inter-actions" (a term implying engagement with each separate entity) with "intra-actions" (a term implying human actions as always already inside a larger flow), as "intra-actions recognize distinct agencies emerge through their intra-activity" (33). The change of perspective brings about the rewriting of the "default grammar of agency" that assigns activity to humans and passivity to nonhumans and constructs the "agentic assemblage" in which agency is confederate, distributed across the whole ecosystem (Bennett 199-21).

Just as manifold forces shape the growth of a seed, many factors shape the growth of a child, such as parenting, education, and cultural beliefs, to achieve the transition from childhood to adulthood. This constructivist view of growth tends to objectify young children as human becomings on their way to achieving full biological and cognitive maturity, independence, and agency already possessed by adults (Haynes and Murris). This stance itself is problematic "since [it] stipulates adulthood as a norm and childhood as an abnormal state to be left behind" ("Recent trends" 136). Alternatively, the new materialist approach re-orientates our focus towards jointly agentic and ever-transformative encounters between children and adults within texts. Building on Barad's "intra-action", Joanna Haynes and Karin Murris propose the idea of "intra-generation" that reconfigures a non-hierarchical and mutual relationality between children and adults. The establishment of "intra-generation" blurs the age boundaries and results in children's and adults' being and becoming part of the world's mattering. Regarding this, all humans and non-humans are entangled, intra-acting with each other in an assemblage.

Therefore, seeds within the assemblage of seed stories are "vibrant matter", possessing agency, value, and meaning, no matter whether they are represented as symbolic motifs or anthropomorphic characters. Children, who share similar trajectories of growth with seeds, are also participants in the assemblage, having incomparable intra-actions with the world. Given that children typically experience

oppression and powerlessness in a world ruled by adults (*Power* 8) and seeds represent plant life at its most minuscule, they become intertwined in a collective assemblage of vulnerability. By recognizing the intrinsic power of seeds and/or children and highlighting the confederate agency that emerged from the seed-child entanglement, the analysis of each seed story in the following sections seeks to negotiate with the existing power hierarchies in the adult world. To illuminate the representation of seeds and the relational poetics of seed-child interactions, I have chosen three recently published picturebooks that explore different angles of seed-child entanglements in terms of growth.[2] *The Bad Seed* concerns the personal dimension of a seed-child entanglement, in which an anthropomorphized seed recounts his experience of being bad. *Stay, Little Seed* draws on the motif of mother trees, revealing the seed-child entanglement in an intergenerational relation. *Seeds of Change* depicts the social-interactive growth of a child, building metaphorical interconnections between seeds and children.

Self-expressions and Self-identity in *The Bad Seed*

Through the new materialist lens, one of the realizations of agency of all matter is to address its innate capacity for self-expression. In Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann's words, "if matter is agentic, and capable of producing its own meanings, every material configuration, from bodies to their contexts of living, is 'telling' "(79). This interpretation of agentic matter is based on matter's "narrative" power itself. Matter, in this regard, is not just a "vibrant matter" as Bennett proposes, but a "storied matter" or "a site of narrativity" (Iovino and Oppermann 83). For a plant, its "narrative" or "telling" is conceptualized as "plant narrative" (Griffiths). Tree rings are examples of plant narratives (James). A seed, with a full set of DNAs of a plant, is also an example of plant narrative. Regarding seeds as archives, Luci Attala and Louise Steel explain that the DNA of seeds can provide information on their area of origin as well as complex interconnections with plants, people, and climate (43). In this light, seeds become storied seeds or texts themselves. Seed stories, then, become a medium to inscribe and represent storied seeds with nonhuman agentic power. To better reveal their agency in children's stories, Guanio-Uluru suggests representing the vegetal forms "as an amalgam of phytomorphic (plant-like) and anthropomorphic (human-like) characters" (157). *The Bad Seed* is an example in which the seed character blends both botanical and human traits.

The title of the book *The Bad Seed* involves a wordplay. It not only plays with the phrase "a bad seed"—a person of bad influence, but also refers to the anthropomorphized seed character who has a bad manner, a bad temper, and a bad attitude. It opens with the title character's self-confession that "I'm a bad seed. / A baaaaaaaaaaad seed" (1) and ends with the bad seed´s decision to be happy by doing

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[2] The depiction of seeds in children's picturebooks tends to be a cross-cultural concern. *Stay, Little Seed* was originally published in Italy, while *The Bad Seed* and *Seeds of Change* were published in the United States. Additionally, *Seeds of Change* presents the story of a Kenyan environmental activist.

good. Born a good seed with a "humble" manner "on a simple sunflower, / in an unremarkable field" (11), the title character used to conform to the image of a natural and innocent child. What changes him may be the loss of his family and his near-death experience caused by industrialization and commercialization which destroys his home and turns him into packaged food. The sunflower seed recalls:

> But then the petals dropped.
> And our flower drooped.
> It's kind of a blur.
> I remember a bag...
> Everything went dark...
> ...and then...*then*
> ...a giant! (13-20)

The recollection of the seed character uncovers storied seeds' intrinsic capacity for storing information as archives, which is captured in both verbal and visual narrations. To show the bad seed's "thing-power", the author gives the seed figure voice, granting his subjectivity of producing "plant narratives". By revealing that "the very idea of narrative is not limited to human storyteller" (James 267), the talking seed also challenges our exclusive ownership of linguistic competency and questions human/nonhuman boundaries divided by narrative autonomy. While anthropomorphism serves as the narrative device allowing the bad seed to express himself, the use of short sentences followed by long pauses (indicated by ellipses) captures one of the significant aspects of plant communication: slowness[3] (Wohlleben). Positioning the seed character as the narrator of the seed story, the verbal narration is phytocentric, depicting his natural origin as well as interconnections with other seeds and humans.

However, in contrast to the phytocentric verbal narration, the visual narration appears to mix both human-oriented and plant-oriented views. All characters in this seed community with different kinds of seeds are represented as an amalgam of anthropomorphic features and phyto-realistic details.[4] On the one hand, these seed figures take on humanoid forms, with characteristics like arms, legs, and faces modeled on the human body. On the other hand, the seeds' bodies resemble the represented species with recognizable phyto-features in terms of their size, shape, line, color, and texture. For example, the sunflower seed character with drop-shaped black-and-white striped shells. Further, the illustrator changes the "size of frame" of the illustrations by presenting the bad seed in "close up", "mid shot", or "long shot" to adjust the social distance between the seed character on paper and the child reader in front of the paper (Kress and van Leeuwen 124-9). For instance, at the beginning of the flashback in which the seed narrator tells the reader that "I was born a humble seed, on a simple sunflower, / in an unremarkable field" (11), the reader can only view a sunflower field in a distant "long shot" without identifying the seed narrator.

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[3] Another famous example of anthropomorphized plants that talk slowly (and even move slowly) is the Ent, a tree-giant character in J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy.

[4] For further discussions on phytomorphic and anthropomorphic plant characters in children's picturebooks, see Lykke Guanio-Uluru's "The Phyto-Analysis Map".

Following the depiction of a phyto-realistic sunflower field, the illustrator zooms in for a close-up representation of the anthropomorphized bad seed having fun with his big family (12). Changing from the long-shot to close-up representation, the illustrator not only introduces vegetal knowledge about the origin of sunflower seeds to the young reader, but also creates a means to engender a sense of intimacy and empathy for the seed narrator. As the distance between the seed character and the reader gets closer and closer, the reader is invited to engage in the view of the seed character—in other words to see the world from the seed's perspective. For example, we recognize the seed character in a close-up representation lying in the package bag sadly, fearfully, and hopelessly (18), while we also immerse in the seed's perspective explaining that "everything went dark…" (17). From the human-oriented perspective, the life history of the seed is about our interactions with seeds in terms of farming, gathering, producing, and consuming food. From the plant-oriented perspective, it is about the seed's recollection of the traumatic experience of losing his family as well as capacity for growing into a sunflower and transmitting his stored information. By permitting a closer view of seeds, these illustrations build "intra-actions" between the character and the reader, helping to dispel our "blindness" towards seeds by providing visual access to "becoming" seeds.

The process of searching for self-identity is also integrated into the self-expressions of the seed, which aligns with a child's self-understanding journey in a *Bildungsroman.* In the bad seed's autobiographical description, he makes a list of his badness in every sentence starting with "I", such as, "I never put things back where they belong" (7), "I'm late to everything" (7), and "I never wash my hands" (8). The use of the pronoun "I" positions the child reader along with the seed character. In effect, the child might, like the bad seed, have sought for his/her identity. The reconstruction of the bad seed's self-identity occurs when he looks at himself in a broken mirror (27). Facing the mirror, the anthropomorphized seed may realize who he really is—part nature, part product, and most essentially *himself*. The "nature" partly motivates him to be good, while the "product" partly urges him to be bad. The tension here resembles the "painful soul-searching" (Buckley 18) in a *Bildungsroman.* The seed and the child co-experience the restless process of being "good" to accommodate the rest of the world. They are enmeshed literally and spiritually, co-sensing a "sort of mix[ed]" feeling beyond the dualism of the world (30).

A Seed Child of a Mother Tree in *Stay, Little Seed*

The seed protagonist in *The Bad Seed* belongs to a "big family" of seeds, with siblings growing alongside a sunflower in the field (11-12). Concerning the system of "assemblage" in new materialism, it is possible to disclose not only the kinship crossing human and nonhuman species as Bouteau et al.'s "plant kinship blindness" and Haraway's "webs of kinship" allude to, but also the kinship for plants. In fact, the phrase "kin recognition" appears regularly in plant studies, referring to "the ability of plants to distinguish their relatives from the strangers" (Attala and Steel 17). Taking

mother trees as examples, Peter Wohlleben explains that these more established trees can recognize and talk with their kin, shaping and caring for their future generations. However, Wohlleben provides evidence that mother trees overshadow their offspring with enormous crowns to prevent their children from growing quickly (32). They do not approve of the rapid growth of their offspring, not because they do not want the independence of their children, but because they want their offspring to live a long life. Wohlleben interprets that "slow growth when the tree is young is a prerequisite if a tree is to live to a ripe old age" (33). A similar situation emerges in the plot of *Stay, Little Seed.*

Stay, Little Seed depicts intergenerational interactions between an anthropomorphized tree as a protective parent and a seed as a growing-up child. When it is time for seed dispersal, all seed children leave their mother tree, except for one tiny seed who clings to its branch in the tree. Although the mother tree knows that in order to make her seed grow independently, "[the seed] needed / to let go of [her] branch, / and fly off to Who Knows Where" (6), she allows the seed to stay for "just one more day" (7) as she is not only worried about the seed's safety but finds herself lonely on the hill. The inner conflict of letting go and staying here increasingly deepens as the mother-like tree finds more excuses and the phrase "just one more day" (7, 9, 13) quickly multiplies. Over time, the tree's attitude towards the seed's stay shifts from mere permission to gentle persuasion. Instead of encouraging the seed to leave, she asks repetitive rhetorical questions to confirm that her seed child will stay with her—"You can't go out in the sun without a hat, can you?" (10); "You can't leave without some clothes when it is so windy and cold, can you?" (12); "You can't go anywhere without boots, can you?" (14). The tree character's impulse to care for the tiny seed resonates with real mother trees' actions to provide nutrients to their offspring. The care provided by the tree in the book, however, is exaggerated in the illustrations of the tiny trappings, such as an umbrella, rain boots, a cap, a scarf, and many more. The physical clothing prepared by parents for their children in literary works not only symbolizes parental love and protection but also parental fear and constraints. This tension is also demonstrated by the contradictory use of black and red lines against the yellow-cream-colored background, in which the given trappings are highlighted in red, while profiles of the characters are drawn in black lines. It is evident that the adult-like tree is the active provider while the child-like seed is the passive recipient. The fact that the mother tree is looking downwards at the seed (or a sapling at the end of the story) indicates the former's power and authority throughout the story. Although the seed child holds mobility, a symbol of freedom, the seed child is physically and psychologically constrained by familial ties and is always connected to his mother tree.

Extending the botanical findings on mother trees' "kin recognition", this seed story involves "the material imagination of their human counterparts" (Iovino and Oppermann 82). In other words, on the one hand, mother trees as storied matter co-constitute the meaning of discouraging the rapid growth of their offspring together with the human author and illustrator; on the other hand, this seed story activates the

materiality of mother trees and their offspring in the forest through words and images (which are also storied matter themselves). This is an instantiation of entanglement of humans' narrative power and plants' narrative power, in which, as Jane Bennett puts it: "human culture is inextricably enmeshed with vibrant, non-human agencies" (108). However, whether the mother tree is recognized as a material property or as a literary representation, the power hierarchy between the tree and her seed is inevitable. Although both the mother tree and the seed child are agentic participants in an assemblage, their interdependencies seem unequal, whereby the child seed apparently relies more on his mother tree's protection and the mother tree has greater power to decide her child's leave or stay. In *Stay, Little Seed*, such unequal interdependencies are also embodied in its "home-away-home" pattern (Coat 71), where the seed child leaves his mother tree for an adventure and eventually returns to the mother tree's side. Thus, despite the new materialists' ideal of constructing a "flat ontology", the existence of plant kinships, such as the relationality of a mother tree and her offspring, strengthens the socially constructed adult/child hierarchy to some degree.

Spreading Ecological Values Through Webs of Kinship in *Seeds of Change*

Although *Stay, Little Seed* reveals the plant kinship that binds a mother tree and a child seed, it also reminds us of our kinship with plants. This form of interspecies kinship goes beyond our genetic ties to plants (Bouteau et al.) and is rooted in our day-to-day engagement with them. In order to cultivate such kinship, Haraway proposes that we embrace both responsibility (being responsible for the interactions with the more-than-human) and "response-ability" (being responsive to the more-than-human) (114). *The Bad Seed* and *Stay, Little Seed* evoke a sense of responsibility and "response-ability" through the portrayal of anthropomorphized seeds. Differently, *Seeds Of Change: Planting a Path to Peace* engages with the two notions by employing metaphorical seeds. While *The Bad Seed* and *Stay, Little Seed* depict the seed-child entanglement on a personal and an interpersonal level respectively, *Seeds of Change* expands this entanglement to encompass a broader social dimension.

Drawn on the autobiographic writing of Wangari Maathai, the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize winner, *Seeds Of Change* is a biography with an overview of the first African female environmentalist's life from her childhood interconnection with nature and cross-national education experiences, to her struggle against deforestation and success in initiating the Green Belt Movement and spreading ecological values to the world. Although seeds are not focalized characters in this story, they merge with Wangari's body and life as vibrant matter of offspring of *mugumo* trees (wild fig trees in Kenya) as well as being symbols of growth, knowledge, and ecological values. Born as a native of Kenya, Wangari's upbringing fosters her ecological awareness to build connections (or make kin) with nature: " 'Feel,' her mother whispered. / Wangari spread her small hands over the tree's

trunk. She smoothed her fingers over the rough bark" (4). The physical touch breaks spatial boundaries between Wangari's body and the vibrant tree, awakening the child protagonist's perceptions and sensual appreciation of the more-than-human world. "Wangari wrapped her arms around the trunk as if hugging her great-grandmother's spirit. She promised never to cut down the tree" (5). From touching to hugging, spatial boundaries between the two species tend to dissolve. The physical intimacy evokes an affective bonding, which further gives rise to the construction of kinship promoted by Haraway. Wangari embraces both responsibility and "response-ability" (Haraway 114). On the one hand, she realizes that she is accountable for protecting the tree. On the other hand, she gives physical and emotional responses to the tree.

The images of Wangari's entanglement with nature further enhance the manifestation of kinship. Concerning the use of colors and lines, the illustrator applies white contoured lines to both the natural landscapes of green leaf patterns and the characters' clothing featuring colorful floral patterns. These contoured lines are interwoven lines along which materials flow and mix, intergrading humans with nonhumans. No matter where Wangari is, she always wears outfits that blend lines and colors *of* nature, *from* nature, and *with* nature. She is constructing an assemblage that aligns with animals, plants, and the natural world by becoming part of them—she "ate the delicious fruit, just as geckos and elephants did" (4) and "listened as still as a tree, but her mind swirled with curiosity like the currents in the stream" (8). The consumption of plants helps the dispersal of fruit seeds; the perception of nature involves the vibrancy of matter. The unitary lines in images and similes employed in words draw the world of materials, forms, and mass together. Wangari, *mugumo* fruits, geckos, elephants, trees, streams, and many more participants become incorporated through building "intra-actions" (Barad) within the cosmos as a whole, in which, as Iovino and Oppermann describe, "dynamics of 'diffuse' agency and non-linear causality are inscribed and produced" (80). In other words, the system of "intra-actions" rejects the hierarchy in favor of the human community, acknowledging cross-species alliance and every matter's agency. This is a rhizomatic paradigm that enacts Wangari's reciprocal relationships and her "agentic assemblage" with nature (Bennett). The establishment of the anti-hierarchical relationship between Wangari and nature relies on an egalitarian intergenerational relation as well as an ecocentric cultural belief.

Compared with Once-ler's claim that the tree is quite useful and can produce a "Fine-Something-That-All-People-Need" (24), Wangari's mother reminds her daughter that "[the tree] is home to many. It feeds many too" (4). " 'Our people, the Kikuyu of Kenya' ", Wangari's mother continues, " 'believe that our ancestors rest in the tree's shade' " (5). Wangari's mother explains the ancient wisdom of co-evolution and shared ancestry. Compared with the evident strong didactic tone in *The Lorax*, it appears that Wangari's mother is not just teaching eco-didactic knowledge, but instilling a kind of *belief* in actions and emotions. Literally, this is just a belief in native plants, but it implies an inclusive and humble view toward all matter. Wangari, her mother, plants, and "all earthlings" are kin, forging an assemblage in which every

entity shares "a common 'flesh' laterally, semiotically, and genealogically" (Haraway 103). Within the assemblage, the adult and the child involve in an "intra-generational" relation that challenges the adult/child power hierarchy in a conventional intergenerational relation (Haynes and Murris). This means that the system of assemblage can be a means of empowering children as they are positioned alongside vibrant matter, such as seeds.

The entanglement of Wangari and seeds permeates through her development from childhood to adulthood. When Wangari finishes elementary school, the metaphor of seeds appears for the first time in the text: "Her mind was like a seed rooted in rich soil, ready to grow" (12). In this botanical simile, the seed stands for the child's innocent mind, ready to be cultivated in Eden with wisdom. Before Wangari left her birthplace for the first time, her mother "picked up a handful of earth and placed it gently into her daughter's hand" (12). In this sense, Wangari herself is a seed that carries the ecological belief of her ethnic group and the hope of her family. She is physically disconnected from the natural landscape after relocating to an urban setting, but she is still mentally entangled with nature. The contradiction between the real urban life and the ideal homeland is vividly illustrated in a double spread, in which there is a plant tendril stretching over the page layout, reminding Wangari of the "Kikuyu tradition of respecting all living things" (15-16). Her poetic relationality with nature established since her childhood gives rise to her enthusiasm and commitment to biology studies. Education gradually changes her life during her transition from a seed, a sapling, to a tree. She becomes a scientist and environmentalist, confronting the environmental devastation caused by authoritative powers. Wangari with "an idea as small as a seed but as tall as a tree that reaches for the sky" (33), travels to "villages, towns, and cities with saplings and seeds, shovels and hoes" (38). She launches the Green Belt Movement, responsive to deforestation that attempts to wipe out the elemental kinship. However, while she fights for plant rights, she is arrested. In her jail cell, Wangari is "like a sturdy tree against a mighty wind" (43). In some way, Wangari and plants are mutually dependent. Plants need her to speak for them; Wangari needs plants to entail her will and empower her agency. The entanglement with plants keeps Wangari powerful. After getting out of prison, she travels around the world again to share her story about seeds, trees, land, and her intra-actions with all matter. Fortunately, "in time Kenya changed. More people listened to Wangari's message, calling her the *Mama Miti*, 'Mother of Trees." (46). In the illustration (45-46), the figure of Wangari is phyto-morphized. She is the main trunk of a tree, carrying a handful of seeds. These seeds sprout actively, extending and reaching out to the world around them. Here, seeds represent the ecological belief in Wangari's mind, spreading through webs of kinship to humans who have not yet engaged.

Conclusion

We have long co-created with seeds in ways that are routinely unacknowledged and underrecognized. In children's literature studies of plants, for instance, there is a pronounced absence of scholarly attention to the representation of seeds, despite a preoccupation with seeds in many children's picturebooks. In this essay, I have expanded Parsley's notion of "plant awareness disparity" by capturing the disparities of our attention to different plant types and their life stages. This extension fosters a more inclusive and holistic perspective on the significance of seeds in our environment. Seeds are foregrounded in seed stories for children, particularly picturebooks featuring the growth motif and seed-child analogy. With a focus on the verbal and visual representations of seeds and their poetic entanglement with children, this study takes a new materialist approach to examine three contemporary seed picturebook stories, namely *The Bad Seed*, *Stay, Little Seed*, and *Seeds of Change: Planting a Path to Peace*.

The analysis reveals the empowering nature of seed narratives which represent seeds as anthropomorphized characters or metaphorical motifs, but most essentially, as "vibrant matter" with agency and "storied matter" with the power of narration. These stories also exhibit the profound entanglement of seeds and children in an agentic assemblage of collective vulnerability, which not only blurs the line between the human and vegetal, but also negotiates power hierarchies embedded in the world ruled by adults. However, negotiations may not always lead to the deconstruction of hierarchies and norms. They depend on which aspect or dimension of the seed-child entanglement is constructed. *The Bad Seed* delves into the personal dimension of the seed-child entanglement, in which a seed character's self-expressions about who he is are highlighted. By depicting a disruptive seed with a child's "bad" behaviors, the representation of the bad seed challenges the adult's superiority and empowers the marginalized children. Situating the seed-child entanglement in an intergenerational relation, *Stay, Little Seed* uncovers the authority of a mother tree in influencing and controlling her little seed's growth process. Although the story shows the uniformity of the plant kingdom and human society regarding relatives and families, it reinforces the socially constructed adult/child hierarchy by representing seeds as more vulnerable life forms than trees. *Seeds of Change* applies the seed-child entanglement to a social dimension, demonstrating how the webs of kinship can emerge as egalitarian intra-generational relations and challenge social authorities and power hierarchies. Instead of anthropomorphizing seeds as child characters, this story overlays seeds as a metaphor of hope with the story of real tree seeds being carried and cared for as part of regeneration projects.

In conclusion, this study posits that seed narratives have the potential to reveal seeds' agentic power and to explore the physical and metaphorical interconnectedness between seeds and children. These narratives play with the asymmetry between adults and innocent children as they reflect upon the differences between matured plants and tiny seeds. By offering words and images as mechanisms

to combat the plant disparity awareness, seed stories remind "us of our fundamental connections to nature–to plants, to animals, soil, seasons, and the process of evolution itself" (Hanson 12).

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Survival, Sustenance, and Self-Sufficiency:
Taking a Plant-Based Perspective in Jean Hegland's *Into the Forest*

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Abstract

As evidenced by its title, *Into the Forest* (1996) by Jean Hegland traces the movement of two adolescent girls ever further into the forest in a postapocalyptic account of the near future. Set in fictional Redwood, California, it depicts a world where trees are gigantic and long-lasting while humans are diminutive and diminishing and contemporary human technological society has fallen apart. Plants, trees, and the forest, and an increasingly intimate knowledge and relationship with these, play a key and ever-growing role in the novel and illuminate its otherwise dark vision of the future. Ultimately, the sisters' taking of an increasingly plant-based perspective offers an alternative trajectory and path toward survival, sustenance, and self-sufficiency for the two young women. Focused on young adult protagonists, the novel tells a post-apocalyptic tale that is both dark and inspiring in its vision of self-sufficiency and reintegration with nature, plant, and forest worlds and provides an ecofeminist critique of capitalist society as well as a more sustainable vision of a future adopted by its young protagonists. This article argues that an increasingly plant-based perspective figures centrally in the narrative arc of *Into the Forest* from beginning to end, from its title and setting to the trajectory of its unfolding plot, and in its conclusion and vision for the future.

Keywords: Postapocalyptic, ecofeminist, phytocentric, plant, forest, regeneration, redwood, burl.

Resumen

Como muestra su título, *En el corazón del bosque* (1996) de Jean Hegland traza el recorrido de dos chicas adolescentes adentrándose cada vez más en el bosque en un relato postapocalíptico de un futuro cercano. Ambientada en fictio Redwood, California, describe un mundo en el que los árboles son gigantes e imperecederos mientras que los humanos son diminutos y van disminuyendo y la sociedad tecnológica humana actual se ha derrumbado. Las plantas, los árboles y el bosque, y un conocimiento cada vez más íntimo de estos, juegan un papel esencial y cada vez más importante en la novela e iluminan su, de otra manera, visión oscura del futuro. Finalmente, el que las hermanas adopten una perspectiva cada vez más basada en las plantas ofrece una trayectoria alternativa y un camino hacia la supervivencia, el sustento, y la autosuficiencia para las dos jóvenes mujeres. Centrada en las dos jóvenes protagonistas, la novela relata una historia postapocalíptica que es tanto oscura como inspiradora en su visión de autosuficiencia y de reintegración con la naturaleza, el mundo de las plantas y los bosques, y proporciona una crítica ecofeminista de la sociedad capitalista, así como una visión más sostenible de un futuro adoptado por sus jóvenes protagonistas. Este artículo argumenta que una perspectiva cada vez más basada en lo vegetal ocupa una posición central en el arco narrativo de *En el*

corazón del bosque de principio a fin, desde el título y el marco de ambientación hasta la trayectoria de su argumento, y en su conclusión y visión para el futuro.

Palabras clave: Post-apocalíptico, ecofeminista, fitocéntrico, planta, bosque, regeneración, secuoya, nudo en la madera.

> *Redwood* (Sequoia sempervirens). *The coast redwood is the world's tallest tree and one of the most long-lived. In favorable parts of their range, coast redwoods can live more than two thousand years. Although only one seed in a million becomes a mature redwood, only wind and storm and man pose any threat to a full-grown tree. Even when redwoods are toppled or otherwise injured, they have a remarkable adaptation for survival. Wartlike growths of dormant buds called burls are stimulated to produce sprouts which grow from a fallen or damaged tree. It is common to see young trees formed from burls encircling an injured parent tree.*
>
> Jean Hegland's *Into the Forest* (1996)*, p. 168

Redwoods, A Prologue

As shown in the encyclopedia entry quoted above, which appears in Jean Hegland's *Into the Forest* (1996), the California coast redwood, or sequoia sempervirens, is famous for being the tallest tree in the world, potentially reaching heights of over three hundred feet. It does not mention the redwood's once widespread global presence, its extensive logging, its mythologization, including in the service of colonial aims (Farmer), nor does it address the often dramatic experience of encountering them, about which even botanist Peter Del Tredici reflects, "something about their huge size or about the solemnity" one feels in their midst is almost spiritual, while "quasi-religious feelings are expressed by nearly everyone who visits an old-growth redwood forest" (Del Tredici 14). Indeed, redwoods often seem to shift the perspective of humans in their midst, as also shown in *Into the Forest*. The novel notes their remarkable survival adaptation—the redwood's power of basal regeneration. Its capacity to resprout and produce, from a burl or lignotuber, "physiologically juvenile shoots continually" throughout its long life, "endows the tree with a kind of ecological immortality," so that "as long as environmental conditions remain constant, the tree can live forever, or at least until it's uprooted" (Del Tredici 22). This botanical perspective on the remarkable resilience of the redwood seems a fitting place to start this article which takes a critical plant studies perspective on Jean Hegland's *Into the Forest,* a young adult survival story set in the fictional town of Redwood, California that traces the evolving relationship of two adolescent sisters with the redwood forest near their home. As indicated by the directionality communicated by its title, *Into the Forest* (1996) traces the movement of its two protagonists ever further into the forest and toward plant and forest worlds, as well as their adoption of a plant-based or phytocentric perspective on plants, trees, and nature (cf. Guanio-Uluru 2023), as well as toward themselves and other living beings.

Jean Hegland's *Into the Forest* (1996)

A postapocalyptic account of the near future set in the forests near the fictional but significantly named town of Redwood, California, *Into the Forest* depicts a world where contemporary human technological society has fallen apart, leaving humans diminutive and diminishing, while the redwood trees seem gigantic and long-lasting. Plants, trees, and the forest, and an increasingly intimate knowledge and relationship with these, play a key and ever-growing role in the novel, as the protagonists learn to see the plant world around them and gradually reorient themselves toward plant-based perspectives rather than anthropocentric ones. I argue that the increasingly phytocentric perspective the sisters adopt during the course of the book helps to illuminate an otherwise dark vision of the future and thus converts a dark post-apocalyptic tale of devastation, societal collapse, violence, and trauma into an inspiring account of two adolescent women's survival, sustenance, and self-sufficiency that ultimately provides an alternative and regenerating trajectory, where the sisters and a new generation might not just survive after trauma, but thrive as part of and within plant and forest worlds.

The novel *Into the Forest*, whose international impact is evidenced by the fact that it was translated into over a dozen languages (with the French translation being awarded a number of prizes), made into a film in Canada, and adapted as a graphic novel in French, focuses on young adult protagonists and the challenges they face on a journey toward adulthood. It therefore can be considered young adult literature, although it might be read by audiences of various ages. Like many contemporary works of young adult (YA) literature, it tells a post-apocalyptic tale that is both dark and inspiring in its vision of adolescent and ecofeminist self-sufficiency and therefore can be read productively in this context (Basu et al.; Curry; Jorgenson; Curtis). As characteristic of YA literature, *Into the Forest* also includes an implied critique of society and, in line with other dystopian and postapocalyptic YA literature, includes an alternative and more sustainable vision of the future represented by adolescent characters, who in fact rebel against conventions of various kinds. This article, however, will focus particularly on how *Into the Forest* merits attention from a critical plant studies perspective due to how this tale of two adolescent sisters offers a reorientation toward a phytocentric perspective that reintegrates the human with nature, forest, and plants and ultimately offers a model of regeneration after trauma. It will examine how plants, trees, and forest develop from being threatening, unknown, and not understood to becoming a refuge and safeguard, providing sustenance and healing, serving as shelter and ultimately an abode, and ultimately representing a site of regeneration and a birthplace of the future, like the redwood burl with which this article begins. As I will show, phytocentric perspectives figure increasingly prominently and centrally in the book's symbolic systems from beginning to end, from its title and setting to the key surroundings of its unfolding plot, and in its concluding vision for the future.

Critical Plant Studies in Children's and Young Adult Literature

Critical plant studies is by now an established field, including in children's literature research, where it has been surveyed, for example, by Lydia Kokkola in 2017, treated extensively in an edited volume on *Plants in Children's and Young Adult Literature* by Lykke Guanio-Uluru and Melanie Duckworth in 2021, which focuses on the representation of plants in literature for children and young adults,' and theorized more recently by Lykke Guanio-Uluru in 2023. Such work builds on earlier ecocritical analysis of children's and young adult (YA) literature from an ecocritical perspective, such as Dobrin & Kidd in 2004 and Nina Goga et al. in 2018, and earlier studies from a plant studies perspective (Jaques; Kokkola; Goga, "I begynnelsen var treet", "Økokritiske perspektiv"; Guanio-Uluru, "Plant-human hybridity", "Imagining climate change"). Notably for this study, Zoe Jaques devotes a chapter in her 2015 study of *Children's Literature and the Posthuman: Animal, Environment, Cyborg* (2015) to the "Tree," while Melanie Duckworth and Lykke Guano-Uluriu's edited volume *Plants in Children's and Young Adult Literature* includes an entire section and 4 articles to "Arboreal Embraces" (Duckworth; Desczc-Tryhubczak and Van Bergen; Goga "'I felt like a tree lost in a storm'"; Casals Hill; Mayne-Nicholls). The current article is indebted to these works.

For example, Zoe Jaques points to the "posthuman potential" of trees insofar as they "point to ways that the environment is of superior importance to the individual life of man, while also, as a source of heat and shelter, sustaining that very life" (115), as experienced by the protagonists of *Into the Forest*. Her analysis, however, focuses on texts that are "tales of (male) heroism and survival" with "hero-protagonists that "rely heavily upon plants, trees, and wooden tools to achieve their aims" (117), while this article focuses on female protagonists in a text that answers her call "to shift the focus onto female protagonists" (117). Kokkola writes that to read children's literature "through a critical plant studies lens, we would need to reject the idea that humans are guardians of the earth and highlight the dependence of humans on the plants. The resulting behaviours might be similar, but the power relations are decidedly different" (Kokkola 277). Precisely such a shift in power relations and dependence is staged over the course of *Into the Forest,* where humans increasingly learn to depend on plants, while their survival clearly depends on it. Kokkola also relates plant studies to ecopedagogy, citing Greta Gaard's suggestion that

> children's literature has an important role to play in developing ecopedagogy [which] differs from traditional environmental education which champions 'sustainable development'. Instead, ecopedagogy places the unsustainability of endless growth and demands a radical reconsideration of human-nature politics. Understanding that plants – not humans – hold the balance of power over the future of the earth, as critical plant studies promotes, is a key step in this endeavour. (Kokkola 278-279)

The ultimate humility of the sisters at the end of the book and their willingness to forsake and burn everything in their former home and move "into the forest," in this sense can be seen to cede anthropocentric power and offer a supreme reorientation

toward a phytocentric perspective. The novel's adolescent sisters accept and embrace the fact that, as Guanio-Uluru and Duckworth note, "'plants dominate every terrestrial environment, composing ninety-nine percent of the biomass on Earth' (Mancuso & Viola xii)," which helps to "instill some humility into anthropocentric planetary thinking" (Guanio-Uluru and Duckworth 1). As a tale of two sisters, *Into the Forest* also taps into feminist posthumanism (Haraway; Braidotti), which offers "persistent critiques of the modern capitalist exploitation of both the environment and other species by calling for a revision of the anthropocentric world view characteristic of current Western culture" (Guanio-Uluru and Duckworth 2). Indeed, *Into the Forest* opens with a critique of the commercialism of Christmas by the girls' father already on the second page of the novel (2) and of capitalism and "voracious consumers" by the seventeen year-old protagonist Nell by the fourth page of the novel (4), which sets the stage for the conceptual transformation to come that includes a rejection of consumerism.

Indigenous Traditions and Models

Guanio-Uluru and Duckworth note that Indigenous and pagan systems of thought "have long retained more respectful alliances with the plant kingdom than has Western science" (Guanio-Uluru and Duckworth 2). *Into the Forest* offers a rejection of Western science, petrochemicals, and technology. Tellingly, Jean Hegland foregrounds as inspirational intertexts three published sources focused on local Indigenous knowledge and experiences, including *Sinkyone Notes* (Nomland), *The Way We Lived: California Indian Reminiscences, Stories, and Songs* (Margolin), and *Original Accounts of the Lone Woman of San Nicolas Island* (Heizer and Elasser). These lift forward stories of independent survival in a similar natural setting by specific historical figures, including two Indigenous women whose stories are specifically cited in Hegland's Acknowledgments and quoted in the text itself, namely "the Lone Woman of San Nicolas Island" (147-148) and Sally Bell. Both represent inspiring stories of survival by an Indigenous girl or woman. The Lone Woman survived 18 years alone on San Nicolas Island as a young woman before dying soon after being taken to the mainland in Santa Barbara. Sally Bell shares her own childhood survival account in *The Way We Lived* (Margolin), where she recounts that she was a "big girl" when her family was massacred by some "white men" and witnessed how they killed her "baby sister," an infant who was still crawling, and "cut her heart out and threw it in the brush where I ran and hid" (166). She "hid there a long time with my little sister's heart in my hands," noting "I felt so bad and I was so scared that I just couldn't do anything else" (166). She then "ran into the woods and hid there for a long time," living "on berries and roots" and sleeping "under logs and in hollow trees" before her brother found her and took her to live with "some white folks" (166). The conclusion of her story and the fact that "white men" are the perpetrators, but "white folks" also represent the only refuge to be found after the massacre, raises important issues elided by Jean Hegland. Indeed, it is important to note the markedly different

experiences of Western civilization by these historical Indigenous women and the fictional white characters in the story.

Yet, aspects of these two Indigenous women's stories of trauma, survival in nature, and resilience over time, as well as their experiences of brutality, violence, and loneliness due to loss of kin, find reflection in *Into the Forest* both implicitly and explicitly. Indeed, Hegland's novel itself echoes Sally Bell's flight "into the woods," as well as in its overall tone toward Western civilization and the rapacious brutality of "white men" from whom the sisters flee into the forest, living on plants and finding shelter in hollow trees. Their story of survival and resourcefulness in nature also echoes the story of the Lone Woman, but reverses its trajectory from independent survival in nature to a toxic and fatal final encounter with Western civilization, by instead tracing a trajectory from toxic civilization toward independent survival in nature, which makes it more akin to white, Western romanticizing of Native life. In both cases, importantly, the tragic aspect at the conclusion of these historical Indigenous women's stories gets elided and erased, while the romanticized survival story is appropriated without regard to the differences in white and Native experiences or history versus fiction.

Nonetheless, these Indigenous foremothers, as it were, are recalled repeatedly in the novel as touchstone figures by the protagonist Nell, just as they are cited by Jean Hegland in the book's Acknowledgments. Yet, at the same time, this use of these Indigenous women's stories represents yet another Western appropriation of Indigenous traditions, stories, and lands and conveniently glosses over the fact that the whiteness of the author and fictional protagonists resembles that of the historical perpetrators of this violence. Indeed, the problematic aspects of appropriation are forecast by the fact that the sisters' pretend play in childhood includes pretending that "we're Indians" (51). By the same token, there is at first little mention in the book of surviving Native people or those who lived in these lands previously. At one point "American Indians" are listed among long ago civilizations (148) in a way that erases contemporary groups. But the book later does also cite massacres, such as the one survived by Sally Bell, as the reason for diminished numbers. Yet this absence and erasure also allows Indigenous knowledge and "Native" plants to instead benefit the sisters. Indeed, as children, they unselfconsciously claim ownership of the land. But at a later point, in response to her erstwhile boyfriend Eli's remark that "It's your forest," Nell recalls, "I was about to protest that it was not my forest when I remembered the redwood stump Eva and I had once claimed as our own" (117). At the same time, however, the author scrupulously cites her Indigenous sources in the Acknowledgments, so the influence and appropriation of Indigenous traditions in the book is not silent, hidden, and uncredited, at least, just as the paratext also notes that Hegland is donating proceeds toward reforestation efforts.[1]

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[1] Among the publication front matter Jean Hegland also notes that "The author is donating a portion of her royalties from *Into the Forest* to World Stewardship Institute (Santa Rosa, CA) for reforestation efforts," which also seems pertinent to this article's focus on plants and trees.

Interestingly, Jean Hegland's novel arguably cleaves closely to a pattern in Native American novels that critic William Bevis in his influential article "Native American Novels: Homing In" (1987) calls a "homing plot." In contrast to a typical Western plot where an often male protagonist leaves home to go on a journey, as Bevis writes, "In Native American novels, coming home, staying put, contracting, even what we call 'regressing' to a place, a past where one has been before, is not only the primary story, it is a primary model of knowledge and a primary good" (582). As part of the homing plot, the protagonist abandons an individual search for the self and instead finds it in "a society, a past, and a place" (585). The ecofeminist *Into the Forest*, which was clearly inspired by several Indigenous accounts and stories, in fact may be seen also to adopt, or even appropriate, a kind of homing plot typical of Native American novels. Unlike the Western male hero in a typical journey plot, here it is female protagonists who come home, stay put, contract, and regress to the forest of their childhood, where they cease to seek their selves elsewhere and find themselves in the past and in a place. The young adult's coming of age and maturation into an adult thus represents a kind of homing in as part of a local geography.

Overcoming "Plant Blindness"

From a critical plant studies perspective, a persistent "lack of interest in discussing plants as a form of life" in Western philosophy, as Guanio-Uluru and Duckworth note (3), and a deeply rooted zoocentrism has been manifest in what Wandersee and Schussler labeled "plant blindness", later defined by Wandersee and Clary "as the inability to see or recognize the plants in one's environment, frequently combined with an inability to recognize the unique biological features of plants and to appreciate their importance in the biosphere and in human affairs" (Guanio-Uluru and Duckworth 3). This notion of plant blindness is powerfully demonstrated in the example of the female protagonists of *Into the Forest*. Indeed, the novel, which simulates an episodic journal being written in the present, can be understood as an account of the sisters' gradual overcoming of plant blindness and eventual taking of a phytocentric perspective even toward the human and themselves. In so doing, the sisters go further than merely viewing trees as being in service to humans, as noted by Kokkola and Jacques (2015), or as merely instrumental (Guanio-Uluru, "Analysing Plant Representation"). Indeed, they eventually adopt a more phytocentric perspective (Guanio-Uluru, "Analysing Plant Representation"), even toward how they view themselves, each other, and a newborn infant by the end of the book, and adopt a different power relation and humility with respect to the natural world.

The sisters' movement toward overcoming plant blindness proceeds in a series of gradual steps. First the collapse of civilization cuts them off from electricity and then the power of gas to transport them or generate electricity, thereby removing petrochemicals and technology from their lives. Their world rapidly shrinks, as they come to think of a separation from "the world beyond Redwood" (16) and eventually

become "so isolated from even Redwood that it was sometimes hard to remember anything unusual was happening in the world beyond our forest. Our isolation felt like a protection" (18). Under their resourceful father's guidance, they reorient from being consumers and leaving home to staying home and (re)using the resources they have. Their father, who is a positive figure until his untimely accidental death, reminds his daughters of the resources they do have, like "a well-stocked pantry, a garden and orchard, fresh water, a forest full of firewood, and a house" (18). Such a view of the forest as a mere source of firewood in some sense ultimately leads to his death in an accident involving a chainsaw (90-94), so in this sense his diligent cutting of wood to provide for his daughters ultimately leaves them as "orphans, alone in the forest" (94), although with plentiful stores he has built up for them as a legacy. His death thus also represents the death of earlier ways, as if opening up space for younger saplings to grow in new directions.

An Adolescent Return to Childhood Places and Homing In

Although the forest at first seems like an enemy that deprives them of their father, the girls have older childhood memories of happily playing in the forest, though this is contrary to the wishes and fears of their mother (50-51). The novel's relating of their initial entry into the forest as young children is accompanied by a description of the forest where they live, which begins, significantly, with a possessive:

> Ours is a mixed forest, predominantly fir and second-growth redwood but with a smattering of oak and madrone and maple. Father said that before it was logged our land had been covered with redwoods a thousand years old, but all that remained of that mythic place were a few fallen trunks the length and girth of beached whales and several charred stumps the size of small sheds (51)

As children, the girls had found and claimed such a stump and "made it our own" and would play "pretend" there in a variety of ways that actually forecast the future more than they knew (51). In this childhood period of playing intensively in the woods, their mother called them "wood nymphs," which links them with the trees (52). In a retrospective view near the beginning of the book, Nell remembers their childhood play and recalls how, "Back then, it seemed the forest had everything we needed" (52), which is a childhood view to which the sisters ultimately return by the end of the book, as young adults, although with a less possessive or instrumental view, as they instead cede control and ownership over things and plants and take up residence by living harmoniously among them.

Eventually, however, the young girls had grown up and found other activities that motivated them. After Eva had turned toward other things, Nell recalls, "I tried going up to the stump alone, but my time there always seemed to drag [...] and finally the forest came to mean nothing more than the interminable distance between home and town" (52). As they grew up, both sisters forgot the childhood significance of the forest to them, showing how they actually acquired greater plant blindness in

adolescence than they had had as children. Nell later returns to the childhood stump as an adolescent, spontaneously bringing her visiting boyfriend Eli there. Rather than finding this childhood play site diminished by the passage of time and her own growth and maturation, she notes "I had forgotten how massive it was, how solid" (119). She quickly reenters into a childhood consciousness of the stump's living nature and the biomes it supported, noting how "it seemed alive. Its outer walls were covered with miniature forests of mosses and lichens. On the north side there was an opening wide enough to let two children enter hand in hand" (119). Returning to the stump thus offers a kind of return to this childhood perspective and a sense of smallness, humility, and sensitivity to plants and other life forms, and literally allows for entry into the tree itself, as human encounters with redwoods famously do.

When Nell and Eli kiss at the stump, the narrator observes from a distinctly and newly phytocentric perspective, "We could have grown roots, we stood there so long" (119). Subsequently, they make love, marking a significant transition or rite of passage into maturity for Nell. Afterwards they find "sharp oak leaves sticking to our backs and elbows and knees, redwood fronds love-knotted in our hair," while Nell "opened her eyes, looked up through the stump to the sky beyond the braid of branches, and it seemed I could hear the sap rising through the ghostly wood" (120-121). The return to the stump thus accomplishes a profound transformation in perspective, as if gaining a new sense of hearing and sight—newly opened eyes and a view framed by the tree. This moment marks a significant turning point in the book toward phytocentric perspectives, which are facilitated by this redwood tree stump in young adulthood, as in childhood before.

Despite their budding relationship, Nell ultimately rejects Eli's invitation to join him in traveling across the country in pursuit of a rumored renewal of civilization in Boston, which is where her former dreams of academic self-realization had resided. Although she at first does depart with him and begins to make the journey, she changes her mind and instead opts to stay with her sister, cleaving closely to home and to her kinship with her sister, who is the only family she has left. She thereby chooses a homing in plot. When her sister asks, "Why did you come back?" she answers, "Because you're my sister, stupid" (141). This divergence from a male-initiated journey, risks, adventure, and a heteronormative romantic relationship leading into the future toward a female-focused desire to remain at home and the valuing above all of a sororal relationship and kinship ties with roots in the past also proves pivotal in the book. Nell thus chooses not to be uprooted, but instead stays close to her roots.

Pivotal Moments and Turning Points

Following this pivotal decision for Nell, Eva faces a crisis point in her own life, being violently raped by a man outside their home. She is deeply traumatized, while her life is forever altered. From this point forward, the sisters live in fear of another intruder and are profoundly aware of their vulnerability. Seemingly inescapably, the

sisters feel "surrounded by violence, by anger and danger, as surely as we are surrounded by forest. The forest killed our father, and from that forest will come the man—or men—who will kill us" (146). At this point, the sisters turn away from men, who represent violence to them, and feel forsaken by the forest. They instead find in each other the love and support they need. Even when Eva turns out to be pregnant as a result of the rape, she welcomes the pregnancy and baby regardless of the circumstances of its conception, feeling with conviction that the baby is "its own person" (165), thereby choosing life and growth while ceding control to nature, as the sisters increasingly do. They altogether reject past models and shed social conventions governing relations, even between human beings and family members.

As part of their healing and reorientation toward plant life, the sisters turn to gardening, another form of growth when facing diminishing stores of food. They also discover that they can forage for berries in the woods, despite their mother's long ago prohibition. Nell suddenly realizes "surely there is more than just an afternoon's treat of berries in the woods. Surely the forest is filled with things to eat. The Indians who lived here survived without orchards or gardens, ate nothing but what these woods had to offer" (171). In this way, Nell suddenly recognizes her own plant blindness and ignorance and cites the Indigenous past as evidence of this. She recognizes that, despite all her studies, she knows only poison oak and a fir tree from a redwood, no more. She vividly describes this realization:

> all the other names—Latin or Indian or common—are lost to me. I can't even begin to guess which plants are edible or how else they might be used. […] And how can bushes or flowers or weeds feed us, clothe us, cure us? How can I have spent my whole life here and know so little? (172)

Having recognized her plant blindness, Nell declares, "There has to be a way we can learn about wild plants" (172), and eventually finds her mother's book *Native Plants of Northern California.* At first it proves a disappointment:

> unconsciously I had been expecting a friend, a guide, a grandmother—some wise woman who loved us and who knew how much we had suffered, who would rise from the pages of that book and lead me into the woods, kneeling by the stream to show me herbs, poking her stick into the bank to dig up roots, patiently teaching me where to find, when to harvest, and how to prepare the forest's bounty. (173)

This search for an elder wise woman also recalls Indigenous traditions, being linked repeatedly with plant knowledge, as does Nell's subsequent comparison to reviving a lost language: "I feel as if I'm trying to learn a new language without the help of tapes and books, a language for which there are no longer any native speakers, and for the first time in my life, I wonder if I can pass the test" (173). This remembrance of Indigenous people acknowledges this Indigenous past and tragic losses, but also, in another way, perpetuates "vanishing Indian" narratives that neglect Native American

persistence and have worked strategically in the past to allow for the reappropriation of Indigenous land and traditions.[2]

Eventually Nell succeeds in overcoming plant blindness and begins to "untangle the forest, to attach names to the plants that fill it" (174). For example, she suddenly sees that "All these years, the bushes that line the roadside have been hazelnut bushes" (174), while the "flowers we laid on our father's grave were blue-eyed grass—the root of which is supposed to reduce fever and ease an upset stomach" (175). Nell thus discovers in the forest spices, medicines, moss for diapers, and other things her pregnant sister may need. She also discovers teas that had been hidden from her by her plant blindness, as if discovering an entire new alphabet of plants:

> There are teas. For months now we have drunk hot water when we could have been drinking wild mint, wild rose, blackberry, bay, mountain grape, black mustard, pennyroyal, manzanita, fennel seed, sheep sorrel, nettle, fir needle, madrone bark, yerba buena, black sage, pineapple weed, violet, wild raspberry. (175)

Most importantly for their continued sustenance, Nell discovers acorns, "a staple part of the diet of many peoples" with high nutritional value, and observes, "I've lived in an oak forest my whole life, and it never once occurred to me that I might eat an acorn" (175). Overcoming plant blindness thus proves to be the key not just for their survival, but also offers a way for them to thrive in a new life at home in the forest.

New Phytocentric Perspectives

These epiphanic realizations mark a complete reorientation to an increasingly phytocentric perspective. Tellingly Nell observes,

> Before, I was Nell and the forest was trees and flowers and bushes. Now, the forest is *toyon, manzanita, wax myrtle, big leafed maple, California buckeye, bay, gooseberry, flowering currant, rhododendron, wild ginger, wood rose, red thistle,* and I am just a human, another creature in its midst. Gradually the forest I walk through is becoming mine, not because I own it, but because I'm coming to know it. I see it differently now. (175-176)

If previously, Nell had begun to hear the forest, now she has begun to more truly see it. She also increasingly recognizes the past histories of the forest and reads in her encyclopedia about the Indian tribes referred to as the Pomo who inhabited the region, seeing the Indigenous history to which she also had been blind. It is then that she encounters the story of Sally Bell, which the book quotes almost in full (178-179), removing only the final mention of Sally being found by her brother and being taken to live with "white folks," which effectively leaves Sally Bell alone in the forest. Like the Pomo, who divided the year into thirteen moons named for the food that was

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[2] For example, Sara Schwebel addresses the "vanishing Indian" trope in the chapter "Indians Mythic and Human" in her book *Child-Sized History: Fictions of the Past in U.S. Classrooms* (Vanderbilt University Press, 2011), while Carole Goldberg counters this aspect of *Island of the Blue Dolphins* in "A Counterstory of Native American Persistence" in Sara Schwebel's edited volume *Island of the Blue Dolphins: The Complete Readers Edition* (University of California Press, 2016).

available when the moon was full, Nell now notes only the moon and food they are harvesting, but has forgotten what month it is (179). Similarly her name has disappeared among all the plant names, as she becomes just a human listed as an afterthought to a description of the forest and many plants, thus restoring phytocentric power relations.

Nell's subsequent killing of a boar in order to combat anemia in her pregnant sister also causes changes in Nell. She in some way merges with the wild sow she has killed out of necessity, for the sake of her sister and her baby, and consumed. As if having merged with the boar, she sometimes feels "as though I were bearing her feral old soul along with my own" and finds herself "looking around these rooms with a sort of sideways terror" and has to remind herself "*Those are only walls. They can't hurt you,*" while her first thought when she wakes is "panic—*I've got to get outside*" (207). She thus has adopted more of a wild animal's perspective on her human home. By contrast, while napping outdoors at the stump, she sleeps very well. In this place, in her dream, her human self vividly merges with the vegetal and is fused with the natural world and all the environment:

> I dream I am buried in the earth up to my neck, my arms and legs like taproots tapering to a web of finer roots until at last there is not clear demarcation between those root hairs and the soil itself. As I look out over the earth, my skull expands as though I were absorbing the above-ground world and the sky itself through my eye sockets. My head grows until it is a shell encompassing the whole of the earth. I wake softly, with a sense of infinite calm (206).

Indeed, frequently in her dreams, the distinction between human and animal is challenged, such as through dreams about symbolic encounters with a bear, until one night when she seemingly has a peaceful encounter with a bear, as the dream becomes reality. These experiences demonstrate a dissolution or even undoing of the human self enabled by a new phytocentric perspective and profound transformations that have resulted and produced new relations between all living things.

Conclusion

The stories of the Lone Woman and Sally Bell, as inspiring foremothers, as it were, are also recalled near the end of the book. In a pivotal moment for the sisters, which threatens the survival of Eva and her infant, since she is struggling to give birth at home, these two Indigenous women are cited as models of using instincts to survive and thereby outliving horror and trauma (212). Guided by instinct, Nell leads Eva to the stump, and once the sisters manage to reach it, all prospects improve. Nell observes, "tonight it seems there is nothing in these woods that would want to harm us. Instead, I think I feel a new benevolence abroad, as if the forest had finally grown sympathetic, as if—huddled inside the stump—we finally mattered" (215-216). This formulation shows a non-anthropocentric view, where in fact the sisters are dependent on the forest and trees and recognize this, while the forest becomes benevolent toward them. When Eva gives birth in the stump,

> the sounds she makes are beyond the pain and work of labor, beyond human—or even animal—life. They are the sounds that move the earth, the sounds that give voice to the deep, violent fissures in the bark of the redwoods. They are the sounds of splitting cells, of bonding atoms, the sounds of the waxing moon and the forming stars (216)

At this point Eva's life is no longer differentiated from the tree, plants, forest, and nature, but has become one with it. As if the first woman, Eva's primal birthing cries speak for the earth, trees, and all, so that she now gives voice to her environment and is one with it. At the same time, however, this representation of women's bodies as 'natural' in an elemental or cosmic sense might also be critiqued from a feminist or ecofeminist perspective.

The newborn infant's entry into their life plays an important role in the conclusion of the novel. Although Eva names the boy Robert after their deceased father, Nell prefers to call him "Burl." As noted in the prologue to this article, the novel cites an encyclopedia entry about the coastal redwood that also focuses on the burl as a remarkable adaptation, also evocatively observing beforehand that the final sentences of Nell's reading mingles with her dreams (168). Nell's use of a botanical term for a part of a redwood tree to apply to a human infant, indicates how her frame of reference has changed to a phytocentric one. At the same time the symbolism of the burl here is significant and powerful. Since the infant called Burl was born of violent rape and an injury upon her sister, and is being raised by two sisters who have been through deprivation, loss, trauma, and hardship and found new ways to navigate the world, the name also signifies a kind of regeneration. A family devastated by loss has reconstituted itself in an unconventional arrangement, as if "encircling an injured parent tree" (168). The burl is also considered "a remarkable adaptation for survival" (168) and therefore completes a triad of survivors.

Although the forest initially had been described as a second-growth redwood forest that had been logged, with a few fallen trunks and charred stumps as the remains of a mythic place covered with redwoods a thousand years old (51), the ghostly redwood tree stump has been rejuvenated and effectively regrown into a still living and significant thing influencing events. Similarly, "those other sisters of mine, the Lone Woman and Sally Bell" continue to be present as guides in moments of hardship or loneliness, in a formulation that now conjures them as a living presence and even kin alongside the sisters, reaffirming their place rather than erasing them. As Nell writes, "each of us longing for the kin we have lost, each of us learning to inhabit the forest alone" (228). At the book's conclusion the sisters not only decide to move to dwell in the stump in the forest for good, but even burn their home and former life, both so there is no return and also to eliminate the threat of human invaders. By this point in the novel, they now have such confidence in the sustaining capacity of the forest that Eva declares, "If we really need something, we'll get it from the forest" (236). She responds to Nell's uncharacteristic hesitation and doubt with the assertion, "We'll learn. We need an adventure" (235). When Nell notes that this is precisely what Eli had said in inviting her to depart, Eva responds with a critique, "This is a real adventure. His was only an escape" (236), signaling how this is an

ecofeminist sort of a homing plot, rather than a Western male hero's journey away, and thus offers a unique plant studies take on the young adult novel as well.

To finally persuade the hesitant Nell, Eva takes another tack, "'Think of Burl,' she urged, using Nell's name for the baby for the first time. 'Even if you can't do it for yourself, do it for him'" (237). Mentioning the child by this phytocentric name finally persuades Nell to embrace this new regenerative vision. They then leave "a whole house full of things we once thought we needed to survive" (239) and use a redwood branch to burn their former life and enter the woods forever. At this point the former dancer Eva finally dances again, but with a new phytocentric model, "She danced with a body that had sown seeds, gathered acorns, given birth […] now wild, now tender, now lumbering, now leaping. Over the rough earth she danced to the music of our burning house" (240), in another primal scene. This makes for an odd display of power, and fire, even as they cede power to plants for good.

The novel's final lines–"Now the wind rises and the baby wakes. Soon we three will cross the clearing and enter the forest for good" (241)–offer a conclusion to the book and the trajectory it has traced toward a phytocentric perspective in *Into the Forest*. Since the novel concludes here, even as the journal-simulating narrative ends, this movement into the redwood forest for good, for the sake of Burl, leaves the reader behind, as the story's young adult protagonists and their newborn infant slip away among the trees of the forest toward a new life. Since the trajectory of the book has increasingly merged their reality and perspectives with that of the forest, this completes a kind of transformation and even dissolution of the human into the world of plants. At the same time, young readers may be comforted by the fact that, due to the sisters overcoming plant blindness and embracing a phytocentric perspective, they have found new models for survival, sustenance, and self-sufficiency to guide them into adulthood. This new epistemology derives from an intimate knowledge of plants, as well as their own resilience and regenerative capacity, exemplified by the redwood tree and its burl, which holds the secret of eternal youth and ecological immortality.

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"To See with Eyes Unclouded": Nonhuman Selves and Semiosis in *Princess Mononoke*

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Abstract

Responding to a robust archive of ecocritical work on science fiction, this paper argues for fantasy as a genre that can offer powerful tools for ecological thinking. Focusing on Miyazaki Hayao's 1997 film *Princess Mononoke,* I argue that fantasy's portrayal of an animistic natural world provides a framework for recognizing and respecting the subjectivity of nonhuman persons. Drawing on Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's concept of multinatural personhood, this paper analyzes the ways in which animistic fantasy allows Miyazaki to portray plants, animals, and other nonhumans as agential subjects that must be respected. Further, using Eduardo Kohn's work on the materiality of semiosis to examine instances of cross-species communication in *Princess Mononoke,* I argue that the film's expanded conceptions of personhood and language counter anthropocentric narratives of mastery by portraying human knowledge as necessarily limited and incomplete. In turn*,* the acknowledgement of epistemological limits encourages an ethical attitude which resonates with Michael Marder's description of plant-thinking as a mode that acknowledges the importance of the unknown and the unknowable. Ultimately, this paper calls for a consideration of how modes of thought and aesthetic representation that have traditionally fallen outside the purview of the scientific can offer resources for imagining human-nonhuman relations.

Keywords: New animism, multinaturalism, speculative fiction, semiosis, plant-thinking.

Resumen

En repuesta a un amplio archivo de trabajo ecocrítico sobre ciencia ficción, este trabajo argumenta que la fantasía como género puede ofrecer herramientas poderosas al pensamiento ecológico. Centrándome en la película de Hayao Miyazaki de 1997, *La princesa Mononoke*, sostengo que el retrato fantástico de un mundo natural animista proporciona un marco para reconocer y respetar la subjetividad de las personas no-humanas. Partiendo del concepto de persona multinatural de Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, este artículo analiza las formas en que la fantasía animista permite que Miyazaki retrate plantas, animales, y otros agentes no-humanos que deben ser respetados. Además, usando el trabajo de Eduardo Kohn sobre la materialidad de la semiosis para examinar ejemplos de comunicación entre especies en *La princesa Mononoke,* mantengo que, al expandir la concepción de persona y lenguaje, la película se opone a las narrativas antropocéntricas de dominio al mostrar el conocimiento humano como necesariamente limitado e incompleto. A su vez, el reconocimiento de los límites epistemológicos promueve una actitud ética que evoca la descripción de Michael Marder sobre el pensamiento vegetal como un modo que reconoce la importancia de lo desconocido y de lo inescrutable. En definitiva, este trabajo apela a que se considere cómo los modos de pensamiento y de

representación estética que tradicionalmente han quedado fuera del ámbito científico pueden ofrecer recursos para imaginar las relaciones entre humanos y no-humanos.

Palabras clave: Nuevo animismo, multinaturalismo, ficción especulativa, semiosis, pensamiento vegetal.

Introduction: Climate Fiction, Science Fiction, and Fantasy

In this paper, I seek to theorize fantasy as a genre for thinking alternatives to the Anthropocene. Within the burgeoning genre of climate fiction, or cli-fi, many thinkers have pointed to science fiction as a genre with unique potential for "speculat[ing] about future technology and conditions" as they relate to climate change (Trexler 13). However, as Marek Oziewicz points out in his introduction to *Fantasy and Myth in the Anthropocene,* the focus on sci-fi as cli-fi has often occurred at the expense of sci-fi's sibling genre, fantasy (3). If science fiction is still suspect in the eyes of some literary critics because it fails to depict climate change as "actually happening on this earth, at this time," the genre is at least tethered to realism through its citation of scientific theory. By contrast, fantasy, with its ghosts and spirits, is commonly viewed as too tied "to the realm of make-believe" for countering the pressing reality of climate change (Millet).

Contrary to the ways in which sci-fi as cli-fi is often framed as offering potential solutions to climate change, my argument for fantasy as cli-fi focuses on the genre's ability to foster respect for nonhuman forces. My case study here is Miyazaki Hayao's[1] *Princess Mononoke,* a 1997 film focused on the struggle between human townspeople and non-human residents of an old-growth forest. Iron Town, led by the ambitious Lady Eboshi, seeks to expand its ironworks operations by clearing more of the nearby forest; however, they meet resistance from the forest's inhabitants, chief among them the wolf-god Moro and her adopted human daughter, San (also the eponymous Princess Mononoke). Attempting to forge a peace between the two sides is Ashitaka, a prince from the last village of the Emishi who leaves his home after being cursed by a vengeful boar god.

In *Princess Mononoke,* Miyazaki deploys fantasy tropes such as talking animals and forest spirits to portray nonhuman entities as agential beings to whom humans owe an ethical obligation. In doing so, the film critiques the scientific tendency to reduce nature[2] to a passive resource that can be exploited without consequence. In

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[1] Japanese names, such as Miyazaki's, are written in Japanese order (surname, given name). All other names written in Western order (given name, surname).

[2] In ecocriticism, nature as a term has been critiqued for the ways in which it implies a separation between the realm of human culture and the natural world. At the same time, the ubiquity of the nature/culture divide means that it is difficult to discuss anthropocentrism without deploying these same terms. While leaning more towards Haraway's conceptualization of co-constitutive naturecultures, I use nature and cultures in this paper as provisional terms, similar to poles on a

place of an instrumental view of nature as natural resource, Miyazaki offers animism as an alternative for respectful engagement with the nonhuman world. In invoking animism, I draw specifically on work in the field of New Animism by anthropologists such as Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and Eduardo Kohn. While anthropology has historically associated animism with underdeveloped 'primitive' culture, New Animism seeks to rethink animism as a viable mode for trans-human relations. In San and Ashitaka's relationships with the forest, I argue that *Princess Mononoke* offers visions of what Viveiros de Castros calls multinaturalism, or a worldview which sees both humans and nonhumans as possessing personhood. Personhood does not connote uniformity, acknowledging that humans, animals, and plants all constitute very different types of persons. However, in many animist societies, personhood does act as a concept that acknowledges the kinship and layers of mutual dependence between different species. Through San and Ashitaka, two young adults who occupy the space between childhood and adulthood as well as between human and non-human, Miyazaki present models of ethical relations to nature based on the recognition of mutual personhood. If a central function of environmental texts aimed at children "is to socialize young people into becoming the responsible and empathetic adults of tomorrow," Miyazaki's protagonists represent a burgeoning model of ecological citizenship in which adult responsibility means embracing animistic thinking rather than rejecting it as unscientific, childish naivety (Massey and Bradford 109).

Central to multispecies coexistence is the possibility of communication between species. Drawing on Edouardo Kohn's theories of material semiosis, I read *Princess Mononoke* as a film that destabilizes the idea of language as the exclusive marker of humanity. In its attendance to non-verbal and often deeply material forms of communication, the film argues for a consideration of semiosis beyond symbolic language, one in which different forms of embodiment allow access to different modes of communication. Rather than viewing language as an innately human activity, Princess Mononoke argues for an expanded view of language, one in which semiosis is a constitutive element feature of life. Consequently, the task of ecological ethics is to pay attention to non-human forms of communication and to forge what Eduardo Kohn calls trans-species pidgins, or necessarily imperfect ways of communication across species, in service of a multispecies cosmopolitics.

At the same time that *Princess Mononoke* emphasizes the importance of cross-species communication, Miyazaki's portrayal of forms of communications that operate beyond human apprehension generates an atmosphere of respect for the unknown—those beings and process which, unseen and unobserved by humans, nonetheless contribute to the functioning of the world. Life and vital processes occur outside a human frame of reference, and responsible ecological practice must proceed with respect for those forces and entities which elude human perception. Here, plant

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spectrum rather than an absolute binary. Thus, while iron ore is more natural than forged steel, neither is purely nature nor culture.

life in *Princess Mononoke* plays a vital role in emphasizing the importance of respect for "the concealed and the withdrawn, including the various meanings of this existence that are equally elusive and inexhaustible" (Marder 28). Focusing on the figure of the Forest Spirit, who possesses power over life and death but notably never speaks throughout the film, I argue that vegetal life in *Princess Mononoke* illustrates the importance of non-totalizing epistemologies that acknowledge the limits of knowledge. In this way, the film promotes a vision of ecological thinking that echoes Michael Marder's description of plant thinking as a mode that respects the obscure and hidden elements of life. Plants for Miyazaki thus serve as vital site for theorizing ethical obligations towards non-humans and Others whose difference from the Self can never be fully assimilated or understood.

Princess Mononoke: Materialist Eco-fable

On the level of narrative, *Princess Mononoke* functions most clearly as an ecological fable about the dangers of human attempts to master nature. If "[t]he typical young adult cli-fi operates with a dystopian setting, where young protagonists are required to find science-based solutions for severe environmental damage," *Princess Mononoke* presents a far more pessimistic vision of the relationship between ecology and technoscientific ingenuity (Rusvia 88). Miyazaki's critique of environmentally damaging technologies emerges most clearly in the depiction of Iron Town. While Lady Eboshi is in many ways a proto-feminist figure, taking charge of Iron Town and organizing it into a haven for former prostitutes and ostracized lepers, iron itself emerges within the film as a potentially sinister force. It is being hit by an iron ball that transforms the boar god Nago into a many-limbed creature comprised of dark, sludgy worms who attacks Ashitaka's village in the film's opening sequence (Fig. 1). Technological progress, as represented by the muskets and mounted cannons which Iron Town uses in combat against Nago and other adversaries, is linked explicitly to death and contagion: the iron musket wounds Nago, transforming him from a god into a demon driven by hatred and vengeance, and Nago in his turn infects anything he touches so that healthy vegetation withers and die in his wake. Ashitaka manages to kill Nago before he can reach the Emishi village, but he too comes in contact with the boar and is infected by a curse that will slowly kill him. Iron may enrich Lady Eboshi and her citizens, just as fossil fuels enrich those who extract them, but the lingering effects on both human and nonhuman life are decidedly deleterious. Rather than scientific salvation, *Princess Mononoke* draws viewer attention to the ways in which technological development has historically contributed to ecological degradation.

Fig. 1. The boar god Nago, corrupted by anger, charges towards the Emishi village. From Princess Mononoke, dir. Miyazaki Hayao, 1997.

However, Miyazaki's other films complicates any reading of *Princess Mononoke* as a wholesale condemnation of science. From the eponymous steampunk castle of *Howl's Moving Castle* to the meticulously detailed airships in *Laputa in the Sky,* Miyazaki's films exhibit a decided fascination with machinery and the capacities they enable. One of Miyazaki's most prominent eco-heroines prior to San, Nausicaä from *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind,* is a budding young scientist whose care for nonhumans does not contradict her desire to analyze her post-apocalyptic landscape. What Miyazaki critiques in *Princess Mononoke* is therefore not science so much as it is certain worldviews that have historically been aligned with scientific endeavors. Chief among these worldviews is what ecofeminist Val Plumwood terms rationalism, or a philosophy that elevates mind over body while also enforcing a separation between the two terms. Under the influence of rationalism, nature becomes raw matter, an object that to be mastered, controlled, and "tortured to yield up her secrets" to the scientific observer (42). Through denying the agency and ethical demands of nonhuman others, a rationalist, instrumental relationship to nonhuman creates and justifies the conditions for its exploitation.

Iron Town, and in particular Lady Eboshi, functions as Miyazaki's primary nexus for modeling the effects of the instrumentalization of nature. While Lady Eboshi works to protect the citizens of Iron Town and even expresses the desire to help San become a 'normal' human, she does not extend her sympathy to the forest residents who are being negatively affected by Iron Town's expansion. Instead, when Eboshi discusses the prospect of clear-cutting the forest with Ashitaka, she emphasizes that her actions will make Iron Town "the richest land in the world." Eboshi is aware that animals and various entities call the forest home, and with these entities frequently threatening Iron Town, she also has a sense of the forest's inhabitants as intelligent beings. Even so, she dismisses their claim to the forest as less than that of the humans. Anthropocentrism reduces nature to Heideggerian standing reserve, a resource whose value is measured in how much wealth can be extracted from it. The irony of

prioritizing humans over nature, however, is that the human realm is inevitably destroyed along with the non-human world. Out of the desire to protect her town from both human and animal enemies, Lady Eboshi accepts a deal with the opportunistic monk Jigo: in exchange for killing the Forest Spirit and bringing his head to the Emperor, Eboshi and Iron Town will receive imperial protection. However, when Eboshi succeeds in killing the Forest Spirit, the Forest Spirit transforms a vengeful, angry creature whose rampage in search of his head destroys both the forest and Iron Town. As the corrupted form of the Forest Spirit flows over the land, its dark, viscous liquidity is reminiscent of both toxic sludge and the molten iron produced in Iron Town (Fig. 2). In the visual similarities to molten iron, there is a sense of karmic irony as Iron Town is destroyed by the product that promised its success in the first place. Similarly, the Anthropocene has frequently been framed as a pyrrhic victory for human ingenuity: in seeking to master nature, humans have become a force on par with natural forces, but at the cost of endangering all life on the planet. Mastery of nature may entail prosperity in the short-term, but eventually it leads to the destruction of both natural and man-made worlds.

Fig. 2. The corrupted forest spirit heads towards Iron Town in search of his head.

At the same time that anthropogenic activity leads to disaster in *Princess Mononoke,* Miyazaki does not present humans as irrevocably corrupt or antagonistic to nature. Most notably, the film's deuteragonists—San and Ashitaka—stand as human characters who fight on behalf of the forest. This sympathy can be explained in part by the fact that San and Ashitaka do not belong purely to the world of humans—San due to her upbringing among wolves, Ashitaka because of the demonic curse afflicting him. However, even as they blur lines between humans and other species, both San and Ashitaka are persistently identified with humanity by other characters, including many forest denizens who view them with suspicion. For all that San tries to reject her human heritage, such ties to humanity are crucial to the film's final act in which only "human hands" can return the Forest Spirit's head and pacify his anger. Contrasted against Iron Town's adult population, San and Ashitaka's status as adolescents straddling childhood and adulthood casts them as symbols of change

and new ways of being. In their interactions with forest denizens, Miyazaki's heroes model an alternative mode of relating to nature, one which proves mutually beneficial for humans and non-humans.

At the same time that San and Ashitaka's behavior appears highly unusual to the inhabitants of Iron Town, Miyazaki does not necessarily position these characters as singular in their regard for the nonhuman world. Iron Town and the broader Japanese empire as represented by the unseen emperor may be societies in which anthropocentric logic reigns, but they are not the only models of community presented in the film. In particular, Ashitaka's Emishi village can be read as an alternative model for human/nature relations, with their treatment of Nago standing out as an example of respectful engagement with the nonhuman. Nago is introduced as a threat, and as a visually repulsive one who contaminates the ground he touches. Yet rather than reacting with disgust or fear, Ashitaka tries to reason with Nago, referring to him as a "mighty Lord" as he pleads with the god to let go of his anger. Even after Ashitaka's entreaties are unsuccessful and he is forced to shoot Nago, the Emishi continue to treat him with the reverence befitting a god. Approaching Nago, the village's wise woman first bows before reassuring him that the villagers will honor Nago's death by performing his funeral rites and marking the spot where he died with a raised mound (Fig. 3). In return, the wise woman asks that Nago "pass on in peace and bear us no hate."

Fig. 3. The Emishi village wise woman pays her respects to a fallen Nago.

Though Nago's anger remains unabated, what stands out here is the tenor of the interactions between him and the Emishi. In contrast to Lady Eboshi, who refers to Nago as a "brainless pig," Ashitaka and the wise woman address him with titles such as "mighty Lord" and "nameless god of rage and hate," respectful epithets which acknowledge the boar god's agency and power. Nago may not be human, but he is a person in Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's sense of personhood as a category that is "anterior and logically superior to the concept of the human" (58). In his work with Amerindian peoples living in the Amazon rainforest, Viveiros de Castro develops the

concept of multinaturalism, which he sees as major characteristic of the worldviews of animist people. For Viveiros de Castro, while modern cosmologies are orientated around multiculturalism, or the belief that beings (primarily humans) inhabit the same nature but different cultures, animist cultures are multinatural ones in which beings (both human and not) inhabit the same culture but different bodies. Multinaturalism consequently operates according to "a unity of mind and a diversity of bodies," one in which culture is universal but manifests itself differently through different bodies (56). In the animist worldview, a jaguar is as much a person as a human[3]; indeed, from the standpoint of the jaguar, it is the person while humans exist as potential objects to be preyed upon. In this way, multinaturalism works against "the idea that culture is universal to human beings and distinguishes them from the rest of nature," instead emphasizing that other beings are persons even if their particular expressions of personhood may differ (12). Without erasing difference, multinatural personhood creates the grounds for interspecies respect and recognition. Nago may not be human, but he is nonetheless a person whose agency and capacity for retribution makes it all the more important that he is treated with respect. In contrast to Iron Town, where fear of animal gods leads Eboshi and the villagers to treat them as dangers to be eliminated, the Emishi present an animist alternative to anthropocentric thinking, one in which recognizing the potential danger of nonhumans such as Nago means recognizing their personhood and agency as well.

Trans-species Pidgins: Interspecies Communication, Semiosis, and Embodiment

Through presenting humans as not apart from nature but a part of it, the breakdown of the nature/culture division in *Princess Mononoke* calls into question many of the other binaries associated with it. One of these primary binaries that Miyazaki challenges is the split between speaking humans and mute nonhumans. Conventionally, language is viewed as the exclusive domain of humans: dogs and parrots may learn to associate words with certain outcomes, but such word-association is generally not considered language usage but rather learned Pavlovian responses. Instead, it is only humans who are fully communicating beings. If one defines language per Ferdinand de Saussure's classic formulation of signs as signifiers representing signified objects, it is difficult to argue that nonhumans possess language in the same way humans do. Language, as a vast cultural system that individuals must be inaugurated into, is constitutive of the human psyche in a manner that has not been found to be true of other species. As illustrated by Ludwig

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[3] In Peter Skafish's translation of *Cannibal Metaphysics,* 'human' is used to designate both the species *homo sapiens* and the subject position claimed by humanity. Thus, Viveiros de Castro argues that nonhumans such as jaguars may "regard themselves as humans" while viewing "both 'human' humans and other nonhumans as animals" (12). For the purposes of clarity, I use 'human' to refer to *homo sapiens,* or what Viveiros de Castro designates "'human' humans," while 'person' is used to a category of subjectivity ("human persons") that can be occupied by multiple species.

Wittgenstein's dictum that "the limits of my language are the limits of my world," language plays a central role in shaping our psyches and how we view the world (72).

At the same time, language as symbolic sign-system is not the only form of communication available. Charles Peirce, who along with Saussure is often credited as one of the founders of the field of semiosis, divided signs into three categories: index, icon, and symbol. As originally defined by Peirce, icons resemble their referent (a painting of a river), indexes are traces of the physical presence of their subject (tracks left in the snow by a deer), and symbols bear no inherent relation to the referent—the word 'apple' is not innately linked to the intrinsic properties of an apple and thus can be replaced with the Spanish 'manzana' or the French 'pomme' with minimal difficulty. Whereas the icon and the index are closely tied to the material form of their signified objects (the index is the trace of the signifier's presence while the icon is modelled after the form of the signified), symbols are more abstract representations of their referents, arbitrary signs that create meanings through their linkage in vast chains of signifiers. Language, seen through the lens of the symbolic, enacts a severing from the material that parallels the rationalist attempt to separate mind from body and thought from world. With a definition of language as symbolic comes an additional severing between humans who possess language and are thus capable of complex thought and animals who, no matter how sophisticated their modes of communication may be, are limited to imprecise, non-symbolic modes of semiosis.

In reading *Princess Mononoke* as a text that challenges human exceptionalism, one of the film's most notable interventions comes in the form of its animal gods. Nago, Moro, and the tribes they lead are all capable of human speech, and with this capacity also comes human intelligence and agency: the animal gods strategize, philosophize about their role in a changing world, and debate the merits of different modes of resistance. At the same time, the forest gods' capacity for human speech does not mean a loss of their animal characteristics. Moro and her children use words to speak to humans, but they also communicate by growling and baring their teeth just as ordinary wolves do. The animality of the forest gods is not just behavioral but also sensorial, with smell playing an appropriately larger role in the sensorium of boar and wolf gods. Moro's children, for example, smell Ashitaka and his red elk[4] companion Yakul when encountering them afresh, a canine habit that acts as both a greeting and a way for gathering information (Fig. 4). Notably, the communication between the wolves and Yakul is a two-way exchange, and while Yakul as an ordinary animal may not speak, he is nevertheless portrayed as no less communicative. When Yakul willingly walks towards the wolf gods to exchange sniffs with them, the unexpected interspecies intimacy between wolf and elk indicates that there is a tacit

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[4] Though characters in the film refer to Yakul as a "red elk," his exact species is ambiguous. Susan McHugh notes that while referring to Yakul as an elk seems to link him to "the extinct giant Irish elk, a species that (despite its name) once ranged as far as Japan)," Yakul is also "[d]rawn more to resemble a bongo" (9). Like the depiction of the Emishi village, which takes inspiration from historical records but also contains significant creative liberties, the "red elk" is best understood as a fictional synthesis of existent species mixed with invented elements.

understanding between animals that would ordinarily relate to each other as predator and prey. Here, animal materiality is not opposed to human abstraction, but a set of codes that operate parallel to and in conjunction with human modes of semiosis. If language is typically figured in terms of abstraction, a chain of self-referential signifiers which bear no innate relation to the objects they signify, cross-species communication in *Princess Mononoke* underscores that human language is not the only or even the most effective mode of communicating information. With all their mastery of symbolic language, the inhabitants of Iron Town do not understand the wolves and can only step away in fear. It is Yakul, via not language but more embodied forms of semiosis, who is able to successfully communicate across species barriers. Through such moments of interspecies communication, Miyazaki blurs the divisions between human and animal, presenting the two categories as overlapping realms rather than incommensurate ones.

Fig. 4. Yakul and one of Moro's wolf children experience a moment of interspecies intimacy.

At the same time that *Princess Mononoke* argues for the importance and sophistication of nonhuman communication, the film's portrayal of multiple forms of semiosis also destabilizes the assumed abstraction of symbolic language. As climate change has acted as a vengeful return of the represented, reminding rational Anthropos of our reliance on corporeal matter, the linguistic turn in theory has been followed by a more recent theoretical turn towards materiality. One key theorist in elucidating the embodied elements of language has been anthropologist Eduardo Kohn. In *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human,* Kohn focuses on nonhuman modes of communication in order to argue that semiosis—and in particular, cross-species semiosis—is constitutive of life itself. Through colors, scent, and taste, plants communicate their edibility to other animals, leading bees to pollinate certain flowers while bitterness and poison protect other plants from being eaten. Similarly, predator and prey animals learn to read signs of each other's presence in order to eat or avoid being eaten. For Kohn, human language may be more complicated and abstract than plumage displays or alarm calls, but it does not

constitute a fundamental break with nonhuman communication. This is because Kohn sees human selfhood as fundamentally "a product of semiosis" carried out within human and nonhuman realm, so that to speak of the mind is to necessarily speak of "minds-in-the-world" (34). Rather than existing independently of matter, minds are created by and embedded within the world, making them "waypoints in a semiotic process" that incorporates extends beyond the human (34).

From this conceptualization of minds as nested inside the world, Kohn argues that "the semiosis occurring "inside" the mind is not intrinsically different from that which occurs among minds" (34). Language systems may at present be uniquely human, but humanity is a category that exists within the world instead of transcending it. Consequently, though symbolic language may be more self-sufficient and abstract than indices or icons, it "is also ultimately dependent on the more fundamental material, energetic, and self-organizing processes from which it emerges" (56).[5] Without corporeality and thus corporeal forms of semiosis, abstract symbolic language does not exist. Within such a framework, symbolic language becomes not a sign of anthropocentric exceptionalism but rather one form of communication among several—more abstract than iconic or indexical semiosis, but still tied to them. In contrary to an opposition of (human) culture versus (nonhuman) nature—an opposition that is internalized by many characters in *Princess Mononoke* and which drives the film's central conflict—an embodied theory of semiosis presents forest gods, non-speaking animals, plants, and humans as all alike insofar as all are communicative beings. Rather than a culture/nature divide in which humans are set apart from and inherently destructive to nature, Miyazaki presents a vision of trans-species interconnection, one in which human destruction of nature can only end in self-destruction.

The Limits of Language: Plants, Alterity, and Meaningful Silences

Even as communication serves as a central node of interspecies commonality in *Princess Mononoke*, not all forms of semiosis are portrayed as equally visible or

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[5] Another crucial part of Kohn's attempt to trace a counterintuitive link between symbolic language and materiality is his proposal of a hierarchal and unidirectional set of relationships that proceeds from icons to indices to symbols, with indices emerging as "products of a special layered relation among icons" and symbols as signs produced from relations among indices (52). In this chain of semiotic relationships, Kohn identifies icons as "the most basic kind of sign process" in which similarity serves as the basis for communication: the reflection of a bird in a pond communicates the presence of a bird above the pond (51). Having established icons as the basic unit of semiosis, Kohn then argues that the index is a sign whose comprehensibility is made possible by icons. In order for animal tracks in the snow to convey the previous presence of a bear or wolf, the tracks must conjure in the mind's eye a memory of the animal walking through snow—a memory that, by its nature, is also an iconic presentation of a prior time. Indices function through reference to icons, and in their turn, indices lay the groundwork for symbolic signs. Here, Kohn's example is the Quichua word chorongo, which refers to the woolly monkey that lives in South American rainforests. In teaching an outsider to associate chorongo with the woolly monkey, a Quichua speaker would point at the monkey while uttering chorongo, with the pointed finger acting as an indexical sign that links the word to the animal being pointed at. Though the complexity of language means that not all words are indexical, all language ultimately translates into icons insofar as Kohn sees icons as the basic unit of thought.

legible. Thus far, the discussion of nonhumans has focused primarily on animal life; plants, though present in Miyazaki's lush renditions of forest landscapes, are less central as characters. When analyzed from an animistic perspective, however, the silence of plant life emerges as a form of other-than-human personhood that is distinct from both human and animal personhood and which accordingly challenges both anthropocentrism and zoocentrism. As defined by Matthew Hall, anthropo- and zoo- centric classifications operate according to philosophies of exclusion, which organize different lifeforms within a hierarchy that justifies "the systematic devaluation of the lowliest parts of the hierarchy" (9). Plants, described by Aristotle as only possessing nutritive souls, exist to be used by animals, who possess both nutritive and a 'higher' sensitive soul; in their turn, animals exist to be used by humans, who rank highest on the Aristotelian chain-of-being because they possess nutritive, sensitive, and rational souls. By contrast, many forms of animism operate according to a philosophy of inclusion, which emphasizes "recognition of connectedness in the face of alterity" (11). Differences exist between plants, animals, and humans, but by foregrounding the ways in which "the plant, animal, and human realms interpenetrate," animism emphasizes connection and continuity across species (100). Humans are reliant on animals and plants for survival, and so they are obligated to consider such species kin—kin we may never fully understand, who do not communicate or act in the exact ways humans do, but important members nonetheless of an interspecies network that sustains all life.

Like its portrayal of animal persons, *Princess Mononoke's* portrayal of vegetal personhood includes both fantastical and non-fantastical plants. Vegetal spirits are present in the film—the Forest Spirit, for example, is associated with both plant and animal life within the forest, and the small, ghostly kodama spirits refer to specific trees as their mothers. With these spirits, magic grants them a greater range of movement and action than ordinary plants. For the most part, however, plants in *Princess Mononoke* behave as plants do: they do not move, talk, or appear to react to external events. Yet while the lives of ordinary plants may be obscure, *Princess Mononoke* uses fantasy to demonstrate that they do occur. In a conversation with Ashitaka, Moro laments that he, and by extension other humans, cannot hear the dying cries of the trees as they are cut down. As a species, wolves are well-known for outdoing humans in detecting smells and sounds; as a god and a wolf, it is thus unsurprising that Moro is attuned to the forest in ways that Ashitaka is not. Embodiment affects what forms of communication can be transmitted, tying the ability to process the world to specific kinds of bodies. As with Yakul, *Princess Mononoke* does not allow viewers to hear the trees directly, aligning us with Ashitaka and the other human characters. In doing so, Miyazaki challenges viewers to acknowledge that there are forms of semiosis and existence that we, because of our status as particular human creatures, may not be able to fully perceive.

Obscurity, however, does not mean such communication between beings is impossible. Plants may not speak, but as anyone who has attempted to keep a plant alive can attest, drooping stems or withering leaves act as clear indications that a plant

is not thriving in its environment. Correctly identifying the cause of ill health requires more work, but through attention to detail, it is possible to cultivate an attunement to vegetal communication. In a similar manner, Moro in *Princess Mononoke* can be seen as translating between trees and humans. Moro's summary of the tree's distress may not be a perfect or complete translation (though such inevitable imprecision is true of all translation), but what Moro does produce is what Kohn calls a trans-species pidgin, or a mode of communication that operates to "align the situated points of views of beings that inhabit different worlds" (141). Against a vision of incommensurable division between human and nonhuman others, trans-species pidgins are imperfect modes of communication that acknowledge the differences between worlds while also seeking to bridge them, allowing us to recognize the selfhood of other beings. In this way, trans-species pidgins work against what Kohn, following Stanley Cavell, refers to as soul blindness, which this paper will modify to call soul ignorance[6]: "an isolating state of monadic solipsism—an inability to see beyond oneself or one's kind" (117).[7] For Kohn, such ignorance is not just a question of ethical relations with nonhumans but also of survival itself. To regard a jaguar as devoid of agency and selfhood is to be unaware of the ways in which the jaguar may regard you—namely, as prey. Not all instances of soul ignorance end with such immediately dire consequences, but in smaller ways anthropocentric myopia contributes to a disregard for nonhuman life that ultimately harms humans as well. In countering anthropocentric exceptionalism, trans-species pidgins such as the one formed between Moro, Ashitaka, and the trees work to bring to light the ethical demands of other species as well as the interrelations between species that sustain human life.

Even with the possibility of trans-species translation, plants in *Princess Mononoke* continue to trouble the limits of knowledge and knowability. The work of external mediators gives viewers access to the voices of the dying trees, but these are not voices that are ever directly heard by humans. What is more, for every non-linguistic being who is given a voice in human language, there are many others whose intentions remain cloaked in silence—grasses, flowers, mosses, and stones whose voices are never heard either directly or indirectly. Yet human inability to perceive phenomenon does not mean that they do not exist, nor does it excuse us from ethical obligations towards unperceived others. As evidenced by Yakul or the kodama who guide Ashitaka safely through the forest, silence does not denote a lack of intelligence or agency. Instead, silence in *Princess Mononoke* functions as a sign of alterity, of modes of being that are radically Other to the human and whose forms of communication consequently elude human perception.

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[6] Here, my choice of terminology is influenced by disability scholarship that has critiqued the linkage of blindness to ignorance.

[7] As originally defined by Cavell, soul blindness refers to a failure to recognize other human beings as selves, though Cavell does later contemplate the possibility of "a comparable blindness we may suffer with respect to nonhuman animals" in the essay "Companionable Thinking" (93). Kohn's usage of Cavell's term builds on this latter essay, explicitly expanding the categories of selfhood to include nonhuman selves alongside human ones.

Chief among these silent beings is the Forest Spirit, who notably never speaks throughout the film and whose motivations are obscure to even the other animal gods. Though the Forest Spirit's physical appearance largely evokes animal life—in the daytime, he appears as the antlered Deer God, while at night, he transforms into Night Walker, a towering, watery creature who walks on two legs—his powers over life and death also align him with plant life. When the Forest Spirit walks, flowers and plants bloom in his wake, tying him to the vegetal as well as the animal world (Figure 5). Similarly, after San and Ashitaka return his head, the Forest Spirit's last act is to make vegetation sprout over the ruins of Iron Town, transforming the devastated landscape into green space before the onlookers' eyes. Given the depth of the power he possesses, it is notable then that the Forest Spirit, in contrast to Moro and other animal gods, never speaks. While the other forest gods' supernatural powers edge them towards greater communicative clarity—they speak, grieve, and think in a manner and language similar to humans—the Forest Spirit remains largely inscrutable. Other characters give interpretations of his actions, but the Forest Spirit himself never offers any explanation of his motives or goals. As his diurnal form as the Deer God, his serene, mask-like gaze does not shift expression even after he is shot by Lady Eboshi; in his nocturnal form as the Night Walker, his form may be more humanoid, but his lack of a face and his looming stature make him appear more like a force of nature than a recognizable person with needs and wants.

Figure 5: Plants spring up when the Forest God's feet touch the ground, emphasizing his connection to vegetal as well as animal life.

As an indisputably powerful yet enigmatic force, the Forest Spirit represents a troubling unknowability that cannot be easily translated into understandable terms. Lady Eboshi's attempt to kill him thus acts as an attempt to translate his existence into human value: the Forest Spirit's head will grant the Emperor immortality, and in return for delivering the head, Eboshi and Iron Town will receive the Emperor's protection. According to an instrumental logic that views the nonhuman world as resource, Eboshi's decision to kill the Forest Spirit is an understandable calculation.

What this calculation misses, however, ends up destroying both Iron Town and the forest. In the same way, modern attempts to subordinate the natural world into standing reserve have resulted in the existential crisis of the Anthropocene. In reducing trees to lumber, instrumentalism overlooks their role in oxygenation, maintaining soil health, and other processes that make agriculture and other human activities possible. Further, even as modern studies of ecosystems reveal the many ways in which different lifeforms rely on each other, there remain—and will always remain—gaps in our knowledge of the ecological impact of nonhuman species. *Princess Mononoke* asks that we acknowledge these gaps and act accordingly, exercising caution and respect in our relations with non-humans.

By insisting on the necessity of respect for the unknown, Princess Mononoke shares affinities with what Michael Marder terms plant-thinking. As a form of thought that aims to reflect the vegetal lives and ontology, plant-thinking for Marder is a mode that emphasizes respect for alterity. Root systems, extending into soil and darkness, constitute the primary life of the plant, and yet this life is one which transpires outside the field of vision, largely unobserved but crucial to plant survival. Consequently, "to get in touch with the existence of plants one must acquire a taste for the concealed and the withdrawn, including the various meanings of this existence that are equally elusive and inexhaustible" (20). Philosophically, this means that plant-thinking is "a thinking that admits difference into its midst and operates by means of this very difference," acknowledging the Other without attempting to immediately assimilate alterity into understandable terms (164). As a form of thought that "preserves the unthinkable in its midst," plant-thinking encourages an attitude of epistemological humility: an understanding that elements of reality lie at the limits of knowability and one should proceed with respect for such unknowns. The Forest Spirit's actions may be difficult to parse, but that does not mean they are unimportant. At the end of film, it is the Forest God's magic that restores the landscape, prompting one man to wondering note, "I didn't know the Forest Spirit made the flowers grow." Prior to this moment, the townspeople's reaction to the forest has been primarily one of fear, with the various forest gods seen primarily "as adversaries whose actions bring only destruction and death, rather than growth and beauty" (Daniels-Lerberg and Lerberg 70). Plant-thinking foregrounds the possibility of such revisions to our understanding of the world, reminding us that human knowledge is never absolute and that there is still a world beyond the limits of language. Even as communication and the importance of forging cross-species dialogue are driving themes in *Princess Mononoke,* tendrils of plant-thinking entwine themselves within the film, insisting on a respect for the silence of those forces that cannot or will not speak.

Conclusion: Genre Fiction for the Anthropocene

In attempting to create stories that respond to the Anthropocene, contemporary writers have struggled against what Amitav Ghosh in *The Great Derangement* identifies as a literary tradition that identifies realism in

anthropocentric terms. In the nineteenth century, Ghosh argues, nature was assumed to be "moderate and orderly"; thus, in novels such as *Madame Bovary,* the behavior of the natural environment faded into the backdrop, becoming a background against which human affairs played out (22). It is humans, not trees or wolves, who have traditionally been the protagonists of 'real' literature—that is, literature that is worthy of critical claim and sustained academic study. As a celebrated figure in literary circles, it is perhaps unsurprising that even as Ghosh critiques nineteenth-century naturalism, he does not see speculative fiction as a fully viable alternative to realism. Science fiction and fantasy take place in "an imagined 'other' world apart from ours" instead of portraying climate change as "actually happening on this earth, at this time," and so speculative cli-fi novels lose the urgency that makes Anthropocene fiction "so urgently compelling" for Ghosh (27-73).

Against Ghosh, I argue for the ecological value of speculative visions, especially when it comes to countering anthropocentric bias. As a fantasy text, *Princess Mononoke* is not mimetic in the way that *Madame Bovary* is, but it is precisely this non-mimetic quality that allows it access to the worlds of animals, spirits, and plants. Miyazaki does not ask viewers to believe that wolves can speak or that trees make decisions in the same way humans do. However, through its fantastical visions of agential nonhumans, *Princess Mononoke* reminds viewers that our view of the world is always partial, with unperceived phenomena always occurring beyond the bounds of representation. In the cosmopolitics that fantasy presents, the natural world is not standing reserve, useful only so far as it can be put to human ends. Instead, boars and trees possess inherent value, and must be approached respectfully as agential beings whose lives intertwine with ours.

In asking viewers to expand their conception of what constitutes reality and personhood, it is notable that Miyazaki chooses to present his message through teenaged protagonists. Even as adolescence is constructed as a stepping-stone towards adult stability, it is time of malleability and potential change, and there is a long tradition tying the struggles of "the subversive adolescent" to "a critique of wider society" (Hilton and Nikolajeva 7). Old enough to have lost the child's naïve faith in adults but young enough to not yet be fully inured to societal norms, the teenage protagonist offers the possibility of new ways of existing and relating to others. When it comes to ecocritical visions, the historical linkage of animism and the child's mind further intensifies the radical potential of the adolescent activist. In classical anthropology, animism was taken to be the domain of the primitive and the childish— untutored children and savages believed in animism, not rational, educated adults. As the crisis of the Anthropocene continues to worsen, however, it has become clear that the world built by rational humans is in drastic need of revision. Amidst an ongoing climate crisis, the child's propensity for animism gains a utopic quality, with attunement to the non-human becoming an ability to "glimpse other worlds underlying and overwriting this one" (Halberstam 28). If animism has been historically associated with the child and primitive thinking, *Princess Mononoke* performs a recuperation of animistic worldviews through two adolescent

protagonists, one of whom explicitly belongs to a Japanese ethnic minority. Through San and Ashitaka, adolescents who guide the adults of Iron Town towards the possibility of a more ethical relation to the non-human, fantasy texts such as *Princess Mononoke* call for an attendance to older ways of thinking and relating which have been historically disavowed by disembodied rationalism. Wonder can be used to distract and mislead, but it can also allow us to see the world anew, temporarily divesting us of familiar worldviews so that we too can see the world "with eyes unclouded by hate."

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Seeds of Latent Hope: The Figurative Entwinement of Children, Adolescents, and Plants in Maja Lunde's *The Dream of a Tree*

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Abstract

Drawing on theorizations and previous studies of climate fiction, perspectives from critical plant studies, and discussions on the mythical and symbolic role of trees and seeds, this study traces figurative relationships between plants and the child- and adolescent characters in Maja Lunde's latest climate fiction, *The Dream of a Tree* (*Drømmen om et tre*, 2022). The novel is the last volume in Lunde's "climate quartet", where she, for the first time in her series, employs a young adult protagonist. The plot revolves around a group of children, stranded on the archipelago of Svalbard that hosts the global seed vault. The study aims to show how the child and adolescent characters in Lunde's climate fiction are embedded in figurative patterns associating them with growth and hope in ways that serve to move Lunde's climate quartet from a dystopian towards a more utopian resolution.

Keywords: Critical plant studies, climate fiction, Maja Lunde, children's and young adult literature, utopia, dystopia.

Resumen

Recurriendo a teorizaciones y estudios previos sobre ficción climática, a perspectivas de estudios críticos de las plantas, y a debates sobre el papel mítico y simbólico de los árboles y las semillas, este estudio traza las relaciones figurativas entre plantas y los personajes infantiles y adolescentes en la ficción climática más reciente de Maja Lunde, *The Dream of a Tree* (*Drømmen om et tre*, 2022). La novela es el último volumen del "cuarteto climático" de Lunde, en la que, por primera vez, la autora utiliza un protagonista adolescente. El argumento gira en torno a un grupo de niños varados en el archipiélago de Svalbard que acoge el banco mundial de semillas. Este estudio pretende mostrar cómo los personajes infantiles y adolescentes en la ficción climática de Lunde están incrustados en patrones figurativos que los asocian con crecimiento y esperanza de formas que sirven para trasladar el cuarteto climático de Lunde de una resolución distópica a una más utópica.

Palabras clave: Estudios críticos de plantas, ficción climática, Maja Lunde, literatura infantil y juvenil, utopía, distopía.

Introduction

This study explores figurative relationships between plants and child and adolescent characters in Maja Lunde's latest climate fiction, *The Dream of a Tree* (*Drømmen om et tre*, 2022).[1] Lunde gained an international readership with *The*

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[1] The quotes and page references in this article refers to the original Norwegian edition and all translations are mine.

History of Bees (2015), which was the first novel in her "climate quartet", revolving around colony collapse disorder (CCC). In her subsequent works, Lunde highlights human consequences of drought (*The End of the Ocean / Blå*, 2017), and species conservation efforts (*The Last Wild Horses / Przewalski's hest*, 2019). The quartet's final volume, *The Dream of a Tree*, turns to plants, with a plot that centers on the importance of seeds for global food security. *The Dream of a Tree* narratively connects with *The History of Bees* by featuring one of the main characters from the quartet's first volume, Tao. While Tao lives in the narrative future in *The History of Bees,* she appears in the narrative present in *The Dream of a Tree*. For reasons of both scope and relevance, this article is focused on analyzing the figurative interrelationship between plants and child and adolescent characters in *The Dream of a Tree*.

Drawing on cognitive narratology, Roberta Seelinger Trites has discussed how metaphors of embodied growth abound in adolescent fiction, citing for instance Georg Bernhard Tennyson's use of plant cultivation as one such metaphor of adolescent growth ("Growth" 6). While her climate quartet primarily is advertised for adult readers, it is notable that Lunde for the first time chooses an adolescent protagonist as her main focalizer in *The Dream of a Tree*, which thematizes human-plant relationships. Thus, Lunde leans on a common mapping metaphor linking plants and adolescent growth.

In a discussion of how to define young adult literature, Svein Slettan notes that young adult literature comprises diverse works in various genres and tends to be written with an age-specific audience in mind (1). Problematizing this delimitation by age, Slettan proposes a more inclusive definition of young adult literature as literature that "*deals with* young adults, is *suitable* for young adults, or is *read by* young adults" (2; my translation, emphasis in original). Following such a broad definition, *The Dream of a Tree* may be classed as young adult literature, since it centers on the life of the adolescent Tommy.

In the previous volumes of the climate quartet, Lunde works with three main layers of narrative time, placing her characters along a chronological continuum of past, present, and future, where they are linked by a common interest in the novels' main topic. Thus, she orchestrates the reader's participation in events that exceed a human life span, approaching what Antonia Mehnert, with reference to Barbara Adam (55), terms "environmental time" (Mehnert 95). In *The Dream of a Tree*, the narrative present of the eighteen-year-old protagonist Tommy is in the reader's future, in 2110. Following a pandemic that wipes out the adult population of Spitzbergen, Tommy survives with fellow adolescent Rakel, his two younger brothers Henry and Hilmar, and Rakel's younger sister Runa. The narrative past is gradually revealed through Tommy's internally focalized memories, through character dialogue, and by aid of third person narration, detailing Tommy's coming of age and his research into the life of Russian biologist Nikolai Vavilov, who established the world's first seed bank in the 1920s. At the novel's end, Tommy finds himself isolated in Spitzbergen, the lone custodian of the global seed vault, as Rachel dies and the younger children are shipped to China by Tao and a Chinese research team, who travels to Svalbard with the aim of appropriating the seeds from the vault. Tommy's preoccupation with Vavilov's life helps further the significance of seed conservation as a cross-generational effort.

Tracing figurative relationships between plants and the child- and adolescent characters in *The Dream of a Tree* and discussing them in relation to patterns of utopian and dystopian writing for children and young adults, this study asks what roles seeds, plants, and plant metaphors play in Lunde's vision of the future, how they are linked to children and adolescents and how such connections serve the overall narrative resolution in the last instalment of Lunde's cli-fi quartet. Before embarking on a close reading and analysis of plant-human interrelationships in *The Dream of a Tree,* the next two subchapters outline theoretical perspectives from previous studies of climate fiction, critical plant studies, and children's literature studies that are useful to the analysis. I also briefly touch on metaphor theory, aspects of tree and seed symbolism, and on seed biology, before moving on to the analysis.

Climate Fiction, Critical Plant Studies, and Utopian Literature: Tropes and Analytical Perspectives

Climate fictions (cli-fi) are attempts to envision and communicate in novelistic form the impact, especially on human individuals, of the large-scale environmental shifts set in motion by anthropogenic climate change. Rooted in the wider field of ecocriticism, Adam Trexler's *Anthropocene fictions: the novel in a time of climate change* was a forerunner in the theorization of the genre, providing the first, book-length study. In it, Trexler is concerned with how cli-fi handles the merger of scientific fact with novelistic form in literary depictions of climate change. Inspired by Bruno Latour's discussions of the social, scientific, and cultural dimensions of scientific knowledge production, Trexler asks: "If facts are both real and fabricated, what is the status of scientific truth in a literary text, itself fiction?" (58). Having examined a diverse corpus of Anglo-American climate fiction, from the 1970s to the early 2010s, Trexler identifies several novelistic strategies commonly deployed in literary representations of climate change that serve as means to merge scientific fact with literary fiction, such as including a scientist in the plot (31) and dumping scientific information in dialogues or reports. In *The Dream of a Tree*, the scientist is dead (Vavilov), but functions as a repository of scientific information available to Tommy though library books.

Another common approach in cli-fi is to embed scientific predictions in the novel's setting. As noted by Caren Irr, "endangered cities, islands and remote Arctic regions" are common locations in cli-fi (2). *The Dream of a Tree*, which is mainly set on the arctic Norwegian archipelago of Svalbard, conforms to this geographic predilection. Common cli-fi settings tend to combine with certain tropes of spatial transformation deployed to signal climate change. As Trexler notes: "Although there are hundreds of climate change novels, only a handful of transformations cover the vast majority of them: direct heat, catastrophic storms, arctic switches, and floods" (78). Interestingly, none of these are immediately relevant in *The Dream of a Tree*, which is set in a future globally marked by the effects of climate change, signaled not least by species loss.

In *Climate Change and the Contemporary Novel*, Johns-Putra points to a recurring rhetorical figure of calling on the love of parents for their children, to bring home the importance of climate action, epitomized in the saying: "We have not

inherited the Earth from our fathers; we are borrowing it from our children" (Johns-Putra 1). As Johns-Putra notes: "This parental rhetoric of posterity is possibly one of the most prevalent tactics in contemporary environmentalist discourse" (4) and this holds true for cli-fi as well. However, Johns-Putra finds that climate fiction "does not simply use the child as a convenient signifier for the future; it just as often actively interrogates this symbolic use of the child and the norms it calls forth" (7). As is discussed in the analysis below, such questioning also takes place in *The Dream of a Tree*, to some degree.

With its emphasis on examining the figurative entwinement of children, adolescents, and plants in a work of climate fiction, this article aims to contribute both to studies of cli-fi and to critical plant studies. Critical plant studies is a cross-disciplinary research field within environmental humanities, comprising biologists, who argue that plants display signs of intelligence (Trewavas; Mancuso and Viola; Gagliano), philosophers, reflecting on the (neglected) role of plants in Western philosophy (Hall; Nealon; Irigaray and Marder) and art and literature scholars examining the presence and representation of plants in cultural expressions (Vieira; Ryan). Various analyses framed by critical plant studies point to a discrepancy between the biological significance of plants and their cultural role in (modern, Western) societies. A notable lack of attention towards plants tends to be explained with reference to Aristotle's *scala natura*, in which plants feature near the bottom of the value hierarchy, and to Genesis, where plants are created before "every living thing" (see Gen. 1.11 and 1.21). Biologists J. H. Wandersee and E. E. Schuster have disclosed a tendency to disregard, and be ignorant of, plants in the environment that they have dubbed *plant blindness*. Following theoretical developments within critical plant studies, Kathryn M. Parsley has proposed substituting the disability metaphor of "plant blindness" with the term *plant awareness disparity*, a suggestion I adopt here.

Wandersee and R. E. Clary speculate that plant awareness disparity is a human perceptual "default" position since plants do not usually pose an immediate threat to human life. In contrast, Matthew Hall has argued that our tendency to focus on, and value, animals over plants, is "largely a cultural-philosophical attitude" (6), founded in a zoo-centric cultural orientation. Hall bases this argument on examination of cultural attitudes towards plants across various metaphysical systems worldwide. The identification of plant awareness disparity as a cultural bias is supported by a recent review study, concluding that diminished nature experience is a likely cause, since plant awareness disparity has predominantly been identified among "urban populations in high-income countries" (Stagg and Dillon 588).

While there are previous studies of Lunde's climate quartet (Furuseth; Whittle), none of them have so far focused on the role of plants in Lunde's fiction. Within children's literature studies, approaches to cli-fi for young adults have predominantly been part of a wider discussion of dystopian and post-apocalyptic trends, prominent in children's and young adult fiction since the 2000s (see Hintz and Ostry; Bradford et al.; Basu et al.; Day et al.) and such perspectives remain relevant here. Studies combining perspectives from cli-fi with analytical attention to plants are further between (but see Guanio-Uluru "Climate"; Colligs; Spencer, and Rusvai).

Reflective of a cultural-philosophical tendency to ignore plants, Monica Gagliano, John Charles Ryan, and Patricia Vieira have found that "poetry and prose in the Western tradition" tend to represent plants as "the correlatives of human emotions" and as "reflecting human states of mind" (x), that is: Plants tend to function metaphorically in literary texts, rather than be represented *as* plants. This tendency is evident also in climate fiction for young adults. Analysis of plant representation in Nordic young adult climate fiction revealed that plants most prominently served metaphorically as keepers of memory and truth, in the form of paper, books and written documents—objects that were emphasized over and above living plants (Guanio-Uluru, "Imagining"). The fictional roles of plants thus had poor correspondence with the real-life significance of plants to biological life and the global climate.

The trope of (dead) plants as record keepers also occurs in *The Dream of a Tree*, where Tommy frequents a library. At the same time, attention towards real plants and the biological significance of plants is signaled in that Tommy's grandmother runs a greenhouse, in which she lectures Tommy in plant care, and in the use of the global seed vault as a significant plot motivator and motif. In a dystopic future, the vault is left in care of the protagonist, who grows to identify with the world's first seed-banker, Vavilov. The "sources of inspiration", list in the appendix of Lunde's novel, shows that she has engaged with texts from critical plant studies (Jahren; Lauritzen; Mancuso and Viola). A phytocentric (plant-centered) analysis of *The Dream of a Tree* is thus highly pertinent.

While Lunde's climate quartet may be read as part of a wider dystopian trend, *The Dream of a Tree* also incorporates traits typical of utopian writing for children and young adults. Carrie Hintz and Elaine Ostry point out that in utopian writing for a young audience, children and young adults are generally the center of concern, "sometimes even bearing the major responsibility for the formation, survival, or reform of the society" (1). This indeed is the situation for the child and young adult characters in *The Dream of a Tree*, as the adult population of Svalbard dies off. In the following, I aim to show how Lunde, in the final instalment of her climate quartet, draws on literary patterns and metaphors associated with child and adolescent characters to shift her writing on climate change in a more utopian direction—a shift accomplished not least by aid of metaphorical figures and mythological allusions linking people and plants.

In the next section, I briefly clarify the term metaphor, introduce key perspectives on tree mythology and seed symbolism, and present biological information about seeds and seed vaults that are relevant to the analysis of *The Dream of a Tree*.

Plants: Metaphors, Mythology, Biology

Discussing embodied growth metaphors commonly employed by critics of young adult literature and the Bildungsroman, Trites calls attention to figures such as the comparison of maturation to a journey (leaving childhood behind), to sculpture

and art (shaping and formation), and to horticulture (cultivation and growth) ("Growth" 65-66). She further notes that female maturation is often metaphorically described with reference to confinement (enclosed, imprisoned), constraint (bondage, pressure), and (sexual) awakening that metaphorically "map embodiment on to the concept of psychological growth" (66).

Trites' discussion of metaphors of embodied growth in young adult fiction most closely aligns with what M. H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham, in their overview of metaphor theory, term *the cognitive view*. The cognitive view argues that metaphor deeply structures our thoughts and perceptions, aiding our mapping across conceptual domains (Abrams and Harpham 189-190). Citing several metaphors so common that "we use them without noticing them", he highlights "People are Plants" as one example of such cognitive mapping metaphors underlying numerous everyday expressions like "She's a late bloomer" and "He's withering fast" (191). Metaphorical associations between people and plants are of particular relevance here.

Noting how metaphor theory has developed into quite a complex field, Abrams and Harpham observe that, following centuries of discussion, "there is no general agreement regarding how metaphors are identified or understood" (189). Taking a historical perspective, they outline four influential theories, where the cognitive view is the most recent (189-193): An earlier view, *the similarity view* considers metaphor a departure from standard language use, taking the form of an elliptical simile that implicitly compares two disparate things to stylistic effect, while *the interaction view*, argues that metaphor permeates all language and reframes our view of the subject (*tenor*) to which the metaphorical associations are applied. Finally, *the pragmatic view* holds that metaphors "mean what the words, in their most literal interpretations mean" and serves the pragmatic function of calling our attention to aspects of a thing that we would otherwise overlook (193).

In a discussion of the narrative functions of metaphor, Gerard Steen seems to discount the pragmatic view when he holds that metaphor "is based in a non-literal analogical relation between two concepts or conceptual domains" (305). He notes that metaphor may play distinct narrative roles as a) a deliberate figure of speech on the part of a narrator or character, serving a stylistic role in the narration (the similarity view); as b) a conventional figure of speech forming part of everyday language use (the cognitive view); and as c) "a mode of narration" serving a structural role in a narrative—his example here is the structural metaphorical relationship between James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Homer's *Odyssey* (Steen, 305-306).

Accepting the cognitive view, which highlights how metaphors are part of everyday language use, one may consider *how* common mapping metaphors become embedded in everyday language. In the case of the metaphor "people are plants" one may speculate that it has something to do with Aristotle's influential description of growth as the foremost *psuche* or "defining activity" of plants (Fossheim 49). According to Aristotle, the plant's ability for growth is shared by both animals and humans. Thus, in this sense, people are "like plants"—a view so culturally influential

it has become embedded in conventional language. Cognitive metaphors thus signal a certain outlook or world view.

The roots of "people are plants" as a mapping metaphor presumably dates from pre-Christian times. Myth theorist James Frazer notes that tree worship once was common with many pre-Christian European peoples (83) and while the tendency to think of plants as family or "kin" is evident in several indigenous traditions (Hall), it was also common in European pagan traditions, not least in Old Norse mythology. According to Old Norse myth, as recorded by Snorri Sturluson in *The Prose Edda*, the first humans were created by the sons of Bor (one of which was Odin), who fashioned them from an ash and an elm, giving them "breath and life, intelligence, movement, speech, sight, and hearing. (…) From them came mankind and they were given a home behind Midgard's wall" (18).

The notion in Old Norse myth of "tree as ancestor" was further strengthened since trees were revered as sacred sites and the Yggdrasil Ash was considered the *axis mundi*, uniting nine disparate realms. In Scandinavia, traces of tree worship are still visible in the rural landscape, in the form of giant trees ("tuntrær") located near old farmhouses (Hulmes). It is not incidental, then, that *The Dream of a Tree* opens with an allusion to the creation story of Old Norse myth, foregrounding, from the very outset, the idea that "people are (kin to) plants".

When common metaphors are read as expressions of mythological world views, their associative range extends towards the symbolic. In literature, a symbol is an object or event that "signifies something, or suggests a range of reference, beyond itself" (Abrams and Harpham 358). Abrams distinguishes between *conventional symbols*, the associative range of which are determined by cultural context, and *personal symbols* that may also be conventional but develop a further associative range within the oeuvre of a particular writer (357-358).

In Old Norse myth, trees—and particularly the ash and elm, symbolize human genesis and ancestry and connote, through their relationship to the "first humans", birth, progeny, and fertility. As Michael Ferber points out, the connotations of individual trees in literature usually are quite species specific—but anything that "can grow, 'flourish', bear 'fruit' and die might be likened to a tree," including, "a person, a family, a nation, [or] a cultural tradition" (219). To Norwegians, the ash is a conventional literary symbol, drawing its associative range from famous passages in the *Elder Edda*, which are invoked in the opening scene in *The Dream of a Tree*, when the orphaned Tommy finds a large ash washed up on the beach.

Like trees, seeds are significant in *The Dream of a Tree*, both in the form of the actual seeds in the Svalbard global seed vault and as metaphors for hope and potential growth. While the seed is a cross-cultural symbol for new beginnings, as a conventional symbol its associative range varies with cultural context. In the Bible, "seed" connotes "offspring" or "progeny", whereas in classical literature it tends to mean "race", "lineage'", or "germ", "spark" or "element" (Ferber 184-185). In *The Dream of a Tree*, seeds connote both "offspring", "progeny", "lineage" and "germ", as will become clear. Ferber refers to Socrates' metaphor of seed dispersal for "the

sowing of knowledge", which is also found in the Biblical Parable of the Sower, and in the word "seminar", denoting a place where "a student's mind is implanted with seeds of knowledge" (185). The "seeds of knowledge" Lunde hopes to implant in the reader of her climate quartet is not least an understanding of climate change effects. *The Dream of a Tree* is in this sense a form of literary "seminar", where the actual role of seeds is highlighted and entwined with plant metaphor and the mythological and symbolic connotations of trees and seeds.

While knowledge dissemination of climate change effects is usually offered in a scientific and factual vocabulary, Lunde seeks to reach a wider audience, using literary and figurative language to bring home the human impact of such changes. This translation from fact to fiction is one that concerns Trexler in his discussion of cli-fi. Arguably, the analysis of the treatment of seeds and seed vaults in Lunde's fiction is served by a baseline scientific knowledge of seeds, to help thresh grains of fact from the metaphorical husks of fiction. In *Seeds*, conservation biologist Thor Hanson details how the human diet is thoroughly dependent on different forms of seeds and how plants strategically adapt their seed distribution in myriad creative ways. In the book, Hanson reverses the common metaphor "people are plants", describing seeds as "babies", sent forth from their mother plant with a "packed lunch" (10). He further notes that "A seed contains three basic elements: the embryo of a plant (the baby), a seed coat (the box [for protection]) and some kind of nutritive tissue (the lunch)" (10). Furthermore, he details the ability of seeds to lie dormant, awaiting suitable growth conditions—an ability that is exploited in the construction of seed vaults that seek to harness seed potentialities for future generations. As Hanson metaphorically puts it, "Seed banks act as giant libraries of variations that farmers and plant breeders can turn to when certain crop traits are needed" (100-101). Notably, he stresses that regular germination tests are vital, without which "the seeds in any given sample could wink out before anyone notices" (103). Undertaking regular germination tests is so labor-consuming that "no single facility can handle all that planting" (103)—a point pertinent to the fictional treatment of the global seed vault in *The Dream of a Tree*, as will become clear.

Drawing on the theoretical perspectives outlined above, this analysis of *The Dream of a Tree* centers on three plant-related motifs in Lunde's novel: the tree encountered in the novel's title and prologue, which alludes to the Old Norse creation myth and establishes certain expectations relative to the protagonist, the plot motif of the seed and seed vault and its associative links to the figure of the child, and the motif of hopeful fertility and renewal versus dystopian sterility and decay played out through the adolescent characters of Tommy and Rakel, and through their younger siblings.

Fallen Ash, Missing Elm

In the prologue of *The Dream of a Tree,* which is set in Longyearbyen in 2097, the reader first encounters the five-year old Tommy on the beach, as he discovers an ash that has been washed ashore, its leaves intact. The parallels to Sturluson's rendering of Old Norse creation myth is obvious: Sturluson describes how the sons of

Bor, "walking along the seashore found two trees" that they transformed to the first man and woman, from whom "came mankind" (18). As the one finding the tree, Tommy is allegorically positioned as a "son of Bor". The prologue thus implicitly leaves the reader with the question: will he be able to bring the tree to life, and to sustain the lineage of "mankind"—or foster a "new" (hu)mankind?

The prologue is narrated by a third person, extradiegetic narrator but is partly focalized through Tommy, aligning the reader with his outlook. Still, the perspective oscillates between thoughts that might be attributed to a child his age and information that likely would not be part of the mental framework of a five-year old, such as the information that "Trees washed ashore on Svalbard all the time, giant logs of larch, Norway spruce, and pine, moved by wind and ocean currents, they came here all the way from Siberia" (*Dream* 8).[2] In the opening scene, Tommy picks a branch from the tree, which has nine leaves—likely an allusion to the nine worlds held together by Yggdrasil. He also pats the grey bark, examines the shape of the leaves, and measures the length of the trunk by counting his own steps. While Ferber observes that "In the Bible a tree often stands for a person, usually to distinguish the godly from the ungodly", where a godly man "is like a tree planted by the river of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season" (219), Old Norse myth regards men, whether godly or not, as actual descendants of trees, and thus as "tree-persons", in the sense that they are "kin" of those first two trees, the ash, and the elm. However, the fertility motive holds, as the ash and elm are still expected to "bring forth their (human) fruit." Embracing the tree, Tommy eventually falls asleep. He is woken by five-year-old Rakel, who is likewise excited about the beached tree. When Tommy angrily insists that the tree is *his* tree, a verbal and physical fight ensues, which eventually is broken up by Tommy's grandmother. It is she who identifies the tree as an ash. Tommy's instinctual refusal to share his tree with Rakel reverberates through the story as Tommy and Rakel mature.

A reading of the opening scene in *The Dream of a Tree* as an allusion to the well-known genesis story of Old Norse myth foregrounds the themes of creation and fertility, but also of infertility and demise, since there is only *one* tree, the ash. Against this mythological background, and because the elm is "missing," Tommy's insistence that the ash is *his* tree has a certain justification, given that the ash mythologically stands in for the male part of humanity. Symbolically, then, the "dream of a tree" in the novel's title may be an allusion to the missing female counterpart of the ash. This interpretation is strengthened by considering that the title's "dream of a tree" is in the singular—if the author meant to encourage an ecological reading, then why not dream of a whole forest? While Tommy does not bring the ash to life in the prologue, mirroring the sons of Bor, he is aided by his grandmother in securing its potential rejuvenation when they collect some of its seeds. Thus, the novel's main theme

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[2] «Trær skylte i land på Svalbard hele tiden, store tømmerstokker, lerk, gran, furu, beveget av vind og havstrømmer, de kom hit hele veien fra Sibir» (8).

regarding the importance of seed conservation is implicitly invoked, as is the importance of biodiversity (the missing elm).

Read in light of Old Norse creation myth, several thematic strands emerge in the opening scene that also have a bearing on the unfolding relationship between Tommy and Rakel in the rest of the narrative. From such a perspective, the episode on the beach functions as a foreshadowing of how Tommy and Rakel eventually *fail* to become the "first humans" on Svalbard and thus the "seed-bearers" of a "new" humanity. Both Tommy and Rakel are orphaned and, though they are not related, grow up together under the care of Tommy's grandmother. When the adult population on the island is extinguished in a viral pandemic, they find themselves, as teenagers, the island's sole caretakers. Getting drunk one New Year's Eve at seventeen, Tommy and Rakel have intercourse and Rakel conceives. The conflict and fighting, as established in the prologue, intensifies: Rakel is frightened about giving birth alone and wants to get away from the island, seeking help and comfort from more people, while Tommy prefers to remain isolated on Svalbard, living with Rakel and the children, while guarding the global seed vault. Eventually, Rakel calls for help from the old satellite radio—a call to which Tao and the Chinese scientists respond when Rakel promises them seeds from the vault.

The Child and the Seed as Purveyors of Hope

In the first instalment of Lunde's "climate quartet", *The History of Bees*, Tao, as one of the focalizing characters, loses her only son Wei-Wen to anaphylactic shock as he is stung by a bee. To the remaining population in future Sichuan (Tao's story in *The History of Bees* is set in 2098), this is hopeful news rather than a tragedy since the bee sting signals the return of pollinators long assumed extinct. The event leads to a change in the government's environmental policy, turning to an emphasis on rewilding to further facilitate the revival of local wildlife.

When Tao returns as a focalizer in *The Dream of a Tree*, the reader learns that Wei-Wen has become a cultural symbol in Sichuan: "Because Wei-Wen is the child who changes everything, he is the start of a new time. He represents hope, the good, everything coalesce around him" (81). The link between children and hope is well established in children's literature studies, where an often-cited tenet is that literature aimed at children must not deprive its child readers of hope. As formulated by Monica Hughes: "I may lead a child into the darkness, but I must never turn out the light" (160). Implicitly, childhood is thus considered a "hopeful" state. Hintz and Ostry tie such a view of childhood as "a space sheltered from adult corruption and responsibility" (5), to a Romantic tradition that regards children as "innocent and pure, close to nature and God" (6), and note that the Romantic association of the child with hope for the future, links the figure of the child to utopia (8). The elevation of Wei-Wen to a symbol of hope and ecological renewal ties in with such a Romantic view of the child. However, as Hintz and Ostry also note, real children do not inhabit utopia (6). Readers of Lunde's complete climate quartet know that Wei-Wen's life, as portrayed in *The History of Bees*, had its share of struggles—it is posthumously that he has been turned into a utopian poster child as a state symbol of hope and it is in

The Dream of a Tree that he emerges as such a symbol. Here, Wei-Wen becomes what Johns-Putra terms "a convenient signifier for the future" (7), while the focalization through Tao, via her internal comments, provides a degree of "interrogation" of this symbolic use of her child on the part of the government: Departing for Svalbard, Tao is relieved she will not have to "share her grief in public" during the annual celebration marking Wei-Wen's birthday (*Dream*, 81), since to her he was a "real" boy, rather than a flawless ideal child.

Dixie D. Massey, Margaret Vaughn, and Elfrieda Hiebert define hope as "a sense of optimism for the future" (575). The definition usefully highlights how hope represents a latent positive potential. Consequently, there is but a short associative leap to the common metaphorical link between seeds, shoots, and hope, given that seeds and shoots—as well as human children—are embodiments and carriers of such future potential. In *The Dream of a Tree*, Lunde relies on just such a metaphorical association to link hope with plants: "Hope is bright green, hope is a sprout, but before the sprout comes the seed. […] The seed is the core of hope" (82). In this manner, both the child Wei-Wen, and plants, most prominently in the form of sprouts and seeds, are associated with hope in the story. It is significant then, that the plot in *The Dream of a Tree* mainly revolves around the hoarding and guarding of seeds (latent potential), rather than their distribution and germination (realized potential).

Dystopian Decay and Utopian Promise

When he learns that Rakel has promised the Chinese scientists seeds from the vault, Tommy reacts with anger:

> She had promised to give away the seeds, as if they were a marked commodity, as if this heritage were hers to trifle with in a cheap transaction. Those coming here, those on their way, wanted nothing but to save themselves and their descendants, he knew this, they wanted to use the seeds to destroy wild nature. They put the small love over the large one, they wanted to consume from the vault, waste the treasure. (*Dream* 426)[3]

Here, Tommy feels that Rakel has betrayed the intention of the global seed vault. His violent reaction seems at odds with the original purpose of the vault, which was established to safeguard biodiversity, to help restore it after apocalyptic or climatic events, such as those that mark Tao's future China, where the need for the seeds seems legitimate. On her way to Svalbard, Tao thinks of the seed vault as "the salvation" for Chinese youth: "billowing yellow wheat fields, grain, sweetcorn, rice, soya" (*Dream* 34) and Rakel reminds Tommy that: "We have something up here that belongs to the whole world" (325). Mirroring the episode in the prologue, where he claims the tree just for himself, Tommy replies: "The seeds are only ours now" (325).

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[3] «Hun hadde lovet bort frøene, som om det var en vanlig vare på et marked, som om denne arven var hennes til å skalte og valte med i en billig transaksjon. De som kom hit, de som var på vei, de ville ingenting annet enn å redde seg selv og sine etterkommere, det visste han, de ville bruke frøene til å ødelegge vill natur. De satte den lille kjærligheten over den store, de ville tære på hvelvet, ødsle med skatten» (426).

As Tao and the scientists arrive to search for the seeds, Tommy argues with her: "We never used the seed storage. And that is how it should be for you too. You ought not to need the seeds" (334). When Tao explains that they are trying to restore biodiversity, Tommy notes that "There are only seeds for farming in the vault" (…) "Robust farming is good for humanity, but animals, plants, all the others, do not need your farming" (335). Hence, his view is that the "big love" for nature should trump the "small love" for human survival.

His reluctance to allow anyone access to the vault is inspired by books he has read about Vavilov, who starved to death rather than give anyone access to his seed bank (*Dream*, 312) and by the admonitions of his grandmother, who, when he once asked her why they did not attempt to plant any of the seeds from the vault in their greenhouse, told him that "This is a bank, Tommy, every country owns their seeds. (…) We have promised not to touch them, promised that they are safe here and that we will look after them, because they might need them again someday" (118-119). Thus, contrary to the practice in real seed vaults of safeguarding the seeds by running regular germination tests (Hanson), in *The Dream of a Tree* the seeds in the vault remain frozen assets of uncertain value.

In having Tommy tend the greenhouse while listening to his grandmother's lessons, Lunde applies two mapping metaphors common in adolescent fiction, where growth is often depicted with the metaphor of humans cultivating plants, but also in the form of "the human mind as a container that needs to be filled, (…) as if knowledge is a fluid poured into the empty vessel of the adolescent's empty but awaiting brain" (Trites, "Growth" 66). Filled with the admonitions of his grandmother, Tommy considers it his duty to protect the seed vault, even to his own detriment.

After a week on Svalbard, Tao and the scientists depart: Their search for the vault is unsuccessful, since, preparing for their arrival, Tommy has managed to screen the entrance, thinking he is protecting wild nature against humanity's selfish need for survival. Leaving in haste, as the water ways are about to freeze over, the Chinese travelers take the younger children with them. Tommy and Rakel have mysteriously gone missing. Eventually, it becomes clear that the pregnant Rakel has fallen to her death in a landslide, initiated by Tommy to help conceal the entrance to the seed vault. Rakel is tragically caught by the landslide just as she and Tommy are having a conciliatory conversation where they finally make up, sharing thoughts over the future of their unborn child. Tommy saves himself, but is now alone on the island, a lonely witness to the departing research ship, after hours of trying to locate Rakel beneath the rocks. Symbolically, he has entombed both Rakel and his own progeny or "seed" (Ferber), thus preventing their growth, while keeping them "safe"—much like the seeds in the global seed vault. His refusal to share, both the seeds and Rakel, has rendered them "impotent." This dystopian outcome rests in no small part on the common cultural association of seeds with hope.

In her discussion of growth metaphors in young adult fiction, Trites notes: "Although authors can rewrite the script [of metaphorical growth] with a protagonist who dies, they still cannot escape the overpowering concept in adolescent literature

that adolescent embodiment equals a script of psychological growth ("Literary" 54). With Rakel's death, the physical growth of Tommy's progeny is certainly stifled, as his own offspring is "nipped in the bud". While Tommy for most of the story is the custodian of growing things, including his younger siblings and the family's giant greenhouse, Rakel seems the character more in keeping with a schema common to young adult dystopias in which "The adolescent comes to recognize the faults and weaknesses of his or her society, and rebels against it" (Hintz and Ostry 9), a process involving a perceived loss of innocence, and thus connoting psychological growth. In this sense, Rakel comes across as the more mature of the two, when she insists both that they should leave to reunite with society and that the buried seeds belong "to the whole world." This promise of growth is undercut as Rakel falls to her death, taking their "child in seed" with her. However, it is possible to read Tommy's refusal to open the seed vault as a stoic effort to safeguard biodiversity, given his view that agriculture only serves to support the "small love" of human procreation. He certainly pays a high personal price for this view, as his own kin die.

Rakel's demise, and the departure of the three younger children, which in a young adult novel might have served to move Tommy to comply with the script of psychological growth, here instead underlines the narrative's dystopian bent when the protagonist suffers a mental collapse in the wake of these traumatic events. The departure from the script of growth typical of young adult fiction is what secures the dystopian feel of the story's ending, at least relative to the young adult protagonist. But just as the story has two main focalizes, it also has two alternative endings: Things are looking much brighter for Tao, who, while she departs without the seeds, does have the children.

Seeds of Rewilding

Read against Tao's account of how the Chinese are moving toward rewilding and ecological regeneration, as symbolized by Wei-Wen, Tommy's fear that they will use the seeds only for the benefit of the "small love" is exposed as potentially unwarranted and out of touch with current realities—and this makes his own breakdown and Rakel's demise even more tragic.

While plant shoots and seeds are cross-cultural symbols of growth and fertility, in *The Dream of a Tree* the feeling of hope, and its association with seeds and sprouts, is carried primarily by the Chinese characters. The situation is much less hopeful at Svalbard, where the conservative impulse of the protagonist, both in his personal relationships and in relation to the seed vault, serves to restrain the budding hope inherent in growing things. But, as Kay Sambell points out, while "the narrative closure of the protagonist's final defeat and failure is absolutely crucial to the admonitory impulse of the classic adult dystopia" (165), dystopian writing for young readers tend to end more ambiguously, to preserve "the future possibility, however slim, of a safe space the child protagonists may inhabit" (172).

Such ambiguity is introduced in relation to Tommy's fate in *The Dream of a Tree*, when he, towards the end of the novel, reestablishes radio contact with his

younger brother, Henry, even as he is unable to say anything, thus leaving the outcome open to the reader's interpretation. In the closing chapter, which is focalized through Tao, the utopian direction of the happy ending is less ambiguous, and carried by the metaphorical entanglement of seeds, children, and hope, as Henry, on a forest picknick with Tao, steals away into an idyllic forest glen. There, in a symbol-laden gesture, he scatters a small bagful of seeds that Tommy once bequeathed him—the seeds once collected from the ash found by the five-year-old Tommy.

Thus, for Tao, Henry comes to embody a real future hope that softens the loss of Wei-Wen, just as Henry's bagful of seeds secures a slim hope of biological renewal and, by extension, the potential continuation of humanity; a symbolic arc built from the combined allusions generated by the prologue's fallen ash and the treatment, both actual and metaphorical, of seeds throughout the novel.

Concluding Reflections

In this essay, I have explored the figurative interrelationships between plants and child- and adolescent characters in Lunde's *The Dream of a Tree*, showing how the story has a dystopian strand, tied to its young adult protagonist. The dystopian story arc, which develops through the story—is symbolically underlined by the motif of seeds that are denied their chance to grow—both in the form of the frozen seeds of the seed vault, to which the protagonist refuses others access, and in the form of Tommy's own genetic "seed", carried by Rakel, that literally falls "on rocky ground" and is enshrined, rather than allowed to develop. This literal "abortion" of the hope symbolically and latently invested in both seeds and children, serves to carry forward the dystopian tone of the previous books in Lunde's climate quartet. At the same time, the development of the adolescent protagonist is described employing common growth metaphors, as the "empty vessel" of his mind is filled, both by his grandmother's teachings and his extensive readings in the library, not least of books about Vavilov and his seed vault. Unfortunately, these teachings lead him to forfeit the chance of actual growth both for himself and his unborn child. Thus, cognitive growth metaphors, and the stunting of expected growth, underpins much of the novel's dystopian rhetoric.

The metaphorical association of children with seeds, shoots, and hope is developed more positively through the story's second focalizer, Tao. Her relationship to the hope invested in seeds and children takes a utopian rather than dystopian turn, as both the children, and the plant seeds carried by Henry, find new land in which to thrive, thus contributing to a healing of Tao's long held grief over Wei-Wen. In this manner, Lunde, in the final instalment of her climate quartet, draws on the metaphorical association of hope and growth with the child characters to shift her writing on climate change in a more utopian direction. By employing two focalizers, she manages to combine a dystopian with a utopian narrative trajectory, while drawing on the deep cross-cultural association of seeds with hope—hope that is both dashed, at Svalbard, and sustained, in China.

Relative to the genre of climate fiction, which seeks to combine fiction and fact, it is fair to say that the reader, through Tommy's conversations with his grandmother

in the greenhouse, gains some knowledge of the growth requirements of real plants. Still, the most potent role of plants in the narrative is metaphorical and symbolic, as both the dystopian and more utopian resolutions to the story hinge on the figurative function of seeds and seed vaults—while little heed is paid to the real-life requirements of actual seeds. This finding aligns Lunde's treatment of plants with patterns found in previous studies of plants in literature more generally (Gagliano et al.) and of plants in Nordic cli-fi for young adults (Guanio-Uluru, "Imagining") more specifically.

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Living and Dying as Compost in the Torne Valley Mires

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Abstract

This article takes Donna Haraway's claim that "We are compost" as a literal statement, and considers what might be the consequences of "living and dying well" as compost (97). Combining the work of Haraway with research within Human Plant Studies (HPS) and insights drawn from Indigenous scholars, the article examines a novel for young teens set in the European Arctic as starting point for imagining how to live as compost. In the novel, *Som om jag inte fanns* [As though I wasn't there] by Kerstin Johansson i Backe, a grieving girl, Elina, seeks out her father's spirit in a sphagnum bog. The article draws parallels between Elina's actions and storying activities in the mire and human-moss relationships. These relationships are reflected against Indigenous ways of understanding the meshing of the worlds of the living and dead, as well as the meshing of humans with other living organisms. In doing so, it opens up a richer understand of human-plant relations, but also points out the risks of living as compost.

Keywords: CYA, moss, compost, Sámi children, HPS.

Resumen

Este artículo toma de forma literal la afirmación de Donna Haraway de que "Somos compost", y considera lo que pueden ser las consecuencias de "vivir y morir bien como compost" (97). Combinando el trabajo de Haraway con la investigación de los estudios de los humanos y las plantas (HPS por sus siglas en inglés), y concomimientos tomados de académicos indígenas, el artículo examina una novela para jóvenes adolescentes ambienta en el Ártico europeo como punto de partida para imaginar cómo vivimos como compost. En la novela *Som om jag inte fanns* [Como si no estuviera allí] de Kerstin Johansson i Backe, una chica de luto, Elina, busca el espíritu de su padre en un cenagal musgoso. El trabajo traza paralelismos entre las acciones de Elina y las actividades narradas en el cenagal y las relaciones entre los humanos y el musgo. Estas relaciones se reflejan frente a la manera en que los indígenas entienden las redes tejidas entre los mundos de los vivos y los muertos, así como las redes de los humanos con otros organismos vivos. Al hacerlo, se abre un entendimiento más rico de las relaciones entre humanos y plantas, pero también señalan los riesgos de vivir como compost.

Palabras clave: CYA, musgo, compost, niños samis, HPS.

Introduction

> Critters are at stake in each other in every mixing and turning of the terran compost pile. We are compost, not posthuman; we inhabit the humusities, not the humanities. Critters—human and not—become-with each other, compose and decompose each other, in every scale and register of time and stuff in sympoietic tangling, in ecological evolutionary developmental earthly worlding and unworlding. (Haraway 97)

In *Staying with the Trouble*, Donna Haraway posits that "We are compost", and that each turning of the compost pile causes new entanglements with other forms of life. In doing so, she foregrounds the process of decay in the renewal of life in more-than-human ecologies. Her work is much cited, indicating that she has touched a nerve in our climate crisis dominated world. This nerve network means that we are not alone, even when we feel lonely or alone, and we do not get to act alone either, as all our actions hold implications for the larger umwelt, the meshing of living and dead, and of various forms of life.

In this paper, the particular entanglement that interests me is that of humans, mosses and other living and dying beings in the umwelt of mires in the European Arctic. 'Umwelt'—the German term for 'environment'—was developed by Jakob von Uexküll in the 1920s to highlight how each living organism experiences its surroundings (Favareau 83). Here I use it to acknowledge vegetal experiences of humans meshing with human experiences of the vegetal world. My aim is to use a YA novel—*Som om jag inte fanns* [As though I wasn't there] by Kerstin Johansson i Backe (1978)—as a springboard to think through the implications of living and dying well as compost. The paper begins by combining the work of Haraway, research within Human Plant Studies (HPS) and Indigenous scholars to build a greater sense of the vegetal world of mosses, lichen and mires, and their entangled relationship with humans. I then examine *Som om jag inte fanns* (1978) as a means of tapping into the hive mind of human experience to consider what it might entail to truly live as compost in the context of the mires of the European Arctic.

Envisaging ourselves as compost, demands a recognition that we are all critters heading towards death, and that now is the moment to consider what kind of ancestor we wish to become. At the same time, Haraway suggests, it behoves us to consider our lives in the thick present as meshing with other life forms, including earthworms, microbes, fungi: "the ongoing, snaky, unheroic, tentacular, dreadful ones, the ones which/who craft material-semiotic netbags of little use in trials but of great use in bringing home and sharing the means of living and dying well" (Haraway 43). Living and dying well thus involves engaging with the alien intelligences of plants, fungi and critters other than ourselves. Given the struggles humans face in trying to understand themselves and their fellow humans, this is no small task, and perhaps especially so for adolescents who are beginning to conceptualize the larger world and their place within it for the first time.

Haraway's methodology is storytelling, an activity she ascribes with the capacity to evoke an ethics of care: "Each time a story helps me remember what I

thought I knew, or introduces me to new knowledge, a muscle critical for caring about flourishing gets some aerobic exercise. Such exercise enhances collective thinking and movement in complexity" (Haraway 29). In this paper, I am interested in how *Som om jag inte fanns* exercises the muscles needed to generate empathetic encounters with alien intelligences and with life as compost. In doing so, I am less concerned with understanding the novel better than I am in using it to imagine the implications of living as compost, and as understanding ourselves as future ancestors.

The novel is set on the Swedish side of the Finnish-Swedish border in the valley of the River Tornio ('Torne Valley' in English) in the 1930s. Since 1809, much of the river has formed a border between Finland and Sweden, although the local name— 'väylä' [route]—recalls that it has always been a route, connecting people, plant nutrients and animals. Before the national border was imposed, the Indigenous people of the Arctic—the Sámi—and the local population—the Tornedalians (literally: 'inhabitants of the Torne Valley') moved freely and used their own languages. The imposition of a state border did not result in total restrictions of movement—not least because one can simply walk or ski across the river for half the year—but the imposition of state laws impacted heavily on the local communities especially the Sámi communities and the Tornedalians, who predominantly spoke Meänkieli (a Finnish-Swedish creole with some Sámi influences). The novel is primarily about the imposition of the Swedish-only practices in schools built on the Swedish side of the river: children were punished for using the Sámi languages, Finnish and Meänkieli. *Som om jag inte fanns* depicts this experience.

Although the novel was published in 1978, it remains important due to the National Minority Acts (SFS 2009; 2019) which mandate teaching about Sweden's five national minorities (Jews, Sámi, Romani, Finno-Swedes and Tornedalingar) in schools as part of the work of apology for abuses in the past (Kokkola, Palo & Manderstedt). *Som om jag inte fanns* is one of the few books to depict the language policies that suppressed the use of the national languages available in a format accessible for young readers. It has been made into a film directed by Klas Härö, and is available in English, but the novel has not been translated. The translations here are my own.

In a very different context, Ernestine Schlant has described literature as functioning as a "seismograph of a people's moral positions" (3). Resonating to her observations of how literature reveals social—and in her case, national—beliefs and attitudes that might otherwise remain hidden, I read Johansson i Backe's novel in search of such hidden understandings of plant-human relations. That is, while humankind might not consciously be aware of our feelings towards the vegetal world, literature exposes understandings that have not been fully articulated. Literature also allows me to pose questions that Western science, with its focus on controlling variables, cannot ask. If we wish to understand the umwelt in which humans and vegetal life are entangled, then we must remain firmly planted in the compost pile. However, the compost pile is always evolving, breaking down, rejuvenating. Literature has a fixity that allows for staying in the moment that real-life obscures.

Children's literature typically expresses adult desires, hopes, and concerns about the future, and so often provides fertile ground for imagining new ways of being in the world. However, in this paper, I am uninterested in whether young readers of *Som om jag inte fanns* would be able to imagine human-plant relations in the ways I describe. I am simply interested in tapping into "collective thinking" about human relations to the vegetal world of the mire (Haraway 97). In doing so, I resist Alison Ravencroft's call for a poetics that produces "its effects most powerfully not through the possible, the familiar—the already known, the already believed—but through the improbable or impossible" (355). Instead, I suggest that the novel can be used to explicate the familiar, and to consider what the implications of the familiar are.

Plants are familiar, but the cognitive bias identified by James Wandersee and Elisabeth Schussler over twenty years ago—*plant blindness*—describes the tendency to overlook plants, to fail to recognise that they are living beings or simply regarding them as a backdrop for animal life. The intellectual labour of Indigenous scholars provides powerful tools for overcoming plant blindness and articulating relationships between human critters and other living intelligences (e.g. Kuokkanen). In *Gathering Moss*, Potowatomi scholar, Robin Wall Kimmerer, sets out to tell the mosses' story, explaining that "we learn each other's stories by looking, be watching each other's way of living" noting that mosses' "voices are little heard and we have much to learn from them. They have messages of consequence that need to be heard, the perspectives of species other than our own" (x). One of the child characters in *Som om jag inte fans*—Elina—seems able to hear the voices of the moss and the mire and, in doing so, models ways in which we might live as compost. Both Kimmerer and Elina draw on Indigenous ways of knowing, which entails the conscious awareness of the meshing of living and dead, humans, critters and the vegetal world that Haraway calls for in her explication of the humusities.

Inhabiting the Humusities

Life on earth is dependent on the thin layer of humus feeding and generating the top-layer of soil. It is primarily formed from decaying plant matter, but also animal matter, which is broken down by fungi, microbes, critters and plants to become top-soil. All animal life is dependent on the vegetal matter that inhabits the few centimetres of soil generated by the cycle of producing plant matter (such as leaves) and its decay. This cycle involves multi-species collaboration. Lichen, for instance, produce acids that break down rock to form the first vestiges of soil (Chen, Blume & Beyer). Typically, mosses follow in the lichen's wake, living in the tiny crevices of opportunity created by the lichen (Kimmerer 16-19). These are two of the oldest types of vegetal matter on the planet (La Farge, Williams & England), and they still dominate the landscape of the European Arctic where the land is still rising in recovery from the last ice-age (Veikkolainen). They are broken down by microbes, fungi and earthworms to produce soil in which the higher order plants, such as trees, can survive.

Humans need to develop new relationships with plants if the species is to survive the climate crisis. Plants literally provide the air humans need to breathe. If we continue to perceive plants as servile, as lacking autonomy and desire, as passive in their relations with humans, we will continue our current downward spiral. Changing direction, I suggest, requires more than scientific knowledge of vegetal capacities, it requires imagining ourselves into a new kind of relationship. Ultimately, it involves overcoming plant blindness and recognizing vegetal agency. This is the driving force behind Human-Plant Studies (HPS). HPS is a theoretical disposition which deliberately reverses the assumption of power between humans and plants. It questions what would happen if we "were to consider how plants *act upon* us, contributing to the co-generation of our cultural practices, values, perceptions, relations, artifacts, and all else through their volitions in the *umwelt* of which all living things are part?" (Ryan 104).

One easily observed example of plant volition is the burr. Burrs catch onto a passing creature, and use its movement to disperse seed in a new environment. Other examples include fruits or nuts which encourage an animal to collect and consume it, resulting in the dispersal of seed either by being spat out in new areas (e.g. orange pips) or by passing it through the digestive tract (e.g. tomatoes), allowing the seed to emerge in a nutrient-rich environment. In *The Botany of Desire*, Michael Pollan notes how human cultivation of plants has moved beyond those which provide food (wheat, rice, maize, potato & soya) to those that provide medicine (feverfew, digitalis, & opium poppies), pleasure (marijuana, & tobacco) and beauty (tulips, & Indigofera tinctoria). Lichen and moss precede animal life on earth, and so their designs are not as dependent on animal forms as those of more recent arrivals, but this does not mean that they lack purpose, intent or volition.

Sámi scholar, Rauna Kuokkanen explains that "in order to maintain the balance of the socio-cosmic order, gifts of the land must be actively acknowledged through practices, acts, and ceremonies which express gratitude and which recognize that the land is a living being that cannot be endlessly exploited. This relationship is not a mechanistic exchange; rather, it reflects a way of being in the world predicated on active participation in its processes" (145). Drawing on her Potowatomi heritage, Robin Wall Kimmerer Kimmerer seeks out the purpose of mosses, asking what role they have to play in the "web of reciprocity", the *umwelt* in which plant, mineral and animal matter participate (106-116). Eventually, she recognizes that their gift lies in their great capacity for retaining water. Both living and dead mosses can store water 16-26 times their dry weight within their cells. In the past, Kimmerer posits, wet moss growing in abundance beside water would have been used as a wash-rag to clean babies, and the fluid retaining properties of dried sphagnum moss made it valuable as diapers and menstrual protection. Such actions situate moss in a relationship that results in the plant receiving nutrient rich bodily fluids in exchange. In practice, the kinds of moss (and lichen) that are most easily dried and stored (such as sphagnum and reindeer moss) cannot cope with such rich nutrients, but this means that they

would break down and the result would be a rich compost that can feed the higher order plants such as trees.

Lacking a connection to Indigenous roots, I struggle with Kimmerer's explanation. Given that mosses and lichens can trace their ancestry back to a pre-human world, I would rather see humans as late-comers to the moss party and consider moss in their relation to the *umwelt* in which they first emerged. I find the story of how mosses gave us the gifts of mires that produce oxygen exercises my muscles of caring more effectively than their later gifts. I recognise that we have reason to give thanks to the mosses, but remain unclear as to what humans should offer in reciprocity. Kuokkanen responds to such concerns by noting that "In this system, one does not give primarily in order to receive but rather to ensure that balance of the world on which the well-being of the entire social order is contingent" (33). That is, the gifts humans bring are based on thankfulness not expectations.

Mires are formed when a wet area—such as the shallow lakes formed from melting snow or glaciers—become filled with plants, most commonly sphagnum mosses which, as Kimmerer explains, create their own ecosystem.

> There is no ecosystem on earth where mosses achieve greater prominence than in a *Sphagnum* bog. There is more living carbon in *Sphagnum* moss than in any other single genus on the planet. In terrestrial habitats, mosses are overshadowed by the vascular plants and assume relatively minor roles. But in bogs they are supreme. *Sphagnum* or peat mosses not only flourish in bogs, they create them. (Kimmerer 118)

The miraculous water retaining properties of living and dead sphagnum mosses generates a spongy mat over the surface of the lake. The dead cells below wick the nutrient rich waters up to the surface. Mosses need light in order to photosynthesize, so the living cells of the sphagnum grow over the top of the dead cells. The density of plants growing in a mire is such that they form highly effective carbon sinks, and are thus essential for addressing the climate crisis and promoting human chances of survival. The lack of human reciprocity in this relationship is startling.

Kimmerer explains that, in death, mosses decompose to form peat, which provides one of the habitats needed for the vascular plants. Although acidic, peat is slightly less acidic than the mire itself, and can support shrubs and ferns. However, the level of acidity deters many larger plants from making use of the environment. Kimmerer also explains how the great water retaining capacities of sphagnum leave the soil saturated. The roots of large trees require air, and need soil that has space for air between the particles. By filling those spaces with water, the moss prevents large trees from taking root, and so the mire remains open and sunny, allowing the living cells to photosynthesize. The small trees that do grow (some types of birch and pine, occasionally willow) remain stunted in comparison with trees growing in aeriated soil with a neutral pH. Their canopies have little impact on the light available for the moss. As these stunted trees decay, they too are absorbed into the peat. However, leaf-mould from the deciduous trees and the trunks will gradually aeriate the soil making it suitable for forests to emerge (Ediculture). Trees growing in a mire thus contribute to the web of reciprocity by being good ancestors to the larger trees that will follow.

The Indigenous peoples of the European Arctic—the Sámi—understand all lands, including rock formations, as living. It takes an act of wilful ignorance—plant blindness—for anyone not to recognise that the mires are living. Navigating in this landscape requires a person to distinguish where the spongy mat of living mosses is strong enough to bear their weight from weaker areas that will cause the person to sink. The decaying process is such that spongy mosses may extend down for many meters. Since one cannot see where the bedrock lies, stepping off the peat onto the living mosses is like stepping onto a raft supported by water. And just as one cannot push down on water to lift oneself up, one cannot push down on a mire to lift oneself. Kicking one's legs is likely to cause one to sink. Instead, one must spread one's weight over the surface, ideally using a rooted plant for support. In short, humans need to understand the vegetation in order to move safely. Understood from a vegetal perspective, plants determine who sinks and who is held up or supported in their attempt to escape.

In real life, the edges between the areas that are strong enough to hold a human weight and the areas where one will sink tend to be gradual so that one gets a warning in the form of a boot-full of water before reaching the dangerous areas. In literature, the edges are more dramatic and there are numerous portrayals of people becoming trapped in the mires. The contrast between the realities of a boot-full of water and the literary life-and death struggle for survival imply that the "collective thinking" about the mires and mosses is that they are threatening (Haraway 97). This fear is storied into portrayals of this environment. However, Elina's engagements with the mire in *Som om jag inte fanns* depicts reciprocity with the land that is primarily loving.

Educating Elina: When Worlds Collide

Som om jag inte fanns is primarily concerned with the Swedish state's endeavours to suppress the local languages spoken in the Torne Valley. I am deliberately over-looking this entirely human-centric, logocentric tension to focus attention on human-plant relations. One of the main child characters, Elina, spends time in the mire because she feels a connection to the spirit of her dead father there. When her teacher starts to behave as though she were not there (the title of the novel), Elina runs away to the mire. Normally, Elina is very agile in the mire and can jump from tuft to tuft, finding her way safely. When she runs away from school, however, she is lured into the dangerous parts of the mire and becomes trapped. The climax of novel involves Elina being rescued, and receiving an apology from the teacher.

Although Elina is portrayed as having Meänkieli as her home language, because her mother's family come from the Finnish side of the border, a careful reading of the text concerning Elina's father indicates that he was Sámi. More specifically, he appears to have been one of the Sámi who lost their rights in the 1928 Reindeer Herding Act, in which the Swedish state limited Sámi heritage to those who owned reindeer. Those employed in other ways lost their rights to the very minimal

protection offered by the state. Elina is described as having dark hair like her father. More importantly for my discussion, Elina's connection to the mire resonates with Sámi worlding practices, especially her respect for all living organisms' selfhood. She recognizes the plants of the mire as having autonomy and intention.

The novel begins with Elina creeping towards the mire as quietly as she can: "It wasn't as easy today as it had been. The frost had made the grass stiff, and it rustled gently. It was important not to frighten the invisible ones away" (Johansson i Backe 5).[1] The "invisible ones" are part of Sámi conception of the world, which acknowledges the continuing presence of the ancestors, as well as the proximity of Sáiva, the spirit world. They appear in another novel by Johansson i Backe: *De Osynliga* (1979). Thomas DuBois (2023) cites the first account of these spirits written by a Sámi—Johan Turi (1854-1936)—in a Sámi language to show that, although acceptance of the presence of spirits is widespread, only certain people, *noaidi* (shaman), are able to see them regularly. However, there are many stories of one-off encounters between the Sámi and spirits of the dead, commonly ancestors. DuBois also cites Turi as commenting that "innocent animals" can also see spirits (which is why the presence of spirits is often recognised through restlessness among dogs or reindeer) (DuBois 4). Elina is not presented as a *noaidi,* but her 'innocent' games in the mire are closely connected to her ability to sense the spirits of both the dead (her father's spirit) and the living (the plants).

In Sámi worlding, there is a constant meshing of the worlds, but sometimes—for instance, in the northern lights—the boundaries between the worlds are more permeable. This proximity of the spirit worlds is celebrated in two recent picturebooks for Sámi children by Elin Marakatt and Anita Midbjer. In *Lilli, Áijá ja guoksagis* [Lilli, Grandfather and the Northern Lights], Lilli's deceased grandmother appears as a presence within the Northern lights. In the sequel, *Lilli, Lávre ja Sáivoálbmot* [Lilli, Lávre and the Saivo folk], Lilli's little brother, Lávre gets his boot stuck in the mire and is carried to safety by a bird who shows him the Sáivo world. Spirits of close ancestors often take the form of birds (DuBois 10-11). There are many stories of the *uldat* (the invisible ones) entering the human realm, typically a young *ulda* woman who marries a Sámi man (Conrad). In *Som om jag inte fanns,* Elina is depicted as loving magical stories: her sister, Irma, borrows a book of fairy tales for her and Elina learns to read in Swedish by reading these stories. In the mire, however, her storying takes another turn.

Elina comes to the mire to deal with her bereavement; she feels the presence of her father's spirit there. As Kuokkanen explains, for the Sámi, the land is "often addressed directly, as if they were relatives. This close connection to the natural realm is evident also in the permeable and indeterminate boundaries between the human and natural worlds" (33). When Elina visits the mire with her father's spirit in mind, she generates stories about all the living spirits she senses there. In addition to

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[1] "Det var inte lika lätt i dag som förut. Frosten hade gjort gräset styvt och det frasade svagt. Det var nödvändigt att inte skrämma bort de osynliga" (All translations from the novel are mine).

her father's spirit, she senses the presence of a cow that wandered into the mire and never returned, moving waters, and also several plants including a birch and fern, all of whom have personal names. She creates stories in which 'Blossoming Birch' and 'Troll Fern' become her companions, and 'Evil Lure' and 'Wicked Snake' form the antagonists. Elina is also renamed as Solveig in the mire. Johansson i Backe makes no attempt to use Finnish or Sámi names. The choice of 'Solveig'—a Norse name—suggests a desire to become part of the Swedish speaking world. One of the meanings of 'Solveig' is 'daughter of the sun', which aligns well with the idea of the idea that the sun is a father figure to the Sámi, as expressed in the award winning poetry, *Beaivi, Áhčážan* [The Sun, My Father] (1991) by Nils-Aslak Valkeapää. Unlike the plant spirits, the father spirit has no bodily form, but Elina's renaming may be part of seeking a connection to him as sunlight.

> Of course, Elina knew that life on the mire was a game. But she also knew that it was more real than her life at school and at home. On the mire then she was herself. Although her name was Solveig there, she was herself. That's where she lived. Understood how everything was. Within her game was the truth. If she didn't have the mire, she would be nobody at all. (Johansson i Backe, 42)[2]

In Elina's imagination, the birch and fern are companions, and she orients herself towards the "Papa-place which was dry and smooth with the softest moss" (Johansson i Backe 7). [3] In short, the plants are recognised as having their own spirits, and her friendships with these spirits are "riktigare" [more real] than her relationships with her living family members and human community in the school (Johansson i Backe 42).

The meshing between the worlds of the living and the dead in the Sámi perception—as in the Midber's illustrations of the Lilli books—comes very close to the reality of the Sphagnum mosses' way of being. Kimmerer describes the way living and dead cells intermesh in the plant's cells as follows:

> The asymmetric ration of 1:20 between living and dead cells in a single plant in mirror in the structure of the entire bog. Most of the bog is dead, unseen. A *Sphagnum* bog is made of two levels, the deep dead peat and the thin surface of living mosses. … the dead cells wicking water up from the depths, carrying it to the living layer above. (Kimmerer 120-121)

The 'dead' cells are the source of life for the sphagnum, just as our dead ancestors are the source of our own lives. Kimmerer's description of the healthy working relationship between the living and the dead cells of the Sphagnum bog is analogous to the healthy relationship between the living and dead ancestors in the Sámi world view.

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[2] "Nog visste Elina att livet på myren var en lek. Men hon visste också att det var riktigare än livet där i skolan och hemma. På myren då var hon sig själv. Fast hon hette Solveig där, så var hon sig själv. Det var där hon levde. Förstod hur allting var. Inne i hennes lek fanns det sanna. Om hon inte hade myren skulle hon vara ingen alls. "

[3] "pappa-platsen som var torr och len med mjukaste mossa."

Ove Kåven (2019) opens up the qualities of relations between the living and the dead in a blog post in which he describes the spirit of a deceased ancestor reaching out to him. The ancestor in question—Johan Kaaven—had considerable power which came to him from the spirit world. Not all his powers were good, and the spirit was troubled. Kåven, who was highly sceptical about the existence of the spirit worlds prior to his encounter with his forefather describes the combination of burden and gift that comes from accepting the legacy: "Whoever receives these powers will also receive an enormous burden; not only must he handle the responsibilities and risks of the powers themselves, but also the weight of the sins of their previous owner" (n.p.). Elina's father is not portrayed as having powers or sins like Johan Kaaven, but she is taking on more adult responsibilities in his absence. As the eldest child, she is expected to take on many duties in the home—preparing meals, harvesting potatoes, cleaning, and caring for her three younger siblings—tasks that were her mother's until her father's death. While Elina's mother endeavours to earn money to make up for the loss of her husband's income, Elina takes over from her mother while trying to keep up with her schoolwork in another language. Connecting so closely with the spirit of her father prevents her from living well in the "thick present" (Haraway 1). She cuts herself off from the world of living humans, reorganizing her routines and psychic space to come into closer contact with the vegetal world. In this way, I suggest, she lives her life as compost.

Living as Compost

Elina's capacity for living-as-compost results in actions that directly nurture the mire, thereby participating in the web of reciprocity, not merely taking but also giving in her relationship to the living, breathing land. On her journey to the mire at the beginning of the story, Elina looks at the autumnal leaves on the ground and espies a particularly beautiful one.

> She picked up a large golden leaf and carried it with her. Elina looked at the sensitive nerves. Leaves are more beautiful than people, she thought. It was perfect and well formed. The leaf could have a home in the mire. Perhaps it would yearn for its own tree, but it had already fallen to the ground. It would never return to its own branch. But out on the, no, within the mire it could be. Become one with the mire. Rest under the blanket of snow all winter. Become one with the soil. Merge. She would put it next to the Papa-place. His spirit would rejoice. (Johansson i Backe 5)[4]

Note how the description of the leaf positions it as compost: it has been part of the lived world of its tree, but now its purpose is to become one with the mire and, in doing so, feed the next generation of plants. This understanding connects all living

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[4] "Hon tog upp ett stort guldgult blad och bar det med sig. Elina tittade på de känsliga nerverna. Löv är vackrare än människor, tänkte hon. Så ordentligt och fint tecknad det var. Lövet skulle få bo på myren. Det skulle Kanske längta till sitt eget träd, men det hade ju redan fallit till marken. Upp till sin egen gren kunde det aldrig komma. Men ute, nej inne i myren skulle det få vara. Bli ett med myren. Få vila under snötäcket hela vintern. Få multna. Sammansmältas. Hon skulle lägga det bredvid pappa-platsen. Hans ande skulle glädjas. "

things and acknowledges a sense of purpose. Living and dead are not separate, but rather parts of the assemblage associated with that place. Elina is bringing the gift of food to the mire.

Elina brings the leaf to the "Papa-place" where she feels the strongest connection to her father's spirit. She then engages in a narrative in which she acknowledges the presence of Onda Loran (Evil Lure): "Evil Lure had his abode in the Dangerous. The Bottomless" (Johansson i Backe 9).[5] Unlike the plant actors in the mire, Onda Loran lacks a definable body. Like them, he takes a human pronoun— 'he'—not the non-human pronoun, 'it'. Onda Loran's formlessness suggests that he is not an individual plant, but rather some kind of spirit, perhaps the collective spirit of the mire. He functions as a force that tempts living creatures—such as a cow belonging to Elina's neighbour—into the Bottomless. Within the mire, Onda Luran steals milk from the cow (called White Lily in Elina's world), and gives it to Wicked Snake: a narrative that connects Elina's world of the mire with the Biblical teachings she receives in school and in her community. At the end of the scene, the leaf shines brightly to show her father's appreciation, which supports the idea that she senses her father's spirit in the sunlight.

> "I'll help you out, White Lily", whispered Elina...
>
> Elina laid the small branch mat over the black ant hole. Wedged it under the soft tufts of grass.
>
> "That's better", she said and jumped nimbly backwards. She felt the tufts sway beneath her. Quickly, she fled to the Papa-place which felt safe. The golden yellow leaf shone brightly. Papa's spirit had liked it. (Johansson i Backe 9)[6]

In Elina's mire world, the cow feeds the waters with its milk. In reality, the decomposing body of the cow is slowly being released into waters of the mire. The mire is positioned as predatory—it *lures* Elina and the cow. At the same time, Elina and the cow are positioned as becoming the compost that nurtures the mire.

Elina's actions (as Solveig) in this scene involve providing vegetal matter that feeds the compost in the form of a leaf and by weaving a small mat of twigs which she places over an ant-hole. The twig weaving is intended to help the cow's spirit escape, while its body feeds the mire. Such a construction would not prevent ants from moving, but it does suggest that she regards the ants as moving between the lands of the dead and the lands of the living, between the spirit world and the world in which she lives as a becoming ancestor. Ants would be unlikely to welcome a structure like a woven mat of twigs, but they might well recycle such matter to produce their own architecture.

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[5] "Onda Loran hade sitt tillhåll vid det farliga. Det Bottenlösa."

[6] "- Jag ska nog hjälpa dig ut, Vita Lilja, viskade Elina...
Elina la den lilla grenmattan över det sura svarta myrhålet. Kilade fast den under de mjuka grästuvorna.
- Nu så, sa hon och hoppade kvickt bakåt. Kände hur tuvornas toppar gungade under henne. Flydde raskt till pappa-platsen som kändes trygg. Det guldgula lövet lyste grant. Pappas ande hade gillat det."

Ants play a vital role in the production of forests, breaking down vegetal and animal matter to produce environments in which fungi, bacteria, mosses and lichen can produce the compost which sustains life on the planet (Cross). Their nests are built by burrowing into the ground, as well as by collecting debris from the forest, much of which they masticate to create their own architecture. They avoid wetlands which would flood the foundations of the anthill. In terms of a realistic portrayal of Arctic mires, the anthill in Elina's mire does not fit. The presence of the plant characters Blommande Björken [Blossoming Birch] and Troll-Feren [Troll-Fern] and—to an even greater extent—an anthill indicate that the Papa-place is a small island where the soil is deep enough to support humans and remain dry.

If we try to make sense of Elina's actions as an expression of human relations with the mire, it indicates that the Papa-place is effectively an island of solid soil matter that can be reached by jumping tuft to tuft across the wetter areas. "You had to know how to jump between the tufts correctly. Light and soft. If you fell between the tufts, you were dead" (Johansson i Backe 9).[7] Reaching the Papa-place involves risking death. Arrival indicates sanctuary. The boundaries between the two worlds are not absolute.

Readers are told that visitors only come to the mire to pick cloudberries. Cloudberries grow in the loose, damp soil on the edges of mires. The ground around a cloudberry is rarely strong enough to fully support an adult, so one must wear long boots when picking them. Equally, they do not grow in the wettest areas, so the risk of becoming dangerously trapped beside cloudberries is minimal. The visitors do not jump between the tufts, and they do not offer anything to the mire. They regard it as a place to exploit for its riches (cloudberries), and regard the Papa-place simply as a suitable site for a picnic.

> The mire was her place. All her own. Except for a week or so when the cloudberries were ripe. A few berry pickers would sometimes come then. But they did not understand the mire. They just picked the berries. … [They didn't see] the Papa-place which was dry and smooth with the softest moss. They just thought the Papa-place was a good place to eat their packed lunches. When the strangers came, then the invisible ones stayed away. (Johansson i Backe 7)[8]

Cloudberries contain seeds that pass through the digestive tract, so in this way the visitors might be considered as becoming compost. However, unlike other animals who eat the berries, humans are unlikely to leave the seeds in a place that is suitable for the plant to germinate. Cloudberries can also disseminate by growing from the root, but this does not allow them to colonise new areas. The visitors do not live as compost or engage in reciprocal gift-giving: they take resources, but do not feed the mire.

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[7] "Det gällde att hoppa rätt på tuvorna. Lätt och mjukt. Kom man emellan tuvorna var man Dödens."
[8] "Myren var hennes plats. Alldeles hennes egen. Utom någon vecka då hjortronen var mogna. Då kunde det ibland komma några bärplockare. Men de förstod sig inte på myren. De plockade bara bären … [De såg inte] pappa-platsen som var torr och len med mjukaste mossa. De trodde bara att pappa-platsen var ett bra ställe att äta matsäcken på. När de främmande kom, då höll sig de osynliga undan. "

Meshing the Worlds of the Living and the Dead

The Papa-place is generated from the meshing of living and dead worlds of the mire, but rises above the waters to form a haven for humans, ants and vascular plants. However, living as compost entails certain risks. In the main narrative, Elina is treated as though she doesn't exist by her teacher (hence the title of the novel). Effectively, the teacher treats her as though she were dead. She finds this so distressing, that she leaves school and runs to the mire in search of solace. She briefly encounters her former teacher, Einar and his wife, Yvonne, who are out picking mushrooms. Yvonne is surprised that the locals don't pick mushrooms, which helps her realise that Elina has no logical reason for being out in the mire. (This is botanically nonsensical: edible mushrooms do not grow in mires. But it serves the plot to have a vegetally-aware character notice the threat to Elina's life.) She and Einar discover that Elina has fallen into the mire and is drowning. Einar holds her afloat while Yvonne runs for help. While they are waiting, Elina explains how she came to be trapped in the mire to Einar: "I was tricked by the Troll-Fern. And by the papa spirit. They are out here on the mire. I'm usually here. They were the ones who wanted me to come" (Johansson i Backe 125).[9]

From the sphagnum moss' point a view, a human stepping over their surface assists the breakdown of dead matter, but it also damages the living plant cells. Moss is not generally considered as one of the carnivorous plants, but it feeds on nutrients which can be found in both plant and animal life, albeit very slowly.

> A side effect of the slow decomposition is that minerals bound up in living things are not easily recycled in a bog. They persist in peat as complex organic molecules that most plants can't absorb. … Nitrogen is in especially short supply, but some bog plants have evolved special adaptations to deal with this limitation: eating bugs. Bogs are the exclusive homes for insectivorous plants like sundews, pitcher plants, and Venus flytraps. (Kimmerer 120)

If a nutrient rich human falls into the mire and starts damaging the food supply, is it not reasonable from the plants' perspectives to regard them as an alternative source of food?

Kimmerer notes that most bog plants cannot absorb minerals easily. However, the spirits that lure Elina into becoming compost fodder belong to the fern and to her father: the plants of the island that is emerging from the bog. Many plants—such a grass and evergreens—benefit from fertilizers such as bone-meal and blood. Ferns dislike high levels of nitrogen, but slowly decomposing animal-matter in a bog provides an excellent source of food. The Papa-place is home to Blossoming Birch, a tree that benefits from the phosphorus found in bone meal. However, Elina claims that she was tricked, which suggests that she is not willing to become part of the mire permanently. She resolutely clings to Einar, and to life refusing to become part of the mire.

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[9] "Jag blev lurad av Troll-Feren. Och av papa-anden. De finns här ute på myren. Jag brukar vara här. Det var de som ville att jag skulle komma."

In the assemblage described in *Som om jag inte fanns*, the sphagnum's water retention has generated an ecosystem in which it can thrive by making use of its extraordinary capacity for retaining water, even in death. When it finally decays, it produces peat. Unlike mosses, the higher order plants like the birch and fern use roots to draw moisture from the soil. They cannot take root in the waterlogged areas where the living mosses are abundant, but they can take root when the mosses decay to the point that the soil contains air. The plants growing in these tufts and islands make use of the slow leeching properties of the bog, as they feed on the slowly decaying plant and animal matter. Elina brings plant matter that helps the Papa-place reduce its acidity and fosters the growth of rooted plants. But, by staying so close to her father, Elina is unable to plant roots that connect her to the living world of her mother and siblings. She becomes part of the compost, only held back by a teacher who recognises her value in the human world.

Concluding Remarks: Imagining Life as Compost

Children's literature set in the Arctic has a long tradition of celebrating children's close connection with 'nature', typically expressed as some generalised whole that encompasses landscape, seasonal change, animal and bird life, rarely paying attention to the specificities of such encounters, unless it is to dominate (e.g. lassoing reindeer). Plants have mostly been treated as passive elements of the setting and/or as symbolic reflections on what is happening in the lives of the child characters. Sámi children have largely been exoticized, their ethnic heritage reduced to traditional clothing, reindeer herding, fishing and music (Conrad). *Som om jag inte fanns,* avoids such simplifications.

Elina embraces the individual plants she knows in the mire as autonomous beings who live their own lives. Each time she arrives at the Papa-place, the plants and the spirit of her father tell her what has happened during her absence. She contributes to the formation of soil in which rooted plants can survive by bringing decaying vegetal matter. She knows how to navigate jumping lightly on the tufts of grass growing on mounds of dead plant matter across the waterlogged sphagnum. She recognises the presence of dead matter—her father, the cow, leaves—as parts of world in which she lives.

Elina knows that the stories she tells herself on the mire are unreal on one level, but they fill her needs more readily than her life at school or at home. Her storytelling activities mediate the alterity of the mire, recognises its intelligence. In *Radical Botany. Plants and Speculative Fiction,* Meeker and Szabari propose that plants "compel us to imagine an ingeniously animated and animating matter that we are never able to observe in all its operations" (2). Like Haraway, who suggests storying, Meeker and Szabari present the kinds of storying activities in which Elina engages as a means of mediating a profoundly different form of intelligence.

> The fact that our relationship to plants is of necessity highly mediated (even as they remain co-participants with us in the assemblages of life) and that our attempts to

> understand them as analogous to us are regularly unsuccessful means that plants inspire speculative activity in our efforts to think with them. (Meeker and Szabari 16)

Living as compost—which Elina models—brings with it the responsibility for nurturing relationships with plant lives, and a recognition that we are future ancestors. However, the novel also warns readers that Elina's endeavours to think with the plants on the mire leads her to risk her life. Unlike the sphagnum, we cannot directly feed on our ancestors, and such direct, reciprocal relations are dangerous. Understanding the sphagnum's incorporation of dead matter into living matter as directly analogous to Sámi understandings of the meshing of the worlds of the living and the dead is one way of thinking with the moss. In the story context, acting upon this belief endangers Elina's life. However, as a speculative activity, it opens up a new way of engaging with vegetal intelligences.

By storying with plants and with her ancestors, Elina addresses her bereavement, and regains her sense of selfhood after it has been questioned by her teacher. Up until the point she offers herself as fodder for the mire to feed upon, the relationship is nurturing and reciprocal. Elina, the individual plants and waters of the mire, and her father's spirit "become with each other, compose and decompose each other, in every scale and register of time and stuff" in an "earthly worlding and unworlding" in which all participants have a purposeful role (Haraway 97). Ultimately, the speculative activity of thinking with plants breaks down, becoming part of the storying compost from which we can build new relations with the vegetal world.

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Unlikely Friends in Patriarchal Lands:
An Ecofeminist Reading of Rajasthani Folktale "Sonal Bai"

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Abstract

"Sonal Bai" is a popular folktale about a girl told by women in Rajasthani-speaking areas of north India to initiate young girls into adulthood. This paper investigates the metaphorical representation of a girl's coming of age through her relationship with a Sandalwood tree analysing, "Sonal Bai" as an ecofeminist text. The story renders voice to socially prohibited themes of menstruation and women's sensual desire as embodied in silent friendship between a sandalwood tree and Sonal (girl with golden hair). The paper highlights how the outwardly simple tale of "Sonal Bai" is in fact an encoded lesson for teenage girls, inverted as a relationship between two highly treasured "belongings"/ "commodities"—sandalwood and a unmarried girl—in a patriarchal society economically dependent on agriculture. The sandalwood tree is highly valuable for farmers; different parts of the tree are used to produce furniture, oil, fragrance and food items. It is also a part of religious rituals where its essence is used as *tilak* on idols in Hindu traditions. Rajasthani Language is spoken prominently in the desert regions of India (Thar Desert) and the existence of such a tree in a desert is as precious and rare as a girl with golden hair. The paper draws reference from recurrent invocation of olfactory senses of the listeners captured by the images of the sandalwood tree in the story. It also explores use of growth metaphors using 'rhizome' like imagery of sandalwood branches reaching the sky which become an escape route for a teenage girl hiding from her family. The temporal and spatial indicators are infused together in the story of Sonal Bai leading to an unlikely friendship between two prized possessions that eventually breaks with the arrival of a patriarchal archetype: a handsome young prince. This study discusses the prevalent *katha* culture in India where women exercise freedom of voice through singing and narrating tales within all-female groups. This site of independent feminine interaction in a highly patriarchal society is investigated using Bakhtin's "Chronotope" to highlight culturally encoded lessons in folktales meant for young girls in Indian society as a means of informal education.

Keywords: Chronotope, folktale, ecofeminist.

Resumen

"Sonal Bai" es un cuento popular sobre una niña que las hablantes de rayastani del norte de la India cuentan a las niñas que van a convertirse en mujeres. Este artículo investiga la representación metafórica de la llegada a la adultez de una niña por medio de su relación con un árbol de sándalo analizando "Sonal Bai" como un texto ecofeminista. La historia da voz a temas socialmente prohibidos como la menstruación y el deseo sensual de las mujeres por medio de la amistad silenciosa entre el árbol y Sonal (la niña con cabello dorado). El artículo destaca cómo el aparentemente sencillo cuento de "Sonal Bai" es de hecho una lección codificada para chicas adolescentes, invertido como una relación entre dos "pertenencias" / "mercancías" muy valiosas—sándalo y una chica soltera—en una sociedad patriarcal que depende económicamente de la agricultura. El árbol de sándalo es muy valioso para los granjeros ya que diferentes partes de éste se usan para fabricar muebles, fragancias y alimentos.

También es parte de rituales religiosos en los que su esencia se usa como *tilak* en ídolos de las tradiciones hindúes. El idioma rayastani se habla principalmente en las regiones desérticas de la Inida (desierto de Thar) y la existencia de tal árbol en el desierto es tan preciada y rara como una niña de cabello dorado. El trabajo toma referencias de la invocación recurrente de los sentidos olfativos de la audiencia capturada en las imágenes del árbol de sándalo en la historia. También explora las metáforas del crecimiento usando imágenes rizomáticas de las ramas del sándalo elevándose hacia el cielo, convirtiéndose en una ruta de escape para la joven que se esconde de su familia. Los indicadores temporales y espaciales se infusionan juntos en el relato llevando a una amistad improbable entre dos posesiones preciadas que al final se rompe con la llegada del arquetipo patriarcal: un joven y guapo príncipe. Este estudio discute la cultura *katha* de la India en la que las mujeres ejercen su libertad de expresión a través de canciones y de relatos dentro de grupos formados sólo por mujeres. Este espacio de interacción femenina independiente en una sociedad altamente patriarcal se investiga utilizando el concepto de cronotopo de Bakhtin para enfatizar las lecciones culturales codificadas en los cuentos destinados a las jóvenes indias como un medio de educación informal.

Palabras clave: Cronotopo, cuento, ecofeminista.

'Sonal Bai' is a popular folktale about a girl told by women in Rajasthani-speaking areas of north India to initiate young girls into adulthood. This article investigates, through interpretive commentary, the metaphorical representation of a girl's coming of age through her relationship with a Sandalwood Tree analysing, 'Sonal Bai' as an eco-feminist text. The story renders voice to socially prohibited themes of menstruation and women's sensual desire as embodied in silent friendship between the sandalwood tree and Sonal (girl with golden hair).

Extended Summary of "Sonal Bai"[1]

In a village there lived a farmer whose daughter was very beautiful. She was called Sonal Bai because her hair was made of pure gold. Her mother was very particular about the daughter's hair. Each day when Sonal went bathing in the lake, her mother would count her hair before and after she came back. One day, when Sonal's mother was counting her hair after Sonal returned from the lake, she realized that she had one hair less, and, no matter how many times she counted, the missing hair remained missing. She scolded Sonal with harsh words and told her that she was no longer a small child, and she should not be so careless. She should grow up and stop acting childish. Sonal was very sensitive and when her mother talked with such rage she could not stop sobbing and crying.

Sonal left her house and climbed up a Sandalwood tree that was growing nearby. She was so heartbroken that she hugged the Sandalwood tree and asked it to grow taller. When Sonal's teardrop fell on the branch of the tree, the Sandalwood tree started growing taller. After some time, Sonal's family realized that she was not in the house, and they started searching for her. Finally, reaching the tree, they saw

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[1] The Summary was written after reading the three versions available; Rajasthani (Original), Hindi and English translations. The English translation by Vishes Kothari is especially helpful for its adept cultural translation.

Sonal sitting on one of its branches. She was sat so high that they were only able to see her by craning their necks.

One by one, Sonal's friends and family members tried to convince her to climb down. Her mother promised to never scold her ever again, but no matter how much her friends danced the *Ghoomar*[2] and sang to appease her, Sonal was unmoved. Each time they finished their song she would ask the tree to grow taller. Finally, her little nephew started to request her to come down. Sonal was especially attached to her nephew. She was unable to ignore his pleas. She requested Sandalwood tree to bend. When she was close enough to climb down from the tree; she picked her nephew up and sat back on a branch asking the tree to grow taller again. No matter how much her family and friends tried to appease her Sonal sat in the tree with her nephew and refused to come down. Each day Sonal's sister-in-law would come with a golden bowl full of *churma*[3] and a golden pot full of water. She would implore Sonal sweetly to eat and drink. Sonal would ask the tree to bend down, and then she would collect the food and drink and climb back up again. She would first offer it to her nephew and then she would eat after him.

Many days passed in the same way. One fine day, a Prince's wedding procession halted under the Sandalwood tree to rest. They were hungry and thirsty. Looking down from the tree, Sonal's heart melted when she saw the procession. She dropped a morsel of *churma.* When the morsel touched the ground, it became a large amount, enough to satisfy everybody's hunger. She then let fall a drop of water which turned into a whole pond of sweet fresh water when it touched the ground.

The people were puzzled at the food and drink that appeared by magic. The prince instructed men to climb and investigate. They were unable to find anybody despite checking thoroughly. The prince was not satisfied and decided to climb and check for himself. He searched behind every leaf and branch. When the prince reached the top of the tree, he found Sonal Bai and her nephew sitting behind two leafy boughs. The prince was startled by the beautiful girl with golden hair sitting atop the tree. He asked her whether she was a fairy or a demonness. Sonal Bai blushed and answered that she was neither, she was just a girl upset with her mother and hiding in the tree with her nephew. The prince was infatuated by her sweet voice and beauty. He urged Sonal to marry him and come to his palace with him. Sonal agreed on the condition that her nephew would remain with her wherever she goes.

Sonal bowed her head, and put her hands together in gratitude to the Sandalwood tree, indebted by the hospitality. Then she rode with her nephew in a golden chariot all the way to the prince's palace. The procession had a long distance to cover to reach the prince's kingdom. On the way, Sonal's nephew grew thirsty. He asked Sonal for water. They arrived at a lake, and Sonal asked her ladies-in-waiting to

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[2] *Ghoomar* is a Rajasthani dance form where women dance around in circles wearing long, wide skirts. The dance was earlier used to invoke the goddess of learning, arts and wisdom by specific communities. It has since become common among diverse communities and is no more gender specific.
[3] *Churma* is a dish made by mixing jaggery and ghee into fresh pan fried or deep-fried dough prepared by making the mixture with hands.

fetch some water. The ladies told her that whoever drinks from the lake will turn into a crow. Sonal told her nephew that the water was bitter, and they would get sweet water at the next lake.

When they reached the next lake Sonal urged her ladies-in-waiting to hurry and fetch water. The ladies did not move and told her that whoever drinks the water of the lake will turn into a dog. Sonal was desperate, but again convinced her nephew to wait till they reached the next lake. On reaching the third lake, the ladies told Sonal that whoever drank its water would turn into a snake. Sonal convinced her nephew to wait again for the next lake. The procession hurried to reach the next lake. At the fourth lake Sonal begged her ladies-in-waiting to run and fetch water for her nephew. The ladies informed Sonal whoever drinks water from the lake will turn into a peacock. The nephew's eyes were swimming; he was unconscious. Sonal was faced with a dilemma, whether to choose a dead nephew or a nephew in the form of a peacock. She sent the ladies to fetch water.

The instant the nephew drank the water he turned into a peacock. The beautiful peacock sang, and Sonal cried as she saw her nephew. The nephew could not see his aunt crying and started crying himself. They spent hours hugging and crying. The prince could not wait any longer and convinced Sonal to leave her nephew and move ahead. He promised her that she could visit her nephew every day.

Each day Sonal visited her nephew with *churma* and pot of water. One of the prince's wives was very jealous of Sonal as she had completely taken over the prince's time and attention. The older wife planned to get even. She visited Sonal and asked whether she could visit her nephew instead of her. She spoke sweetly and convinced Sonal to stay back while she went to give food and drink to her nephew. On reaching the lake, the older wife found the peacock (nephew) and offered him *churma*. The peacock was gullible like his aunt. He bent down to eat, suspecting nothing. The older wife twisted the neck of the peacock and killed him. With her bloody hands she ate the *churma* and drank the water.

Next day, when Sonal went to the lake to meet her nephew, he did not come when she called. She searched everywhere and called his name several times. After looking for a long time, she found the dead body of the peacock under a tree. Sonal was inconsolable, and the peacocks at the lake all cried with her. She was heartbroken and life left her body. The peacocks performed the final rites for both Sonal and her nephew. They all gave up food and drink and wailed night and day. Soon, they also perished. The trees and plants also withered away. There now stood two worn out Sandalwood trees where Sonal and her nephew died. The trees still grieve and wail for Sonal and her nephew.

Text in Context: "Sonal Bai" in 20th century Rajasthan

Outwardly simple, "Sonal Bai" is, in fact, an encoded lesson for teenage girls, inverted as a relationship between two highly treasured 'belongings'/ 'commodities' (sandalwood and unmarried girl) in a patriarchal society economically dependent on

agriculture. The sandalwood tree is highly valuable for farmers, as different parts of the tree are used to produce furniture, oil, fragrance and food items. It is also a part of religious rituals where its essence is used as *tilak*[4] on idols in Hindu traditions. Rajasthani Language is spoken prominently in the desert regions of India (Thar Desert) and the existence of such a tree in a desert is as precious and rare as a girl with golden hair. The tale forms part of '*katha*'[5] culture in India where women exercise freedom of voice through singing and narrating tales within all-female groups. Culturally encoded lessons in folktales meant for young girls in Indian society represent a means of informal education. Moreover, this safe space that women build transforms into a site of independent feminine interaction and exchange of values inside a highly patriarchal society.

The story was recorded at Borunda village in Rajasthan, North India. Rajasthani is a language spoken in state of Rajasthan and to an extent in the surrounding states of Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Haryana and Punjab (north-western region of Indian subcontinent). There are two important geographical features of the area; the Aravalli mountain range and Thar desert run diagonally dividing the temperature and vegetation. The village of Borunda was one of the first to start using tube-wells and tractors for farming (Thomas A. Timberg report, 1981). The latter half of 20th century witnessed development and awareness that was a clear reflection of India's freedom from colonial rule in 1947. Arrival of electricity helped the agriculture flourish where earlier water was drawn from deep wells manually and access to even drinking water was limited (Chandidan Detha)[6]. The change in natural landscape also reshaped the cultural landscape embedded through the literary expressions that underwent translations from orality to textual forms.

When folktales began to be printed in anthologies and collections categorization of the audience/listeners based on gender or age was no longer possible. 'Sonal Bai' the folktale was first recorded in Vijayadan Detha's collection of Rajasthani folklore titled, *Baatan Ri Phulwari*, *A Garden of Tales*, a collection published over the span of 15 years (1960-1975) in 14 volumes. Thus Sonal Bai's story was no longer restricted to female listeners. The folklore anthologist Vijaydan Detha wrote in his introduction to *Baatan Ri Phulwari*:

> My Village was my university, and my literary education if any came from rural women who always had so many interesting stories, anecdotes and wisdoms to share. When men my age went out to hunt or drink, I used to sit in my courtyard listening to what the women had to say, their gossip, their tales. At one point, I specifically started to invite all the women who were willing to just sit with me and talk. There were days when I was surrounded by women lost in conversation for hours at end. (Detha)[7]

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[4] Tilak: a mark on forehead worn by Hindus.
[5] Katha: Oral stories recited on specific occasions.
[6] Chandidan Detha's letter published with the introduction of *Baatan Ri Phulwari* volume-1 (1963), published by Rupanayan Sansthan. Ruapanayan Sansthan was established by Komal Kothari and Vijaudan Detha in Borunda village, Rajasthan and published literary work in Rajasthani language. The folktales collected in Borunda were published as Baatan Ri Phulwari in 14 volumes.
[7] A closed quotation from Vishes Kothari's translation of select folktales from *Baatan Ri Phulwari* titled; Folktales from Marwar.

Detha gives credit for his 'literary education' to the female get-togethers where women shared tales and anecdotes in the absence of men. This particular tale was meant for young girls as a cautionary tale forewarning them to keep themselves in check lest they try to break free from under the mother's tutelage. The tale in form of 'katha' opens space for women to share and address often stigmatized and taboo subjects like female desires, menstruation and coming of age. 'Coming of age', with its physical and emotional changes in a female body, also comprises distaste towards parental supervision, the need for freedom, the search for companionship and the discovery of personal desires, all of which are evident in the first part of the folktale. Sonal Bai's ill-fated life and death have one single episode of peace and fulfilment, which is her time spent in the Sandalwood tree.

The story takes place in three different environmental settings; in the first part there is an allusion to swimming and eventually the protagonist loses a golden hair while in water; in the second part Sonal lives on top of a tree away from her family; and in the third part she is married to a prince but spends most of her time with her nephew near the lake where he turned into a peacock. When her nephew dies, and she passes away grieving for him, they both metamorphose into Sandalwood trees. The movement from internal to external records the temporal and spatial shifts in a space that is neither domestic nor public. This third space is nature; Sonal's life on the Sandalwood tree is marked with peace and contentment. Sonal's movement in physical terms from interior to exterior chronotopes (Bakhtin) echoes Tamil's poetic concepts of *akam* (domestic) and *puram* (public space)[8]. Unlike the common notion that dangers lie outside the domestic space and once a girl crosses the safe space she will be exposed to all kinds of vices, she finds her solace in a tree which can only grow outside it. She is endangered once she leaves the tree, establishing the symbolic power of the tree as the protector. The tree in this sense is a domestic space that is rooted and safer than a prince's palace. The creation of this personal space with the tree challenges the domestic and public spaces.

Active or Passive: Role of Flora and Fauna in Sonal Bai's tale

Plants as anthropomorphic beings is a common motif in folktales. The presence of Sandalwood tree in this story alludes to certain olfactory and masculine elements that attract a young adult's senses. The sandalwood tree and its products are called *chandan*; the off-white shade of lightest beige is referred by the same term. This masculine tree develops a connection with a young girl. The dropping of food or water from the sandalwood tree attracts the prince to search for Sonal and he immediately gets infatuated by her sweet voice and beauty. He abandons his wedding procession to another town and decides to marry Sonal. The stages of a young girl's

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[8] In Tamil classic poetics; the external space and internal space divide the private and public called: *akam* and *puram* respectively. A.K. Ramanujan in his essay 'Flowering Tree' uses this distinction to inspect the form of female-centric narratives where agency is given or taken from a women based on internal and external space.

attempt to adopt to her changing body and hormones is echoed from the outset where she leaves her house as a teenager longing for personal space, she then experiences the peaceful companionship of nature (sandalwood tree) followed by her marriage to the prince who comes to rest under the tree on his way to his wedding. Sonal becomes capable of choosing a partner for herself after spending time practising in a temporary family setting, where she is a mother-like figure to her nephew and the sandalwood's partner. She lives in the tree with her nephew sharing water and food given by her family. Despite her anger and frustration against her mother and family she comes down from the tree only to take her nephew with her. When she does finally leave the tree, she is soon met with challenges that turn her nephew into a peacock, leading to his death and eventually to her own end as well.

The relationship between the tree and the protagonist is one of silent companionship. The Sandalwood tree has no dialogue in the entire story. Sonal talks to the tree and asks 'him'[9] (gender marking based on Hindi and Rajasthani language) to grow taller so that she can distance herself from her mother. It is important to note that the gender of the Sandalwood tree is male, unlike most representations of the tree in narratives where its function of nurturing and bearing fruits renders it a female character. The gender of sandalwood trees is male in Sanskrit, Rajasthani and Hindi language. Thus, the choice of a sandalwood tree highlights the desired male intervention in a young female's adventure. The tree provides Sonal with a safe home without asking for anything in return. The Sandalwood tree responds to everything Sonal asks him whether it is to grow or bend. The ability to communicate with the tree becomes Sonal's power. It also highlights a lack of connection and communication with nature from the other characters in the narrative. The phallic imagery of the Sandalwood tree growing taller and taller each time Sonal pleads is also an important motif that suggests the young adult's sensual fantasies. The sprouting of two sandalwood trees on the occasion of death asserts an active role on the part of the Sandalwood tree. Sonal comes to the tree when she wants to distance herself from her family, and disassociate from the obligations of growing up. The tree offers Sonal a safe abode away from her family and society. It transforms her character from a sensitive little girl to a young adult capable of living alone and taking decisions for herself.

It is also important to discuss the transformation of Sonal´s mother from an active participant to passive one. When the flora and fauna attain active roles, the mother becomes an absent figure in Sonal's story. Even when Sonal decides to marry, the family, including the mother, are neither informed nor invited. She bids goodbye to the tree and leaves with the prince and his people. The theme of absent mother/ parents which is common in young adult literature comes to play in the folktale after the first episode where Sonal Bai leaves her family after she is scolded by her mother, who tells her:

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[9] *Chandan* in Hindi and Rajasthani, *Chandana* in Sanskrit is the name for Sandalwood trees and its products. The tree is refered with male pronouns in Sanskrit, Rajasthani and Hindi (other languages with Sanskrit origins).

> you aren't a child any longer, but your childishness has still not one!...Ultimately, only one's own common sense can be of use!...You have gone and lost a hair worth a lakh...dare you repeat this again! Then there will be no one worse than me! (43, from Vishes Kothari's English translation of Sonal Bai)

Physically, the single hair lost in water alludes to the loss of freedom and innocence. The loss is not just physical but economical as well. The hair is pure gold and worth a lakh (one hundred thousand in Indian currency). Sonal's mother attempts to discipline her, reminding her of the responsibilities of girls. The mother's character communicates the socio-cultural code of behaviour, including control over freedom of movement, the importance of physical beauty (as wealth), and vocal domination. Melanie Duckworth writes: "In children's literature, maternal desires are generally (and understandably) seen as secondary to the character development of child protagonist. The characters of mothers are frequently required to get out of the way of narrative in order for the child to experience her own adventure. The desire for a mother to protect and nurture can stifle a child's narrative potential" (105). The character of Sonal criticises the practices of parental supervision and control as she commences her own personal journey. The geographical displacement provides her with a temporal space in which to delay the next phase of her life as a responsible adult. The sandalwood tree becomes her safe haven, emotionally and physically distancing her from impending womanhood.

The Socioeconomic Wealth of Patriarchy: Sonal and Sandalwood Tree

Unlike the western conception of humans as a superior species, which allowed them to treat non-human species as resources, traditional Vedic understanding of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*[10] implies that all living beings on the planet are one family as they are all made of *Panchmahabhutas* (five elements: water, fire, air, earth and space). However, environmental awareness, of the philosophical and physical levels found in the ancient Vedic texts, has been long abandoned. The aftermath of the colonial era in India resulted in a frenzy of development that concentrated on the creation of urban spaces, an industrial boom that overshadowed the rural agricultural spaces, distancing the population from the "ecological paradigm" (Shiva 2002; Rangarajan 2013). The traditional world of the folktales contained a closer relationship with nature that faded with the arrival of urbanization. The commercial lens seeps into the patriarchal view of the household where girls are referred as '*Paraya Dhan*'[11] which literally translates as 'another's wealth' in patriarchal families in India (Rawat 44). The hierarchy is established essentially by the family system

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[10] The idea of Universal brotherhood I.e.; '*Vasudahaiva Kutumbakam*' is emphasised in Hindi Vedic philosophy implying that everything on the planet is part of one big family. If harmony is disrupted by one family member it will reflect on the others as well.

[11] *Paraya dhan* automatically disassociates the girl's parents by its terminology establishing the ownership of females as the wealth of her husband's family.

(Bhasin). The terms used for unmarried girls in society further highlight their state and status in the context. Similar to a girl being nurtured until she comes of age, after which she is married off, the Sandalwood tree is a long-term investment for farmers. Farmers plant a tree and wait for two to three decades to sell it. The status of both Sonal Bai and the Sandalwood tree in the household is like that of a prized 'resource' that will be traded off once they reach the acceptable age. Such socially common notions of proprietorship are referred to as a "rhetoric of ownership society" by Vandana Shiva a renowned Indian Ecofeminist.

Remarkably, Sonal Bai recounts an unlikely friendship between two prized possessions that eventually breaks with the arrival of a patriarchal archetype—a handsome young prince. The sandalwood tree is highly valuable for farmers. Different parts of the tree are used to produce furniture, oil, fragrance, and food items. It also plays a part in religious rituals where its essence is used as *tilak* on idols in Hindu traditions. The narrative also has to be understood from the socio-religious context where the Sandalwood tree's close association to god worship is translated as symbol of purity. "Sandal plays an important role in the worship of Gods, its paste and oil are used for incense and religious ceremonies and for cleansing holy places" (Kumar et al.). The tree is praised in Vedic texts and its heartwood is considered sacred. It is claimed that Goddess Lakshmi lives in the sandal tree, and the wood is used to worship God Shiva. Similarly, a young maiden is also considered a symbol of purity in socio-religious contexts (Ploss and Bartels); the partnership in the story is indeed reaffirmed as pure through Sonal's choice of partner. The transience of flowers and short blooming period makes products made of trees like sandalwood that retain their scent and other properties indefinitely (McHugh) the symbol of permanency which allows Sonal to return to form at the end of the story.

However, *oikonomics*[12], the wisdom of living in harmony with world, was preserved in traditional households through women-centred narratives that were part of female tradition (see Rangarajan, Ramanujan). Unlike, male-centric tales especially where the boy/man sets out on an adventure for a princess, treasure or special powers, the female-centred tales focus on providing agency to their protagonists who are otherwise marginalized in reality. The difference in patterns and symbolic meaning of flora and fauna in narratives shared among women are based on the culturally perceived world of the gendered teller, listener and interpreter (Ramanujan).[13] At end of the tale, Sonal's and her nephew's bodies metamorphose into Sandalwood trees, returning to the state where they felt happy and fulfilled. Once dead the rules of the social world do not apply, and they choose to revert to the family they formed before the arrival of the prince. In an almost poetic way Sonal chooses to be one with the sandalwood tree upon her death. The 'seeds' of

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[12] *Oikonomics* is the term used for economics and management of a household. In patriarchal societies women and girls are responsible for domestic chores. Hence, the concept of oikonomics is closely related to female-centric narratives.

[13] Folktales like the 'Flowering Tree' from Karanataka, 'Tezimola' from Assam in India are women centric stories wherein the young-adult female protagonist transforms into a tree.

experience before and after living in the tree reflect her final decision to be one with the Sandalwood tree. The end also hints at the essence of Sandalwood tree that the two carry with them, even after they leave it far behind for the palace of the prince. Sonal is protected from the manipulations and rules of the human world when living in the tree. Her most fulfilling time is spent in the company of her nephew and the tree giving.

Cautionary or Revolutionary Tale?

The story of Sonal and the Sandalwood tree represents a form of cautionary tale for young girls, warning them against the harsh reality of the society. Ramanujan suggests in his rereading of a Kannada female-centric folktale titled "Flowering Tree", "In telling such a tale, older women could be reliving these early, complex, and ambivalent feelings towards their own bodies- and projecting them for younger female listeners." Further, if the listening audience included boys, they might be enriched by such tales by developing empathy for female's struggles in society. The agency provided by such women's tales addresses the socially prohibited themes of a girl's coming of age, love, and the dangers of transgression, simultaneously exercising freedom by asserting the immortality of nature and the mortality of humans. The close relationship between females and nature bestows them with peace and companionship that transcends life and echoes the Hindu Vedic philosophy of *Panchmahabhutas*[14] where all living and non-living things are indivisible since everything is made of the five elements; fire, earth, water, air and sky.

The two sandalwood trees that grow from the graves of Sonal and the peacock (nephew) are described as 'worn out' and that cry for the loss. Sandalwood is an important component of funeral rituals in Hinduism. "It is customary in certain communities among the Hindus to put a piece of sandalwood in funeral pyre" (Kumar et.al), providing further rationalization of the choice of tree in the folktale. It draws olfactory (fragrance and pheromones), religious (*tilak* and essence for offering), economic (monetary value) and physical (smooth texture, rooted and magnanimity) meaning. The nature markers in the story—peacocks, plants and trees—perform the final rites of the deceased and offer an ode to their closeness to sandalwood trees, which make them a family. The sandalwood trees that wail for the loss signify the purity of the sacrifices made by Sonal in her life.

The internal conflict in the narrative where the protagonist's choices lead to her early death and her rebirth as a sandalwood tree echo the female preoccupation with conduct in society. A rereading of the ending provides an answer to the question of whether the tale is cautionary or revolutionary. The wailing of peacocks on their death, the final rites conducted by the peacocks, and their metamorphosis, provide a

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[14] According to Ancient Vedic Philosophy *Panchmahabhutas* are the five elements; *Akasha* (sky)*, Vayu* (air), *Agni* (fire), *Jala* (water) and *Prithvi* (earth) that constitute everything on the planet. This implies the indivisibility of humans and non-humans displacing the idea of human superiority. The five elements are also indicators of the five senses.

freedom that transforms the tragic ending of a cautionary tale into the hope for a higher existence.[15] Nature, as represented by the trees, peacocks and water in the lake, accepts Sonal and her nephew as family when humans abandon and attack them. Only a deeper reflection upon the fear and sorrow of Sonal's tragic death (cautionary) can lead a reader/ listener to this revolutionary initiation of an empathetic female into immortality revoking the image of the two Sandalwood trees rooted to the ground where Sonal and her Nephew died. This 'rhizome' like beginning of 'after-life' at the end of the story sprouts from the growing voices of struggle, valorizing marginal entities like women, flora and fauna in a patriarchal, consumer-centric society.

Final Observations

This tale allows us to 'engage ecocritically with a contemporary ecological dharma'[16] in the words of Rangarajan. By foregrounding such female-centric folktales, valorizing their bodies, feelings and emotions and situating them in the present ecological crisis, the tale revives the oikonomical wisdom encoded with "ecosocial ideals" (Barnhill).[17] Invoking a 'rhizome'-like figure such folktales sprout from unforeseen patriarchal (and consumer-centric) social spaces and grow with other marginalized entities such as flora and fauna. The rhizome only grows with the growing voices and narratives giving space to discourses such as eco-feminist stories of struggle and survival. Ecofeminist critics cite the close proximity of two marginalized groups, women (and girls) and nature, in a patriarchal capitalistic society (see Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva, Carol Adams, Douglas Vakoch). Ecofeminism in literary discourse aims at a rereading of texts to identify the connection between women and nature and to further establish a subject-subject relation to defy their objectification. This folktale is a testimony for the prevalent practise of women's and young girls' close association with nature in Rajasthan.[18]

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[15] The idea of good deeds leading to a higher form of existence in the next life is known as Karma in Hindu Philosophy.

[16] *Dharma* essentially means the correct way of living, the moral conduct of life, based on the Sanskrit literary tradition. Rangrajan suggests that *Dharma* implies environmental wisdom at its core.

[17] 'Ecosocial ideals' is a term coined by David Barnhill and means solving the present ecological crisis by searching for positive ways to alter it using ideologies, social structures, cultures, values and behaviors that propagate the wellbeing of the Earth and healthy relationships among all things.

[18] Folktales like 'Ras Kas Diya Jale' (where a woman chooses a snake as her partner), 'Naagan, Tharo Bansh Badhe' (where a male cobra transforms into a human to marry a girl) are common in Rajasthani folklore, highlighting the proximity of female protagonists to nature, especially in the role of beloved or desirous partners.

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"Grump Mountain": Viewers' Attributions of Agency to a Climate Fiction Film

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Abstract

Environmental narratives—such as the genre of climate fiction—have been the topic of much theorization and discussion in terms of their potential to enrich human ways of thinking about the nonhuman environment. In this paper, we discuss the responses of a small sample of participants who watched a short climate fiction narrative, the trailer to a climate change documentary called *Not Ok: A Little Movie about a Small Glacier at the End of the World*. Using discourse analysis, we focus on how participants construct agency for the nonhuman narrator of the story—a mountain and former volcano named Ok that was once the site of Okjökull (Ok glacier). Participants' responses reveal how simple nonhuman agency becomes woven into more complex constructions when the trailer is discussed. Our analysis shows that only participants who took the perspective of Ok mountain and seemed to relate to it as the narrator of the story constructed more complex agencies for the mountain. Participants who did not relate to Ok mountain as the narrator conveyed simpler forms of nonhuman agency. Representing nonhuman agency in the mountain and animating the figure with a human voice (of narration) is a particular narrative strategy; in this study, we were interested in understanding how such a figure might challenge simple tropes of nature's agency and invite more complex ways of conceiving nonhuman agency. The cli-fi trailer also led viewers to ponder the destructive anthropogenic impacts on nonhuman environments. Some participants took the material to be merely an environmental message without engaging the nonhuman narrative aspects. The anthropomorphizing of Ok mountain's story, as was the case in the video material, may, we argue, limit interaction-oriented accounts of the entanglement of (non)human agencies. Finally, we conclude, many participants' tendency to understand environmental stories as (solely) moral messages presents a challenge to both climate fiction and narrative communications.

Keywords: Climate fiction, empirical ecocriticism, nonhuman agency, interview study, environmental films.

Resumen

Las narrativas medioambientales, como el género de ficción climática, representan un tema de gran interés a nivel de teoría y discusión respecto a su potencial para enriquecer formas humanas de pensamiento sobre el medio ambiente no humano. En este artículo, presentamos las respuestas de un

pequeño grupo de participantes que vieron una corta narrativa de ficción climática, el tráiler de un documental sobre el cambio climático denominado *Not Ok: A Little Movie about a Small Glacier at the End of the World*. Utilizando el análisis del discurso, nos hemos enfocado en cómo los participantes crearon agencia para el narrador no humano de la historia—una montaña y antiguo volcán llamado OK, que fue una vez el emplazamiento de Okjökull (el glaciar Ok). Las respuestas de los participantes indican cómo la simpleza de la agencia no humana se convierte en construcciones más complejas cuando se debate la narrativa. Nuestro análisis demuestra que sólo los participantes que adoptaron la perspectiva de la montaña Ok y que parecían identificarla como la narradora de la historia construían una agencia más compleja de la montaña. Los participantes que no identificaban la montaña Ok como la narradora expresaban formas más simples de agencia no humana. Representar la agencia no humana en la montaña y animar la figura con una voz humana (de narración) es una estrategia narrativa particular; en este estudio, nos interesaba comprender cómo esa figura podría desafiar la simpleza de los tropos de la agencia de la naturaleza y dar lugar formas más complejas de concebir la agencia no humana. El tráiler también llevó a los espectadores a reflexionar sobre los impactos antropogénicos destructivos en entornos no humanos. Algunos participantes interpretaron el material simplemente como un mensaje medioambiental sin considerar los aspectos narrativos no humanos. La antropomorfización de la historia de la montaña Ok, como en el caso del material audiovisual, puede limitar los relatos orientados a la interacción sobre la implicación de las agencias (no) humanas. Por último, concluimos que la tendencia de muchos participantes de entender las historias ambientales como (únicamente) mensajes morales plantea un desafío tanto a la ficción climática como a las comunicaciones narrativas climáticas.

Palabras clave: Ficción climática, ecocrítica empírica, agencia no humana, estudio de entrevista, películas medioambientales.

Introduction

In recent years there has been an explosion of interest in climate fiction. As a genre, climate fiction (or "cli-fi") is a narrative mode exploring the theme of climate change with regards to social, cultural, and psychological issues; it typically combines fictional plots with speculation on the future as well as reflection on the human-nature relationship (Goodbody and Johns-Putra; Trexler). Much discussion has emerged on the potential effects of cli-fi, but studies with actual readers and viewers are still rare.[1] In terms of cli-fi films, the only studies concerning the perspectives of actual audiences are those on Roland Emmerich's 2004 blockbuster *The Day After Tomorrow* (Leiserowitz; Reusswig and Leiserowitz; Reusswig et al.). Given that cli-fi is a burgeoning area of creative production in film, text, and other media, there is a growing need to understand how audiences are interpreting, engaging, and integrating climate fiction narratives into their larger understandings of socioenvironmental dynamics.

In this paper, we present our study on how participants discuss a short video that is narrated by a nonhuman subject; specifically, we analyze how viewers construct varying kinds of agency for the film's nonhuman narrator, a mountain in

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[1] One of the few examples of empirical studies on climate fiction are in the work of Schneider-Mayerson (2018, Schneider-Mayerson et al., 2023).

Western Iceland. Following a series of interviews, we discuss the potentials, limits, and implications of filmic cli-fi and narratives that center nonhumans.

The caldera at the apex of Ok mountain, the talking mountain, in the trailer to the film, Not Ok: A Little Movie about a Small Glacier at the End of the World.

This study is situated within the emerging field of *empirical ecocriticism*, which focuses on people's responses to environmentally oriented narratives. A central theme in ecocriticism has been to understand the potential of literary texts to nuance the ways that people view ecological phenomena (Garrard). Ecocriticism has also addressed climate change, arguing that fiction occupies a central role in conveying the scale and impacts of the crisis (Trexler). Climate fiction—a genre ranging across media, including digital media, television, film, short fiction, the novel, and the memoir (LeMenager)—has been depicted as providing a space of critical reflection on consumption-oriented lifestyles, as well as collective and individual actions and visions of the future (Goodbody and Johns-Putra; LeMenager; Malpas; Weik von Mossner, *Franny*).

However, the often-discussed challenge of climate narratives is that climate change is such a vast, multi-scaled phenomenon that it seems to resist the affordances of the traditionally human-centric and linear narrative form (e.g. Caracciolo). After all, climate change demands that we envision humans as a collective geological agent, with impacts upon the Earth system of great magnitude. Yet, individual humans can only experience specific effects of the climate crisis, meaning that each of our positioned observations are only a partial view of a larger dynamic created by the human species writ large (Chakrabarty). We note too that it is overwhelmingly the exploitation of fossil fuels by industrialized countries historically and in the present that have led to the climate crisis and that populations in the less industrialized world will be those who will most bear the consequences. Climatological precarity is not a great equalizer; it is instead a barometer of inequality (Howe). In addition, climate change and the discourses revolving around it reflect Western culture's anthropocentrism—that positions the nonhuman environment in the role of an object, or resource, to be exploited (Plumwood; Weik von Mossner, *Affective*). The question of how climate fiction films might encourage people to challenge their linear

and anthropocentric ways of constructing the world is a critical element of scholarly discussion and one that also implicates the politics of climate more broadly.

The growing field of ecocritical scholarship bridges narrative reading and reader's attitudes about, or interpretations of, the environment. Underscoring readers' engagements with storyworlds, Erin James (*Storyworlds, Narrative*) and Alexa Weik von Mossner (*Affective*) have argued that literature and film can make new things matter to us, widening our concern to include human and nonhuman others. A related direction in literary scholarship has focused on the exploration of nonhuman narratives—those which focus upon, or are narrated by, a nonhuman object or animal. Bernaerts et al. conceptualize nonhuman narration to emerge from a double dialectic of empathy and defamiliarization as well as human and nonhuman experientiality. As is common in much environmentally oriented scholarship, the nonhuman narrators that Bernaerts et al. consider are either nonhuman animals or inanimate objects.

There have been very few attempts to investigate the affordances of environmental narratives empirically, especially in the context of human-nonhuman relationships to climate change. Filmic cli-fi has received relatively little attention compared to its literary counterpart. Previous analyses of filmic cli-fi narratives have evaluated movies such as Bong Joon-Ho's *Snowpiercer*, a post-apocalyptic dystopia reflecting the sociopolitical problems prevalent in the times of climate crisis (Chu), Roland Emmerich's dystopian disaster film *The Day After Tomorrow* (Weik von Mossner, *Facing*), the first Hollywood blockbuster to self-consciously address climate change, and Franny Armstrong's apocalyptic *The Age of Stupid* (2009), a documentary mixing fictional and factual elements (Weik von Mossner, *Franny*). To our knowledge, no previous research has addressed real audience responses to short, filmic cli-fi narratives representing a nonhuman perspective. The objective of the project we illustrate here aims to begin to remedy that omission, joining other ecocritics in the project of challenging what Monika Fludernik (13) has called the "anthropomorphic bias" of storytelling -narrative's tendency to privilege human characters.

A central concept we highlight in this study is *agency*—the ability to act toward some end. In conversations about the climate crisis and other ecological catastrophes, agency serves as a key point of discussion. Traditional notions of agency are human-centric and refer to a feeling of control over oneself and the surrounding nonhuman world (Dürbeck, Schaumann, and Sullivan; Marchand; Yamamoto). Such a notion defines agency as an attribute of a single, autonomous human being, whose identity as a human is rendered as distinct from, and superior to, the nonhuman. Agential capacity in this form is thus intrinsically intertwined with the problematic use of Northern, industrialized power that looms behind ecological crises (Marchand; Plumwood). In recent theoretical debates, such traditional notions of agency have been questioned especially by new materialist interpretations. In these accounts, agency arises from complex interrelated networks of beings, phenomena, and processes (Barad; Braidotti; Haraway), not solely or even primarily, adjacent to human will. In a related manner, in Bruno Latour's actor network theory agency is

not an attribute of separate human individuals, but something intrinsically networked between and among humans and nonhumans (*On actor-network theory*, *On network theory*). Thus, separation becomes a fiction.

In this article, we approach agency as a discursive project; we are interested in how participants construct the capacities and abilities of the nonhuman narrator of the video narrative they watch and then discuss in an interview setting. Our analysis focuses upon understanding what *kinds* of constructions of agency are available to the participants as they interpret the video. We approach the interview data by defining agency loosely as different discursive descriptions of *being-ableness* (Toivonen, Wahlström, and Kurri)—ability and capacity in a wide sense—as we aim to move away from conceptualizations that assume agency is synonymous with intentional, deliberate actions traceable back to human psychology. This language-centered perspective does not imply that we disregard the fact that watching a film is an embodied and emotional activity, as Alexa Weik von Mossner has illustrated (*Affective*).

Another recurring term used frequently in this paper is *nonhuman*—a term being employed in humanistic disciplines that has been called the "nonhuman turn" (Grusin), or the "more-than-human turn" (Howe). We acknowledge that the phrasing of nonhuman can be seen as problematically reinforcing the binary opposition between humans and the rest of the environment (Kortekallio). In this article, we primarily use the term to refer to the mountain narrator of the cli-fi video material.

Our study is embedded in a larger project of nonhuman-centric narratives. It is also critically related to and expands upon previous research publications from this study using a different set of interviews (Toivonen; Toivonen & Caracciolo), where participants' conversations around written nonhuman-centric narratives were analyzed. In a previous study (Toivonen and Caracciolo) it was found that nonhuman-centric narratives had the capacity to complicate and challenge traditional, simpler constructions of the nonhuman or "nature". These traditional notions, prevalent in modern Western thinking and media discourse, represent nature as a vulnerable victim of human actions, as a potentially threatening force with which humans should not interfere, or as the harmonious provider of sublime experiences (Coscieme et al.; Evans; Hansen; Olausson and Uggla; Wall; Williams). Each of these perceptions work to maintain a narrative where humans are separate from, and indeed above, the nonhuman environment (Marchand; Plumwood). In this paper, we aim to expand on the conversation about the potential of nonhuman-oriented fiction to illuminate distinct forms of nonhuman agency.

In this article, we analyze viewers' responses to a video trailer of the documentary *Not Ok: A Little Movie about a Small Glacier at the End of the World*, which tells the story of Okjökull (Ok glacier) and Ok mountain, a former volcano, where the glacier was situated.[2] The trailer, comprising the first three minutes of the

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[2] The trailer to the full documentary is freely available on Vimeo and was shown to the participants of this study via this link: <u>Not Ok Trailer on Vimeo</u>. The full movie *Not Ok* tells the story of Okjökull (Ok glacier), the first of Iceland's major glaciers to be destroyed by climate change; the film uses a non-

documentary, opens with a foggy scene where large stones occupy the lower half of the screen. The camera pans across the rocks and low male voice begins narrating, with heavily accented English: "This is me. They call me Ok. I'm a mountain." Wind can be heard across the soundscape. The next images depict footage near the top of Ok and neighboring mountains that are snow covered with rocky protrusions against a blue sky. Ok mountain expresses its position as a lesser mountain in what are called "human books" since Viking times and confirms that as a mountain, Ok has been here for a very long time. The video then cuts to a truck driving across a mountain road and Ok admits that it has issues with humans since they get worked up about strange things, lately about melting glaciers. The camera retreats to show two people, male and female, standing on a snowy landscape. The mountain narrator exhibits a touch of sarcasm when it describes that these two anthropologists have come to Iceland to talk to Icelanders about how they feel about losing their glaciers. Ok then announces, again with a slightly snarky tone, that that for humans "even when they are talking about glaciers, it's still all about *them*…".

Caption The human protagonists, two anthropologists, in a snowy field near the top of Ok mountain, from the film, Not Ok: A Little Movie about a Small Glacier at the End of the World.

Erin James' (*Narrative*) Anthropocene narrative theory maps out innovative narratological structures through the components of worldbuilding, material, time, space, and narration. Similarly, the cli-fi trailer invites the viewer to mentally model a world of stone, ice, and snow—a world where a mountain is narrating its story from its own perspective. From the standpoints of material, space, and narration, the viewer is challenged from the beginning: the mountain landscape is not inert and voiceless, nor is it a stable setting for human characters to develop their drama, but an active narrator of its own story. The connection between space and narration is

human narrator as the voice of the mountain to offer commentary on the glacier's status and how it has been perceived in Iceland over time. The movie is directed by anthropologists Cymene Howe and Dominic Boyer and is part of their research in Iceland. More information can be found on the website not ok movie.

complex: disrupting anthropocentric assumptions, the viewer is transported to an unfamiliar space and tasked with hearing a narrative seemingly spoken by the space itself. With only the foggy, snowy landscape of Iceland to visualize the viewer must combine the narrating voice with an unseen "speaker," off camera. In this way, the trailer works against the traditional idea that narration and voice only emerge from a speaking (human) subject.
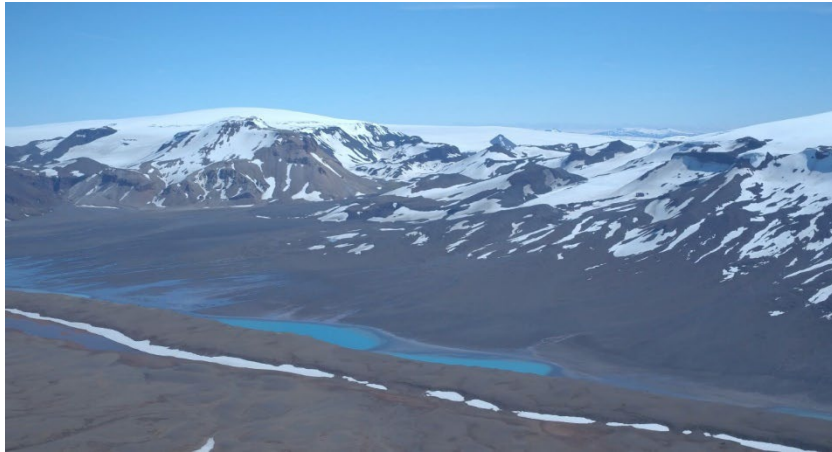
Caption: The camera pans to landscapes surrounding Ok mountain, from the film, Not Ok: A Little Movie about a Small Glacier at the End of the World.

With a few verbal gestures, Ok sketches its existence across a vast geological timescale. Even if climate change is never explicitly mentioned in the video, an alert viewer is cued to think about the slow processes of global warming that has led to the humans losing "their" glaciers. Erin James argues for the importance of narratives that task their readers with interpreting an event as both something that occurs within a narrative and a part of a longer chain of events beyond the timeline of the narrative. In this manner, the two anthropologists arriving at the mountain suggest a longer history of humans occupying nonhuman spaces, often with a colonialist, exploitative mindset hinted at by the nonhuman narrator. "The effect event" in James' theory illustrates the impacts of slow, detrimental processes that operate as signifiers of destruction due to their effects on objects and bodies. Ok mountain never mentions global warming as the culprit behind the loss of its ice cap; indeed, the mountain's concerns about humans go back more than a thousand years, with human selfishness and general disregard being one of the mountain narrator's primary critiques. Now, the glacier on top of Ok is gone -an example of a Jamesian effect event.

Caption: A truck appears on the volcanic gravel road near the base of Ok mountain, from the film, *Not Ok: A Little Movie about a Small Glacier at the End of the World*.

We understand the trailer as representative of climate fiction rather than a classic documentary—even as the full documentary and Ok's story are firmly rooted in the ethnographic context of Iceland. Even taking the new materialist standpoint that all beings, elements, and processes—including mountains—exhibit some kind of agency, we find that anthropomorphism is, to some degree, inevitable when nonhumans are employed as narrative agents (Weik von Mossner, *Affective*). We align with James (*Narrative*) in her critique of narrativity and argue that even if a mountain is an agent in the sense that it is capable of many things, it cannot produce an actual narrative without a human intervention. Thus, it is the characterization of Ok that makes this piece climate *fiction* for the purposes of this study.

As the influence of climate fiction in popular culture as well as in academic conversations is ever increasing, it is important to understand the potential of nonhuman-narrated climate fiction to challenge human centeredness. Climate fiction's potential is typically facilitated through conversations—in book clubs, classrooms, and other social settings. Similarly, in this study we inquire about how viewers attribute agency to the nonhuman figure, Ok mountain, as a narrator and subject that is established in the short trailer of the film. The larger goal of this project overall is to expand our understanding of real audience responses and conversations regarding climate fiction narrated from the perspective of a nonhuman agent.

Method

This study is a part of a larger project where participants' discussions of short climate fiction were studied. The interviews analyzed here belong to a larger dataset of 28 interviews total. Eight semi-structured interviews were conducted by the first author on Zoom videocalls, mostly in English, with a handful in Finnish. In 21 of the 28 interviews, the participants discussed a written nonhuman-oriented narrative. The results of the analysis of these interviews is presented in Toivonen and Toivonen and Caracciolo. For the portion of the study discussed in this paper, participants were

shown the trailer of the documentary rather than the entire film.[3] Because the documentary focuses primarily on human narratives about the loss of Ok glacier, it was important that participants focused on the short trailer as a work of climate fiction that is designed around a nonhuman narrator with an emphasis upon the *fiction* of the mountain's voice. Having the participants engage with a smaller amount of material—in total a few minutes—also ensured that it was fresh in their memory; it was also a manageable amount of visual/audio material for viewers to engage in the context of an interview.

The participants were volunteers that represented 3 different nationalities (American, Canadian, and Finnish), with ages ranging from 31-83. Three of the interviewees identified as women and five as men. The backgrounds among the group were varied: one was a literary scholar, but the others were not professionals in the field of narrative or fiction in any manner. The professions of the participants included a youth worker, a self-employed artist, and a climate scientist. The educational level of the participants was high, as they all had at least a bachelor's degree.

Participants were recruited by various means including social media, emailing environmental and climate science organizations, as well as the snowball method through the first author's networks. Following the tradition of qualitative research and knowing that the data would likely be analyzed through discourse analysis, the sample was collected using a purposeful sampling method.[4] Since this study is explorative and qualitative, the goal in forming the group of participants was to ensure that an array of different ways of discussing the agency of the nonhuman environment would be observable. All participants signed an informed consent form prior to the interviews and, if requested, were sent their anonymized interview transcript by email for commentary.[5]

The interview protocol consisted of questions related to a participant's thoughts about the nonhuman environment and climate change. The respondents were first asked two questions to introduce them to environmental issues; they then received a link to watch the trailer of *Not Ok* (duration approximately 2.5 minutes).[6] After watching the eliciting material, the participants were asked about various aspects of their thinking with regards to the nonhuman environment. All interview questions concerning agency were carefully worded to ensure that participants

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[3] The trailer of the documentary represents climate fiction, while the full documentary is exactly that, a documentary, and thus not suitable for our purposes. In addition, the trailer was discussed as one part of a longer interview, and having participants devote more time than a few minutes to the trigger material would have warranted a whole different interview protocol and study design.

[4] See e.g., Palinkas et al. The method is sometimes also called *purposive sampling*.

[5] The project was ethically approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Arts and Philosophy at Ghent University, the affiliation of the first author when conducting this research.

[6] They were not given any background information about the documentary before or after watching it. If the participant had questions about the documentary, they had a chance to ask them at any point of the interview or after it, by emailing to the first author. As all the participants received the link to the trailer as a message in the Zoom videocall environment, they had the chance to copy the link and find out freely any information on the video after the interview.

would not simply reproduce anthropocentric interpretations. This paper focuses on participants' constructions of discursive agency in this conversational context; the same stories encountered in another context might be experienced in different ways, leading to different outcomes.[7] The first author transcribed the interviews verbatim into English, anonymized them, and gave all participants a pseudonym. The interviews were then analyzed drawing from discourse analytical methodology (e.g. Nikander; Trappes-Lomax).

From the perspective of discourse analysis, a critical question pivots upon how people conceptualize nonhuman agency. Following a social constructionist position, discourse analysis is interested in how people produce meanings and build different versions of the world through language-mediated, situated social processes (Nikander; Potter and Hepburn; Ussher and Perz). As with constructionist positions more generally, this paper avoids attributing participants' interpretations to solely psychological or material phenomena (Nikander; Potter and Hepburn). At the same time, we do not suggest that (non)human agency exists only at the linguistic level because material phenomena and social contexts each condition the meanings created through human language and communication; there is a mutual dependency between material, discursive, and sociocultural understandings of nonhuman agency.

In the first phase of the analysis, the first author of this paper carefully read and re-read all 28 transcripts, paying attention to every word, expression, sentence, and metaphor related to nonhuman subjects. Special attention was paid to active verbs that can be interpreted as having agential qualities. The goal was to identify a variety of ascriptions given to the nonhuman in terms of abilities, actions, ways of existing, occurring, and influencing the world. Following initial readings, the first author constructed a preliminary list of nonhuman agencies and discussed these initial categorizations with Marco Caracciolo, the second author of Toivonen and Caracciolo. Next, the analysis focused on storytalk[8]—the explicit discussion of the narrative the participants read or watched and their constructions of nonhuman agency. The final stages of the analysis of participants' discussion on the written narratives vs. the filmic narrative were conducted separately. Finally, the categorizations presented here were reviewed by the second author of this paper. The results presented here thus carry similarities to those presented in Toivonen and Toivonen and Caracciolo, but expand on this previously published work, showing an independent set of findings.

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[7] The basic assumption in qualitative research is that the impact of the interviewer/researcher and the specificity of the interview situation are not problems of the research setting but acknowledged as the basis from which these specific research results arise. Moreover, we wish to make the point that it is the dialogic setting that allows nuanced responses to nonhuman narrators to be developed, making our results relevant for many conversational settings such as schools or discussion groups.

[8] Elsewhere, Toivonen and Toivonen and Caracciolo have defined "storytalk" as explicit discussion on a narrative in an interview or some other interactional context (Toivonen; Toivonen and Caracciolo). I made unnecessary edits here, my apologies! It was good the way it was!

Results

The analysis revealed ten different kind of nonhuman agencies presented in Table 1.[9]

Agency category	How nonhuman agency is presented	Examples of participants' descriptions of nonhuman agency
1. Not transparent	Something that is partly beyond human perception and cognition.	**"it felt like it could do a lot, but I can't know what it could do"**
2. Sublime force	Powerful, ancient, mysterious, sacred.	**"it is like old and somehow eternal"**
3. Systems and interconnectivity	Part of a system; sometimes humans are explicitly mentioned as being one part of interconnectivity.	**"there's some relationship that the humans nearby have to the glacier, to me that suggests that there's some dependence of the people on the glacier"**
4. Producer and enabler	Maintaining life or producing something, such as oxygen or pleasant experiences.	**"There is a very human-centric attitude toward everything, right, that involves the earth, right? What can the earth give us in terms of natural resources."**
5. Threat	Power that challenges people with natural forces, weather events, etc.	**"is there like something threatening in that mountain"**
6. Personality	Having human characteristics	**"it had like a personality and a character"**
7. Cognizant and sentient	Cognitively and communicatively adept	**"It was able to pattern a story, like come with not necessarily a plot but at least a logical sequence of events. It was able to communicate its emotions."**
8. Living or existing	A living entity or active process; includes descriptions actions wherein the environment "exists" or has qualities of "being".	**"it was mentioned that it is a volcano, so then people can think about what a volcano can do."**
9. Victim and object	Observed, defined, used, and/or destroyed by people.	**"humans are this incredibly potentially damaging agent to its being as a volcano"**
10. Detached and separate	Detached from humans, dismissed and/or forgotten such that the nonhuman does not intersect with humans.	**"these Vikings hardly ever even mentioned it, because it was not meaningful in that way either"**

Some participants attempted to construct Ok mountain as an entity with its own independent existence and perspective, whereas others did not respond to the

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[9] Note that nonhuman agency characterizations presented elsewhere based on the same research project but on interviews where the participants were presented with written narratives (Toivonen; Toivonen and Caracciolo) are similar to this table but, most notably, lack the category 6, personality.

video as representative of Ok's viewpoint at all. Whether and how the viewer attributed an independent viewpoint to Ok coincided with whether they granted Ok what we call here *complex nonhuman agencies*. Table 2 illustrates how a participant's general orientation to a nonhuman perspective is related to the kind of agencies they attributed to Ok, the nonhuman narrator.

Table 2[10]

Participant	Orientation to the video/the nonhuman perspective	Nonhuman agency construction
Adam	Focus on the nonhuman perspective	Complex: Limited cognizant
Rosa		Complex: Limited cognizant
Isabella		Complex: Limited cognizant
Esteri		Complex: Nontransparent agent
Paul		Complex: Nontransparent agent
Åsa	Construction of a human-nonhuman relationship	-
Gloria		Simple: Living or existing being
Uri	Detached (the video is about "the problems of environmental change")	Simple: Living or existing

Five participants (Adam, Rosa, Isabella, Esteri, and Paul) related to the video as an invitation for them to understand the viewpoint of Ok as an agent. Each of these five participants also ascribed a *complex agency* to Ok. With complex agency we refer to constructions of agency that consist of two or more of the agency construction types presented in Table 1. Adam, Isabella, and Rosa articulated a complex agency for Ok that we can call "Limited Cognizant", while Esteri and Paul constructed a complex agency that falls within the classification of "Nontransparent Agent".

Three participants (Gloria, Uri, and Åsa) did not attribute an independent perspective to Ok in their discussions of the video trailer. Åsa and Gloria focused on the video's presumed message about human-nonhuman relationships, while Uri's discussion was detached—he felt the video conveyed a relatively weak environmental point, "trying to show some of the problems of environmental change". Gloria and Uri found Ok to have simple nonhuman agency (ascribing only one type of agency at a time), while Åsa did not attribute any kind of agency to it whatsoever.

In the next section, we provide a series of examples on the distinct categories of nonhuman agency in participants' constructions.

Limited Cognizant: The Nonhuman Has Cognition but is Restrained

Ok was described as having some cognitive skills while it was, at the same time, limited by human agency. Rosa and Adam described Ok as reflective or understanding

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[10] All participant names in the table and elsewhere in the text are invented pseudonyms.

but stated that this disposition would conflict with Ok's real situation as the object of human actions. Either Ok thinks that it is powerful but actually is not, or it has not accepted that humans are a destructive and intrusive force in its world.

> Interviewer: *What kind of an actor was this mountain in the text and what I mean by that is, what was it able to do? What was it presented as able to do in the video?*
> Rosa: Yeah, I would say it was presented as… on one hand, <u>knowledgeable and wise</u> (7), and on the other hand, <u>somewhat powerless</u> (9). Right, <u>it doesn't control who comes to the mountain, doesn't control how… how… what stories humans tell about his landscape</u> (9). And it's very <u>different from what he thinks of himself</u> (7), so… You know, <u>it didn't to me imply that he had a whole lot of agency for his future</u> (9).[11]

Rosa's description of Ok mountain, the former volcano, registers it as both cognizant (7) but also powerless, not because of the looming threat of climate change but because it is not in control of who comes to it and what stories humans tell about its landscape (9). In Rosa's analysis, Ok is not an agent in the sense that its real circumstances are distinct from how it thinks of itself (9)—note Rosa's use of the pronoun "he," possibly triggered by the male voice narrating the story. Thus, Ok is not only capable of thinking but is also able to make cognitive mistakes. Interestingly, the video does not show Ok as entertaining unrealistic ideas about itself, suggesting a strongly subjective element in Rosa's description.

Nontransparent Agent: The Nonhuman Agent is Not Immediately Understandable to the Human

Ok was described as an agent that in some way remains resistant to humans' attempts at understanding it. Esteri conveyed complex nonhuman agency in her description of Ok mountain which, for her, took up the qualities of a Nontransparent agent. In her account, she moved from stating that little was said about Ok's agency in the video to ultimately elaborating a more nuanced and complex account of Ok's agentive potential.

> Interviewer: *So, what kind of an agent or actor this mountain was in that video, so in a way, what was it displayed as being able to do?*
> Esteri: In my opinion, they didn't really much say what the mountain in itself could do. Of course, <u>it was mentioned that it is a volcano, so then people can think about what a volcano can do</u> (8). To my mind, they talked more about glaciers, and then to my mind came these kind of reportages that are related to glaciers, and now that the glaciers are melting… For example just recently there was this piece of news where it was stated that now that the glaciers are melting and all kinds of bacilli and bacteria and viruses get unleashed which haven't ever seen the modern world, so could there happen something like this type of pandemic or some other equivalent idea. In my mind they got connected, <u>the powers of the mountain</u> (2), also to this like recent news coverage and then when it came to me, about <u>this Grump Mountain, the kind of grump</u>

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[11] The talking turns marked with italics are those of the interviewer, to separate them from the talk of the interview participants. The underlined parts show the central verbal expressions that were coded in a particular way during the analysis.

image, or the kind of a mental image of an old man (6), so for me, like what the mountain could do, for me perhaps <u>this kind of a person, the kind of older man represents the kind of power that could do a lot of things</u> (6). <u>It has experience and wisdom</u> (7), and something that perhaps humans or younger people don't have, so like for me, what it could do, for <u>me it felt like it could do a lot, but I can't know what it could do</u> (1). Except for the fact that it's a volcano and <u>a volcano concretely erupts</u> (8), but <u>if we think that it is some other character, like a troll or some you know some like God character or something like that. Because it did speak after all</u> (6).

Interviewer: *Yeah. So for you there was this thought that you can't know all the things it could do?*

Esteri: Yeah, for me came perhaps a bit more the thought that, for me -<u>I can't know all the things this this mountain could do, but for sure it can do a lot of things about which I can't know what they could be</u> (1).

This complex construction of nonhuman agency emerges from a negotiation between the categories of "volcano" and "human." Esteri starts her response with the statement that because Ok is a volcano, then "people"—not her per se but an imagined generic audience—will think about what members of this category (volcano) can do. This expression can be read as an attribution of "living or existing" agency that depicts nonhumans as merely "existing" or being alive (8). Attributions of personality (6) emerge when Esteri discusses Ok as an older (human) man with experience and wisdom, thus, with a degree of cognitive agency (7); additionally, this figure is attributed with the potential to do things that exceed her understanding (1). She continues by depicting a more-than-human character (that she dubs troll or God), with the reasoning that Ok "did speak after all." Esteri states several times that Ok can do a lot of things which she, as an observer and perhaps specifically as a *human* observer, cannot know; this formulation provides a very clear example of what we designate as "nontransparent agency" (1). Ok is, then, a subject with agency but whose nature is not immediately clear to the human viewer.

Esteri characterizes Ok as exhibiting a human-like personality, and drawing from a variety of sources and representations -from news stories to a popular Finnish fictional character, Mielensäpahoittaja[12] (literally, "a person that gets upset easily", in English translations, The Grump). Even after having quickly traversed various options for Ok's subject position -from an old man to a troll or God—she determines that while Ok is capable of many things, the precise nature of Ok's capacities remains unclear to her. Such depictions of nonhuman agency as complex but not entirely transparent illustrate how narrativized nonhuman agents may be able to resist humans' intellectual colonization. It is also worth noting that Esteri did not use Ok's narrative to access her personal memories, experiences, or knowledge about the environment—a common occurrence among the participants not granting Ok with complex agency—but instead jumped into the storyworld on Ok's terms.

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[12] The main character of Tuomas Kyrö's book series, the first novel "Mielensäpahoittaja" published in 2010 (Helsinki: WSOY).

Simple: The Nonhuman as "Living or Existing"

In these constructions, Ok was not understood to be a character; instead, there was a generic volcano or a more generic landscape to which only limited agency was attributed. This minimal agency consisted of descriptions of simple actions typical of an entity that does not do much beyond "living or existing;" a volcano was described as doing what volcanoes do, erupt.

Gloria, a participant trained in an environmental field and living in a geographical location where she is very much involved with the consequences of climate change in her daily life, did not describe Ok itself as any kind of agent, but spoke about the general quality of volcanoes having the capacity to erupt. Despite characterizing Ok with so little agency, Gloria's experience of the video was not thin; she explained that she liked the video and that it made her feel as though she is not alone in being concerned about the environment. Gloria's sensemaking points to the importance of acknowledging that a viewer's interest in the environment, their educational background or involvement with environmental activities, as well as their affirmations about a particular narrative, do not necessarily predispose them to relate to the story or to take the viewpoint of the nonhuman subject.

Our example of simple agency in response to the video comes from Uri, who did not seem to relate to Ok's perspective or to the video narrative at all. Unlike Gloria and Åsa, he did not construct the video as conveying a metaphor about human-nonhuman relationships but instead related to it as a warning message about the melting of glaciers. He spent significant time wondering about the filmed footage and described the landscapes as an "uninhabitable place," having "no indication of wildlife."

> Interviewer: *If you think about the mountain in this video—what kind of an actor or agent was it? Was it presented as able to do something, this mountain?*
> Uri: The mountain itself was able to do something, as in produce something?
> Interviewer: *Yeah, I wonder how you perceived it in the video?*
> Uri: Actually, I didn't perceive it first of all as a mountain as such. The- I suppose if I looked at it again, I could look for that but-
> Interviewer: *Okay, so for you it was ice, or glacier?*
> Uri: Well, not even a glacier, I mean it may have it may have been glacier at one point but you know the obviously there was bare ground and I've been in glacial countries or in in glacial areas in Alaska for instance [talk about his travel experiences deleted for the purposes of preserving anonymity] and this was really not that kind of environment to me. I guess probably it does reflect the possibilities of… volcanic activity, although again, I'm thinking of that one great field of what appeared to be just small stones or small gravel, gravely type stones that that's not particularly glacial activity either. Anyway. Next question?

For Uri, the trailer for *Not Ok* was not a narrative at all, but a series of separate (and rather uninteresting) scenes that he tried to interpret based on what he knows about different kinds of landscapes. He likewise did not construct a specific nonhuman narrator with whom he could have interacted, and thus struggled to answer the

question about the agency of the volcano. He attributed simple agency to the landscape shown in the video, describing it as "reflecting the possibilities of volcanic activity". Uri tried to visually read the footage according to his own experiences, but, frustrated with the task, asked for the next question to be presented.

Discussion

We have shown a variety of responses and attributions of nonhuman agency that occurred as participants discussed a nonhuman-oriented climate fiction video. The participants differed a great deal in how they focused on the nonhuman narrator in terms of that narrator's perspective as well as what kind of agency Ok might have. The participants who acknowledged the presence of a nonhuman narrator as such, with its own specific perspective and story, also attributed more complex agencies to it; that is, they combined more than two of the ten different types of nonhuman agency in their accounts when describing Ok. Three participants did not relate to Ok's perspective at all, only attributing simple agency, if any agency at all, to it. The video seemed to primarily invite them to ponder their own knowledge and experiences of environmental issues and different landscapes. These participants also focused primary attention on the visuals of the video, that is, the drone-filmed snowy landscapes of Iceland, and tended to disregard the vocal narration component. Indeed, one challenge of the video narrative used in this study may reside in the fact that it visually combines filmic footage that is not in any direct way illustrating the simultaneous audio narration.

Participants identified the human characters in the video as scientists, and the descriptions of them were either neutral or negative. For Adam, the humans were an annoying disturbance, "pesky anthropologists" distracting him from learning more about Ok's perspective. Esteri described them as "stupid," and Isabella as just having come to "ogle" the mountain without being able to do anything about the disappearance of the glacier. Most participants mentioned that the videoclip illustrated how self-centered human beings are. In this respect, the audience responses resonate with Bernaerts et al, who have argued that nonhuman narration often reveals the problematic ways in which humans are in a relationship with their environment and other living beings.

This particular video did not always trigger nuanced descriptions of human-nonhuman relationships; instead, viewers were able to occupy a morally superior position condemning the silliness and selfishness of *other* humans (represented as the "ogling" anthropologists).[13] Furthermore, even if the video invited the participants to produce complex constructions of nonhuman agency, these conceptualizations were still relatively human-centric, reminiscent of the results of a previous study on how people respond to written nonhuman-centric narratives

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[13] The ironic nature of the humor used in the video trailer may also not have translated well among non-native English speakers since there was a high degree of subtlety in the videoclip's dialogue (and nonhuman narration).

(Toivonen; Toivonen and Caracciolo). Inviting less human-centric reflections and discussions on human-nonhuman interconnectedness might call for a more experimental and less anthropomorphizing story, as is outlined in Caracciolo's call for alternative narrative strategies.

We have described how this video employed an anthropomorphized mountain as narrator. However, discussions around anthropomorphizing are complicated. In general, ecocriticism has tended to be cautious about discourses that anthropomorphize nonhuman nature (Iovino). However, many prominent scholars have discussed a strategic use of anthropomorphization to evoke empathy in human readers or viewers (Bennett; Iovino; Herman; Keen). Jane Bennett has argued that strategic anthropomorphization is useful in expanding the idea of nonhuman agency and in challenging the fundamental narcissism of humans. The film used in this study could be taken as such a strategic anthropomorphization. While some participants did expand nonhuman agency in their discussions about Ok, this did not always take place, and it was mostly the selfishness and stupidity of *other* humans that was criticized. Furthermore, anthropomorphization has been discussed as a continuum of narrative and visual techniques that can serve different functions. David Herman discusses the representation of nonhuman experiences in graphic narratives on a scale from animal allegory to texts that capture the distinctive phenomenology of nonhuman experiences. The anthropomorphization of Ok could be viewed as anthropomorphic projection on Herman's scale; audience responses to significantly less human-like anthropomorphizations of nonhuman landscapes warrant further research. In general, our study aligns with previous perspectives that have underlined anthropomorphization as a complex task that demands careful execution (Herman; Iovino; Keen).

In previous conversations about environmental narratives, the focus has been on nonhuman animals and occasionally, inanimate objects (see e.g. Bernaerts et al.; Herman; James; Weik von Mossner); little attention has been paid to attributing human characteristics to other dimensions of nonhuman nature. This is perhaps reflective of the possibility that animals hold a different place in the emotional repertoire of humans in comparison to landscapes and other non-sentient entities. This study presents an attempt to describe discursive responses to a relatively unusual nonhuman narrator, a mountain. It is possible that a key aspect preventing some viewers from getting deeper into Ok's perspective is that the video depicted a nonfamiliar, distant setting with a narrator that was anthropomorphized but still difficult to identify.[14] This is an interesting challenge for the narrative form in climate change communications, because most endangered glaciers are in desolate and hard-to-reach places. It is also one reason why the often-repeated claim that innovative

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[14] In the interviews, Ok (Okjökull) was referred to by the interviewer and the participants as a mountain, a volcano, and a glacier; Ok is not an active volcano anymore, and Okjökull, which sat atop Ok mountain, also lost its status as a glacier. Ok is classified as a mountain, because its highest peak reaches 1,450 metres above the sea level; it remains designated as a mountain on Icelandic maps though the glacier is, in newer maps, no longer indicated.

narrative strategies can bring the vastness of climate change closer to human scale and help humans comprehend their own entanglement with it (e.g. Caracciolo) is less easily put into practice. While a nonhuman (yet anthropomorphized subject) telling its story invited complex constructions of nonhuman agency, it also illustrated the challenges of relating to such a narrator. This paper points to the possibility that climate change-related impacts on nonhuman beings that are spatially distant (or seen as far away from viewers) cannot be easily assimilated or "brought closer" to all audiences by simply including a nonhuman narrator and a recognizable story format.

One of the limitations of this study is that it is restricted to responses obtained in a very particular setting, that of a research interview. Weik von Mossner (*Franny*) reminds us of the importance of complex and contextual factors when we discuss the "impact" of cli-fi narratives: It makes a difference whether we watch a film on our own or in a setting that allows opportunity for discussion and contextualization. The effectiveness of any message depends in part on the ideological mindset that the individual brings with them to the viewing situation. A different kind of interview setting might have elicited different results. However, given these context-specific variables, we maintain that this study illustrates both the potential and the limitations of filmic climate fiction as a tool to offer more complexity to the traditional, simple constructions of nonhuman agency.

Another limitation of this study is that the video was in English, and the voice was slower than a normal rate of speech; this may have confused some viewers, especially if they do not listen to a lot of content in English. The heavy Icelandic accent probably caused additional challenges, even if it was only one Finnish participant, Paul, who explicitly stated that the accent caused him difficulties. It is possible that these qualities might have caused the viewers to misinterpret parts of Ok's narration.

Several participants related to the video trailer as a political or environmental message rather than a story. Is it possible that audiences have encountered so many persuasive environmental messages and calls-to-action embedded in narrative form that they can no longer experience a cli-fi story simply as a story, or as a way to interact with fictional characters and worlds? This leads us to the question of whether cli-fi can or should be approached as pure "entertainment" instead of instrumentalizing it as a tool to deliver information. While we know that persuasive or overtly didactic uses of narrative as a tool of climate science communication can easily backfire (Dahlstrom), the narrative form can also operate as a powerful tool to communicate the ramifications of the climate crisis and invite people to engage with it (Caracciolo; Goodbody and Johns-Putra; James; Schneider-Mayerson, Weik von Mossner, and Malecki; Trexler). This study suggests that it is perhaps not constructive to frame climate fiction as primarily didactic, since experiencing a story as an environmental message—a political encounter—might overshadow the ability to experience it as simply a *story*.

Illuminating the contingencies of climate change through nonhuman-centered video narratives seems both a promising as well as a difficult vehicle to explore the emotional and intellectual challenges presented by climate change. An

anthropomorphized subject of the nonhuman environment presents a puzzle to viewers as something betwixt and between the human and the nonhuman. In the context of a structured interview, such a video can trigger constructions of complex agency that exceed traditional, simpler representations of the nonhuman environment as either threatening natural force or sublime source of divine experiences. Truly problematizing human-centric conceptualizations of agency or exploring the complicated nature of human-nonhuman interrelatedness may require longer, more sophisticated, and less anthropomorphizing stories. Having a nonhuman narrator ventriloquize what are ultimately human thoughts and concerns is not an unproblematic narrative strategy, but as we hope to have shown, it can invite reflections on a more complex picture of nonhuman agency. The findings point to the possibility that narrative and fiction can convey an accessible account of the scale of climate change while provoking critical reflections (e.g. Caracciolo; Goodbody and Johns-Putra, Trexler).

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Appendix

Text from Trailer for *Not Ok: A Small Movie about a Little Glacier at the End of the World* (2018, Cymene Howe and Dominic Boyer, directors).

(Mountain Narrator)

This is me. They call me Ok. I'm a mountain. Well really, a volcano, or at least a former volcano. I've been around here as long as there's been here to be around. And for most of that time, I've had a glacier on my back. I am not handsome like Eiríksjökull or Thorisjökull, my neighbors over there. So, the first humans, the Vikings scarcely put me in their books. They decided that me and my fellow mountain Skjaldbreiður over there were parts of a dead troll, which is ridiculous. So, humans, yeah, I have issues with them. They get obsessed about strange things. Recently, they have been getting very worked-up about glaciers. So, these two foreigners came to visit last year to talk to Icelanders about how they felt about losing their glaciers. They called themselves *anthropologists*, which I find kind of hilarious, you know, with humans, even when they're talking about glaciers it's still ALL about them.

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Narrating Loss in James Bradley's *Clade* (2015); or, Introducing Arrested Narrative in Climate Fiction

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Abstract

In James Bradley's futuristic novel of climate crises, *Clade* (2015), characters constructed to evoke empathy and readerly attachment, and whom we expect to be further developed narratologically, are prone to sudden, unexpected and unexplained disappearances. The development of cared-for characters is thus 'arrested' at the level of narration. For readers, this is disarming and disconcerting. However, we find purpose in such acts of narratorial breakage in cli-fi texts like *Clade*. In contemporary stories of climate crises, which project environmental destruction, the loss of habitats and species, and severe disruption to human and nonhuman lives, the arrestation of a character's development parallels a sense of environmental loss evoked at the level of storied content. Put another way, the sudden disappearance of character-story at the level of form imitates the sudden erasure of species, ecosystems and lived experience in the storyworld of *Clade*. We call such narratological innovation *arrested narrative*. In this essay we define and describe the appearance and function of arrested narrative in *Clade*, in some depth, as well as its emergence in two other novels of climate crises, Megan Hunter's *The End We Start From* (2017) and Diane Cook's *The New Wilderness* (2020). While investigations into narrative form in stories of the Anthropocene are not new, ecocritical literary scholarship remains largely focussed on story-level content. This examination of the way arrests in narrative discourse parallel environmental ruptures at the level of content, in selected cli-fi, is aimed at contributing to the emerging field of "econarratology" (James), concerned with the study of the workings of both form and content in ecofiction.

Keywords: Arrested narrative, climate fiction, econarratology, empathy, *Clade*.

Resumen

En la novela futurista de James Bradley sobre la crisis climática, *Clade* (2015), los personajes construidos para evocar la empatía y el apego del lector, personajes de los que esperamos un mayor desarrollo narratológico, son propensos a desapariciones repentinas, inesperadas e inexplicables. De este modo, el desarrollo de los personajes más queridos queda "suspendido" en el plano de la narración. Para los lectores, esto resulta inquietante y desconcertante. Sin embargo, en la ficción climática (cli-fi) como *Clade* encontramos un propósito en tales actos de suspensión narrativa. En los relatos contemporáneos de crisis climática, que proyectan la destrucción del medio ambiente, la

pérdida de hábitats y especies, y graves trastornos para las vidas humanas y no humanas, la suspensión en el desarrollo de un personaje es paralela a una sensación de pérdida medioambiental evocada a nivel del contenido del relato. Dicho de otro modo, la repentina desaparición del relato de un personaje en cuanto a la forma es una imitación del repentino exterminio de especies, ecosistemas y experiencias vividas en el mundo narrativo de *Clade.* A esta innovación narratológica la llamamos suspensión narrativa. En este ensayo definimos y describimos con cierta profundidad la aparición y función de la suspensión narrativa en *Clade*, así como su aparición en otras dos novelas sobre crisis climáticas, *The End We Start From* (2017), de Megan Hunter, y *The New Wilderness* (2020), de Diane Cook. Aunque las investigaciones sobre la forma narrativa en los cuentos del Antropoceno no son nuevas, los estudios literarios ecocríticos siguen centrándose en gran medida en el contenido a nivel del relato. Este examen del modo en que las suspensiones en el discurso narrativo son paralelas a las rupturas medioambientales con respecto al contenido, en una selección de cli-fi, pretende contribuir al campo emergente de la "eco-narratología" (James), que se ocupa del estudio del funcionamiento tanto de la forma como del contenido en las narraciones ecocríticas.

Palabras clave: Suspensión narrativa, ficción climática, eco-narratología, empatía, *Clade.*

Summer Leith is a key character we warm to and empathise with early in James Bradley's 2015 cli-fi novel *Clade*. The only child of Adam and Ellie, Summer suffers from asthma attacks as a child in a world becoming ever-more polluted and harder to breathe in. We get to know her as a teenager, growing up in a 2030s world of social upheaval and environmental rupture caused by climate crises. The anticipated development of her character is, however, suddenly halted. Just as we are developing a readerly attachment to her and *expecting* to learn more about Summer as a character—based on "textual cues" or "a textual blueprint" that we as readers draw on to make "provisional inferences" about a narrative's direction (Herman 150)— Summer dissipates. Her story, the development of her character, is arrested. She does return to the narrative, intermittently; however, she is given no back-story, we learn nothing about the intervening years of her life between fleeting appearances. Such unexpected arrestations also occur with the development of other well-rounded characters in *Clade*, a novel whose storyline stretches from the 2010s to near the end of the century. The effect of these arrests is disarming and disconcerting, especially given that, as Angelo Monaco argues, Bradley otherwise seeks to "arouse empathetic responses in readers" of *Clade* "by means of empathetic engagements in human vulnerability and ecological decay" (207).

We read purpose in the arrest of character development in this novel. It is a purpose, a formalistic attribute, that is particular to a number of novels of climate change, and we identify it as *arrested narrative* in climate fiction. In contemporary stories of climate crises, which project the loss of habitats, the extinction of species, the disruption and loss of human and nonhuman lives in the age of the Anthropocene, the sudden arrestation of characters' stories, as well as the irresolution of elision in a cared-for character's story, parallels and exacerbates the sense of environmental loss. Put simply, the sudden disappearance of character-story imitates the sudden erasure of species, landscape and lived experience in *Clade* in particular, but also in a number

of other cli-fi novels. Arrested narrative, then, is a narratological innovation that works formalistically *in climate fiction* to simulate and enhance a deep sense of loss and distress over human-caused, environmental disruption and destruction that is portrayed at the story-level in these novels. In other words, disruption or arrest operates here at "both the story and discourse levels" (Chatman 60). Arrested narrative purposefully impairs readerly predictability and expectation, and emulates a rupture of climate-disaster loss that species are likely to face, if action is not taken now by individuals, corporations, nations and others to impede global warming. This essay examines the workings of arrested narrative in *Clade,* in some depth, because such *formal* disruptions to character development that function as a mirror of environmental ruptures in the *content* of cli-fi narratives appears to be most prominent in this text. Later, we briefly describe further instances of arrested narrative in two other novels of climate crises, Diane Cook's *The New Wilderness* (2020) and Megan Hunter's *The End We Start From* (2017).

We use the term 'arrested' for the narratological phenomenon we describe here, as opposed to synonyms like broken, fragmented, disrupted or ruptured, because it best suits the kind of halted, though not necessarily completely severed, seizure of narratorial discourse that we find occurs in some novels of climate fiction. Narratologists offer little help in seeking to secure the best term. They have used a range of terminology to define various breaks, ruptures and arrestations in time, story and discourse, particularly in relation to modernist prose (see Albiero; Kavaloski; Keniston and Quinn; Müller-Funk; Nünning and Nünning; Stivale). Ansgar and Vera Nünning, in a study of what they refer to as "broken narratives" (37), point to a lack of definitional work on narrative arrest or rupture in narratology handbooks (37). They find no entries on "the term 'broken narrative(s)' nor on related concepts like 'discontinuity', 'fragmentation', 'incoherence' or 'rupture'" in leading textbooks (37). Rupture, which Wolfgang Müller-Funk defines as "any cessation of a narrative sequence, which contrary to narrative closure does not arise out of a story's inherent causal logic" (9), appears to be the term most commonly adopted to describe breaks in narrative time or story. However, in most usages, rupture signals complete collapse or irreparable severance. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) defines rupture in terms of a breach or break in a surface or substance, "The act of breaking or bursting […] of being broken or burst" ("Rupture"). Arrest, on the other hand, while defined in the *OED* as the "act of stopping anything in its course," can also be, "The act of standing still, […] halt, delay," as well as, "A sudden, sometimes temporary, cessation of function" ("Arrest"). While cataclysmic events that occur within the storyworlds of climate fictions can be described as ruptures, breaks at the level of narrative *discourse*, which involve sudden stoppage in some instances though mere delay or temporary cessation in others, might best be described as an arrest of narrative.

We wish to distinguish our work on arrests in narrative discourse in ecofiction from examinations of temporality in storying climate crisis more broadly. Much work has been done on the latter, that is, on the challenges of narrating the immense temporalities of environmental time. It was Barbara Adam, in *Timescapes of*

Modernity (1998), who proposed a "proper engagement with temporality" and the imagining of new "timescapes" to deal with impending environmental crises (228). Ecocritic Rob Nixon has drawn attention to the "representational challenges and imaginative dilemmas" posed by the "slow violence" of environmental destruction, "whereby violence is decoupled from its original causes by the workings of time" (11). More recently, rhetorician Debra Hawhee has urged new approaches to "how time gets told" in an age of climate crises (8): "We humans must get better at imagining a deep future, a medium term, and a very near term, to keep them all open and link them together, and to do so at the same time, in the now" (Hawhee 26). Literary scholar Sarah Dimick, in a study of "disordered environmental time," argues that environmental time is a mode of temporality that is phenomenological, "it proceeds according to phenological coordinates such as the air's temperature, the particular scent of foliage, the tenor and intensity of insect noise, and a host of other sensory data" (706). Dimick argues for more "interplay between literature" and these new environmental temporalities in the age of climate change (715). These studies point to the need for reinterpretations of time in a physical world disrupted by climate crisis and in literary texts seeking to articulate the "environmental arrhythmias" of climate change (Dimick 715). However, our focus in this study is on arrhythmias in the *narration* of climate fiction, such that this might reflect or articulate climate upheaval as represented in a fictional story. It is Dimick's questions about disordered time and *form*—"How do shifts in seasonality reverberate within literature and the human imaginary? Is it possible that our production of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases impacts narrative form?"—that we seek to address in this study (702).

While investigations into narrative form in stories of the Anthropocene are not new (see Caracciolo; James; James and Morel; Lehtimäki; Morgan), ecocritical literary scholarship has focussed largely on the social and political content that arises from the storyworld action of climate fiction. However, for Marco Caracciolo, the examination of narrative form "is crucial to bridging the divide between literary representation and social and political issues" (28), particularly with regard to stories about the ecological crisis. He argues:

> If we want to fully rise to the challenge of the Anthropocene, we need to think about it as a formal problem, where the word 'formal' denotes the cognitive and affective schemata required to envisage a phenomenon that is fundamentally multifaceted and complex, and whereby the human subject seems to loop, epistemically and morally, into nonhuman realities that Western culture has taught us to consider external to ourselves. (28)

For Caracciolo, "a more playful approach to form might be able to address [the] limitations of storytelling and meet the demand for 'new stories'" of the Anthropocene that many critics and activists claim are urgently needed (28). Arrested narrative in cli-fi represents, to invoke Caracciolo, a "departure from conventional stories and schemata via experimentation with form" that has not yet been examined in Anthropocene writing (29). In broader terms, we view our work as contributing to

what Erin James calls "econarratology" (xv), a relatively "novel project" that seeks to pair "ecocriticism's interest in the relationship between literature and the physical environment with narratology's focus on the literary structures and devices by which writers compose narratives" and by which readers process them (4, xv). James argues that "ecocritics rarely, if ever, evoke narratological ideas or vocabulary in their readings of primary texts, as they tend to remain more interested in realist content than form or narrative structure" (3). This examination of the way arrests in narrative discourse parallel environmental ruptures at the level of content offers a possible corrective to the rarity of studies of *both* form *and* content in ecofiction novels.

Clade is a novel of climate crisis set across the course of the twenty-first century.[1] Its examination of polar ice-melts, rising sea levels, species collapse, storms, floods, drought, fire, disease, as well as climate-induced social unrest, riots and refugee movements, ranges all over the globe, though it is principally set in eastern Australia. The story begins with Adam Leith, as a young climatologist, stepping out into the cold of an Antarctic day to conduct research. It's around 2022 and "the planet [is] on a collision course with disaster" (18), with flatlands of the world under flood and tropical forests on fire. Across the next nine chapters there are switches in narrative voice and character perspective, and leaps forward in time, as we follow the stories of Adam and Ellie, their daughter Summer (for a while), Summer's son Noah (more extensively), as well as others connected to their friends and families. Bradley's cli-fi, set in the near future, thus "engages with the challenges of time, place, and human agency that climate change presents" (Khalaf 60). While it deals with plagues, climate disasters, social and political turmoil, mass extinctions and other likely consequences for the planet, if action is not taken urgently to reduce global warming, "*Clade* remains largely focused on the personal, and on the strength and vulnerability of the human heart" (Baillieu).

Works of fiction that engage with climate crises tell certain kinds of truths about a lack of concerted human action on averting or minimizing planetary collapse, but they can also work towards "imagining possible strategies to move us forward" (Wright 102). Laura Wright argues that for readers of cli-fi, truths are realized via an "ability to empathise with fictional characters who are grappling with the potential devastation that our species has caused to our planet. And, in many ways, this engagement with the empathetic imagination can be a more effective intellectual and emotional driver than many of the scientific narratives that exist about climate change" (102). Thus, for Wright, "Fiction that engages with climate change […] can help us negotiate the space between dystopia and reality. It can, perhaps, help us intervene in a tragedy of our own making" (114).

One of the ways in which Bradley tells stories of an ailing, vulnerable planet and its human and nonhuman species is through the metaphor of illness. Many human

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[1] James Bradley, an Australian novelist and literary critic, describes his own novel *Clade* as "geological fiction" (qtd. in Baum), but it is also internationally-lauded "cli-fi" (Bloom). Indeed, Dan Bloom, who coined the term cli-fi, names Bradley's *Clade* as one of a few books "from the cli-fi genre" that he thinks people will "still be reading in 100 years" (qtd. in Flyn).

characters in the novel suffer from disease or from a physical or mental ailment. These include infertility, Alzheimer's, cancer, depression, malaria and cholera. However, nonhuman species suffer too, bees from "Accelerated colony collapse disorder," due to the overuse of insecticides (148), bird species from global warming and loss of habitat. There is also—prophetically, for a book published in 2015—a virus that emerges in China, "Acute Viral Respiratory Syndrome" (195), which attacks the human respiratory system, enforces isolation and mask-wearing, and spreads rapidly, lethally, around the globe. But illness in *Clade* is not just metaphor for an injured planet; people and nonhumans are made sick by a polluted, poisoned, overheated and malnourished environment. Bradley's novel might thus be described as "ecosickness fiction," an emergent literary mode that seeks to "posit the interdependence of earth and soma through affect" (Houser 2-3). For Heather Houser, such literature "shows the conceptual and material dissolutions of the body-environment boundary through sickness and thus alters environmental perception and politics. Uniting earth and soma through the sickness trope, albeit a trope with a material reality, ecosickness narratives involve readers ethically in our collective bodily and environmental futures" (3). Borrowing partly from Houser's idea of a link between ecosickness narratives and readerly affect, Angelo Monaco argues that *Clade* engages with disease and human vulnerability to evoke empathy in readers, who are thereby imbricated in "an ethics of care" for the planet (206). However, as stated above, these ties of empathy or "personal involvement" with particular characters (Louwerse and Kuiken 169), after having been carefully established, are then strategically severed in *Clade*.

Suzanne Keen defines empathy as "a vicarious, spontaneous sharing of affect [that] can be provoked […] by reading" (208). She cites "character identification" as the "most commonly nominated feature of narrative fiction to be associated with empathy" (216). Further, while the "speech, thoughts, and feelings of characters […] are very often supposed by narrative theorists to enhance character identification, […] relatively externalized and brief statements about a character's experiences and mental state may be sufficient to invoke empathy in a reader" (Keen 218-19). Interestingly, initial readerly identification with and empathy for the character of Summer, in *Clade*, may be enhanced not by one or the other of the above-cited factors but by a combination of both. That is to say, in two early chapters in *Clade* we receive only "externalized and brief statements" about Summer before we gain more direct insight into her "speech, thoughts, and feelings" in a succeeding chapter.

In the second chapter, for instance, we gain brief insights into Summer's childhood development, chiefly through the externalised perspective of her parents, Adam and Ellie. While extreme heat and power cuts—external environmental threats—pervade the family's domestic routine, Summer is raced to hospital with a severe attack of asthma. After action is taken to "open up her airways" at the hospital (34), the family arrives home to find "the air thick with the stink of rotting food" (35). The effects of global warming, literally as all-pervasive as air, cannot be averted, cannot be kept beyond either vulnerable human bodies or domestic living spaces. In

the third chapter, Summer, now a young teenager, is still narrated through an adult-as-focaliser, Maddie, Ellie's stepmother. When Ellie and Summer come to visit Maddie at her beach house, the older woman detects an abiding "core of sadness and restlessness in Summer" she has never been able to source (45). This hints at the elusive nature of Summer's character for the reader, too. Her inscrutability is accentuated by particular incidents in this chapter. As the two women watch from the beach, Summer steps out into the sea for a swim, "drops into a low, clean dive and disappears" (48). When they get back to the house, "Summer disappears to her room" (49). Later, Maddie wonders "whether there are things Ellie is not telling her about Summer" (60). There is a paradox at work here: how might we be drawn towards identifying with or empathising with Summer if she remains so elusive, so withdrawn from narratorial focus? Indeed, at this point in the text, we as readers engage in what Keen refers to as "gap-filling [...] by which a reader supplements given character traits with a fuller psychologically resonant portrait" (217). Here, Keen references Wolfgang Iser's theories on the imaginative process of reading. Iser argues that it is only by imaginatively "filling in the gaps left by the text itself" that reading becomes active and creative, and thereby engaging and pleasurable (285, 280). For Max Louwerse and Don Kuiken such imaginative 'filling-in'—a reader's "projection of possibilities for understanding narrative events [... and] for comprehending character development"—serves to enhance personal involvement in a narrative and empathy with a character (170).

Clade's fourth chapter, as with the previous chapters, has a heterodiegetic narrator, but now Summer herself is the focaliser. We get to experience her thoughts and feelings, which further accentuates our readerly interest in her as a key character. With student friends, Summer spends most of her time in bars, wandering the streets of Sydney, popping pills, and breaking into empty apartments at night, simply for the thrill of invading and sometimes trashing other people's homes. She is thus represented as a troubled young adult, restless, reckless, somewhat unsure of herself and her future. She is an engaging character. At the end of the chapter, Summer is standing on a balcony looking towards "the glow of the fires" at the edge of the city. She "closes her eyes, breathes in the smoky air" (92). Will her growing scepticism towards her friends turn her away from mischief? What will become of her? The liminal space of the balcony, Summer's halfway state of wakefulness, and the inhalation of only half-breathable air, all suggest a shift, a possible transition or orchestrated turning point in Summer's story. To this point in the novel, across three of the first four chapters, Bradley has invested much in the development of Summer's character, left us curious and wanting to know more as readers.

However, when we next meet Summer, ten or more years have suddenly passed and we learn very little more about her (105). She is living in the English countryside and has a son, Noah. But Summer is closed off from us. We learn nothing more about her character through the rest of the novel, what she studied, what work she may have done, how or why she came to be in England, what her state of mind is, how she came to have a son. Somewhat disconcertingly, development of her character

has been arrested at the level of narration. Of course, this could be seen as a writerly error on Bradley's part in the way he has constructed his narrative. But we read this arrest in character development as strategic, especially given that Summer's narrative arrestation is not exceptional. For there are other characters in *Clade*, human and nonhuman, who are either excised from the narrative altogether (such as Maddie, and bees) or who are reinserted or revived only very briefly and without recourse to where they have been or what they have been doing in an interim time period (such as Ellie and Amir). Again, there is purpose in the arrested narratives of these characters. Just as Summer's story is discursively disrupted, which functions to parallel climatic rupture in the storyworld of *Clade*, so too are other characters' stories arrested in parallel to environmental loss.

For instance, the vanishing of various bird species occurs alongside the demise of Maddie's three-year-old son Declan, who succumbs to cancer (54f, 67, 69). Both events are remembered by Maddie in a similar fashion. She ponders the disappearance of kookaburras, cuckoos and cockatoos—emblematic Australian birds—but is "not sure when they began to disappear" (55). Likewise, she "is not sure when she began to withdraw," after realising that hospital-bound Declan was beyond recovery (67). The extinction of bird species, in particular, weighs heavily on Maddie. She remembers "their crazed laughter and screeching clamour echoing through the trees like a memory of the primordial forest" (54). The novel alludes here to the ancient lineage of birds, which are direct descendants of dinosaurs (Jaggard; Padian and Chiappe). The rupture of this lineage, with "great waves of birds falling from the skies" (Bradley 55), indexes the catastrophe of climate destruction: Species that have survived on Earth since primordial times are fading into oblivion. Maddie's memory of the "laughter" and "screeching clamour" of birds highlights their sonority. With their loss the planet falls silent. After the death of Declan, the remaining part of the chapter is strikingly filled with other silences. There is the silence in Maddie's relationship with her husband, Tom, that leads to their divorce (72), the quiet of the house on the morning of Tom's funeral (70), the quiet of the beach where his ashes are scattered (73). The chapter closes with Maddie remembering Tom's sadness at the disappearance of birds: "They're dying, you know," he once remarked. "They're a ghost species" (74, 75). Pondering the memory of these words, Maddie silently watches a lone, black currawong take flight outside her window. Maddie's story is arrested after this chapter; she is not mentioned again. Hence, her quietening and the arrest of her narrative occurs alongside the silencing and gradual disappearance of birds, thereby drawing attention to a ghostly hush associated with climate-induced extinction.

Bees, which also "existed alongside the dinosaurs" (177), face a fate similar to bird species in *Clade*. Readers are introduced to bees via Ellie, who, now separated from Adam, lives in a remote rural region. On a walk one day through a forested area she stumbles across a bee hive, and meets the bees' keeper, Amir, who becomes her friend. Previously a doctor from Bangladesh, Amir is one of "hundreds of millions" of people displaced by rising sea levels: "Bangladesh is gone, as is much of Burma and

coastal India" (167). He has escaped to Australia, where he now lives as an "illegal" and tends to bees (167). "I think they know me," Amir tells Ellie. "They know things, bees. They become used to you […]. It is not so unreasonable to think they might have memories" (150). Ellie observes that the "glistening architecture of the wings" endows the bees with a "curiously archaic quality" (146). Like Amir, Ellie wonders whether bees have a concept of time, considering "they have existed for so long, their colonies shifting and changing and evolving as the world [has] altered around them" (177). Ellie further ponders what bees might be able to comprehend "of the past, of the future, of the deep well of their history" (177).

What is emphasised here is not only the bees' longevity as a species but also their affinity with humans. Bradley thus draws attention to potential synergies, knowledges and even kinships across a human/nonhuman divide, across species equally vulnerable to the effects of climate crises. Ursula Heise argues that in seeking to tell better stories about extinction we need to "frame our perception and relation to endangered nonhumans" within *human* stories (5):

> [However] much individual environmentalists may be motivated by a selfless devotion to the well-being of nonhuman species, however much individual conservation scientists may be driven by an eagerness to expand our knowledge and understanding of the species with whom we co-inhabit the planet, their engagements with these species gain sociocultural traction to the extent that they become part of the stories that human communities tell about themselves: stories about their origins, their development, their identity, and their future horizons. (5)

Indeed, stories of the survival of humans and bees are inextricably linked in *Clade*. As Ellie's relationship with Amir deepens, she wonders about becoming "attached to a man whose life is so parlous, who might disappear at any moment" (183). This reflects the precarity of bees in the narrative: their colonies are collapsing but the reasons for this collapse remain a mystery or remain untraceable to a singular cause (148). Since "there appears to be no pattern to the process," the future of both the bees and Amir remains uncertain (166). At the end of the chapter, after a sustained absence, Amir makes an unexpected return, gifting Ellie a piece of honeycomb, suggesting that both he and the bees are not about to disappear. However, bees are declared extinct in the following chapter; Amir is mentioned only once more, briefly (285). Hence, our readerly and empathetic investment in the lives of both Amir and the bees is arrested; once again, the impediment of character development at the level of narrative discourse in *Clade* parallels the climatic disruption to human and nonhuman lives at the level of story.

In seeking to identify and describe the particularities of arrested narrative in cli-fi, we pause here to acknowledge that characters disappear from all kinds of stories, sometimes for inexplicable reasons. In contemporary fiction, George R.R. Martin's fantasy series, *A Song of Ice and Fire*, which began with *A Game of Thrones* (1996) and was adapted into a hit TV series of the same name, became famous for suddenly "killing off beloved characters" (Selcke). For one critic, the shock of sudden character-death in Martin's work engineers a readerly distancing from text and story:

"Fans learned quickly not to get too attached to characters, because Martin doesn't hesitate to kill off characters who feel like vital protagonists in a split second" (Roberts). Martin himself argues his strategy works to heighten suspense, because if you kill off a beloved character, as Tolkien did with Gandalf in *The Lord of the Rings*, "the suspense of everything that follows is a thousand times greater. Because now anybody could die. And, of course, that's had a profound effect on my own willingness to kill characters at the drop of a hat" (qtd. in Schaub). For Robert Dale Parker, too, shows like *Game of Thrones*, wherein any character can die at any moment, work to "tighten the screw of suspense" and keep viewers watching: "The vulnerability of the characters makes viewers want to find out which characters will survive" (Parker 79).

However, arrested narrative in cli-fi—what we are seeking to describe as an unanticipated suspension or disruption of character development in novels of climate crises—is not a plot device aimed at generating suspense. Rather, it is a narratological strategy, a discursive device, that works formalistically to simulate and enhance a deeper sense of distress, invoked at the level of story, over human-caused, environmental disruption and destruction. We have identified this device in James Bradley's *Clade* but it can also be found in a number of other cli-fi novels, including Diane Cook's *The New Wilderness* (2020) and Megan Hunter's *The End We Start From* (2017).

Bea, the protagonist of *The New Wilderness*, joins a group of volunteers in the last remaining patch of natural wilderness—somewhere in North America—in order to escape from an overpopulated, polluted city and save her sick daughter, Agnes. The volunteers are part of a government study to determine whether humans can co-exist with nature at all. Initially, the action is focalised through Bea as we follow her and others on a challenging journey through the wilderness. Bea notes how her daughter observes her intently (65), provokes her (89), mimics her behaviour (8), and at other times acts like a wild animal (7f, 112): We empathise with Bea and her care for her daughter. However, when Bea receives news that her own mother has passed away in the city, she suddenly runs off, leaving her daughter and her partner behind (135). Her story comes to an abrupt halt. In the next section of the novel, a year later, Agnes wakes up by herself, and becomes the focaliser from here on in (139). She has adjusted to the absence of her mother and whenever she is asked about Bea, Agnes replies that her mother is dead (147). When Bea makes an unexpected return, her daughter becomes detached and distant (237f). The reader learns nothing about what really motivated Bea to leave her child; there is no extensive backstory about what Bea did during her absence, apart from brief mentions about what is going on in the city (251-53). After Bea's departure and the shift in focalisation to Agnes, readerly empathy shifts too. We begin to see the world through the eyes of a child who has grown up in the wilderness. After her mother reappears, Agnes starts to withdraw from her. This estrangement of daughter from mother is imitative of the distance Bea created to her daughter in deciding to return to the city. Bea's arrested narrative in *The New Wilderness* can be read, in turn, as mirroring the abrupt loss of home and

familial surroundings caused by the contaminated, environmentally destroyed world that is storied in the novel.

Megan Hunter's *The End We Start From*, set in a futuristic, flood-devastated England, also contains a case of arrested narrative. The protagonist and her partner, R, are forced to leave their home in London due to flooding, just after the mother gives birth to their first child, Z (6). The family of three, along with R's parents, make a getaway from the disastrously flooded south of the country towards higher ground, towards R's childhood home in the north (10). But the journey is fraught with other dangers: climate disasters have led to the collapse of political structures and outbreaks of civil unrest (37f). About a third of the way into the novel, R suddenly disappears—his narrative is arrested—and he remains absent till the very end. This disappearance is foreshadowed by R's frequent absences: he is away on a hiking trip when Z is born; he increasingly leaves his partner alone with the new-born child on the precarious journey north. He returns from a shopping trip to announce that his mother, G, has died, though the cause of her death remains unmentioned (14). Later, R embarks on a quest to forage for food with his father but returns alone to report that his father has been killed in a violent altercation (38). R rushes his partner and baby out of the house in which they are staying and into their car, saying they need to flee immediately from imminent danger. For a while, they live in their car until Z gets sick and the mother convinces R to shelter in an overcrowded refugee camp, one of many that have been set up in response to flooding and civil disorder. After the move to the camp, R vanishes, without explanation, leaving mother and infant to fend for themselves in a shelter, surrounded by strangers (43). Hunter's novel then develops as a story of human resilience in the face of climate-induced crises. Both mother and child establish new networks of sociability in order to survive. They join with other refugees in escaping to an island to avoid food shortages and violent unrest (55f). Just before the end of the novel, with both flooding and civil strife abating, mother and child return to their apartment in London. R unexpectedly reappears (118). While Z takes his first steps through the flood-ravaged apartment, signifying a new beginning—the titular end the protagonists start from—R's sudden reappearance implies the restauration of some kind of familial stability.

But R's very return to the narrative, his unanticipated survival, which is just as abrupt and surprising as his earlier disappearance, serves to illustrate a key characteristic of *arrested* narrative in cli-fi—as opposed to narrative *rupture*—as we have sought to define it. Character development is arrested in so far as it is halted, detained, held up, but *not necessarily erased* from the narrative. The disappearance of an important or cared-for character from a cli-fi novel may well mean that that character has died or will not figure again in the plot, but any such character might just as easily return to the story. Unpredictability, instability, indeterminacy, all in relation to a character's possible development: this is the sense of what arrested narrative produces in a reader in particular cli-fi. And these qualities, formalistically constructed, echo the unpredictable, volatile nature of the environment, of untimely climate catastrophe in the age of the Anthropocene. As Tobias Menely and Jesse Oak

Taylor put it, "[The] Anthropocene is unfinished, a tale without an ending" (10). Writing and reading climate fiction is ultimately about writing and reading into the unknown, the unknowable; it is about "the acceptance of inconsistency, the belief in complexity, the attention to contradiction" (Menely and Taylor 13).

Narratologists Ansgar and Vera Nünning, in a 2016-published investigation of domains and features of "aesthetic ruptures in literature" and "discontinuities in serial story-telling," point to stories of "modernism, the avantgarde, and migration" as particularly interspersed with breaks and disruptions in acts of narration (46). They then assert that:

> In addition to the fields in which there has been research on the phenomenon of broken narratives, there are, however, a number of other domains in which broken narratives have recently featured quite prominently, without as yet seeming to have caught the attention of scholars working in the respective fields. In an age of ongoing crises, it is probably no coincidence that broken narratives seem to have proliferated in a number of new contexts. (46-47)

We argue that one of the "new contexts" in which breaks or arrests in the act of narration feature quite prominently, and which has not yet caught the attention of scholars, is Anthropocene climate fiction. The arrestation of character development, as we have sought to describe it in climate fiction like *Clade*, *The New Wilderness* and *The End We Start From*, is an innovation at the level of narrative form. The sense of loss, of unexpected disruption to empathetic investment in a character's development, which works at the level of narrative discourse (i.e., regarding *how* the story is told), parallels the sense of loss that is experienced by characters within the storyworld of the novel (as well as by readers) at climate devastation, environmental destruction and the sudden loss of species, habitats, ecosystems, and human and nonhuman lives. In addition, we specifically identify this 'break' as an *arrest* rather than a *rupture* in the act of narration, given that in the cli-fi we have examined there is no finality or closure around any character's disappearance; the character's story is held in abatement, he/she/it/they may well return but might not. This narrative move both imitates and invokes the unpredictable, indeterminant nature of climatic futures in the age of the Anthropocene.

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Permeabilidades rizomáticas
en la nueva poesía de la Partición india

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Resumen

Este artículo intentará leer la memoria de la Partición india de 1947 desde las nuevas materialidades ecológicas, que estudian de manera inclusiva e interrelacionada la realidad biológica de la corporalidad de los territorios y los individuos que los pueblan, por un lado; y que son conscientes de la cinética entrópica de los cuerpos en tensión y de la permeabilidad holística y rizomática de tales cuerpos, por el otro. Para este propósito se utilizará una breve selección de poemas de entre el amplísimo corpus generado por este hito, de autoras tales como Prerna Bakshi, Sujata Bhatt, Adeeba Talukder, y Moniza Alvi. No pretende ser exhaustivo, porque sería imposible dar una visión global de la amplia cantidad de hechos traumáticos, ecos, espejismos, revisiones y relecturas que ha conllevado la Partición –una gran cicatriz que se abre y supura con facilidad—, sobre todo cuando están tan cerca los eventos, talleres y conmemoraciones de los setenta y setenta y cinco aniversarios, respectivamente. Entre los principales puntos de interés destacaremos, en primer lugar, la construcción de imágenes paisajísticas mediatizadas por la fractura; a continuación, la problematización de los diferentes exilios ideológicos provocados por la Partición; o, finalmente, la integración material de las realidades culturales e identitarias, vistas como hechos físicos y tangibles, susceptibles de desarrollo y transformación.

Palabras clave: Poesía de la Partición india, 75 aniversario, nuevos análisis materialistas, permapoiesis, ecotonos.

Abstract

This paper aims at tackling the memory of the Indian Partition (1947) from the viewpoint of new ecological materiality, that studies inclusively and interrelatedly the biological reality of the corporeality of territories and their inhabitants, on the one side; while being aware of the entropic kinetics of tense bodies and their holistic and rhizomatic permeabilities, on the other. To this purpose, a reduced bunch of poems from a much wider corpus generated by this turning point is chosen, written by women authors such as Prerna Bakshi, Sujata Bhatt, Adeeba Talukder and Moniza Alvi. It does not

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by any means pretend to be exhaustive because it would be impossible to globally visualize the enormous amount of traumatic facts, echoes, mirages, revisions and rereadings that the Partition brings about–a wide scar that opens and bleeds with ease—especially when all kinds of events, workshops and memorials of the 70th and the 75th anniversaries are so close. Among the most relevant items there could be highlighted, firstly, the construction of landscape imagery mediated by fracture; secondly, the problematization of the various ideological exiles caused by the Partition; or, lastly, the material integration of cultural and identity realities, seen as physical and tangible facts susceptible to development and transformation.

Introducción: lecturas porosas y viscosas de la materia

El quince de agosto del año 2022 se cumplieron setenta y cinco años de la Partición del subcontinente indio (1947-), un hecho histórico señalado que creó un trauma personal y nacional, de ámbito privado y público, que todavía afecta a la memoria colectiva de los países que surgieron en aquel momento.[2] Allí, y entonces, se generó con dolor un imaginario nuevo del paisaje fracturado, además de una melancolía del lugar y de las gentes que lo habitan. Ríos de tinta han cubierto, desde múltiples perspectivas, la realidad política y religiosa colonial, que hizo que la despedida del Raj británico incluyese la creación de unas fronteras artificiales e inviables entre India y Pakistán, que fueron modificadas posteriormente, con la creación de un tercer país, Bangladesh. El éxodo generado, la división de familias en ambos lados de las fronteras, la violencia multiforme, en múltiples ámbitos y cuerpos, recuerda otros hechos históricos traumáticos, producto de las guerras ideológicas y étnicas. Además, se constató la transformación sociopolítica de realidades fronterizas, teniendo como ejemplo principal la división de Bengala en lo que hoy en día es la Bengala Occidental, uno de los estados más pudientes de India, y, al contrario, la realidad de una Bangla-Desh limítrofe, empobrecida y acuciada por calamidades; o la del Punjab, entre India y Pakistán, en el otro lado. Con este hito en mente, este artículo estudia una breve selección de nuevos poemas de autoras indias, tales como

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[2] Sirva de ejemplo "Silence Between the Notes" (Aftab & Jenamani, 2019), que incluye una recopilación de textos de autores como Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Ali Sardar Jafri, Akhtarul Iman, Amrita Pritam, Munir Niazi, Nasir Kazmi, Agha Shahid Ali, y muchos otros; además de tratar del problema de la convivencia entre religiones: los poemas "exploran los conceptos de separación, desarraigo y pérdida del hogar al albor de la emigración. Los hindúes, musulmanes y sijs habían estado conviviendo durante siglos, disfrutando entre ellos de los festivales culturales y religiosos de los demás. Repentinamente, unos se tiraron a la garganta de los otros; los amigos se volvieron enemigos, casi de la noche a la mañana. Esta antología busca asir el dolor y la agonía de las gentes que fueron desarraigadas cruelmente de sus hogares y patrias" (Asad n.p.). [Todas las traducciones del inglés de fuentes primarias y secundarias en este artículo son del autor]. Cfr. asimismo la compilación "This is Not the Dawn," hecha a modo de relectura y creación de nuevo material dialógico a partir de textos escritos en el tiempo de la Partición (Asian American Writers' Workshop n.p.). También, "What is separation's geography?" (Drabhu y Jha), que incluye diez poemas de Faiz Ahmed Faiz, WH Auden, Jibanananda Das, Amrita Pritam, Shiv Kumar Batalvi, Agyega, Mehjoor, Annada Shankar Ray, Nida Fazli y Agha Shahid Ali. O la reciente "India at 75," de 2022 (Sharma n.p.).

Prerna Bakshi, Sujata Bhatt, Adeeba Talukder and Moniza Alvi, desde la óptica de los nuevos materialismos, que tienen la realidad biológica y las interrelaciones entre los cuerpos como puntos de partida.

Para evitar el pensamiento monolítico, sólido, patriarcal y antropocéntrico de las viejas estructuras científicas, las nuevas teorías materialistas ponen el foco e intentan derivar hacia una naturaleza flexible y permeable de los cuerpos y de las ideas, entrelazados inevitablemente en un todo que ha sido tradicionalmente dividido en pro de la abstracción intelectual.[3]   Esto conlleva un cambio de paradigma sustancial, en favor de posturas más holísticas y afectivas, donde el "sentipensamiento" sería un método mucho más propicio.[4]   Los nuevos paradigmas inclusivos, de esta forma, cuentan con texturas que son siempre fluidas, líquidas, orgánicas y articuladas—a pesar de contar con mayores o menores elementos de resistencia.[5] Nos adentraremos, así, en las principales herramientas que pueden ser utilizadas para el análisis de realidades posicionales, puntuales y concretas, como esta de la Partición India de 1947. En este sentido, las conexiones corporales se conciben como un gran núcleo somático, viviente y sintiente, pero no vertebrado ni unitario, sino con características rizomáticas.[6] Parece, pues, necesario abarcarlo desde estrategias que partan de concepciones biológicas y fisiológicas tangibles, y no de abstractos filosóficos humanocéntricos, cargados del peso de una tradición

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[3] Especialmente, nos referimos a las teorías de la interconexión y la ética interrelacional de Braidotti (*Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* y las posteriores elaboraciones sobre la posthumanidad); el Realismo agencial de Barad (*Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*); la Transcorporalidad de Alaimo en la que "estamos literalmente enredados en el mundo físico material" (Kuznetski, 139); o el parentesco de Haraway, en el que es necesario "generar parientes sinchthónicamente, simpoiéticamente. Sea lo que sea que seamos, necesitamos generar-con -devenir-con, componer-con los 'confinados a la tierra'" (*Seguir con el problema* 158).

[4] El neologismo "sentipensar" describe un paradigma que reúne conceptos éticos y estéticos, con el fin de evitar dualismos erróneos entre el pensamiento y el sentimiento. Orlando Fals Borda, en Colombia, lo utiliza, por ejemplo, con la acepción de una cultura "anfibia," en el ámbito de los pescadores fluviales del país, la cual, según Tamayo Leal, "no sólo se mueve entre dos ambientes distintos (ser "anfibio" entre la razón y el corazón), sino que además es capaz de juntar el saber y el sentir, reconociendo el vínculo estrecho que subyace a la relación mente-cuerpo, razón-corazón, saber-sentir, etc., y extrayendo de allí nuevas formas de conocer sintiendo" (Sentipensar n.p.). También Saturnino de la Torre acuña el término de "holomovimiento," una forma de actuar holísticamente, pensando y sintiendo sin hacer prevalecer uno sobre el otro (Moraes & De la Torre).

[5] Especialmente clave es la "modernidad líquida (o tardía)" de Zygmunt Bauman, que describe las nuevas sociedades desde el desmantelamiento de las instituciones sólidas, que conduce a una falta de referentes –al desapego por el entorno, el consumo excesivo, la jerarquización, el egoísmo, la contaminación, la producción abundante de residuos, y el aislamiento tecnológico (o "efecto otaku").

[6] Jacques Deleuze y Félix Guattari construyen el "rizoma" de la cultura a través del constante cambio de las cosas en un devenir espaciotemporal; en ese sentido, la conectividad interactúa con las relaciones interespecies como "núcleos descentrados," pero con complicidades comunes. El rizoma se define, así, como una "arborescencia fúngica" y orgánica que se reproduce en la distancia, divergiendo y diversificándose sin raíces: "un rizoma no tiene principio ni fin; permanece siempre en el medio, entre las cosas, un inter-ser, un intermezzo. El árbol es una filiación, pero el rizoma es una alianza, una alianza única" (25). Estas y otras teorías ejemplifican una nueva "posicionalidad" del animal humano en el entorno natural.

humanista (darwinista y colonial) que ha sido mediada por la divinización de nuestra especie y no visibiliza bien la verdadera naturaleza de las Otredades no-humanas.[7]

Los materialismos feministas, postcoloniales y ecologistas son conscientes de la necesidad de un cambio de enfoque teórico y utilizan para ello distintos instrumentos. Nancy Tuana, por ejemplo—partiendo del trauma provocado en Estados Unidos por la catástrofe humana del huracán Katrina en Nueva Orleans—, fue consciente de la naturaleza tensa, pero finalmente permeable, de la materia, que definió como una "porosidad viscosa" (Alaimo, *Material Feminisms*). La "viscosidad" indica la fuerza que un cuerpo imprime para mantener su forma y apariencia tangible, a pesar de que su naturaleza es potencialmente frangible y podría dividirse. La "porosidad," por otra parte, parece una estrategia contraria, puesto que la resistencia a la fragmentación proviene de la facilidad que esta materia tiene para dejarse traspasar. El oxímoron "porosidad viscosa" es, así, un elemento poderoso, extrapolable para definir la capacidad de resiliencia, entropía y acomodación de la materia, en territorios cruzados, problemáticos y hostiles, por una parte, pero también polifónicos, multiculturales y policromáticos, por otra. El análisis literario y cultural materialista que se propone, por consiguiente, parte de la concepción unitaria de lo corpóreo y lo espiritual, lo fisiológico y lo emocional, que nace de la propia concepción de la vida en la tierra. Por eso, se incorporan focalizaciones biológicas esenciales, tales como la respiración y los sentimientos, de una forma orgánica y tangible.[8]

Convengamos entonces que un análisis permapoético concibe el texto como una entidad sólida, incidiendo

> … en la creación literaria como ente biológico—que nace, crece, respira, transpira, evoluciona, muere, pesa, se descompone, se aligera, se transforma y nace…—La relación material indaga en construcciones físicas como la jardinería poética, la sedimentación, el abono, y, sobre todo, la respiración y exudación, como elementos de construcción lírica. (Oliva 242)

Los "permacuerpos", en ese contexto, se constituirían como unidades de contenido material, y actúan de forma vertical, centrípeta y concéntrica, a través de la

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[7] El concepto de "orientalismo" de Edward Said, la "subalternidad" de Gayatri Spivak y las teorías postcoloniales de *The Empire Writes Back*, de Ashcroft, Griffiths y Tiffin (y, más tarde, las ecopostcoloniales, de Huggan y Tiffin), junto a la "localización" y el "tercer espacio" de Homi Bhabha, que forman ejes esenciales del pensamiento postcolonial, pueden extrapolarse al estudio de lo "postcolonial verde" (*Green Postcolonialism*). Tanto la construcción artificial del Otro, a través de falsas dicotomías generada a través del saber científico (Said); la discriminación vertical y basada en la superioridad de un poder foucaltiano (Spivak); la centralización, reconstrucción y reconocimiento de las diferencias (*Empire*); así como el análisis de la localización y los intersticios entre culturas (Bhabha); son útiles para el estudio de la naturaleza elocuente y agente; de la relación entre animales humanos y más-que-humanos; así como para visibilizar las injusticias ambientales, dignificar especies y territorios, y desentronizar el reinado patriarcal humano sobre el planeta.

[8] Este concepto se ejemplifica muy bien por medio de artistas como Juliana Spahr, que, en su libro *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs* (2005), afirma que sentimientos como la rabia o el dolor, por ejemplo, son identificables y acumulativos entre todos los seres sintientes que "respiran" (esta relación de familiaridad y empatía constituye uno de los ejes vertebradores del Ecofeminismo, en su afán por ampliar las injusticias de género a la naturaleza y sus habitantes).

sedimentación provocada por el paso del tiempo y la acumulación de historias, sucesos, en un espacio determinado.[9] Las metáforas corpóreas y sensoriales (de densidad y disolución) se entrelazan, como palimpsestos sucesivos. Evitando la lectura simple, de una sola capa—y limpiando (o traspasando) las diversas pátinas que han cubierto dicha realidad orgánica—podrán alcanzarse sus identidades esenciales, sus puntos de origen y sus formas primigenias, sin menoscabar la realidad conectiva de los cuerpos, que se sitúa en un plano transversal a ellos (como los "transcuerpos" de Alaimo, por citar un ejemplo). La naturaleza se transforma, así, en un lugar de unidad y revelación—un espacio físico en permanente mutación—que no se constriñe a las lecturas de tropos metafóricos y metonímicos o semánticos, sino que imbrica su materialidad en el discurso abstracto. A través del esencialismo celular puede llegarse a la anagnórisis y a la transfiguración, es decir, la fisicidad "es" semiótica y expansiva, y como postura, ejerce peso y resistencia, no solo corpórea, sino también ideológica, abstracta y militante. Elementos básicos de esta ingeniería fisiológica serían la sedimentación, la fertilización y, sobre todo, la respiración y la exudación, como tropos de la fabricación lírica y del estudio teórico-crítico materialista.

Otro concepto que ayuda al nuevo análisis material es el de "ecotono." Su punto de partida es el estudio de los límites de los ecosistemas en tensión, y ofrece una nueva alternativa a los *border studies*—tan relevantes en los estudios antropológicos, culturales y postcoloniales.[10] En biología, un ecotono es una zona limítrofe (delimitada y concreta) situada entre dos biomas, en cuyos hábitats conviven formas específicas de vida, muy diferentes entre sí, hasta el punto de no ser compatibles—con lo que la idiosincrasia opuesta de su naturaleza crea una gradación de tensiones, que van desde lo que parece fácil de traspasar a lo infranqueable a primera vista. Dicha gradación se produce entre Ecoclinas (o zonas de transición geográficas) y Ecotipos (las arquitecturas corporales determinadas que conviven en un bioma), en una fascinante combinación entre la mayor o menor viscosidad identitaria del lugar, por un lado, y la identidad biológica específica de sus habitantes, por el otro. Las posibilidades de cruce y la posterior supervivencia vital dependerán, entonces, del nivel de oposición sistémica entre ambos cuerpos. Una hostilidad orgánica que, paradójicamente, genera mayor energía creadora cuanta más dificultad encuentra en sus confines.

Si extrapolásemos esta realidad biogeográfica al análisis literario y cultural, podemos ver cómo encaja muy bien con otros conceptos teóricos provenientes de los estudios fronterizos e identitarios, interraciales y multiculturales—tales como la nostalgia creativa; el mimetismo; la dislocación y el desplazamiento; las identidades mono- y policromáticas; la visibilización y el resurgimiento; la falacia patética y el

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[9] O un cronotopo, que diría Bajtín, es decir, una condensación espaciotemporal y dialógica que significa en el relato.

[10] Términos y desarrollos como la "liminalidad," los "intersticios," el "*In-betweenness*," o el antes mencionado "tercer espacio" de Bhabha –por nombrar algunos de los más frecuentados hoy en día— forman parte de esta disciplina.

diálogo finto entre animales humanos y no-humanos; las "patrias imaginarias"; la condición anfibia; y un largo etcétera de términos semejantes. Ni que decir tiene que el ecotono no solo sirve para acercarse a las fronteras físicas y materiales, naturales y políticas evidentes, sino que llega (desde el materialismo inclusivo que hemos estado analizando) hasta las pulsiones y barreras mentales, los estudios del trauma y los afectos, las esquizofrenias culturales, y otros aspectos distintivos de la mente humana. En ambos casos, para el estudio de la poesía de la Partición, los dos términos son particularmente significativos: los permacuerpos, por la naturaleza traumática y prolongada en el tiempo, que produce una sedimentación individual y colectiva; oral y transmitida por escrito; y multifocal y problematizada por imaginarios radicalmente distintos. Y los ecotonos, porque las múltiples fronteras trazadas (en el este y el oeste, y entre regiones entre sí, divididas arbitrariamente y de forma caprichosa) generaron—a través de la violencia y el sufrimiento—una energía traumática poderosa y una gran cantidad de literatura posterior, que es equiparable a la fuerza atómica de la fisión resultante, como comprobaremos a continuación.

La Partición india: un caso de estudio

La natura loquens *orgánica de Prerna Bakshi*

En los nuevos textos sobre la Partición, escritos desde una mayor distancia temporal, esta se manifiesta muchas veces como un relato de los antepasados (madres, padres, tíos, abuelas…), que es apropiado y sentido profundamente como un hecho traumático heredado de forma epigenética, es decir, que deja una huella profunda, alterando la conducta sin tener razones fisiológicas o de mutación concretas. En consecuencia, la voz poética no es testigo del hecho, sino que se convierte en relatora, traductora y termina por agenciarla visceralmente a su discurso. El poema "Sed" de Prerna Bakshi (*Tipton* 15) es un claro ejemplo, puesto que comienza señalando la experiencia vivida por su tío (en este caso en la otra frontera, la de Pakistán), situando la historia en los albores de la división que se iba a producir, en un clima de angustia y éxodo preventivo de poblaciones con creencias contrarias a la ortodoxia del lugar[11]:

> Me cuenta mi tío de cuando las voces
> de la Partición agitaban el aire,
> todo olía a Partición.
> No solo la tierra.
> Nada quedaba fuera
> de su alcance.
> Todo debía partirse.
> Incluso el agua.

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[11] La autora coloca esta frase al final del poema: "[Nota de la autora: Cuando corrieron rumores sobre la Partición, tanto mis abuelos maternos como los paternos, con sus familias, tuvieron que huir de Pakistán. El poema reflexiona sobre el caos y el clima político que había en aquella época]."

En las vías del tren,
gritos de agua hindis, agua musulmanes
podían escucharse mientras los refugiados que huían
buscaban en sus bolsillos andrajosos
para pescar unas pocas monedas que cambiar por agua.
El viaje era largo. No todo el mundo
pudo conseguir pasar al otro lado
con vida.

Los que lo hicieron iban con su sed mitigada
Pero, ¿y el agua? ¿Qué aplaca su sed?
Si el agua pudiese hablar
confesaría su sed.
Su sed de paz.
Sed de cordura.

Sed por que la dejen
En paz de una puta vez.

Al comienzo del poema se describe el terremoto biopolítico que sucedió en aquel momento, en el que se perdió la convivencia y, como en toda catástrofe—aunque al ser esta no-natural podría haberse evitado—se generaron múltiples necesidades elementales para la vida: la primera y primordial, la de la subsistencia, que pasa básicamente por la necesidad de beber. Quizás lo más importante desde el punto de vista permapoético sea la prosopopeya que Bakshi utiliza con el agua, dotándola de voz—y por tanto de agencialidad receptiva—para servir de estandarte a la ignominia humana que presencia y de la que es parte fundamental. Así, como en un juicio salomónico en el que el objeto de disputa se virara y profiriera una clamorosa queja, el agua viene a convertirse en el símbolo de la naturaleza contra la destrucción del mundo que generan las hostilidades de las poblaciones de la especie humana. En última instancia, se invierten las tornas y el agua deviene en juez (en el propio Salomón) y, por medio de una paradoja oximorónica poderosa, proclama que tiene "sed de paz y de cordura." La naturaleza, en suma, convertida en fisura sísmica contra su voluntad, reniega de volverse un ecotono infranqueable y lanza un improperio que no es más que la suma de todos los dolores colectivos que en aquel momento se profieren. Esta natura loquens, en suma, es consciente de la hostilidad del animal humano contra sí mismo, y de lo destructivo que puede ser con su entorno, poniendo "vallas al campo" y destruyendo así el orden natural de las cosas.

La misma autora, en su poema "Preguntas" (Peril n.p.), retrata de forma compasiva y emotiva el vacío poblacional que supuso el éxodo:

Una pulsera de cristal rota
caída en la calle
trae más preguntas que respuestas

Un hogar abandonado
justo en medio del vecindario
trae más preguntas que respuestas

> Un vecindario apartado
> que no se ve a simple vista
> trae más preguntas que respuestas
>
> Pulseras de cristal rotas, hogares abandonados, vecindarios apartados,
> herencias todas de la partición
> partición – trae más preguntas que respuestas

En este caso, lo que es más significativo es la técnica expresionista que hace significar la ausencia de vida a través de la mirada autorial, posada sobre los restos de objetos y espacios concretos. Por consiguiente, las preguntas elucubran los hechos sucedidos a través de estos elementos: la pulsera de cristal nos avanza una huida precipitada y agitada, en medio del caos y de la urgencia del peligro que se siente; el hogar abandonado, el hecho de la segregación que se ha producido en cada villa; el vecindario apartado, la imposibilidad de convivencia ideológica entre grupos que habitan un mismo espacio, y, con ello, la creación de guetos. Todos ellos constituyen la muestra fehaciente de la derrota de la humanidad.

Estas dos piezas de Bakshi, para resumir, dan constancia de la pervivencia del trauma de la Partición, dando testimonio no-directo (a través de experiencias orales de familiares de generaciones anteriores), pero también visiones nuevas del hecho que ha provocado que la identidad propia se altere y la realidad física transmute. Pero lo que es más importante es que el relato se hace teniendo a la naturaleza (y al entorno) como protagonista agente, dotándola de voz y siendo el escenario activo de las historias. Tanto si se queja de la sinrazón humana (en "Sed") como si se convierte en un lugar desolado (en "Preguntas"), lo cierto es que adquiere dimensiones protagónicas y se sitúa en un lugar donde la conectividad y el apego por el lugar pueden transformar la visión de los hechos.

La distorsión del locus amoenus *de Sujata Bhatt*

Sujata Bhatt (1956-) narra, asimismo, una experiencia traumática familiar de segunda generación, a partir del relato de su madre cuando era casi una adolescente, en el poema "Partición" (Genius n.p.). Atemorizada por la violencia de la calle, la joven se recluye en el jardín, que se convierte en un refugio parlante donde las emociones de miedo, angustia y frustración pueden ser mitigadas. Es muy interesante comprobar la combinación sonora de un "lugar" que se crea para la contemplación estética, la meditación y el soliloquio por excelencia, invadido ahora por los gritos, golpes, ruidos y toda la desazón exterior. Una multitud, cobijada en la estación ferroviaria de Ahmedabad—en la zona sur de la línea divisoria pakistaní—ante la amenaza exterior de linchamiento, se agolpa y espera la llegada de una salvación vial que no acontece; se convierten, así, en el símbolo colectivo de la tragedia sucedida en 1947, que quedó grabada no solo como un shock en la memoria de la protagonista sino en la de sus descendientes y en la conciencia colectiva del lugar. La actitud de la

tía paterna de su madre, en contrapunto, representa una dualidad significativa. Demostrando madurez, la señora ayuda con provisiones y bebida a la gente que está enjaulada en un lugar lleno de hierro y máquinas, en contraposición con el jardín. La continuidad en el tiempo (que puede ser considerada corta en perspectiva) se narra como algo angustioso, que pareció durar una eternidad.

Esta es una de las características propias de la generación del trauma: la impresión, como un clisé, de una perturbación que se convierte en una pulsión obsesiva. Sin embargo, y paradójicamente, el jardín es también una prisión para la joven, aislada en soledad por el propio miedo que la paraliza. Y la naturaleza no se siente en armonía, sino que se sofoca, se distorsiona por las interferencias causadas por la geoestrategia política, que olvida las consecuencias de los actos de despacho. Hasta las sombras de los árboles pueden devenir fantasmagóricas y los cantos de los pájaros, añadir decibelios al tumulto. En un desequilibrio obvio, los lugares mutan su condición natural: el jardín pierde su amenidad y se muestra ambiguo y en desequilibrio, contagiándose de la inestabilidad mental de la protagonista; y la estación de tren, un lugar concebido para permanecer temporalmente y abrir puertas al exterior, se estanca y paraliza como una trampa de cazador. Esta disociación funcional topofóbica[12] no es más que la constatación de la perdurabilidad del trauma en la historia de la región:

> Tenía por aquel entonces diecinueve años
> y cuando estaba en el jardín
> podía oír los gritos de la gente
> atrapada en la estación de tren de Ahmedabad.
> Sintió que nunca acabaría – el ruido –
> un sonido nuevo en la ciudad.
> Su tía, la hermana de su padre,
> solía ir cada día a la estación
> con comida y agua –
> Pero ella se sentía atemorizada,
> sentía que no podía ir con su tía –
> Así que se quedó en el jardín
> y escuchaba. Incluso los pájaros sonaban distintos –
> y las sombras que daban los árboles de nim
> no traían consuelo.
> Y cada día pedía
> tener el coraje suficiente para ir con su tía –
> y los días pasaban y ella
> escuchando los gritos de la gente.

En el desenlace, tras una interrupción temporal que nos trae hasta el momento presente, se produce la contextualización de la historia: la efeméride del cincuenta

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[12] Inscrito dentro de la geografía de la percepción, el geógrafo sinoamericano Yi-Fu Tuan (*Topophilia: A study of environmental perception, attitudes, and values* [1974] y *Space and place: The perspective of experience* [1977]) analiza las razones por las que se siente apego o desapego por un lugar determinado, o lo que es lo mismo, "topofilia" o "topofobia." El discurso, por consiguiente, va definido por la emocionalidad sensoafectiva del espacio habitado y las experiencias dichosas o traumáticas que se hayan tenido durante el transcurso.

aniversario de la Partición, en 1997, ha provocado este desahogo por parte de la madre, que acaba de convertirse en septuagenaria. El hecho de que se produzca a medianoche es muy significativo, puesto que la medianoche es también una línea divisoria en sí misma,[13] y marca el momento del cambio de estatus geopolítico. La relatividad temporal continúa ofreciendo el contraste entre la milenaria existencia de la India y los cincuenta años del nuevo país, sorprendentemente más joven que la misma madre. Esta cadena de hechos no hace más que generar un crescendo de sensaciones, desde la tristeza a la culpa, y finalmente la cólera, que termina con la invectiva—espontánea y dirigida contra una sola persona, pero extrapolable a otros muchos agentes. La expresión puede ampliarse al desconocimiento del territorio, al antropocentrismo patriarcal y al caprichoso trazado de las fronteras, que ignora hábitats físicos, biomas, formas de vida de animales humanos y no-humanos, equilibrios ecológicos, y también a las particiones familiares, la armonía de grupos étnicos y sociales, y un largo etcétera. El *locus vivendi* escindido resuena en cada efeméride, más o menos modesta, que se ha de producir desde entonces hasta nuestros días. Y la culpa de la joven por paralizarse ante el trauma no puede ser comparable a la del prócer, ignorante de la realidad cotidiana:

> Ahora, cuando mi madre
> me lo cuenta a medianoche
> en su cocina – ella ya con
> setenta años e India con
> 'cincuenta'. 'Pero, obviamente,
> India es mucho más vieja', me dice,
> 'India siempre ha estado ahí.
> Pero cuánto me gustaría haber
> ido con mi tía
> a la estación de tren –
> Aún me siento
> Culpable de eso'.
> Y entonces me pregunta:
> '¿Cómo pudieron
> haber dejado a un hombre
> que apenas sabía
> de geografía
> dividir un país?'

En resumen, Sujata Bhatt es conciente del legado de dolor que impera en todas aquellas personas que sufrieron la Partición y se apropia de generación en generación, creciendo en matices y agrandándose en el espacio-tiempo. La herida no solo es psicológica, sino que es también territorial y afecta tanto al sentido del lugar como de la pertenencia física. La materia sufre simpoiéticamente y se entrelaza con

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[13] La simbólica "medianoche" –es decir, un momento de oscuridad que divide nuestra concepción temporal del día, en el que todo se desdibuja alrededor y se pierde la noción de la realidad funcional— ha sido utilizada con cierta asiduidad para describir la pérdida de la realidad geográfica india, la división territorial y la desazón provocada a partir de entonces. Cfr. la premiada novela, booker de bookers, *Hijos de la medianoche* (1980), de Salman Rushdie, como ejemplo sobresaliente.

los estados de ánimo de los personajes. Atestigua y se deforma con el trauma, pero no tiene capacidad agencial, sino que sirve de continente sintiente de los hechos.

El diálogo líquido de Adeeba Talukder

La naturaleza adquiere mayores dimensiones en todos los rangos del análisis, en el poema titulado "Línea divisoria," de la pakistaní-americana Adeeba Talukder (*At the time of partition* 57-58). Este texto largo, dividido en tres partes y situado en la frontera pakistaní, constituye un alegato poderosamente visual, al contrario que el auditivo de Bhatt contra los efectos calamitosos de 1947. Así, en la primera parte, el ecotono sísmico de la Partición se convierte, por medio de la metáfora, en una barrera mórbida que se desintegra en una miríada de polillas que huyen de la luz como un polvo venenoso y artificialmente fabricado. Recuerda someramente la "mancha de tinta" que supuso el trazado político de la frontera, imaginada en un despacho de político (siguiendo la cadena de imágenes que pueden sobrevenir al leer el texto). La expresión "torcida" es clave para entender la posición militante de la autora, que describe una vez más el error que supuso su trazado, y el peso de la carga de ese error, que pervive en el tiempo y no cesa de supurar. En este sentido, la línea termina por convertirse en el borrón que se extiende por todo el mapa –que desdibuja y cubre como una losa no solo el paisaje, sino todo el hábitat natural y las criaturas que lo pueblan: sus sistemas de vida, cultivos, villas, cosechas, animales no-humanos, tasas de natalidad y mortalidad… Las polillas son, en realidad, una suerte de diminutos vampiros que succionan la luz, que es la generadora de vida, de forma que la destrucción es total.

> Trazaste en nuestra tierra
> una línea divisoria torcida.
> Esa mañana
> aprendimos: el amanecer
> había sido mordido por polillas,
> volando en hordas, como locas
> hacia la luz. Sin saber la naturaleza
> de la luz, acabaron
> con todo.

El poema continúa, de forma poderosamente visual, desgranando la infección que supuso el hecho traumático. La perspectiva mira desde lo alto, como si fuéramos un ácaro, un virus de esa malatía, o como si nos hubiéramos convertido en un pájaro y volásemos—lo que lleva a entender que todas estas imágenes fantasmagóricas son producto de un mal sueño, una pesadilla con tintes surrealistas, que es otra manera de expresar el dolor postraumático que se sufre. Ahora se focaliza la fisura como un "abismo plateado" que es lo único que puede verse en la oscuridad. En tres dimensiones, el mapa de la Partición se rasga, cruje y es imposible de cruzarse. El ecotono viscoso, en este sentido, se vuelve pétreo y se parte en mil pedazos, coadyuvado por la violencia generalizada que se sucede en el continuo espacio-

temporal. Una nueva metáfora, a continuación, transforma en ceniza las sombras producidas por el vuelo de las polillas: la tierra ha sido abrasada, reducida a ceniza, a polvo, a la nada. Lo único que queda entonces es el éxodo y la capacidad creativa orgánica que se produce cuando un trauma de estas dimensiones acontece, que es una de las condiciones positivas de la viscosidad porosa de los bordes en tensión de los biomas en conflicto.

> Desde lo alto, solo divisábamos
> un abismo plateado, de una milla de largo,
> cada lado sumergido
> en la oscuridad—
>
> la oscuridad de la noche, la oscuridad
> de la ceniza. Buscamos, tamizamos
> la tierra y no encontrábamos nada.
>
> Nos marchamos, intentando preservar
> al menos la memoria. Nuestro idioma,
> como nosotros, no tenía patria.

La segunda parte restringe la visión a un espacio paradójicamente íntimo y propicio para el diálogo, pero al mismo tiempo situado en el eje líquido de la línea divisoria, en la "infinitud" de la nada con que acaba la primera sección: el ojo de las sombras. Ahí, en el silencio del vacío se establece la interconexión, la complicidad transcorpórea y enmarañada de la materialidad. La voz humana "habla" y se comunica empáticamente con un bote vacío, que se supone que ha sido utilizado repetidas veces para cruzar esta "laguna estigia" que ha provocado tantas muertes y tanto sufrimiento[14]:

> Hablé con un bote pequeño
> en aguas negras, solo
> en la infinitud:
>
> ¿Qué pulso controlas?
> ¿y qué aguas temblorosas
> te mantienen?
>
> ¿Qué camino
> hacia delante te encontraste?
> ¿Qué ha vivido en tu pasado?

De este modo, las preguntas dejan de ser retóricas para significar en su contexto material. Ecos de seres concretos, momentos de cotidianidad pasados y de incertidumbres futuras, se entretejen en la bruma negra de las repercusiones del

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[14] En lecturas traumáticas psicoanalíticas, esto sería el producto de una distorsión de la mente, afectada por la angustia existencial, es decir, un efecto unitario que no establece comunicaciones entre cosas. El cambio de paradigma materialista lo relee como una interconexión agente (Braidotti), una comunicación transcorpórea (Alaimo) o una red, una maraña afectiva y sintiente (Haraway), por citar algunos ejemplos.

infausto acto. La inefabilidad resuena como un oxímoron transcendental que se sustenta en el tembloroso terreno liquido de las aguas:

> El bosque se oscurece
> a la noche, hasta que
> queda solo su silueta.
>
> No hay respuestas.
> el aire se vacía, sin nada
> que prender.
>
> En la distancia, palpita el horizonte
> como un corazón

Tras esta localización puntual que desglosa preguntas esenciales en un espacio significativamente inestable—y tras la estasis retórica—se desvía la mirada a otro elemento natural: el bosque del litoral que rodea el río y que es tan solo una silueta que puede apenas adivinarse. Este hecho demuestra que la materialidad, a pesar de ser cómplice de los anhelos de respuestas, no es capaz de dar significados a la sinrazón humana. Una cadena de imágenes simbólicas y lógicas se sucede: el silencio físico al no existir articulación sonora alguna; la soledad de la no habitación del lugar a causa de la desbandada provocada; la falta de referencias físicas en la sucesión alegórica de diversas clases de sombras (naturales y artificiales…). Lo que sí se resalta, finalmente, es la compasiva complicidad del entorno, personificado a través del horizonte que late y, tras tanto silencio acumulado, retumba en la distancia. Es lo único que queda y que puede ser reparador ante tanto vacío.

La tercera y última parte, en un giro del discurso, consigue al fin terribles respuestas, que no hacen más que acrecentar la gravedad del suceso:

> Cuéntales:
>
> He visto piel machacada
> hasta el hueso, muerta,
> transparente como el papel.
>
> He visto mentes enteras
> hechas ceniza.
>
> He visto más agua
> de la que puedo comprender,
>
> a los humanos pedir
> toda la luz posible.
>
> Y algunas noches, juro
> que está tan oscuro
> que Dios no nos alcanza a ver.

Lo que se narra es la destrucción violenta y corpórea de habitantes, intentado escapar del escenario de terror que contemplábamos en la primera parte. De nuevo, las

texturas empleadas son sustanciales para lograr la conmiseración: la piel machacada parece una receta macabra de algún cocinero diabólico en un mortero geográfico, realizada de forma abstracta e ignorante del lugar. El hecho de ser "transparente como el papel" nos devuelve a la cartografía torcida y emborronada del principio. La materia celulosa, es, en sí, una transformación artificial humana de la naturaleza; es decir, una textura plana de la compleja realidad dimensional y orgánica de los espacios reales. La disolución de las conciencias va acorde a la destrucción de los cuerpos físicos—con ecos lejanos de las piras funerarias hindúes. Se deforma, así, el orden simbólico purificador de los elementos esenciales de la naturaleza—fuego, aire, agua, tierra—, ejemplificando una destrucción antropogénica y autófaga que parte en sus orígenes, y en teoría, de la racionalidad intelectual negociadora para resolver un conflicto. El poema termina abundando en la oscuridad absoluta, con alusiones teológicas esenciales—Dios es la luz—y trayéndola al presente, con lo que el permacuerpo, como un palimpsesto cubierto por pátinas temporales, es revelado.

La viscosidad permeable de Moniza Alvi

La escritora pakistaní-británica Moniza Alvi (1954-) ejemplifica muy bien la imbricación entre cuerpos, sentimientos y pensamientos de las redes tentaculares de Haraway. En sus obras, la autora levanta su voz contra las dicotomías generadas por las distintas colonizaciones del territorio indio, y la indiferencia, a menudo hipócrita, de los gobernantes hacia el entorno que remodelan en pro del refinamiento de la "civilización." Así, en "¡Acordáos de Cawnpore!" (*Atlanta Review* 28), una frase de la monarca victoriana destapa la escisión entre la bondad, la autoridad y la dignitas del poder colonial, por una parte, y la visceralidad de la realidad del paisaje y de todos sus habitantes, por otra: "*Querida Lady Conserva* escribió la Reina Victoria / **Todos nuestros pensamientos van dirigidos a India.** // ¿Pero qué le importa o sabe el tigre / de pensamientos o cartas / o chintz o acuarelas?" Pero el poema que interesa aquí es "Partición de Corazones," donde la voz poética filosofa, de forma especial, sobre la causa en sí de la Partición, evitando las quejas y las razones históricas y políticas de los que la llevaron a cabo, zanjando con una sola frase todo el dolor acaecido: la cara "oscura" de la Independencia. Con esta elección ética, la autora prefiere potenciar la intensidad integral de la fractura a las razones ideológicas y abstractas que la provocaron:

Una Partición de Corazones, fue llamada
esta cara oscura de la Independencia.

Se culpa a los británicos, se culpa al Congreso,
se culpa a Nehru, se culpa a Jinnah.

¿Y de qué sirve?

Una Partición de Corazones, fue llamada.

Y, sin embargo, las conexiones no se han roto,

algunas, al menos –

entre Pakistán e India
    los vivos y los muertos

las familias y los que ya no están
    las gentes y ellos mismos.

Una Partición de Corazones, fue llamada
esta Partición de cristal blindado.

Aunque primando las figuras humanas y sus repercusiones en el tiempo y el espacio, el poema expresa abiertamente las "conexiones" plurales y rizomáticas que se establecen entre los cuerpos, y lo hace de una forma vertical, no-lineal y fragmentada, uniendo territorios, presente y pasado, vivos y muertos, familias rotas, e identidades poliédricas. Estas redes, que vinculan orgánicamente las ideas y lo material, hablan de una oposición directa a los muros rígidos de la ortodoxia, y se imbrican con la condición líquida y permeable de la nueva modernidad. Interesa especialmente la referencia final al refuerzo de cristal que separa la realidad de ambas naciones. La materia del cristal parece infranqueable físicamente, al contacto, pero es absolutamente permeable desde el sentido de la vista, y su transparencia la hace mucho más peligrosa a un tiempo, puesto que parece fácil de cruzar y lleva al choque inevitable, pero a su vez define la semejanza "familiar" de los seres que habitan en cada lado. El cristal es, también, una sustancia delicada, frágil y fácilmente rompible. Blindar el cristal sugiere, entonces, que la frontera—si alguna vez lo pudo parecer— no es tan infranqueable, y añade al artificio de la mano del hombre una certeza de que hay que defenderla, porque es débil y caprichosa. Es decir, al efecto espejo del cristal, en el que dos realidades constituyen indudablemente un mismo cuerpo, se une la artificiosidad *contra natura* de su creación y la necesidad de mantener reforzada la coartada de su mantenimiento. Contemplación, doppelgänger, imposición y alta tensión, en un cóctel explosivo volcánico que es imposible de extinguir por la mano del hombre. En pocas palabras, un ecotono muy tensionado, que produce la alta actividad catártica y creadora que hemos estado analizando.

Conclusiones

La producción generada a partir de la Partición india de 1947 continúa acumulándose en el tiempo, a cada efeméride o suceso relacionado con ella que tiene lugar. Se transmite, así, de generación en generación, y resulta un ecotono muy tenso que debe desarrollarse, pintarse, escribirse… Por eso, permanece vigente no solo en esferas políticas y sociales, sino en el campo más amplio de las ciencias humanas, del que las humanidades ambientales en general, y la ecocrítica en particular, forman parte. La sedimentación y fertilización vertical de los contenidos que se expresan—la mayoría de carácter confesional y basados en experiencias traumáticas, directas o indirectas—forma permacuerpos, ricos en metáforas y metonimias sobre la

imbricación humana en la tierra. La mayoría de carácter paradójico, hablan de la sinrazón y arbitrariedad de tal división contra natura, y de la violencia que permitió la separación de miembros de una misma familia, el éxodo en situaciones casi bélicas o la desaparición de múltiples víctimas en el momento concreto de la Partición. Sin embargo, en una suerte de alegoría material, también expresan la amputación dolorosa del territorio, la desaparición de especies y paisajes, y resuena la exacerbación del sentimiento de amor por lo perdido, así como la extrañeza melancólica de la fractura. Y lo que es más relevante, son terreno propicio para que se permita un diálogo elocuente con la naturaleza, por medio de fórmulas más o menos antropocéntricas—y utilizando falacias patéticas diversas. Aún así, se hace posible comprobar cómo la agencialidad, el testimonio y el grito de la tierra dibujan una complicidad con el sufrimiento humano, en la conciencia de la fragilidad de ambos, actuando como testigo y víctima de la situación. Se potencia, por consiguiente, un vínculo topofílico prolongado en el tiempo, que parte del horror y sirve como contraprestación al trauma persistente y deformante de la materia fronteriza. Además, el apego por el lugar es directamente proporcional al sentido de la pertenencia, y el territorio escindido se siente como unitario, formando parte de una sola realidad natural (algo consuetudinario a la concepción rizomática).

En las cuatro autoras escogidas hay diversas aproximaciones a la pérdida. Se recogen, así, las impresiones de primera mano de los que vivieron aquel momento y las reescriben, reviviéndolas en sus propios cuerpos y acumulando la aflicción y la angustia por lo perdido como herencia epigenética. Los permacuerpos resultantes presentan una carga de sedimentación que fertiliza la aparición de nuevos discursos sobre temas comunes, y generan una energía discursiva que es producto del compost acumulativo en el tiempo. Prerna Bakshi, en primer lugar, dibuja una natura loquens metafórica, que habla en nombre de los que han sufrido o desaparecido, víctimas de la violencia. Su voz es una falacia antropomórfica evidente, pero coloca a la naturaleza como protagonista envolvente de sus habitantes y demuestra una agencialidad activista poderosa. Del mismo modo, utiliza objetos abandonados para que en una cadena de sinécdoques generen preguntas sin respuesta y, de manera expresionista, se carguen de patetismo. Lo material, entonces, adquiere una importancia específica y sobre ella se conectan las redes invisibles de los sentimientos, y las comunicaciones somáticas entre los distintos cuerpos de las historias.

Por su parte, Sujata Bhatt incide en la generación del trauma de la Partición, pero también en la transformación de los *loci amoeni*, afectados por la angustia y el shock de las situaciones extremas, pero a la vez reconociendo los vínculos invisibles y significantes entre cuerpos: continentes y contenidos, espacios reales e imaginados, objetos y sentimientos... Establece, asimismo, la dimensionalidad del hito histórico, trayéndolo hasta el presente y advirtiendo que las preguntas esenciales sobre su origen no se han respondido, y que siguen produciendo desazón, inestabilidad, por un lado, y somatizaciones y pulsiones físicas, por otro. En su caso, Adeeba Taluker dibuja un escenario macabro y gótico utilizando diversas texturas materiales, con una fuerza que emana de la oposición frontal entre la "mancha humana" y la devastación

de las catástrofes naturales. Las metáforas antrópicas son, ciertamente, "sucias" y emborronan la realidad del paisaje; las telúricas son igualmente perturbadoras, pero parten de una resistencia inercial y, en última instancia, de la propia sinergia generada por lo antinatural de la fuerza ejercida por el hombre. Más relevante si cabe es la agencialidad compleja de objetos concretos en diálogo líquido con su continente natural. Las preguntas generan un escenario distópico que reverbera en todos sus estadios: desde el palimpsesto temporal inicial hasta los ecos sucesivos que amplían la "oscuridad" del hecho traumático. Finalmente, Moniza Alvi ahonda en la fragmentación, estableciendo redes tentaculares entre el territorio, los cuerpos vivos y las emociones humanas. La escisión se extiende, además, a la intangibilidad aparente de la vida y la muerte. El ecotono aparece con mucha claridad a través de la metáfora de la viscosidad ambigua del cristal, cuya textura engañosa permite traspasarla sensorialmente, ejemplificando así el propósito deliberado del hecho y su naturaleza artificiosa y autocrática.

Para concluir, todos los poemas de esta selección—que podría ampliarse con facilidad con textos de Tanzila Ahmed, Nirupama Menon Rao, Taslima Nasreen, Fatimah Asghar, Zia Ather y un largo etcétera—acusan un agudo sentido del lugar y de la pertenencia a espacios que transcienden las fronteras trazadas por la Partición de 1947. Con esto, se cargan de una densidad propia de los terrenos que han sido abonados por múltiples identidades y problematizaciones. La búsqueda de semillas de significación material, o permacuerpos, conlleva la extracción de capas intertextuales diversas, que parten, en primera instancia, del contacto estrecho con el lugar. Pero, también, de la posterior elaboración epigenética, "sentipensada" por los descendientes, en su ansia de relocalización afectiva y recuperación del espacio perdido. En este sentido, los ecotonos tensionados que aparecen son muy difíciles de cruzar, pero a la vez generan una gran carga emocional y creativa, llena de tropos metafóricos y metonímicos, que expresan la viscosidad porosa de la fractura. Son ejemplos concretos de la difícil permeabilidad rizomática que permite traspasarla por medio de sinergias catárticas y sensoriales. Los múltiples filamentos resultantes no hacen sino conectar una y otra vez con los habitantes de este territorio, y poblarlo de redes somáticas y semióticas que se multiplican en el tiempo y en el espacio.

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Cosmo-poéthique et écologie de la parole.
Sur Erri De Luca et Jean-Claude Pinson

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Résumé

Parus respectivement en 2013 et 2015, la *Poéthique* de Jean-Claude Pinson et *La parole contraria* (*La parole contraire*) d'Erri de Luca questionnent le savoir-faire, le savoir-dire et le savoir-être, expérimentant une littérature du moi en son environnement, qui ne se distingue pas de la vie et de ses choix éthiques. Au cours de vingt ans de réflexion à propos de la poésie pour Pinson, et plus récemment pour De Luca, lors de sa défense contre l'accusation d' "incitation au sabotage" du TGV Lyon-Turin, chacun éclaire dans son essai la question de ce que peuvent des voix singulières, de leur possibilité de vivre hors des cadres dominants. Ils posent ainsi de façon comparable la question d'une écologie de la parole repartant du sens des mots pour réinventer librement le monde, une voie cosmo-poéthique qui rompt avec le conformisme, nomme les désaccords qui l'en séparent et peut contribuer à redessiner l'espace public.

Mots-clés: De Luca, justice, parole, Pinson, poéthique.

Abstract

Published in 2013 and 2015 respectively, Jean-Claude Pinson's *Poéthique* (*Poetics*) and Erri de Luca's *La parole contraria* (*The Contrary Word*) question know-how, knowing how to say and knowing how to be, experimenting with a literature of the self in its environment, which is not distinct from life and its ethical choices. In the course of twenty years of reflection on poetry for Pinson, and more recently for De Luca, during his defence against the accusation of "incitement to sabotage" of the Lyon-Turin high-speed train, each of them sheds light in his essay on the question of what singular voices can do, of their possibility of living outside the dominant framework. In this way, they pose in a comparable way the question of an ecology of speech, starting again from the meaning of words to freely reinvent the world, a cosmo-poetical path that breaks with conformism, names the disagreements that separate it and could help to reshape the public space.

Keywords: De Luca, justice, speech, Pinson, poethics.

Resumen

Publicados en 2013 y 2015 respectivamente, *Poéthique* (*Poética*), de Jean-Claude Pinson, y *La parole contraria* (*La palabra contraria*), de Erri de Luca, cuestionan el saber hacer, el saber decir y el

saber ser, experimentando con una literatura del ser en su entorno, que no es distinta de la vida y sus elecciones éticas. A lo largo de veinte años de reflexión sobre la poesía para Pinson, y más recientemente para De Luca, durante su defensa contra la acusación de "incitación al sabotaje" del tren de alta velocidad Lyon-Turín, cada uno de ellos arroja luz en su ensayo sobre la cuestión de lo que pueden hacer las voces singulares, de su posibilidad de vivir fuera del marco dominante. De este modo, plantean de forma comparable la cuestión de una ecología de la palabra, partiendo de nuevo del significado de las palabras para reinventar libremente el mundo, una vía cosmo-poética que rompe con el conformismo, nombra los desacuerdos que lo separan y podría ayudar a rediseñar el espacio público.

Palabras clave: De Luca, expresión, justicia, Pinson, poética.

Poéthique, une autothéorie* de Jean-Claude Pinson (2013) et *La parole contraire* d'Erri de Luca (2015) sont deux essais qui envisagent la possibilité d'une parole vraie, belle et juste à la fois concernant l'*oïkos*. Le premier est un livre bigarré qui collecte des textes datant des années 1990 à 2010, articles inédits ou non, à la fois poétiques et philosophiques. C'est un "pot-pourri" nourri d'expériences où la théorie ne relève d'aucune systématicité mais d'un principe de variété, à l'image des "poèthes" pris pour exemples, aussi divers que Barthes, Bergounioux, Deleuze, Gracq, Leopardi, Michon ou Negri. Comme avant lui Heidegger ou Augustin Berque, l'auteur retravaille la formule de Hölderlin selon laquelle "l'homme habite en poète" (*dichterisch wohnet der Mensch*), dans le cadre d'une réflexion éthique sur la vie sensée des hommes sur la Terre. Puissant mot-valise associant poétique et éthique, le titre du livre, *poéthique*, place sa réflexion au carrefour de deux dimensions dont il réaffirme l'implication, le savoir-faire et le savoir-être. Le sous-titre n'est pas moins important, l'*auto-théorie* revendiquant la subjectivité d'un "je" situé qui s'engage expérimentalement pour se rendre capable de dire "nous". Ces essais sont une défense de la poésie que beaucoup croient morte, élargie dans sa définition, affranchie de sa relégation au champ strictement littéraire, bien vivante partout où sont mises en pratique de nouvelles formes de vie. C'est ni plus ni moins que la parole performative qui est en jeu, sincère, belle et efficace, celle qui agit et succède pour le temps présent à l'éloquence antique que regrettait Rousseau. Elle relève d'un art et d'une politique du vivre, qui "[reconnaît] dans le style", hors de toute autonomie de l'art, "un outil ouvert, plastique, critique, mais aussi profondément ambivalent, de qualification du vivre" (Macé 15).

Cette parole qui est un acte, procédant de l'agir (du *poïein*) et d'une manière d'être (*éthos*), c'est aussi ce que vise Erri De Luca dans *La parole contraire*, ne serait-ce que par la vigueur de la rhétorique judiciaire. Il s'y défend dans le procès pour "incitation au sabotage" qui lui est intenté par l'entreprise française chargée des travaux du TGV Lyon-Turin, risquant cinq ans de prison pour avoir écrit qu'il fallait "saboter" la ligne, conviction qu'il réitère dans l'essai puis encore à la veille de son procès: "la ligne soi-disant à grande vitesse en val de Suse doit être freinée, entravée, donc sabotée pour la légitime défense de la santé, du sol, de l'air, de l'eau d'une

communauté menacée" ("Déclaration spontanée"). Bien au-delà de son cas personnel, ce plaidoyer défend ceux dont la parole n'est jamais entendue, les voix minoritaires car invisibilisées du mouvement NO TAV, le Val de Suse en lutte contre un projet d'aménagement qui prévoit de percer des tunnels en pleins gisements d'amiante et de pechblende radioactive au risque de les disperser. En présence tant des choses que des mots, l'écologie est ici un combat *in situ* pour la liberté d'expression et la polysémie, les juges ne retenant qu'un seul sens au mot "sabotage" là où De Luca, refusant "la limitation de sens […], accepte une condamnation pénale, mais pas une réduction de vocabulaire" (*La parole contraire* 30). Au-delà de ce mot qui fâche, *corpus delicti* prétexte, l'enjeu est la langue, entre l'exigence que les mots aient un sens et la liberté d'y construire autre chose qu'un sens univoque et joué d'avance. Dénonçant un marché public noyauté à grand renfort de mensonges par la mafia, la démonstration du déni d'équité établit que ses propres paroles sont accusées d'avoir un impact nuisible sur le réel alors que celles des soutiens au projet ne sont jamais semblablement examinées. L'écrivain engagé, cette parole parmi d'autres qui a charge de les rendre toutes possibles, est mu par le "devoir de protéger le droit de tous à exprimer leur propre voix" (*La parole contraire* 17), dans un contexte de verrouillage oppressif et d'intimidation armée.[1] Sa visée est la démocratie, toujours à construire et jamais acquise, sans laquelle aucune pensée en général, écologiste en particulier, n'est possible.

Quelle écologie de la parole pour le langage comme milieu?

Relevant d'une même visée poéticienne qui replace l'art d'écrire dans une manière de vivre dont il n'est pas distinct, l'interrogeant dans sa capacité à interagir démocratiquement avec les lecteurs—autres écrivains en puissance et dont l'art de lire implique tout autant une éthique (Merlin-Kajman)—ces deux textes renouent significativement avec l'exemplarité de l'éthos et la portée potentiellement universelle de l'expérience individuelle, ici et maintenant. Celle-ci ne concerne pas toujours explicitement la nature ou le souci environnemental, mais aussi les préoccupations sociales, en lien avec les rapports de classe.

Les recueils de Jean-Claude Pinson et les récits d'Erri De Luca ont en effet d'abord été politiques par leur égalitarisme (son engagement syndical et pacifiste vaut à l'écrivain italien la persécution des années de plomb). Il s'y opère pourtant à l'évidence une convergence des luttes, lorsque Pinson salue par exemple "l'élégance à la fois cosmopoétique et cosmopolitique" des paysans sans terre du Pernambouc au Brésil (*Drapeau rouge* 52) ou quand De Luca souligne plus récemment les liens entre l'action de résistance des collectifs NO TAV et celle des citoyens aidant les migrants: "À Lampedusa aussi, une communauté réagit à la dégradation imposée par des lois criminelles. Les ordres venus du continent ont voulu serrer un nœud coulant autour

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[1] Fin connaisseur de la Bible hébraïque, De Luca la cite à l'appui de la mission de l'écrivain, selon ses termes: "être le porte-parole de celui qui est sans écoute: *Ptàkh pìkha le illem*: 'Ouvre ta bouche pour le muet' (*Proverbes/Mishlé* 31, 8)." (*La parole contraire* 18).

de l'île et en faire une terre fermée. Les Lampédusains l'ont dénoué et ont fait une terre ouverte" (*La parole contraire* 20).

Même quand il se centre sur des enjeux en apparence purement sociaux, et moins environnementaux, le propos des deux écrivains a bien fondamentalement à voir avec une écologie de la parole, au sens d'un souci permanent de qui parle, à qui, de quoi et de quelle façon. Mais aussi d'où, puisque "toute habitation (toute existence) suppose un rapport sensible aux lieux, qu'ils soient occupés, quittés ou traversés, remémorés ou imaginés, proches ou lointains", sa "contingence irréductible au concept" faisant de toute poésie "une forme d'écologie" (*À quoi bon la poésie aujourd'hui?* 40). La dimension écologique de cette recherche d'une parole vraie, que Pinson nomme poésie et De Luca littérature, consiste donc dans son attachement sensible aux circonstances.

Le "devoir" de parler et d'écrire s'impose à chacun d'entre eux. De Luca explique que s'il "se [taisait] par convenance personnelle, préférant [s']occuper de [ses] affaires, les mots se gâteraient dans [sa] bouche" et "[son] vocabulaire d'écrivain tomberait malade de réticence, de censure" (*La parole contraire* 37–38). Pour Pinson aussi il y a un devoir d'écrire "l'hymne de notre temps, qui ne peut être qu'un chant du cygne—du cygne et de l'ours blanc agonisant sur la banquise", un devoir d'élégie, "avant que le monde ne finisse par tout à fait finir, un devoir de chanter ce qu'il y a eu de beau et de grand sur la planète" (*Drapeau rouge* 80).

Mais il ne s'agit pas d'user de la parole simplement pour dénoncer ou regretter. Dans les deux essais, l'attention se porte sur le langage en tant que milieu où nous cohabitons avec les autres. Entre tribune et lettre ouverte, l'écriture y trace comme un cercle de craie caucasien, un lieu pour la parole à propos du bien commun. S'interrogeant sur le pouvoir des femmes et des hommes justes, même seuls, contre l'injustice et la laideur frappant l'écoumène, elle relève d'un souci qu'on pourrait aussi qualifier de géopoétique, se préoccupant du sens et de la beauté du monde, tentant de renouer le rapport Homme-Terre en le délivrant de sa captation par les experts de l'économie et de la technoscience. Là où Michel Deguy, dans *Écologiques,* réserve cette action de refaire sens aux poètes et aux philosophes, Pinson comme De Luca évoquent quant à eux l'ensemble des hommes de bonne volonté.

Comment cette revendication éthique de l'écriture à la première personne reflète-t-elle une conscience renouvelée de devoir situer la parole au contact retrouvé des choses? Le préfixe "re-" est en fait de trop, lui prêter substance laissant croire qu'il y aurait eu en quelque mythique âge d'or une unité entre un langage juste (tant équitable qu'adéquat) et le monde qu'il chantait. Il est plus probable qu'il n'y eut jamais, depuis que les hommes parlent et pensent dans les mots, qu'une aspiration jamais assouvie à parler aussi juste que possible.

> [...] je m'obstine à chercher des raisons de ne pas définitivement conclure que travailler à changer la vie et s'employer à changer la syntaxe sont des activités d'ordre distinct, étanches, incompatibles. D'où le choix de la poésie, pour un premier livre, *J'habite ici*, où je tente d'éclairer un peu, pour ne pas renoncer, le vieux projet d'habiter autrement, poétiquement, la terre et le monde. (*Poéthique* 181)

Sur le plan du langage et indistinctement de la vie, la recherche d'un monde meilleur s'affirme comme idéal poéthique, idée régulatrice et quête utopique, paradis redéfini, vers lequel on ne peut faire que tendre. L'activité poéthique se redéfinit chez Pinson et De Luca comme l'utopie énonçant et échangeant, par-delà les différences, les idées sur ce que serait une vie juste, une vie qui n'en condamne pas d'autres à se sacrifier pour elle. Résolument pratique dans son expérimentation des possibilités de s'accorder en mots et en actes sur ce que serait un bien commun, elle cherche des langages capables de dire quelque chose qui soit vrai pour plus d'un et à plus d'un titre, en plusieurs langues et à plusieurs échelles.

Exposer les désaccords et nommer l'innommable pour agir

S'il y a "parole contraire" comme il y a des "vers oppositionnels, déviationnistes et brouilleurs de cartes, [...] s'en allant apaches à pied se mêler aux cris du monde, avec lui rugir et s'insurger" (*Drapeau rouge* 45); s'il y a soulèvement d'un "poétariat" (néologisme de Pinson désignant ce tiers-état de travailleurs intellectuels et artistiques, ces précaires résistant à la rationalité économique nivelante, moins autoritaires que les avant-gardes poétiques); si donc la parole habitée (vraie, éthique et esthétique à la fois) est menacée partout où elle éclot, par un conflit écrasant avec les mots creux des novlangues, les clichés des langues de pouvoir et de l'industrie culturelle, c'est qu'il y a un rapport de force entre la maigre possibilité de dire et d'agir avec justice d'une part, la domination écrasante, de l'autre, du populisme culturel, des "éléments de langage" et de la communication envisagée comme une technique, réduction généralisée de la parole à l'échange de messages univoques entre émetteurs et destinataires, lesquels ne sont en rapport aux mots qu'à la façon dont on emploie des outils ou exploite des ressources.[2]

Si l'esthétique est toujours une éthique, ce qui donne à sentir (*aisthesis*) étant en rapport avec une certaine manière d'être (*éthos*), la poéthique comme la parole contraire, loin de tout réenchantement inoffensif du monde, nomment leurs ennemis et choisissent leurs utopies concrètes pour transformer le monde selon leur idée de la justice. *Le poids du papillon* met ainsi en scène la question de la violence, sociale et naturelle, à travers la lutte entre un vieux chamois (le roi) et un vieux chasseur braconnier alpin. Conscient qu'"un homme est ce qu'il a commis" (*Le poids du papillon* 46), celui-ci pèse avec lucidité ses propres actes et sa loyauté à l'aune de celle des bêtes, qui en des "temps privés de justice [...], en exerçaient une à appliquer au jour le jour, entre les guet-apens qu'ils subissaient et ceux qu'ils tendaient" (*Le poids du papillon* 54). Former son éthos commence par prendre conscience du "mal" que l'on fait, fût-il nécessaire, plutôt que de l'éluder. Comme l'écrivait l'historien de l'art John Berger, qui jugeait d'une œuvre en fonction du fait qu'elle promouvait ou non les droits sociaux et environnementaux, et faisait l'éloge d'un certain oiseau blanc de

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[2] Sur le rapport de la poéthique avec l'éthopoïétique de Foucault, et du poétariat avec le cognitariat de Michael Hardt et Antonio Negri, on peut lire avec profit : Michel Laure. "Crise de la poésie? Le poétariat selon Jean-Claude Pinson". *Les Temps Modernes* 2010/1 (n° 657), pp. 247–59.

l'artisanat populaire, symbole du lien entre la chose vivante qu'est l'animal de référence, son nom et l'acte d'en modeler par ses mains l'image, "le problème, c'est qu'on ne peut pas parler d'esthétique sans parler du principe espérance et de l'existence du mal" (Berger 77). On ne peut écrire *poéthiquement* à propos du bien commun sans désigner un mal auquel il s'oppose.

La disculpation de De Luca demande à son lecteur de trancher: elle n'est convaincante que pour celles et ceux qui en tirent toutes les conséquences et retournent l'accusation contre les véritables "utopistes" (au sens restreint dont ils sont les tenants, de "rêveurs irréalistes"), les promoteurs qui rêvent de leur tunnel irréalisable.

> L'utopie n'est pas un point d'arrivée, mais un point de départ. On imagine et on veut réaliser un lieu qui n'existe pas. Le Val de Suse se bat depuis une génération pour la raison inverse : pour que le lieu existe encore. Non pas celui imaginé par ceux qui, du moment qu'ils réalisent un profit sur un des nombreux grands travaux, sont indifférents aux préjudices causés à la santé publique. Une utopie, et des pires qui soient, est l'asservissement d'un territoire à une spéculation déclarée stratégique pour de plus grands abus. Le percement et la pulvérisation des gisements d'amiante horrifient tous ceux qui sont au courant des terribles méfaits d'une dispersion de ses fibres toxiques. Pour moi, c'est un viol de territoire. (*La parole contraire* 19)

La parole contraire porte une relecture d'ensemble non seulement des faits mais de la langue qui les dit et de la vision du monde qui s'y profile. Pour montrer qu'un certain aménagement du territoire se pense hors-sol, hors des choses et contre les êtres qui y vivent, elle requalifie ici les faits et le sens des mots, explicite et assume des différences radicales de points de vue que les formules de propagande consensuelles ont inversement pour fonction d'effacer sinon de faire taire.

La tâche du poèthe est immense, tant il y a de mots où la variété et pour ainsi dire la biodiversité du sens est appauvrie par un usage conformiste de commodité. Alors que sa circulation en tant que mot se galvaude infiniment à mesure qu'elle est réduite par le *greenwashing* à un label "vert" pouvant couvrir toute activité prédatrice, l'écologie est par excellence l'objet d'une telle occultation entre des visions du monde radicalement différentes mais surtout démesurément inégales. Là où ceux qui se payent de mots se targuent par des slogans aussi superficiels et apparemment inoffensifs qu'omniprésents, monopolisant l'espace public et médiatique, d'être "éco-responsables" en ce qu'ils construisent, vendent et consomment certaines voitures (ou certains tunnels ferroviaires) plutôt que d'autres, les poèthes soucieux de parole contraire, quand ils n'associent pas l'écologie au choix dangereusement mûri de renoncer aux consommables inutiles et délétères, plaident pour qu'un débat contradictoire et équitable puisse tout au moins advenir à leur sujet, c'est-à-dire au sujet des conséquences qu'ont tous nos actes. Ils s'efforcent que soit publiquement questionné le sens donné aux mots, et exprimés les dissensus.

Lier le beau, le juste et le vrai: implications cosmo-poéthiques

"Parler hors de toute limite" ("*to speak somewhere without bounds*", Thoreau 324): ce vœu d'une parole libérée des enclos, des mensonges, empaysements et autres métaphores refroidies, était déjà celui de Thoreau, figure centrale chez Pinson et dont chaque page est indistinctement une contemplation de ce qui vit, une enquête sur les *écosystèmes et une prescription* quant à ce qui peut ou ne peut pas y être fait par les hommes. De Luca se réfère plutôt à Goethe, George Orwell, Pier Paolo Pasolini et Salman Rushdie dans la construction de son éthos mais il est impossible de ne pas penser à la désobéissance civile. Si à la suite de *Walden*, le *Nature Writing* est "une écriture qui rassemble les visions du naturaliste et du poète" et tente "d'allier l'approche scientifique, la vision esthétique, l'utilisation métaphorique des phénomènes naturels et le travail créatif de la langue" (Granger 15), il semble que c'est toujours aussi une écriture éprise d'une justice plus grande que le droit commun, soucieuse comme chez Aldo Leopold d'étendre la sphère éthique aux non-humains ou de "ne pas représenter comme légitimes les seuls intérêts humains" (Buell 6–7). Sans lui en être redevables, les essais de Pinson et De Luca se préoccupent tout comme ce *Nature Writing* à la fois de connaissance scientifique, de sensibilité esthétique et d'une éthique qui rende justice à tous les êtres, humains et non-humains; ces préoccupations s'impliquant intimement.

Cette triple exigence que l'on retrouve donc dans des aires culturelles et linguistiques variées et à des époques éloignées, le mot grec de cosmos en est un nom parmi d'autres possibles. Depuis Humboldt, il désigne la description d'un ensemble certes divisé et conflictuel, mais uni en sa diversité même. Parler de cosmo-poéthique permet d'envisager à la fois ce que les hommes ont de commun, leur condition d'habitants de la terre et du langage, tout en ne faisant pas comme s'ils étaient semblables ou justiciables de cette illusoire "totalisation de l'ensemble des agir humains en *une* 'activité humaine' générant *une* 'empreinte humaine' sur la Terre" (Bonneuil et Fressoz 82), totalisation que véhiculent certains discours de l'Anthropocène. Autant dire qu'il n'y a pas qu'une poéthique possible dès lors que nous vivons au sein d'un multivers, mais au moins autant que de cosmologies existantes.

Or dans chacune de ses mises en œuvre locales, la préoccupation environnementale est toujours non seulement à la fois une question de sentiment du beau et de connaissance des faits, mais aussi, indissociablement en tant que telle, une question de justice du faire et de justesse du dire. La tentative langagière de réunir ces dimensions peut se nommer cosmo-poéthique par l'adjonction d'un préfixe qui rende ce en quoi le discours poéthique touche à l'inscription des hommes dans un univers qui les englobe et qui, s'il est loin d'être une création figée ou parfaite—la théogonie est morte—, présente dans son évolution même, dans sa qualité de *physis* changeante, la cohérence indiscernable et laïque d'un univers polycentré, divers et arlequin. Que le monde, cet insoupçonnable Grand Tout, soit beau et présente du sens est ce dont les formes de vie débattent à tout instant, comme l'écrit Pinson.

> Rien n'a de sens. Mais il y a du sens et tout a du sens. Rien n'a de sens : le monde n'a pas de sens ; pas de fondement, pas de justification, pas de fin (finalité). Le ciel est vide, tout est absurde et l'existence avance "cap au pire". [...] Et cependant il y a du sens. [...] Pour la raison première que l'homme est un être parlant, venu au monde dans l'ordre des mots et y mourant, même s'il travaille parfois à s'en arracher, à être un "partant". (*Poéthique* 89)

Parler pour créer du jeu

Au carrefour des genres sérieux mais ludiques et spéculatifs de la poésie et de l'essai, la poéthique parle de notre possibilité de vivre en échappant au néant et à l'absurde. Si le monde peut avoir du sens, c'est selon elle par la parole sincère et créatrice de liberté, laquelle liberté "ne se mesure pas à des horizons dégagés, mais à la cohérence entre mots et actions" (*La parole contraire* 34). Cet art de bien dire n'est pas une simple "bonne parole" ni un énième soi-disant "parler vrai" dont se fendrait la langue de bois, mais l'éloquence sans artifice du poétariat. Pour Jean-Claude Pinson,

> Participent de ce "poétariat" entendu *au sens large* tous ceux qui, confrontés aux mutations du capitalisme (à diverses formes de précarité), se saisissent de ses modalités nouvelles (celles notamment du travail cognitif) pour inventer, au jour le jour et dans les interstices du système, des formes de vie, sinon alternatives, du moins soustraites au modèle dominant. [...] Quant au sens restreint, il vaut pour tous ceux qui, d'une façon ou d'une autre, parfois très loin des lieux estampillés de l'art, mettent l'activité artistique au cœur de leur existence et s'engagent, à des degrés divers, dans l'aventure d'une œuvre. Les seconds (artistes et poètes au sens restreint) sont une sous-classe des premiers ("poètes" de leur propre existence), et c'est, selon moi, un *continuum* qui conduit de ceux-ci à ceux-là (et réciproquement). (*Poéthique* 25–26)

C'est une parole ou une action qui tranche, dont l'effet est de libérer l'horizon, de faire sécession et de donner de l'oxygène, de se dégager du prêt-à-penser conformiste. On est donc loin de ces ruses rhétoriques qui permettaient de persuader les spectateurs ou de l'aura magique mais autoritaire d'une véridiction révélée verticalement au lecteur ou à l'auditeur. Il n'y a pas de message mais seulement un idéal d'énonciation. Dans *Pour une écologie de l'attention*, Yves Citton en formule le questionnement, se demandant, "alors que toute notre éducation sensorielle et savante nous a entrainés à repérer des figures saillantes, comment voir et entendre le fond—indissociablement commun et environnemental—qui soutient notre existence ? Comment communiquer avec le commun ?" (Citton 278).

Horizontale et rhizomatique, la parole poéthique circule de proche en proche entre des voisins que son usage engage à fraterniser. Il semble que sa sincérité énonciative située et singulière soit au nombre des choses qui permettent de *mettre en commun* (idéal autrement démocratique de la communication, qui y retrouve ses lettres de noblesse), de sentir et de faire exister ce qui *lie* plutôt que ce qui *distingue*. En d'autres termes, que la parole poéthique participe de cette "cosmopolitesse" consistant à "retrouver et inventer les égards ajustés envers les autres formes de vie qui font le monde" (Morizot 287).

Sortant du livre pour investir nos vies et leurs langages ordinaires, faisant en sorte que chacun, construisant sa voix individuelle tant dans les accords que dans les désaccords, puisse repenser une démocratie radicale et régler au quotidien son assentiment à la société à partir de la confiance en soi, la poéthique et la parole contraire prennent acte de ce qu'"*il n'y a pas de règles qui dise comment revendiquer*" (Laugier 86). Elles consonnent en tant que telles avec la tradition anglo-saxonne du *dissent* et de la désobéissance civile (de Thoreau et Emerson à Cavell et Wittgenstein), se fondant sur notre "capacité à être expressifs, c'est-à-dire PUBLICS" (Laugier 87). Soucieuse de ce que nous puissions devenir poèthes en ayant à cœur (*to mean*) ce que nous disons et faisons à chaque instant, cette parole cosmo-poéthique combat l'étouffement conformiste de la démocratie en refusant son propre cantonnement dans le purement esthétique, ce retour déguisé aux Belles-Lettres de l'Ancien Régime qui stipendiaient les seuls écrivains, classe sociale à part, pour produire de belles œuvres qui ne changent surtout pas le monde.

Rendre les lieux (aux) publics

Par son caractère d'engagement concret, parler poéthiquement, qu'il s'agisse de porter la parole contraire ou celle de la célébration, requiert le corps. Pour De Luca, "la littérature agit sur les fibres nerveuses de celui qui a la chance de vivre la rencontre entre un livre et sa propre vie" (*La parole contraire* 12). Le poème, qui pour Pinson "excite les nervures les plus secrètes de notre habitation corporelle et spatiale du monde", fait bien autre chose que de délivrer un message mais "dessine et décline des versions de mondes qui sont autant d'esquisses d'une autre économie possible de l'existence—d'un autre *éthos* (séjour), qui serait, selon le mot de Mallarmé, plus 'authentique'" (*À quoi bon la poésie aujourd'hui?* 31–32). L'auteur de la *Poéthique* prend soin de proposer plusieurs de ces plus authentiques séjours sans les hiérarchiser; ainsi suggère-t-il à propos de Gracq que villes et campagnes s'écoutent.

> [...] dans la mégalopole affairée et vibrionnante, s'il importe de ne pas céder au fantasme régressif de l'idylle campagnarde, il importe tout autant de témoigner pour ce timbre et ses lointaines harmoniques. Car le secret de la *domus* dont il retentit discrètement témoigne d'un rapport immémorial aux éléments, à la terre et au ciel, appartenance qu'il est plus que souhaitable de ne pas oublier si nous voulons que demeure viable une habitation humaine sur la terre, et pas seulement un décor de ruines pour quelques zombies errant après le grand naufrage. (*Poéthique* 159–60)

La parole cosmopoéthique, tantôt constructive tantôt contraire, a vocation à résonner non seulement dans la presse ou les collections littéraires sagement retirées d'un monde qu'elles surplombent, mais dans les lieux publics. Le narrateur de *Trois chevaux*, qui plante des arbres et lit de vieux livres aux pages déjà tournées par d'autres, fort de ce que "chaque exemplaire d'un livre peut appartenir à plusieurs vies", affirme qu'il devrait "rester sans surveillance dans les endroits publics pour se déplacer avec les passants" puis "mourir comme eux, [...] n'importe comment sauf d'ennui et de propriété privée, condamnés à vie à l'étagère" (*Trois chevaux* 22).

L'auteur du *Laïus au bord de l'eau* s'inspirait déjà du "cours dit naturel des choses" (*Laïus* 27), "[écrivant] comme on herborise" (Laïus 34) aussi bien à propos des points d'accord entre Virgile ou Bo Juyi et le bord de l'Erdre que du "rappel à la réalité sociale" de ceux qui y dorment (*Laïus* 35). Alors qu'en *cantator analyticus*, il écoutait une conférence de philosophie et regardait par la fenêtre, apercevant un renard sous les étoiles, il déplorait ignorer le langage de celles-ci et se demandait "comment faire tenir ensemble — dans quel étrange opéra polyglotte ?—tous ces chants qui s'ignorent", concluant en manière de "morale de la fabrication du chant poétique" que "tous [ces] jeux de langage [étaient] à goûter" (*Laïus* 37).

C'est en vertu de la même conviction quant à l'habitation de lieux à partager, que De Luca considère le lieu même de son jugement à la veille de celui-ci, ayant refusé de contester formellement l'accusation pour ne pas faire l'impasse sur le lieu et le moment de la comparution.

> [...] je tiens l'accusation contestée pour un essai, la tentative de faire taire les paroles contraires. C'est pourquoi, j'estime que cette salle est un avant-poste tourné vers le présent immédiat de notre pays. [...] Je crois que ce qui est constitutionnel se décide et se défend dans des lieux publics comme celui-ci, de même que dans un commissariat, une salle de classe, une prison, un hôpital, sur un lieu de travail, aux frontières traversées par les demandeurs d'asile. Ce qui est constitutionnel se mesure au rez-de-chaussée de la société. ("Déclaration spontanée")

Une telle poéthique de la parole habitée, toujours à même l'existence sociale et sans nul double discours, implique la présence au monde. Elle implique de ne pas se payer de mots, pas même pour éviter le risque de situations inhospitalières auxquelles un être poéthiquement parlant doit faire face. Si la logique du capitalisme écocidaire est de déplacer ses crimes hors des lieux où il attire l'attention, la défense poéthique consiste au contraire non seulement à occuper les lieux encore réputés publics mais à rendre publics ceux-là même qui ne le sont plus à toute heure, ces lieux du ban où personne ne veut ou ne peut regarder, des prisons surpeuplées et des ghettos diffamés aux centrales fissurées et autres décharges empoisonnées, souvent d'ailleurs tout aussi peuplées de prolétaires et de poétaires invisibles.

Conclusion

La recherche de formes de vie qui puissent "rendre notre existence aussi belle que possible et la conformer autant qu'il est en nous aux conditions esthétiques du milieu" (Reclus 156), formulation par Élisée Reclus d'une idée plus que jamais vivante, concerne non seulement nos façons de nous nourrir, de nous abriter et de nous vêtir, mais nos manières de parler, un acte constitutif de l'habitat, en tant que tel plus ou moins écologique ou cosmo-poéthique. La question de Hölderlin recèle sa propre réponse.

> De vivre ainsi dans l'attente, et de faire, de dire néanmoins quelque chose,

voilà ce que je ne sais faire, et à quoi bon des poètes en des temps de nécessité? (Hölderlin 257 ; notre traduction)[3]

Les poèthes agissent comme tels pour pouvoir continuer à vivre, pour pouvoir dire, c'est-à-dire faire, quelque chose, alors même que tout semble décourager l'action, la parole et plus généralement la vie. Dans une voie analogue qu'il nomme "l'écologie du récit" (complémentaire de l'écologie de la parole), Jean-Christophe Cavallin suggère que "la fonction de la littérature est d'intégrer symboliquement la singularité de la condition humaine dans le contexte général de la condition terrestre" (Cavallin 37). Procédant non du maquillage mais du dévoilement, cette dimension nouvelle ouverte à nos paroles et à nos actes n'a rien d'une cosmétique. À rebours des simplismes et des "envoûtements médiatiques" du "capitalisme attentionnel" (Citton), l'écologie de la parole (comme celle de l'attention) regarde les mots comme les habitants d'un milieu physique où elle se tient de plein pied, plutôt que comme les instruments d'une fallacieuse persuasion. Elle ouvre un espace commun où par sa rencontre avec les autres, chacun expérimente par lui-même les faits et trouve l'occasion de se faire soi-même, de se façonner un éthos (non seulement une conscience, terme bien cérébral, mais surtout un séjour) en donnant peu à peu corps aux mots de l'idéal. C'est d'où elle tire son aspérité, celle d'un langage parfois aussi dur à entendre que le réel est devenu difficile à regarder.

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[3] "So zu harren, und was zu tun indes und zu sagen, /Weiß ich nicht, und wozu Dichter in dürftiger Zeit."

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"Then We Build a System to Deal with It": Waste, the Technological Sublime, and the Abject in Don DeLillo's *Underworld*

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Abstract

Over twenty-five years after the publication of Don DeLillo's magnum opus *Underworld* (1997), which depicts the shift from a naïve belief in technological progress at the beginning of the Cold War to disillusionment as it ended, the novel is more topical than ever, faced as we are with the growing recognition of the failure of both technorationality and capitalism to address humanity's depredation and despoilment of the biosphere. This article argues that *Underworld* deploys what David Nye has called the technological sublime to depict the attempt to master recalcitrant nature, only to ironically reveal the impossibility of the endeavor. DeLillo connects waste's 'worthlessness' and its consequent status as abject to the fantasy of mastery mediated by the technological sublime, thereby critiquing the U.S.-American ideology of progress through technological innovation. Seen within its own logic, the technological sublime is a project of liberation, a vision of impending omniscience, a permanent deferral of human limitation. Yet when waste becomes sublime, the progression toward mastery does not proceed smoothly. Although the technological sublime "undermines all notions of limitation, instead presupposing the ability to continually innovate and to transform the world" (Nye 60), *Underworld*'s aestheticization represents it at its limit, when it can no longer regulate the abject threat of waste. Ultimately, I argue that DeLillo asks readers to grapple with abjection by dramatizing the failure of the technological sublime as an aesthetic strategy, which inadvertently reinscribes the boundaries that it seeks to override: the finitude of the embodied human, the abjection that accompanies the awareness of our relative powerlessness, enmeshed amongst the world around and in us.

Keywords: Ecoaesthetics, waste, technological sublime, the abject, contemporary U.S.-American literature, Don DeLillo.

Resumen

Más de veinticinco años después de la magnum opus de Don DeLillo, *Submundo* (1997), que describe el cambio de una ingenua creencia en el progreso tecnológico al principio de la Guerra Fría a la desilusión al término de ésta, la novela está más de actualidad que nunca, enfrentando como estamos el creciente reconocimiento del fracaso tanto de la tecnoracionalidad el capitalismo para abordar la depredación y el expolio de la biosfera por parte de la humanidad. Este artículo sostiene que *Submundo* hace uso de lo que David Nye ha llamado lo sublime tecnológico para describir el intento de dominar la naturaleza recalcitrante para revelar irónicamente la imposibilidad del empeño. DeLillo relaciona la "inutilidad" de los residuos y su consecuente condición de abyecto con la fantasía de dominio mediada por la sublimidad tecnológica, criticando así la ideología estadounidense del progreso a través de la

innovación tecnológica. Visto dentro de su propia lógica, lo sublime tecnológico es un proyecto de liberación, una visión de omnisciencia inminente, un aplazamiento permanente de la limitación humana. Sin embargo, cuando el despilfarro se convierte en sublime, la progresión hacia el dominio no avanza con fluidez. Aunque lo sublime tecnológico "socava todas las nociones de la capacidad de innovar continuamente y de transformar el mundo" (Nye 60), la estetización de *Submundo* lo representa en su límite, cuando ya no puede regular la amenaza abyecta del despilfarro. En última instancia, sostengo que DeLillo pide a los lectores que se enfrenten a la abyección sublime tecnológico como estrategia estética, que reinscribe inadvertidamente las barreras que busca invalidar: la finitud del ser humano encarnado, la abyección que acompaña a la conciencia de nuestra relativa impotencia, enredada en el mundo que nos rodea y en nosotros.

Palabras clave: Ecoestética, residuos, sublime tecnológico, lo abyecto, literatura estadounidense, Don DeLillo

> *Man is never weary of working [nature] up. [...] More and more, with every thought, does his kingdom stretch over things, until the world becomes, at last, only a realized will, – the double of man.*
> – Ralph Waldo Emerson ("Nature" 51)

Technological Mastery and The Threat of Waste

As the epigraph from the U.S.-American Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson gestures toward, U.S.-American culture is built on the ideals of the European Enlightenment, "a doctrine," in the words of philosopher Val Plumwood, "about reason, its place at the apex of human life, and the practice of oppositional construction in relation to its 'others', especially the body and nature, which are simultaneously relied upon but disavowed" (18). Threatened by the inhospitality of the natural world, U.S.-Americans have turned to technology time and time again to "work things up": Early colonists taming the 'howling wilderness' of the New World, settlers turning California from a desert into a garden, and a long line of 'improvements' (dams, canals, railroads, highways) all testify to the enduring U.S.-American desire to bring nature under human control. Over twenty-five years after the publication of Don DeLillo's magnum opus *Underworld* (1997), which depicts the shift from a naïve belief in technological progress at the beginning of the Cold War to disillusionment as it ended, it is more topical than ever, faced as we are with the growing recognition of the failure of both technorationality and capitalism to address humanity's depredation and despoilment of the biosphere. When 'anthropogenic mass', or the weight of all human-made materials, outweighs all non-human biomass, as has been the case since 2020 (Elhacham et al.), it can be said without hyperbole that we are living in a version of Emerson's "realized will—the double of man." This miserable accomplishment calls for, to borrow Pramod K. Nayar's phrasing, "a change not only in our consumption of the literary canon, but also a *repurposing* of canonical texts in order to deliver the urgent news of climate change, eco-disaster and the fragility of human-nature relations" (26).

One of the most important U.S.-American Cold War novels, *Underworld*'s expansive narrative reach makes it difficult to summarize. Jumping among the decades between 1950 and 1990, the novel is held loosely together by the doings of quasi-protagonists Nick Shay and Brian Glassic, both of whom work at a waste management company, as it follows the lives of a dozen characters scattered throughout the United States. The wide scope of the novel results in dense and evocative descriptions of daily U.S.-American life, musings on the nature of postmodern existence mediated by consumerism and visual media, and a fascination with waste. This interest in waste does not come out of nowhere. DeLillo has been thinking about waste for decades, as Todd McGowan notes: "In early novels such as *Americana*, *End Zone*, and *The Names*, characters drew attention to the presence of waste; in *White Noise*, waste becomes a threat that must be avoided; and in *Underworld*, waste management becomes the central concern" (123). *Underworld*'s thematization of waste has received extensive critical attention since its publication. Scholars tend to treat waste as a metaphor for the collective unconscious of America during the Cold War (Schaub) or as a component of a postmodern sublime, the "large forces of corporate organization that control the social and economic relations of human beings" (Tabbi 7). Elise Martucci has analyzed how the novel's thematization of waste "raises our environmental consciousness by revealing the dark underworld of consumer culture" (108) and a recent article by Rachele Dini draws on New Materialism and analyzes waste in light of "entanglements of human and non-human actors" and how waste produces 'stories' of its own ("What We Excrete" 166). However, *Underworld*'s depictions of overwhelming encounters with waste, the novel's dramatization of the failure of humanity to master nature, has not been fully explored.

This article argues that *Underworld* deploys what historian David Nye calls the technological sublime to depict the attempt to master waste and reject the abject, only to reveal the fantastic and illusory nature of this endeavor. Although waste is ubiquitous in the novel, Brian Glassic's visit to the Fresh Kills Landfill in New York City (the biggest landfill in the United States until its closure in 2001) and Nick Shay's visit to a recycling plant in Phoenix, Arizona, are uniquely sublime encounters.[1] Both scenes are mentioned by scholars analyzing the novel's "sacralization of waste" (Salmela 52; Kielland-Lund 89; McGowan 136), but one interesting exception is Ruth Helyer's article "'Refuse heaped many stories high': DeLillo, Dirt, and Disorder." Here, she examines *Underworld* through the lens of Julia Kristeva's abjection, arguing that

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[1] Waste is ubiquitous in *Underworld* and, unsurprisingly, much excellent scholarship on waste's function has been published. Cf. in particular Mikko Keskinen ("To What Purpose Is This Waste? From Rubbish to Collectibles in Don DeLillo's *Underworld*," 2000); David H. Evans ("Taking Out the Trash: Don DeLillo's Underworld, Liquid Modernity, and the End of Garbage," 2006); Christine Temko ("Regulation and Refuse Matter in Don DeLillo's Underworld and Eugene Marten's Waste," 2013); Rachele Dini, ("'What We Excrete Comes back to Consume Us': Waste and Reclamation in Don DeLillo's *Underworld*," 2019); and Markku Salmela ("Recycling Fictions in the City: Don DeLillo and the Materiality of Waste," 2019). In this article, I pursue a connection between the technological sublime, its mediation through encounters with waste, and the abject, the dark underside of the technological sublime, a nexus unexplored, to my knowledge, by DeLillo scholars.

the relationship between waste and the abject in the novel reminds us "of the futility of inflicting meaning upon ourselves" in late capitalist society, where "rigid gender categories and societal norms can only create membranes prone to fracture, which in turn leave us feeling vulnerable and exposed" (1004). Her insightful work, however, analyzes neither Fresh Kills nor the fictional Phoenix recycling plant. Helyer's work testifies to the unmissable presence of the abject in *Underworld*, but there is a deeper connection between the technological sublime, its mediation through waste, and the abject that I wish to pursue here.

I will argue that *Underworld*'s representation of waste as sublime is interesting because DeLillo undermines a central conceit of U.S.-American culture, critiquing the U.S.-American ideology of progress through technological innovation which fosters an unsustainable lifestyle anchored by 'cheap' oil, extractivism, and the domination of non-humans. This emerges out of the ontological status of waste, something abject and without intrinsic value.[2] In contrast, the sublime, as defined by Immanuel Kant, is found in 'great', ostensibly valuable, things. DeLillo connects waste's 'worthlessness' and its consequent status as abject to the fantasy of mastery mediated by the technological sublime. Although the technological sublime is traditionally represented as a transcendent experience without end or limitation, *Underworld*'s aestheticization represents the technological sublime at *its* limit, where it fails to regulate and neutralize the threat of waste.

The Technological Sublime and the Abject

Underworld depicts two encounters where a threatening non-human object dwarfs and overwhelms a character, only for the character to be rescued from this unpleasant feeling of weakness and delivered unto a pleasurable feeling of mastery. When one is confronted by waste *en masse*, like at the Fresh Kills Landfill on Staten Island, New York City, the refuse from eight million trash cans is just as overwhelming as a tempestuous storm, a volcano eruption, or a hurricane, two 'natural' objects considered sublime by its most famous proponent, Immanuel Kant.[3]

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[2] Depictions of waste in literature—and how waste is a proxy for cultural ascriptions of value—have attracted significant attention in the last two decades: John Scanlan (*On Garbage*, 2005), Sophie Gee (*Making Waste: Leftovers and the Nineteenth Century Imagination*, 2010), Susan Signe Morrison (*The Literature of Waste: Material Ecopoetics and Ethical Matter*, 2015), Martin O'Brien (*A Crisis of Waste?: Understanding the Rubbish Society*, 2008), William Viney (*Waste: A Philosophy of Things*, 2014), and Rachele Dini (*Consumerism, Waste, and Re-Use in Twentieth-Century Fiction*, 2016), among others, have made significant contributions to waste studies.

[3] Kant, in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, distinguishes two types of sublime objects: the mathematical, which is merely large, and the dynamical, an object that is both large and powerful. Dynamically sublime objects mark a subject's insufficiency and relative powerless vis-á-vis the outside world. Crucially, however, the sublime is confronted at a remove. The threat is present, but it is mediated, weakened, by distance: "The astonishment bordering on terror, the horror and the awesome shudder, which grip the spectator […] is, in view of the safety in which he knows himself to be, not actual fear" (Kant 152).
However, it is not the object itself that is sublime, according to Kant. Because the Kantian sublime is "not only great, but simply, absolutely great, […] equal only to itself […], nothing that can be an object of the senses is […] to be called sublime" (Kant 134). Kant finds the sublime, consequently, only "in our

It would be odd, however, if a novel about late-twentieth century U.S.-American culture reproduced 'verbatim' the aesthetic conditions of a world that had witnessed neither air travel nor nuclear war. Therefore, to analyze *Underworld*'s sublime encounters, I draw on the work of historian David Nye, whose account of the technological sublime incorporates the astonishing technological development that has occurred since the Industrial Revolution, focusing specifically on the U.S-American context. One central difference between the Kantian and the technological sublime is, as Nye argues, that the technological sublime can occur without recourse to a 'natural' phenomenon at all. In the technological sublime, an individual grapples with man-made objects which gesture toward the "potential omnipotence of humanity" (Nye 285) instead of being overwhelmed by Nature and then rescued by reason. No less of a transindividual phenomenon than Kant's reason, this self-reification has nonetheless superseded reason's empowering function. Similarly, the threat that initiates the Kantian sublime, that is transformed into pleasure at the right distance, is not present in the technological sublime (or so one might think; later, I will show that DeLillo's portrayal of abject waste fulfills this function). I argue that *Underworld* develops and then subverts the technological sublime, representing it at its limit (paradoxically, for the technological sublime denies the existence of limits altogether), where the dark underside of the sublime, the abject, reemerges. In doing so, DeLillo critiques the U.S.-American ideology of progress through technological innovation. *Underworld* is not a monument to human greatness; it does not depict a concupiscent striving toward mastery and domination.

In contrast to Kantian sublime, where time and space are temporarily suspended, the technological sublime "annihilate[s] time and space" (Nye 61).[4] Technologies like the railroad or electricity disrupt formerly unalterable conditions of human existence: distance and Earth's diurnal rhythm. Consequently, the technological sublime forcibly disrupts the continuity of spatial and temporal relations that circumscribe humanity. An object that evokes the technological sublime loosens the cinch of some current limitation, making life easier and better *now*. In sum, the technological sublime "undermines all notions of limitation, instead presupposing the ability to continually innovate and transform the world" (Nye 60). A vision of a future is inscribed on the physical 'body' of the technological object

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ideas [that follow]" from nature (134). Only reason, an idea which rescues the subject from the overwhelming threat of Nature, is truly sublime. Through the subject's relationship to reason, they find a way to transcend the bodily limitations that an encounter with nature reminds them of. The sublime experience is a sudden enlightenment, where objects that make "our capacity to resist into an insignificant trifle" (144) prompt us to notice that we can master terror through reason.

[4] One point of connection between the technological sublime and the abject is their distortion of time. Where the technological sublime seeks to annihilate time, "[t]he time of abjection [is]," Kristeva writes, "a time of [...] veiled infinity and the moment when revelation bursts forth" (Kristeva 9). Both the technological sublime and the abject alter the human being's 'normal' relationship with time, albeit in diametrically opposed ways: the technological sublime seeks to eradicate time whereas the abject compresses and thickens two different experiences of time, the eternal and the ephemeral. The link between the technological sublime and the abject will be drawn out in greater detail in the pages to come.

wherein every limitation has been overcome: a world where everything has been ordered and optimized for humans.

This vision is a fantasy, but this is not self-evident. Only by acquiescing to its logic and following the technological sublime to its conclusion can the fantastical nature of the entire system be glimpsed; this is, as I will show in the next section, exactly what *Underworld* does. Indeed, Nye himself ultimately unearths "a contradiction at the heart of the technological sublime" (Nye 285). This contradiction is an ambiguous mix of of omnipotence and impotence, a simultaneous sense of dis- and empowerment. While Nye alludes to this, he does not describe this contradiction in great detail. Yet those versed in psychoanalysis may recognize the fantastical nature of the description of the technological sublime. I would like to suggest that the nature of this contradiction at the core of the technology sublime is best characterized by what Julia Kristeva has termed the abject.

The abject is, Kristeva writes, "*a something added* that expands us, overstrains us" (11; emphasis in the original). In this way, the abject shares something in common with the sublime, albeit in a negative way. Where the sublime's grandeur strains the human capacity to fathom an experience, the abject utilizes a similar liminality to produce uncertainty and discomfort, Kristeva's gesture to an expansion or overstrain.

Kristeva analyzes how the ego constructs identity by creating and policing a boundary between inside (clean) and outside (unclean), a process she calls abjection. Once the subject realizes it cannot be perfectly clean and proper, it rejects and expels what it does not like, purifies itself – or tries to. Kristeva considers body waste (feces, tears, blood) as the paradigmatic icon of abjection since the fluids of the body cannot be permanently evacuated while the subject remains alive. Bodily waste illuminates the unending nature of this process: it is difficult to definitively exclude those unwanted things which arise inside the subject. The abject is "not an ob-ject facing me, which I name or imagine" (Kristeva 1). Like the sublime, it is a mixture of both subject and object, the result of an embodied encounter. What is abject "is radically excluded [...] draws me toward the place where meaning collapses" (Kristeva 2), where the definitive classification of subject against object threatens to fail. This radical exclusion, however, is neither final nor precise, nor does it convey the pleasure of mastery that marks the sublime. The abject is ambiguous, does not respect the 'clear' delineations of a symbolic system: "We may call it a border; abjection is above all 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" (Kristeva 9). Although the abject endangers the self, in order to remain whole the subject must attempt to contain it outside the self through a series of 'Not-I' limitations: the abject "takes the ego back to its source on the abominable limits from which, in order to be, the ego has broken away [...]" (Kristeva 15).

But what is the connection between the burnished, pleasing, and optimistic technological sublime and the abject? The sublime vision is transformative: The threat of violence nears, but, like an aesthetic defense mechanism, the sublime transforms it into a pleasure of mastery when the perceiver has the necessary

distance, at the boundary between indifference and paralysis. Nature is transformed from threat to servant, one who isn't allowed in the house. Were the utopian desire that undergirds the technological sublime—the total domination of non-human nature—ever to come to fruition, there would be no more threat, no outside threatening the inside, no 'not-I,' and no need for a border to demarcate what threatens and what has been mastered. Crucially, there would be no more abject. Ultimately, the technological sublime, because it seeks to permanently overcome human limitation, is a narcissistic experience, a human marveling at its reified will, its own creations.

As we have seen, the sublime is an experience that transforms a threat into the secure knowledge of mastery—it orders non-human objects and stabilizes them, makes them meaningful and, most importantly, subordinate to the rational subject. Waste, however, challenges the stability of the rigid subject/object ontology that undergirds the sublime. This is because waste is abject, as we saw in the discussion of Kristeva above. If, as I will show, there is a contradiction at the heart of the technological sublime, then the analysis that follows will show that the abject *is* this paradox: at the core of the technological sublime lies an encounter with abjection, the uncomfortable reassertion of twinned essential qualities of humanity: the finitude of the individual and the limitations to human existence that arise from the human's enmeshment with non-human nature. *Underworld*'s depiction of abject waste, I argue, challenges the hegemonic dominance of the ideology of progress, mediated through the technological sublime, in U.S.-American culture.

Drawing on the abject to analyze *Underworld*'s depiction of the sublime encounter with waste is useful because waste is itself abject: humans cannot help but produce it, both intimate body waste and the detritus of consumption and consumerism, despite the inevitable (and perhaps necessary) rejection of waste once produced.[5] Indeed, Kristeva argues that waste embodies the abject's threat to a stable ontology: "The danger of filth represents [...] the risk to which the very symbolic order is permanently exposed, to the extent that it is a device of discriminations, of differences" (69). Exposing ourselves to waste, which we create and then disavow, reveals the artificial and contingent nature of our value and meaning-making structures.[6] Analyzing the U.S.-American attempt to master waste that *Underworld*

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[5] While Kristeva's famous essay focuses, due to its author's psychoanalytic bent, on bodily waste and the psychological formation of the individual, this article will focus on material waste, the garbage that the novel's U.S.-Americans produce in the course of their daily lives. While it might be possible to argue that there is a meaningful difference between primary bodily waste and secondary waste, I, following William Viney (2014), believe that this distinction dissolves when waste is viewed in terms of 'use.' In this sense, waste is the product of a process of using, one that can describe ingestion, metabolism, and feces production as easily as it can the process of wearing out a pair of shoes.

[6] This conception of waste hearkens back to Mary Douglas' classic analysis of dirt and social system, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1966). Dirt, the most basic form of pollution, Douglas argues, "is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements" (36). Pollutants, like garbage, 'belong' outside the boundaries that demarcate a taxonomy. Kristeva does not mention Douglas, but they share an interest in the role of boundary work in system construction and in the 'unwanted' parts of a culture or a subject.

portrays is necessary because it is an instance where the otherwise wildly successful practices of domination that have resulted in the Anthropocene and its attendant crises meet their match. The abject-ness of waste, at least in *Underworld*, triumphs over the technological sublime.

Fresh Kills Landfill: The Promise of Technical Mastery

Can waste be mastered? This is the central question of the novel—and perhaps of the Anthropocene—which *Underworld* self-consciously poses. At Fresh Kills, Brian Glassic asks himself how we can keep waste, "this mass metabolism[,] from overwhelming us" (DeLillo 185). The novel seems to answer Brian's question through the remarks of another character, Jesse Detweiler, a consultant who advises the waste management firm for whom Brian Glassic and Nick Shay work: "Isolate the most toxic waste [...] [But] [d]on't hide your garbage facilities. Make an architecture of waste" (DeLillo 286). Detweiler recognizes the existential threat of waste, "[c]onsume or die" (DeLillo 287–88) is his zingy phrase, and he advises protagonist Nick Shay to make waste sublime, a profitable "landscape of nostalgia," complete with "bus tours and postcards" (DeLillo 288). Framing waste management as a tourist venture produces 'treated' waste, safe to gaze at through the tour bus window. Detwiler's vision of waste as sublime, waste mastered by technological progress, would neutralize the effects of abjection and erase the discomfort, danger, and uncertainty that accompany it.

In this section, I will demonstrate how *Underworld* depicts Fresh Kills Landfill as an object of the technological sublime. DeLillo is at pains to describe how the landfill annihilates time and space, as well as fulfilling two paradoxical social functions: dividing humans into groups based on technological expertise and reaffirming a common humanity. However, once *Underworld* establishes the technological sublime as mediated by the landfill, it begins to critique and undermine it by suggesting that the abject lies at the heart of the encounter with the technological sublime.

In a masterstroke of DeLilloan irony, Fresh Kills Landfill is initially portrayed as an escape from the web of human-made and human-oriented things. Driving to Fresh Kills, Brian Glassic is 'stuck' on the freeway, stuck in traffic with nothing to look at besides advertising billboards. All that he sees, he realizes, are "systematically linked in some self-referring relationship that had a kind of neurotic tightness, an inescapability" (DeLillo 183). No matter how long he drives, he is always at the same site, surrounded by "billboards for Hertz and Avis and Chevy Blazer, for Marlboro, Continental and Goodyear" (DeLillo 183). The billboards' inexhaustible reference to products and commodities blots out any trace of the non-human. However, he eventually escapes this "neurotic tightness" and arrives at Fresh Kills, literally at the end of the road, which ends in "gravel and weeds" (DeLillo 183).

Freed from the web of human-made commodities, Brian looks out at Fresh Kills. He initially perceives the "terraced elevation [...] reddish brown, flat-topped,

monumental" (DeLillo 183) as an Arizona butte, signaling a picturesque impulse, alerting the reader to a retreat from human artifice and constraint. The word "monumental" also suggests the grandeur of a natural scene. Brian is initially confused because he mistakes the landfill, a highly artificial object, for a picturesque natural scene. This confusion is significant because Fresh Kills is located on Staten Island, one of New York City's five boroughs, an environment dominated by humans more thoroughly than anywhere else in the country.

However, an ironic reversal immediately follows. Brian soon realizes that what he is seeing is "real and […] man-made" (DeLillo 183–84). Here, DeLillo plays with the reader's expectations. If the brief association of the landfill with an Arizona butte awoke the expectation that Brian is looking out on a beautiful natural vista, symbolically contrasting with the intensely human nature of the freeway, and of New York City, where much of the novel takes place, then the reader's realization, focalized through Brian, that he is looking at a landfill ironically denies this interpretation. What was promised as a picturesque escape from the human is revealed to be, instead, a disguised extension of humanity's dominance over the non-human. If the reader begins to expect the Kantian sublime, through the presence of the word "monumental," for instance, then this expectation is immediately supplanted by the technological sublime: Brian is gazing at an engineering marvel, not at an Arizona butte.

As Brian looks at the landfill, it gradually becomes sublime. The overwhelming sight, the result of New York City's half-century attempt to deal with its waste, annihilates time and space, making it an encounter with the technological sublime. The landfill is described as "science fiction and prehistory, garbage arriving twenty-four hours a day" (DeLillo 184). Science fiction, as Canavan and Link argue, is essentially about "the negative depiction of the dystopias that will arise 'if this goes on'" (Canavan and Link 9). A desire-laden depiction of the future, science fiction is outside time because it is fictional and, were it possible at all, has not yet occurred. Despite this, science fiction reiterates the temporal structures of humanity and limns itself as a continuation, a prophecy of an impending 'now.' Prehistory, in contrast, denotes an epoch that is outside of time, outside of historical narrative. It is impossible for a body in space to move forwards and backwards simultaneously, but the sublimity of the landfill—its consolidation of past and future—inspires the mind to effect a double projection, an escape out of a series of 'nows.'

Whereas science fiction and prehistory represent an attempt to escape from measurable time, to break with the linear succession of 'nows,' "garbage arriving twenty-four hours a day" performs the opposite, attempts to abolish time entirely by creating an interminable, de-differentiated 'now'. The machines in the passage, "bulldozers pushing waves of refuse […] [b]arges unloading, sweeper boats poking through the kills […] vehicles with metal rollers compacting the trash, bucket auger digging vents for methane gas, […] a line of snouted trucks sucking in loose litter" (DeLillo 184), are not beholden to biological demands and thus do not need to divide time into day/night, work/rest, or even produce/consume segments. This is sublime

time, the eternal now, which, as we saw above, has an abject underside. Here, the novel suggests that humanity can master the threat of waste, its unceasing calling-forth of the abject, by countering it with technological innovation, mechanical intermediaries that are able to escape biological rhythms and cycles, the physical traces of time on the human body. This representation of temporal distortion in the landfill is in line with the traditional U.S.-American cultural imaginary of technology, which *Underworld* will later critique.

The description of the landfill also annihilates space. In order to grasp this immense sight, Brian's eyes wander:

> All this ingenuity and labor, this delicate effort to fit maximum waste into diminishing space. The towers of the World Trade Center were visible in the distance and he sensed a poetic balance between that idea and this one. Bridges, tunnels, scows, tugs, graving docks, container ships, all the great works of transport, trade and linkage were directed in the end to this culminating structure. (DeLillo 184)

Though the description links the World Trade Center to capitalism and comments on the connection between capitalism and waste, I want to focus on how the novel links the World Trade Center and the landfill as purveyors of the technological sublime because they both defamiliarize objects.[7] The World Trade Center, a skyscraper, unlocks a new precipice from which to gaze, an untethered, god-like position which distorts the 'natural' relationship between humans and the space they inhabit, creating the illusion of a total, finite, and depthless environment. In the landfill, the three stages of the life cycle of man-made objects (production, consumption, and expulsion) have been combined, telescoped into a totality of discard. The spaces through which objects have travelled are now lost because the objects cease to be historical items. Any disaggregated use- or exchange-value an object may have had, textured by its interaction with space through time, is erased by its deposition in the landfill, a repository for worthless things. 'They' become an 'it' defined by uselessness: the mass noun 'waste'. The everyday objects through which space is read become unrecognizable—the grammar of reality, space and time, has been effaced.

Additionally, the built environment of the technological sublime produces affect by sorting human beings on the basis of expertise, "a split between those who understand and control machines and those who do not" (Nye 60). Brian Glassic recognizes this split—and his position within it—and that contributes to his affect:

> The mountain was here, unconcealed but no one saw it or thought about it, no one knew it existed except the engineers and teamsters and local residents, a unique cultural deposit, fifty million tons by the time they top it off, carved and modeled, and no one talked about it except the men and women who tried to manage it, and he saw himself for the first time as a member of an esoteric order, they were adepts and seers, crafting the future, the city planners, the waste managers, the compost technicians,

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[7] The "poetic balance" links the processes of production and consumption symbolized by the World Trade Center, which generates unusable byproducts which must go somewhere—to the landfill. Rachele Dini notes that "we *need* [this] endpoint because it *allows us* to keep making things, buying things, and selling things" ("Consumerism" 162, emphasis in the original).

> the landscapers who would build hanging gardens here, make a park one day out of every kind of used and lost and eroded object of desire. (DeLillo 185)

The aura of power and control that knowledge bestows is not, however, universal. First, Brian differentiates between the great mass of people who don't know Fresh Kills exists at all and those who do, the "engineers and teamsters and local residents." The excluded increase, are slowly whittled away until only the waste managers remain. This is mirrored by the increasing precision by which the landfill is evoked. It is initially a "mountain," for those who merely see and know it. For those, however, who can speak about it, the members of an "esoteric order," the mountain ceases to be a figure of speech; the image becomes more figurative and the language more technical, "fifty million tons […] curved and modelled." A distinction is made between those who passively observe, the teamsters and local residents, and those who (try to) manage. The nouns "[a]depts and seers" evoke a spiritual power linked to a group of highly educated technocrats, "the city planners, the waste managers, the compost technicians, the landscapers" who are united by their ability to control the Fresh Kills Landfill, constructing it in the present and into the future. Through his apprehension of a sublime, man-made object, Brian identifies himself as a member of a group who can create technological wonders that overwhelm the minds of their fellow humans.

Yet one paradoxical aspect of the technological sublime is that, even though it splits humans into groups, it also unites them by evoking a common humanity. The technological sublime, even as it reiterates hierarchies, creates "a communion, through the machine, of man with man […] a group experience of its own potential greatness" (Nye 62). In *Underworld*, waste is the object through which the essential commonality of humanity is mediated, the recognition and attempted rejection of the abject. Brian feels enlightened when he realizes that banal matter signifies an organizing, evaluating system:

> He looked at all that soaring garbage and knew for the first time what his job was all about. Not engineering or transportation or source reduction. He dealt in human behavior, people's habits and impulses, their uncontrollable needs and innocent wishes, maybe their passions, certainly their excesses and indulgences, but their kindness too, their generosity, and the question was how to keep this mass metabolism from overwhelming us.
>
> The landfill showed smack-on how the waste stream ended, where all the appetites and hankerings, the sodden second thoughts came runneling out, the things you wanted so ardently and then did not. (DeLillo 184–85)

The waste becomes—not a collection of symbols—but a mass of empty vessels, gesturing to the animus which produced, consumed, and discarded them. *Underworld* names the universal, "behavior," and then lists particulars. By stratifying the vast array of micro-longings and actions that tapestry human lives, the novel brings into relief the essence of humanity, the need to consume in order to continue living.

The rhetorical descriptions of the object that prompts the technological sublime also serve to unite humans separated by millennia and continents. The grandeur of Fresh Kills is suggested by evoking an ancient wonder of the world and then dwarfing it: "He imagined that he was watching the construction of the Great

Pyramid at Giza—only this was twenty-five times bigger" (DeLillo 184). Toward the end of the extended description, Brian characterizes the park that will be built on top of the landfill in terms of another ancient wonder, the fabled Hanging Gardens of Babylon (DeLillo 185). David Nye notes that nineteenth-century U.S.-American writers often alluded to great architectural and technological achievements of the ancient world to rhetorically position contemporary technological works. Linking august objects such as the Acropolis or the Pyramids of Egypt to canals and railroads connects their creators, which testifies to the durability of human culture in spite of the erosional effects of alterity, time, and space. Even though the cultures that produced these sublime objects have disappeared, through the technological sublime they nonetheless signify the (supposedly) indomitable essence of humanity: the non-human other, nature, has not eradicated the traces of a long-departed human culture.

Brian finds "the sight inspiring," feels "a sting of enlightenment" (DeLillo 184). After a while, however, his pleasure begins to transmute into discomfort. He no longer sees the landfill as a heap of unwanted objects, but as a threat, "a mass metabolism" that needs to be kept from "overwhelming us" (DeLillo 184). The threat of waste becomes more evident when Brian fantasizes about the people who live near Fresh Kills: "When people heard a noise at night, did they think that the heap was coming down around them, sliding towards their homes, an omnivorous movie terror filling their doorways and windows?" (DeLillo 185). Here, waste's abjection emerges, a slippage between inside and outside, between controlled and uncontrollable. The rejected waste escapes the landfill and returns to threaten human homes. Brian's "movie terror" vision of waste flooding homes is *Underworld*'s ironic suggestion that the technological sublime's attempt to reject and control the abjection of waste is only partially successful. DeLillo's choice to represent the technological sublime through waste is effective precisely because waste itself is abject: it is defined as such, an unwanted and reviled Other from the outset. DeLillo dramatizes the transformative potential of the technological sublime at the point where it meets its match. Embedded in the core of the novel's depiction of the technological sublime is a powerful repudiation of this vision of mastery, of human dominance over non-human nature.

The Recycling Plant: The Abject at the Heart of the Technological Sublime

Whereas waste was sent away to the landfill under the strategy of containment during the Cold War, when Brian visited Fresh Kills Landfill, it is reabsorbed into a matrix of commodification and consumption after the fall of the USSR. In fact, it is no longer considered waste at all. Nick Shay's visit to a recycling plant on the edge of Phoenix, Arizona, is a refined encounter with the technological sublime. The threat of abjection disguised by the sublime object, the fundamental constraint of human finitude, has been 'designed' out of the experience. The technological sublime encounter that results from this new waste management strategy—recycling—is registered by a disembodied, seemingly omnipotent observer. However, despite the

best attempt of engineers and architects to sanitize waste and remove its abject quality, even the recycled commodities depicted by the novel are undergirded by abjection. Although the novel initially depicts this experience as pleasant, the sublime encounter is immediately followed by descriptions of Nick's helplessness and anger as he ruminates on his aging body and the insufficiency of memory. This juxtaposition undermines the technological sublime and the ideology of progress on which it is based, drawing attention to the indomitability of waste and to the ultimate failure of the technological sublime, a result of the abjection that is embedded at its core.

The technological sublime is characterized by an individual's experience of the annihilation of time and space. At the recycling plant, the body and its non-ocular sensations are reduced to practically nothing:

> [I]nside the vast recycling shed we stand on a catwalk and watch the operations in progress. The tin, the paper, the plastics, the Styrofoam. [...] [F]our hundred tons a day, assembly lines of garbage, sorted, compressed and baled, transformed in the end to square-edged units, products again [...]. (DeLillo 809)

This passage suggests a god-like omniscience: on the catwalk, Nick and his granddaughter can survey the recycling plant as a totality, as if they were above or outside it, able to rise above the huge quantities ("four hundred tons a day") and recycling procedures for materials as varied as tin, paper, plastics, and Styrofoam. The novel moves from the evocation of such an experience—the juxtaposition of Fresh Kills and the World Trade Center, as we saw above—to depicting an actual experience of totality. The text completely obliterates any trace of their bodily existence besides visual perception. The other four senses have been minimized. The design of the recycling plant minimizes noxious smells and harsh sounds.[8] Only self-consciously aesthetic sights remain: "brightness streams from skylights down to the floor of the shed, falling on top of the machines with a numinous glow" (DeLillo 809). All that remains to this experience is the (supposedly) immutable sense of sight. DeLillo here removes from the unique body its unique set of spatial and temporal coordinates, all senses except a stable sense of visual perception, creating what could be called a phenomenological experience of the annihilation of time and space.

In this version of the technological sublime, waste is no longer wasted. The fear that confronted Brian at Fresh Kills, the threat of waste overwhelming the boundaries of the landfill and invading people's homes, has been replaced with a vision of eternal consumption. Leonard Wilcox writes that "in this malign reciprocity of power and waste, an excess or remainder no longer seems to mark a limit condition" (124). This dissolution of the limit is the attempted resolution of the abject. Waste is no longer rejected and set 'outside' the bounds of human civilization, since machines have the

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[8] Comparing Nick's sensory experience here with Brian's at Fresh Kills sharpens the distinction. At Fresh Kills, the stench of the garbage is mentioned four times, including a twice-repeated one sentence paragraph: "The wind carried the stink across the kill" (185). The extended description also devotes a line to the efforts of humans to combat this overpowering reek, "tanker trucks spraying perfumed water on the approach roads" (184). Brian's sublime encounter is embodied, whereas Nick's bodily presence seems superfluous.

power to reclaim it, to prepare it for human (re-)consumption. Consumption is a process, always in the present continuous:

> The trucks are arrayed in two columns outside the shed, *bringing* in the unsorted slop, the gut squalor of our lives, and *taking* the baled and bound units out into the world again, the chunky product blocks, pristine, newsprint for newsprint, tin for tin, and we all feel better when we leave. (DeLillo 810; my emphasis)

Here, there is only the singular space, the itinerant instant of consumption. At Fresh Kills, one distinction remained: something was either product or waste, inhabited different spaces and times. In some sense, products 'aged' and became waste. This distinction has been effaced. Things are products, continually regenerated and refurbished, and there is no space outside the production/consumption nexus, no more waste, no need for landfills or containment. Objects are reformed into what they already were: "newsprint for newsprint, tin for tin." Waste has been transformed (back) into commodity as if it had never been wasted at all, signaling the triumph of the technological sublime, the mastery over matter.

Concurrent with the recycling plant's repackaging of objects, the technological sublime attempts to decouple sublimity from abjection. Nick's granddaughter "loves this place" (DeLillo 809), as do the other kids who visit: "[they] love the machines, the bales and hoppers and long conveyors" (DeLillo 810). The children reify humanity when affected by the machines at the recycling plant: The machines are depicted as both outside human control, because they partake in numinosity, but also, because we are their origin, as our subjects. The dissipation of the threat of waste is made explicit when the text contrasts an old landfill to the recycling plant: "the landfill across the road is closed now, jammed to capacity, but gas keeps rising from the great earthen berm, methane, and it produces a wavering across the land and sky that deepens the aura of sacred work" (DeLillo 810). The threat of waste overwhelming is acknowledged by "closed now, jammed to capacity," but the fact that it is closed *now*, supplemented by the recycling plant, transforms the threat into an ambivalent, almost beautiful sheen that reinforces the ideology behind the technological sublime, which aims to eradicate the abject. The wavering alters the landscape, physically distorting the protean components of 'nature,' "land and sky." The gas is transformed from a harmful substance into a harmless substance—or even a beneficial one, since it seems to complement the 'spiritual' work done at the recycling plant. Here, the transition of the technological sublime from the landfill to the recycling plant mirrors the (attempted) permanent expulsion of waste and its abject threat. Waste will no longer exist, since it will be a permanent commodity, recycled and recycled indefinitely; the abject will no longer exist, because there will be nothing outside the human and its artificial network of commodities against which to define the human.

The technological sublime, as we have seen, attempts to shift its primary ignition away from the threat that inspired the Kantian sublime and toward the pleasure of mastery. By doing so, it would efface the abject. At Fresh Kills, it did not completely succeed, but at the recycling plant, the overwhelming vastness of waste does not seem threatening, as if the technological sublime has achieved its aim and

redeemed waste back into the consuming, living body. As Elise Martucci points out, however, "one must pause at this description of recycling's redemptive effects and question whether this 'redemptive quality' is a false sense of achievement" (121).

Indeed, directly following the recycling plant, Nick ruminates on his life:

> I drink aged grappa and listen to jazz. I do the books on the new bookshelves and stand in the living room and look at the carpets and wall hangings and I know the ghosts are walking the halls. But not these halls and not this house. They're all back there [...] and I stand helpless in this desert place looking at the books.
> I long for the days of disorder. I want them back, the days when I was alive on the earth, rippling in the quick of my skin, heedless and real. I was dumb-muscled and angry and real. This is what I long for, the breach of peace, the days of disarray when I walked real streets and did things slap-bang and felt angry and ready all the time, a danger to others and a mystery to myself. (DeLillo 810)

There is a sudden outburst of affect, a mixture of desire, anger, and helpless. Whereas at the recycling plant Nick was merely a pair of eyeballs, shorn of his other senses, this passage reengages those senses.

No longer in the sanctifying sphere of the recycling plant, far from its reassuring vision of controlled aging, Nick doesn't value the sensual experiences of listening to jazz, drinking grappa, or touching books. His thoughts turn toward the past, when he felt 'real.' Note that the word 'real' appears three times in three sentences: Nick characterizes himself as "real" twice and he also walked "real streets" in the Brooklyn of his youth. He describes this lost sense of realness with language of embodiment: "rippling in the quick of my skin," "dumb-muscled," as if the past possesses the unity that the recycling plant provided the products which passed through it—the plenitude and presence of wholeness. Here, the limitations of an embodied being reassert themselves and fall short of the promise of the technological sublime. Nick has aged; the past is irretrievably in the past. What is this affect if not a burst of anger and fear by an aging man whose life, as Patrick O'Donnell points out, "embodies the history of the subject produced by objects" (119)? What's more, this outburst is directed precisely against the highly controlled experience the recycled products partake in, "a kind of brave aging" (DeLillo 809). Whereas the recycled commodities age in the most superficial sense, reliving their past 'lives' as a useful item over and over again, Nick is divorced from his past, hyper-conscious of the difference between his youthful body and the body he inhabits now. If waste is offered eternal life as recycled commodities, the sublimity of this gift is marred by Nick's realization that this "kind of brave aging" will never be extended to him.

The sublime attempt to definitively master waste by purifying it of abjection has not succeeded. Or, rather, the technological sublime fails by succeeding, reminding Nick that he has limitations which cannot be mastered, and that, indeed, his entanglement in time and space constitutes his very being. What he is feeling is abjection, the sense of "perpetual danger" (Kristeva 15) that the technological sublime is supposed to eradicate. Despite his attempts to escape abjection by working on the containment and consumeristic sacralization of waste, through both personal

means and in his employment at a waste management company, he—and U.S.-American culture at large—cannot ultimately escape the abject. There is a certain poignancy in the fact that even the human's most powerful creations, such as the recycling plant, which the novel portrays as annihilating time and space for the commodities it processes, ultimately serve to reinforce the inescapability of human limitation. The passage illustrates the pernicious and complicated relationship between an individual, the waste they produce, the abject, and the late-twentieth century technological sublime. Weaving these elements together, *Underworld* mediates the U.S.-American wish to remain present and powerful, to wholly liberate oneself from abjection and reincorporate waste by denying its existence altogether. In a culture where failure is seen as moral unworthiness, *Underworld*'s depiction of abject waste and the failure of the technological sublime challenges the hegemonic dominance of the ideology of technological progress and the domination of non-human nature.

Conclusion: The Limit of the Technological Sublime and the Abject Sublime

Seen within its own logic, the technological sublime is a project of liberation, a vision of impending omniscience, a permanent deferral of human limitation. Unacknowledged, the core of this project is the obliteration of abjection, a complete and total mastery of both subject and object. Yet, as we have seen, when waste becomes sublime, the progression toward mastery does not proceed as smoothly as promised.

I have tried to show two things. First, if the waste management apparatus—landfills and recycling plants—that the novel depicts represent the material component of the system built "to deal with it" (DeLillo 288), the technological sublime represents the aesthetic component of U.S.-American culture's response to waste. Both Brian Glassic and Nick Shay experience the annihilation of time and space in response to encounter with monumental waste-management projects. They both, too, are initially enchanted by the vision of omnipotence and mastery that these projects evoke.

However, building off the first argument, I have demonstrated how, by injecting moments of doubt and feelings of anger at the end of the two protagonists' encounters with the technological sublime, *Underworld* unearths the abject which paradoxically lies at the heart of the technological sublime. In response to the landfill, Brian Glassic asks an unsettling question he can't answer: what will people do when the landfill overflows, when the "mass metabolism" escapes the site where it has been contained, out of sight, out of mind (DeLillo 184)? The novel suggests that the answer is to replace the landfill system with recycling, wherein products never become waste. The recycling plant is, then, an example of Jesse Detweiler's "architecture of waste" (DeLillo 286). It envelopes waste within the technological sublime and make it appear pleasing to the eye. In this acted-out fantasy, abjection, waste's dark underside, has (ostensibly) been designed out of the experience. Yet at the end of the novel, Nick

Shay is powerless, frozen between the promise of mastery that lies just out of reach and his embodied, enfeebled experience as an aging human limited by the passage of time and the yawning chasms that separate him from the "real" place of his youth.

The novel's confrontation with waste, a depiction of frustrated mastery that sketches the limits of the supposedly illimitable technological sublime, belongs to a category of experience that could be called the abject sublime. Beholding a sublime technological wonder, a manifest version of Emerson's "double of man" mastering the natural world (Emerson 51), Nick Shay is thrown back onto his corporeality and historicity as he tries to transcend these limitations. He is only human. By portraying Nick in this way, DeLillo asks readers to grapple with this abjection by dramatizing the failure of the technological sublime as an aesthetic strategy, which inadvertently reinscribes the boundaries that it seeks to override: the finitude of the embodied human, the abjection that accompanies the awareness of our relative powerlessness, enmeshed amongst the world around and in us. *Underworld*'s sublime encounters with waste are prescient reminders that humans are neither omniscient nor omnipotent, that individuals, nations, if not the human species, are circumscribed by entities that resist and frustrate our desires, especially the desire to escape entanglement in a relational world that is only partially responsive to our attempts to communicate with it. *Underworld* suggests, but masterfully refrains from moralizing, that we would do better to acknowledge our limitations and our partiality rather than act out "massive fantasies" (DeLillo 421) of dominance or mastery, aided by technology, the "god trick" about which Donna Haraway has written so persuasively (191). This suggestion, mediated by the aesthetic strategy of the abject sublime, is a critique of U.S.-American culture, especially the ideology of progress upon which the technological sublime is predicated.

Indeed, in times like these, times of upheaval, of loss on a planetary scale, times of seemingly unthinking pursuit of technological domination, we should pay attention to the (ultimately) ethical appeal of Don DeLillo's *Underworld*. In lieu of a triumphant *tour de force*, *Underworld* subverts the technological sublime and the ideology of progress from which it stems. This subversion recognizes the abjection of waste, a status that can neither be completely excluded nor comprehensively integrated. Just like the complex and uneasy relationship between the human and the non-human, which unfolds in a liminal space akin to the abject, there is no way to permanently banish the essential trait of humanity: fallibility. Acknowledging our fallibility on a collective and individual level is a necessary and important step towards making amends to all those with whom we share this planet.

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Ruptura con la tesis de la excepción humana en novelas francesas del siglo XXI: Chevillard, Message y Brunel

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Resumen

Partiendo del libro de Jean-Marie Schaeffer sobre el fin de la excepción humana, se analiza cómo el dualismo ontológico y la ruptura óntica—que postulan, respectivamente, la división del ser humano y su separación del resto del mundo—se cuestionan en algunas novelas francesas de la actualidad. El corpus está compuesto de tres obras, que representan con elementos fantásticos o de ciencia ficción, tres fines de mundo diferentes: *Sans l'orang-outan* de Éric Chevillard de 2007, *Défaite des maîtres et possesseurs* de Vincent Message de 2016 y *Les métamorphoses* de Camille Brunel de 2020. Se estudia cómo la jerarquía tradicional del mito de la excepcionalidad humana—"humano-razón" por encima del "animal-cuerpo"—se rompe en estos relatos: con la inversión del orden jerárquico en el caso de Chevillard, con el desplazamiento del humano hacia abajo en el orden jerárquico para Message y en la eliminación de la jerarquía en la novela de Brunel. Se mostrará que estos cambios se pueden observar en el nivel de las isotopías también y, concretamente en el de las rupturas de isotopía. Finalmente, el elemento común en estos relatos es el compromiso ecológico con los animales y la reinterpretación del lugar de los seres humanos en la Tierra: se recuerda que todos, independientemente de la especie, formamos parte de una misma red de la vida.

Palabras clave: Éric Chevillard, Vincent Message, Camille Brunel, excepción humana, animales.

Abstract

Starting from the book by Jean-Marie Schaeffer on the end of the human exception, it is analyzed how ontological dualism and ontic rupture—which postulate, respectively, the division of the human being and his separation from the rest of the world—are questioned in contemporary French novels. The corpus consists of three works that represent three different ends of the world with fantastic or science fiction elements: *Sans l'orang-outan* by Éric Chevillard from 2007, *Défaite des maîtres et possesseurs* by Vincent Message from 2016 and *Les métamorphoses* by Camille Brunel from 2020. It is studied how the traditional hierarchy of the myth of human exceptionality—"human-reason" above the "animal-body"—is broken in these stories: with the inversion of the hierarchical order in the case of Chevillard, with the displacement of the human down in the hierarchical order for Message and in the elimination of the hierarchy in Brunel's novel. It will also be shown that these changes can be observed at the level of isotopies as well, and specifically at that of isotopy breaks. Finally, the common element in these stories is the ecological commitment to animals and the reinterpretation of the place of the human beings on Earth: it is remembered that everyone, regardless of the species, is part of the same web of life.

Keywords: Éric Chevillard, Vincent Message, Camille Brunel, human exception, animals.

Introducción

Elegir un corpus de novelas francesas "ultra-contemporáneas" en las cuales se cuestione la excepción humana es una tarea ardua no por la escasa presencia de este tipo de obras en el campo literario francés, sino por todo lo contrario: por la frecuencia con la que aparecen los animales en los relatos de autores franceses. Sophie Milcent-Lawson habla de un verdadero giro animal que hace referencia tanto a la omnipresencia del tema, como a una nueva manera de representarlo ("Tournant animal" 2).

Es decir, para entender el punto de vista animal, el novelista intenta imaginar y, por supuesto, transmitir por el lenguaje lo que estos pueden ver o sentir: intenta ponerse en la piel de los animales. Esto es bien lo que hace Tristan Garcia en *Mémoires de la jungle* (2010), novela casi enteramente narrada por un chimpancé o, de una manera menos innovadora, Bernard Werber en *Demain les chats* (2016), cuya protagonista es una gata. Sin embargo, en este artículo no nos interesamos por la búsqueda formal (estilística, lingüística o retórica) para llevar a cabo esta descentralización, de la que se ocuparía la zoopoética de Anne Simon,[1] sino por los relatos en los cuales los humanos se ponen *literalmente* en la piel de los animales. Dicho de otro modo, se van a explorar novelas con algunos elementos fantásticos o relatos de anticipación donde los humanos ocuparán el lugar de los animales. Concretamente: *Sans l'orang-outan* de Éric Chevillard (2007), *Défaite des maîtres et possesseurs* de Vincent Message (2018) y *Les métamorphoses* de Camille Brunel (2020). Estas obras borran los límites entre lo humano y lo animal de maneras muy diferentes, pero tienen en común la ruptura con la tesis de la excepcionalidad humana y con un antropocentrismo que podríamos definir aquí como el desinterés por el punto de vista de seres no humanos.[2]

Jean-Marie Schaeffer en su ensayo *El fin de la excepción humana* define y analiza lo que llama la "Tesis". Esta postula que "en su esencia propiamente humana, el hombre poseería una dimensión ontológica eminente en virtud de la cual trascendería al mismo tiempo la realidad de otras formas de vida y su propia condición 'natural'" (Schaeffer 14). Aunque presente en la Biblia y en general en toda la cultura Occidental, la excepcionalidad humana se cristalizaría ante todo en el pensamiento cartesiano y en el de sus seguidores. Según Schaeffer, se basa en cuatro afirmaciones básicas: en la ruptura óntica, el dualismo ontológico, la concepción gnoseocéntrica y el antinaturalismo. Aquí nos interesan especialmente los primeros dos conceptos que están estrechamente relacionados con nuestro tema, a saber, la confusión de los límites de lo animal y de lo humano.

El autor francés recalca la estrecha relación entre ruptura óntica y dualismo ontológico:

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[1] En resumen, el objetivo de la zoopoética es estudiar los recursos estilísticos, lingüísticos, narrativos u otros que se utilizan para representar el mundo de los animales (Simon, "Présentation de la zoopoétique").

[2] En este artículo vamos a distinguir entre un antropocentrismo "erróneo" o excesivo y un antropismo crítico que definen Quintanilla y Andrade (220) como "*la conciencia racional y crítica de [la] antropologización inevitable de la naturaleza*, en cualquier situación posible de comunicación humana."

> El postulado de la ruptura óntica presupone una concepción dualista del ser humano. [..] Por "ruptura óntica" entiendo el postulado que sostiene que existen dos clases de entes, el hombre por un lado y todos los demás por el otro. Se trata de una concepción segregacionista que establece una inconmensurabilidad entre el hombre y los otros seres vivos. Por "dualismo ontológico" entiendo la tesis según la cual existen dos modalidades de ser, la realidad material de un lado y la realidad espiritual del otro. (Schaeffer 29-30)

De una manera simplificada, esto significa que la superioridad de la especie humana se justifica por la existencia de una división en el interior del ser humano: como dice el filósofo, "él mismo se encuentra dividido" (43). El humano se caracterizará para los defensores de la Tesis por su razón e intelecto, su espíritu, mientras que el animal se describe únicamente por su materialidad y corporalidad. Como veremos, en las novelas elegidas justamente se cuestiona la idea de la ruptura óntica desde el dualismo ontológico, sin que eso suponga una ruptura completa con ello: los animales tendrán características humanas y los humanos características animales.

En las próximas páginas, se estudiará en las tres novelas del corpus cómo la jerarquía humano/animal se rompe a través de los (inter)cambios de roles, lo que se plasmará también en el nivel de las isotopías. Como veremos, cada autor propone una manera diferente de rechazar la jerarquía cartesiana: invirtiendo el orden y los valores (Chevillard), desplazando a los humanos hacia abajo en el orden jerárquico (Message) y eliminado las diferencias y, por lo tanto, la jerarquía misma (Brunel).

Inversión de la jerarquía: *Sans l'orang-outan* de Éric Chevillard

Las obras de Éric Chevillard en general ponen en escena mundos ficcionales poco realistas que tienen sus propias reglas de funcionamiento, sin embargo, como lo afirma Dominique Faria (114), eso no significa una falta de interés o de compromiso con la realidad de la parte del autor, sino todo lo contario: como muchas novelas fantásticas o de ciencia ficción, sus relatos hablan de nuestro mundo a través de mundos (im)posibles. En particular, numerosos críticos han llamado la atención sobre el compromiso ecológico de Chevillard (Faria, Cazaban-Mazerolles, Bouchez) y, en particular, la omnipresencia de los animales en su obra (Afeissa, Sermet, Steyaert). En efecto, cuando le preguntan sobre esta recurrencia, lo explica de la siguiente manera:

> [...] me encantan los animales, su infinita variedad que nos distrae tan oportunamente de los pocos roles que casi inevitablemente estamos destinados a encarnar en el transcurso de una vida humana, y que también compensa la pobreza de nuestra imaginación. Además, los animales nos ofrecen figuras alegóricas, metafóricas o imaginarias muy emocionantes para el escritor, no soy el primero en darme cuenta de ello. Por último, tengo muy claro que este mundo les pertenece tanto como al hombre, e incluso parecen más preocupados que él por preservar sus equilibrios. (en Allemand 153)[3]

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[3] Las traducciones de los textos que se citan son nuestras. A partir de ahora, las versiones originales se citarán a pie de página: "[...] j'aime les animaux, leur variété infinie qui nous distrait si opportunément des rôles peu nombreux que nous sommes amenés presque inévitablement à incarner tour à tour dans le cours d'une vie d'homme et qui compense aussi la pauvreté de notre imagination. Les animaux nous proposent en outre des figures allégoriques, métaphoriques ou fabuleuses très excitantes pour l'écrivain, je ne suis pas

Vemos pues que la presencia de los animales en la obra de Chevillard tiene que ver con la fascinación del autor hacia ellos, así como que los "utiliza" con fines estéticos. Sin embargo, también se preocupa por lo que son, y aboga por su derecho a estar en el mundo. Sus relatos representan, así, un espacio que compartir entre humanos y animales. Como dice Cazaban-Maserolles (62), los relatos de Chevillard desarrollan una estética de la "copresencia" donde humanos y no humanos no están jerarquizados.

La novela *Sans l'orang-outan* es sin duda una de las más "ecológicas" del autor, ya que el centro de todo el relato es la extinción de la última pareja de orangutanes: de Bagus y de Mina. En la primera parte, el narrador Albert Moindre, cuidador de estos primates, lamenta su desaparición que rompe el equilibrio del ecosistema. En efecto, en la segunda parte narra las consecuencias catastróficas a las que llevó la extinción: a un mundo recubierto de arena, donde los humanos viven su miserable vida sin alegría, ni esperanza. Finalmente, el protagonista, siempre afligido de la muerte de Bagus y de Mina, intenta convertir a algunos humanos en orangutanes para restablecer el equilibrio.

La muerte de Bagus y Mina es una pérdida personal para Moindre cuya vida se vuelve vacía de contenido, pero también lo es para toda la humanidad. El narrador habla en la mayor parte del tiempo en primera persona del plural refiriéndose a los humanos: "¿Cómo sería nuestra vida sin los orangutanes?" (21).[4] Resulta que el orangután es un eslabón imprescindible de la vida y su extinción tiene consecuencias nefastas:

> En este vacío, nuestro antiguo mundo se derrumbó. Tales modificaciones en su orden sensible no pudieron permanecer sin efectos. El ecosistema gravemente dañado y desorganizado no fue menos trastornado que si la tierra hubiera temblado en su base. De hecho, esta se movió, desalineada, desconcertada, tambaleándose en el camino recién aparecido en el lugar de la órbita sedosa y finalmente se lanzó en trayectorias frenéticas.
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> Repercusiones, efectos en cadena, cada criatura, cada cosa en este mundo experimentó su pequeña sacudida. (63)[5]

El orangután parece ser incluso más importante que los propios humanos. La vida de la última pareja sin duda tenía más valor para el protagonista que la de cualquier persona, incluida la suya, de un *Moindre* (apellido parlante que significa "menor"): "La supervivencia de mi apellido me es indiferente, podemos llegar a un acuerdo, Muerte, un trueque justo. Si aflojas tu agarre, si liberas a Bagus y Mina, soy tuyo en este momento" (48).[6] Si el orden jerárquico según el cual la vida de un ser humano vale más que la de un animal se invierte, es por el valor que damos a su rareza. La extinción implica la

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le premier à m'en être avisé. Enfin, j'ai la conscience très vive que ce monde leur appartient tout autant qu'à l'homme et qu'ils semblent même plus soucieux que lui d'en préserver les équilibres" (en Allemand 153).

[4] "Que sera notre vie sans les orang-outans?" (21)

[5] "Dans ce vide, s'est abîmé notre monde ancien. De telles modifications de son ordre sensible ne pouvaient demeurer sans effets. L'écosystème gravement lésé et désorganisé ne fut pas moins bouleversé que si la terre avait tremblé sur son socle. Elle a bougé, d'ailleurs, désaxée, déroutée, cahotant dans l'ornière nouvellement apparue en place de l'orbite soyeuse et finalement précipitée dans des trajectoires folles. Contrecoups, répercussions en chaîne, chaque créature, chaque chose de ce monde reçut sa petite secousse." (63)

[6] "La survie de mon nom de famille m'indiffère, nous pouvons nous entendre, Mort, donnant donnant, si tu desserres ta prise, si tu relâches Bagus et Mina, je suis à toi dans l'instant." (48)

posibilidad de no poder volver atrás, la desaparición de un punto de vista único: "La perspectiva del orangután, que no carecía de importancia en la invención del mundo [...], esa perspectiva única a la cual debemos la percepción de los trinos de tantos pájaros cantores y el sonido de las primeras gotas de la tormenta sobre las hojas, esa perspectiva ya no está" (18).[7] En cambio, el número de humanos no hace más que aumentar. La inversión de valores, aunque no aceptada ni moral, ni jurídicamente por los humanos, aparece también en la novela *La guérilla des animaux* de Camille Brunel cuyo protagonista lo explica de manera aún más clara que Albert Moindre: "El mundo ha cambiado en los últimos veinticinco años [...] La vida humana impresiona menos. Pronto seremos diez mil millones de humanos, mientras que los tigres serán solo dos mil. ¿Qué vida tendrá más valor, en su opinión?" (Brunel, *Guérilla des animaux* 43).[8]

El narrador describe a los orangutanes en términos muy positivos y muchas veces con características que normalmente atribuimos a los humanos. A menudo se genera, lo que podría denominarse "ruptura de isotopía":[9] "Tenía una personalidad y un físico tan notables que no se podía apartar la mirada de él, llamémoslo encanto, carisma" (13);[10] "Al igual que el hombre, el orangután [...] se ha forjado una personalidad a través de mutaciones, apropiaciones y eliminaciones; ha sabido hacer valer sus elecciones, imponer su modelo de sociedad y preservarlo a lo largo del tiempo de cualquier influencia o contaminación" (15);[11] "sus excepcionales recursos de inteligencia e imaginación" (59).[12] En lugar de "animales de zoo", los llama "pensionistas" o "huéspedes" ("pensionnaires", 43). Incluso subraya que su nombre significa "hombre del bosque": "esto es malayo, más o menos malayo, literalmente 'hombre del bosque', orangután" (54).[13]

Por el contrario, las partes del cuerpo humano son normalmente definidas con términos que se utilizan para denominar a las de los animales: por ejemplo, "patas": "Así es como ahora deambulamos sobre nuestras patas entre multitudes, indecisos, llenos de vagos deseos o aspiraciones" (11).[14] Por otro lado, Pelleport, el médico que contagió a los últimos orangutanes causando su muerte, se convierte en el virus mismo con una sustitución metonímica: "Ese virus microbiano, el microbio asesino de orangutanes, eres

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[7] "Le point de vue de l'orang-outan qui ne comptait pas pour rien dans l'invention du monde [...], ce point de vue unique à quoi l'on devait la perception des trilles de tant d'oiseaux chanteurs et celle des premières gouttes d'orage sur les feuilles, ce point de vue n'est plus." (18)

[8] "le monde a changé depuis vingt-cinq ans [...] La vie humaine impressionne moins. Nous serons bientôt dix milliards d'humains tandis que les tigres ne seront plus que deux mille. Quelle vie aura le plus de valeur, selon vous?" (Brunel, *Guérilla des animaux* 43)

[9] La isotopía semántica para Greimas (2002) es lo que permite leer un discurso como coherente, gracias a la repetición de semas. La ruptura significa aquí que, en un contexto que normalmente se refiere a los humanos, aparecen los animales.

[10] "Il possédait une personnalité, un physique si remarquables qu'on ne pouvait le quitter des yeux, appelons ça le charme, le charisme." (13)

[11] "Comme l'homme, l'orang-outan [...] s'est forgé une personnalité à force de mutations, appropriations, éliminations, il a su faire valoir ses choix, imposer son modèle de société et le préserver au cours du temps de toute influence ou contamination." (15)

[12] "ses exceptionnelles ressources d'intelligence et d'imagination." (59)

[13] "c'est du malais, plus ou moins du malais, littéralement homme de la forêt, orang-outan ou orang-outang." (54)

[14] "Ainsi errons-nous désormais sur nos pattes de foule, indécis, velléitaires." (11)

tú, Pelleport" (18).[15] En alguna ocasión, incluso parece que humano y animal podrían cambiar perfectamente sus roles:

> [Bagus] imitaba a Pelleport tan bien que este, el primero en confundirse, a veces se quedaba en la jaula después de haber abierto la puerta a Bagus, a quien dejaba ir creyendo que este se marchaba para reunirse con su esposa en su casita de las afueras. Y este error continuaba hasta que, al día siguiente, Bagus regresaba a la jaula con el equipo del veterinario y encontraba a Pelleport agachado, quitándole los piojos a Mina. (15)[16]

Pero es sobre todo en el eje de la verticalidad, que recibe aquí un contenido simbólico, que humano y orangután se diferencian. Si normalmente son los primeros que se caracterizan por los valores que representa la altura, la espiritualidad—y que permitía a los seres humanos situarse a sí mismos en la cima de la creación según la tesis de la excepción humana—aquí la altura será un atributo de los orangutanes. El humano es representado como un ser "pegado" al suelo, mientras que el hábitat del orangután es el árbol, la altura: "El orangután iniciaba el movimiento, los árboles se elevaban con él. Los arrastraba hacia arriba" (130).[17] De hecho, fue él quien permitió al hombre acceder a las alturas: "Pareciera que el orangután—lloro al pronunciar su nombre—nos mantenía erguidos desde su rama sujetándonos por el cabello. Nos elevaba. Nos abría el cielo, apartaba las nubes, acercaba la luna. El orangután nos abría un camino entre las estrellas" (22).[18]

Cuando desaparece el orangután, los seres humanos se vuelven aún más pesados: "De vuelta al suelo, e incluso a las profundidades, a los caminos de turba, a los sótanos, al túnel arcilloso entre las raíces" (17);[19] "Todos mis movimientos pesan ahora. Vivo en una mina de plomo; el mulo ciego enganchado a los carritos, soy yo" (22);[20] "Nuestros cuerpos pesados, entorpecidos, paralizados, languidecen en el recuerdo de la flexibilidad y la agilidad" (70).[21] Se les compara a animales "horizontales" como las larvas: "tristes larvas en la última etapa de nuestra metamorfosis, permaneciendo larvas, creciendo en nuestras ruinas" (129).[22] Sólo el anhelo de la verticalidad les recuerda a la vida anterior y les da algo de esperanza. Con un enorme esfuerzo, se turnan para llevarse unos a otros sobre la espalda: "Más lejos del suelo, más cerca del cielo, en ese campo libre donde todo aún parece posible e incluso deseable" (70).[23]

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[15] "Ce virus microbieux, le microbe tueur d'orang-outans, c'est vous, Pelleport." (18)

[16] "[Bagus] imitait Pelleport si bien que celui-ci, abusé le premier, demeurait parfois dans la cage après les soins ayant ouvert la grille à Bagus qu'il laissait partir en croyant quitter les lieux lui-même puis rejoindre son épouse dans leur maisonnette de banlieue, et cette méprise durait jusqu'au retour de Bagus dans la cage, le lendemain, muni de la trousse du vétérinaire qu'il trouvait accroupi en train d'épouiller Mina." (15)

[17] "L'orang-outan initiait le mouvement, les arbres montaient avec lui. Il les tirait vers le haut." (130)

[18] "À croire que l'orang-outan —je pleure en prononçant son nom— nous maintenait debout par les cheveux depuis sa branche. Il nous tirait vers le haut. Il nous ouvrait le ciel, écartait les nues, rapprochait la lune. L'orang-outan nous frayait un chemin entre les astres." (22)

[19] "Retour au sol, et même aux bas-fonds, aux chemins de tourbe, aux caves, aux tunnel glaiseux entre les racines." (17)

[20] "Tous mes gestes pèsent désormais. Je vis dans une mine de plomb; la mule aveugle attelé aux wagonnets, c'est moi." (22)

[21] "Nos corps lourds, entravés, perclus, se morfondent dans le souvenir de la souplesse et de l'agilité." (70).

[22] "de tristes larves au dernier stade de notre métamorphose demeurant larves, croissant dans nos ruines." (129)

[23] "plus loin du sol, plus près du ciel, dans ce champ libre où tout semble possible encore et même souhaitable." (70)

Después de la muerte de la pareja Bagus y Mina, el narrador se apropia de sus cuerpos y les hace construir un santuario elevado que simboliza su superioridad: "En una amplia plaza, en el centro de la ciudad, Ragonit construyó un pedestal de tres metros de altura, sobre el cual colocó una campana perfectamente hemisférica, una cúpula translúcida bajo la cual, en una noche fría y tranquila, se instalaron Bagus y Mina" (139).[24]

Pero el anhelo de la verticalidad se coronará definitivamente con el intento de hacer revivir de manera artificial, mediante ejercicios físicos y pequeñas clases de moral (166), al orangután. El humano se muda a las alturas de los árboles donde antes vivían los orangutanes: "De ahora en adelante, pasaremos nuestra vida en los árboles. Ese es nuestro principal objetivo, amigos míos: convertirnos principalmente en seres arborícolas" (162).[25] El narrador-entrenador espera que así se produzca una especie de evolución inversa, del humano al mono: "Las pequeñas modificaciones anatómicas y morfológicas que nuestro cuerpo deberá experimentar para lograr en todos los aspectos un rendimiento equivalente al del orangután ocurrirán sin cirugía, a través de una lenta asimilación y adaptación al entorno" (172).[26] Por consiguiente, el estado superior de la existencia sería la animalidad. En efecto, es justamente la falta de animalidad, la ruptura del humano con el entorno natural que lo convierten en ser inferior, incapaz de sobrevivir en la naturaleza (alguno de los "futuros orangutanes" muere por caída, otros devorados por un tigre):

> Porque al observar nuestros resultados, al ver simplemente cómo ha evolucionado el mundo bajo nuestro dominio y lo que hemos hecho de él, ya sea por avaricia, derroche, negligencia o cualquier otra buena razón de ese tipo que solemos alegar para disminuir nuestras responsabilidades, se deduce que el orangután era mucho mejor hombre para este trabajo que nosotros, y como prueba de esta perfecta simbiosis con su entorno, daos cuenta cómo él lograba esto sin esfuerzo, mientras que nosotros solo la experimentamos en raros momentos de éxtasis, después de la visita del jardinero y el desminador, bajo el parasol y el paraguas. (172)[27]

Después del intento fallido de educar una nueva generación de orangutanes, el narrador recalca su decepción en varias ocasiones y describe con disgusto la humanidad de sus "orangutanes":

> ¡Pero miraos, aferrados a esas ramas como ahorcados! Me decepcionáis. Levantáis hacia el cielo cuatro muñones de orangután, haciendo muecas ya mejor que él, aunque completamente fuera de lugar. Me habláis de elongaciones, tendinitis, lumbagos, esguinces,

[24] "Sur une vaste place, au centre de la ville, Ragonit édifia un socle de pierre haut de trois mètres qu'il surplomba d'une cloche parfaitement hémisphérique, un dôme translucide sous lequel, par une nuit froide et calme, emménagèrent Bagus et Mina." (139)
[25] "Or nous allons dorénavant passer notre vie dans les arbres. Tel est notre premier objectif, mes amis : devenir essentiellement arboricoles." (162)
[26] "Les petites retouches anatomiques et morphologiques que notre corps devra subir pour obtenir en tout domaine des performances équivalentes à celles de l'orang-outan adviendront sans chirurgie, par lente assimilation et adaptation au milieu." (172)
[27] "Car au vu de nos résultats, à simplement regarder comment le monde a tourné sous notre règne et ce que nous en avons fait, par cupidité, gabegie, incurie ou toute autre bonne raison de ce genre que nous alléguons ordinairement pour diminuer nos responsabilités, il se déduit que l'orang-outan était bien mieux que nous l'homme de la situation, et j'en veux encore pour preuve de cette osmose parfaite avec son milieu à laquelle il parvint sans effort tandis que nous ne la connaissons qu'en de très rares moments d'extase, après le passage du jardinier et du démineur, sous le parasol et la parapluie." (172)

> calambres, ¡qué tristeza! ¡Oh larvas! Os oigo gemir por una uña rota y, pues, temo un poco vuestro primer encuentro con el tigre. ¿Sois tan cobardes, tan débiles? (175)[28]

A pesar de todos los esfuerzos, el humano sigue siendo humano, no puede liberarse totalmente de su cuerpo formado por la evolución. Pero sí hay una esperanza de que con la práctica esta evolución se pueda invertir, sobre todo con una pequeña ayuda: en el último capítulo el narrador relata que una humana ha sido fecundada *in vitro* con los ovocitos de Mina y los espermatozoides de Bagus. Una hibridación de los cuerpos que no sólo puede devolver al mundo el orangután, sino comenzar una nueva historia donde el humano será también orangután: "un hijo que será también el padre de todos nosotros" (287),[29] anuncia al final el narrador. Se trata de un "movimiento progresivo de regresión", como observa De Smet (339), presente en otros textos de Chevillard también, sobre todo en *Préhistoire* (1994); de una involución entendida en un sentido positivo que abre toda una gama de nuevas posibilidades, une nueva era posthumanista (ver Sermet 149) no antropocéntrica.

Desplazamiento de la jerarquía: *Défaites des maîtres et possesseurs* de Vincent Message

Ponerse en la piel de los animales se observa como algo completamente diferente en *Défaite des maîtres et possesseurs* de Vincent Message. En esta segunda novela del autor militante vegano,[30] una especie extraterrestre llega a la Tierra y, después de algunos años de letargo y observación, toma el control del planeta. En su nueva sociedad se trata a los humanos como éstos trataban antiguamente a los animales. Es decir, los roles no se invierten entre animales y humanos, sino que se produce un desplazamiento hacia abajo en el orden jerárquico, ya que el estatus de los animales, prácticamente ausentes en este relato, no cambia (sabemos que los extraterrestres también consumen su carne).

Al leer las primeras páginas del libro, el lector todavía no conoce la identidad del narrador y automáticamente piensa que se trata de un ser humano, como observa Sophie Milcent-Lawson ("Parler pour les animaux" 3) al analizar la novela, porque nada indica que el narrador no pertenece a la especie humana.

No obstante, aunque el narrador efectivamente es identificado por el lector como humano, no es verdad que no haya nada extraño en el texto. En el primer capítulo se hace referencia a una persona llamada Iris, que también identificamos como humana por sus

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[28] "Mais regardez-vous, accrochés à ces branches comme des pendus! Vous me décevez. Vous levez vers le ciel quatre moignons d'orang-outan en grimaçant déjà mieux que lui quoique tout à fait hors de propos. Vous me parlez d'élongations, de tendinites, de lumbagos, d'entorses, de crampes, quelle tristesse ! Ô larves! Je vous entends geindre pour un ongle cassé et, du coup, j'appréhende un peu votre première rencontre avec le tigre. Êtes-vous de telles mauviettes, de tels pleutres?" (175)

[29] "un fils qui sera aussi notre père à tous." (287)

[30] "Se podría decir que el compromiso en el sentido sartreano es defendido por escritores como Alice Ferney, Marcela Iacub, Vincent Message o Camille Brunel cuando toman públicamente partido por la causa animal en la prensa o durante conferencias, e incluso mediante la adhesión a una asociación militante" ["On pourrait dire que l'engagement au sens sartrien est défendu par des écrivains comme Alice Ferney, Marcela Iacub, Vincent Message ou Camille Brunel quand ils prennent publiquement parti pour la cause animale dans la presse ou lors de conférences, voire par l'adhésion à une association militante."] (Romestaing)

atributos humanos: tiene cabello: "Su cabello suelto estaba pegado en mechones pegajosos" (17);[31] tiene aire de "poeta" según el narrador: "lo que es suficiente—con sus manos en los bolsillos y el cabello desordenado por la lluvia—para darle el aspecto de una joven poeta rebelde (19);[32] habla: "sigue, de hecho, lo desarrolla y argumenta. Dice […] (20)[33] y se le llama explícitamente una chica joven (25). A ella y a sus "semblantes" el narrador hace referencia en tercera persona del plural, excluyéndose a sí mismo de su grupo:

> Esa luz después de la lluvia, dice ella, tal vez sea la que prefiere, porque da contornos a las cosas, incluso a las más opacas y difusas. Dice eso, y la luz está ahí de repente también para mí. Sin ella, solo la vería a medias. Por mucho que uno intente mirar las cosas desde todos los ángulos, hay que reconocerlo: *ellos* perciben los colores con más sutileza; *ellos* son más sensibles a todo eso, y ella en particular. (20; énfasis añadido)[34]

Esta auto-exclusión es extraña; aunque en un primer momento podemos interpretarla como una referencia a una clase social u otra a la que no pertenece el narrador, la mención a las diferencias de percepción indican que se trata más bien de una diferencia biológica. Y de repente, la isotopía del mundo humano que acompaña a Iris (una ambulancia que viene buscarla tras un accidente) se rompe al final del capítulo con la introducción de la isotopía animal y más concretamente la de la carne ("carnicero", "cámara frigorífica", "tabla (de carnicero)", "troceada"): "Si se dieran cuenta de que estaba destinada a terminar en las cámaras frigoríficas de un carnicero, o troceada en un mostrado […] (27).[35] Al principio parece que tenemos que corregir nuestra hipótesis e identificar a Iris como animal. Sin embargo, muy rápido nos damos cuenta de que nos hemos equivocado en el caso de Malo Claeys y no en el de Iris. El narrador se desmarca claramente del grupo de los humanos: "Antes de nuestra llegada, los hombres habían recorrido este planeta en todas direcciones y habían dejado sus huellas en todas partes" (29).[36]

Todo el primer capítulo se caracteriza por esta indeterminación referencial, lo que, por otra parte, es totalmente normal en las novelas contemporáneas. Esta prolongación de la ambigüedad que concierne a la identidad del narrador hace que, una vez esta se desvela, su discurso sea más chocante. Al final del primer capítulo cuando todavía no sabemos quién es Malo Claeys, este se pregunta: "¿Hasta cuándo la vida de un hombre merece ser vivida? ¿Quién puede saber eso? ¿Quién tiene el derecho de decidirlo?" (26).[37]

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[31] "Ses cheveux dénoués étaient collés en mèches poisseuses." (17)

[32] "[…] qui suffit —mains dans les poches, tignasse déglinguée par la pluie— à lui donner l'allure d'une jeune poète rebelle." (19)

[33] "Elle poursuit, d'ailleurs, développe et argumente. Elle dit […]" (20)

[34] "Cette lumière d'après la pluie, dit-elle, c'est peut-être celle qu'elle préfère, parce qu'elle donne des contours aux choses même les plus ternes et les plus indistinctes. Elle dit cela, et la lumière est là pour moi aussi soudain. Sans elle, je ne la verrais qu'à moitié. On a beau retourner la chose dans tous les sens, il faut le reconnaître : *ils* perçoivent plus finement les couleurs; *ils* sont plus sensibles à tout cela, et elle tout particulièrement." (20 ; énfasis añadido)

[35] "S'ils se rendent compte qu'elle était destinée à finir dans les chambres froides d'un boucher, ou détaillée sur un étal […]" (27)

[36] "Avant que nous n'arrivions, les hommes avaient parcouru cette planète en tous sens et avaient partout laissé leurs empreintes […]" (29)

[37] "Jusqu'à quand une vie d'homme mérite-t-elle d'être vécue? Qui peut savoir cela? Qui a le droit d'en décider?" (26)

Estas preguntas reciben su significado pleno y nuevo en el capítulo siguiente cuando el narrador explica que pertenece a una especie extraterrestre.

Las rupturas de isotopía, término que utiliza Sophie Milcent-Lawson en su artículo ("Parler pour les animaux"), son características de toda la novela. A partir del segundo capítulo, a la historia del presente que se centra en el accidente de Iris, la humana "de compañía" de Claeys, se intercala el relato de la llegada y la toma de posesión de la Tierra por los alienígenas. El narrador describe largamente cómo es el lugar de los humanos en la nueva sociedad. Esta sociedad es sorprendentemente parecida a la de los humanos: sabemos que tienen ministerios, leyes, que viven en familia, por ejemplo. Por un lado, porque son similares por naturaleza, pero también porque, como dice Claeys, se trata de una especie mimética: "Estas similitudes, por cierto, se han intensificado con su contacto. Porque nuestra condición, sin vergüenza ni orgullo, es ser una especie mimética" (79).[38]

Una de las "instituciones" que copiaron de los humanos es la cría intensiva y en general la industria cárnica. En el capítulo seis, el narrador habla de su experiencia como inspector del sector, y describe sus visitas a las macrogranjas y a los mataderos. Este capítulo también empieza con una ambigüedad como en el principio de la novela: al leer sobre la cría intensiva, sin conocer cuál es la especie criada, el lector piensa automáticamente en los animales: "He trabajado durante unos diez años en la inspección de explotaciones ganaderas" (99),[39] "La cría era una industria en expansión que necesitaba ser controlada" (100).[40] Después de esta introducción de dos páginas que nos sitúan en la isotopía de los animales, el narrador rompe con ella explicitando que se trata de la cría de los humanos: "En resumen, hay tres categorías de humanos: aquellos que trabajan para nosotros, aquellos que se esfuerzan por hacernos compañía y aquellos a quienes comemos" (101).[41] A partir de este momento, la isotopía de la cría hace referencia a los humanos: "hay una especie de esquizofrenia en criar a ciertos hombres para amarlos y compartir nuestro día a día con ellos, y a otros hombres para matarlos y comérnoslos" (101);[42] "criar a una gran cantidad de ellos para consumir su carne" (104);[43] "Sus costillas, asadas a fuego alto y volteadas con una espátula en lugar de un tenedor para evitar que se pierda la sangre, pueden ofrecer momentos de deleite" (104-105);[44] "maternidades, incubadoras, parques de engorde, mataderos, fábricas de procesamiento" (106);[45] "Nos gusta creer que los hombres que terminan en nuestros platos han vivido al aire libre, entre pastos y bosques" (108).[46]

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[38] "Ces ressemblances, du reste, se sont accrues à leur contact. Car c'est notre condition sans honte et sans fierté que d'être une espèce mimétique." (79)

[39] "J'ai travaillé une dizaine d'années à l'inspection des élevages." (99)

[40] "l'élevage était une industrie en expansion, qu'il fallait contrôler." (100)

[41] "Il y a, pour résumer, trois catégories d'hommes: ceux qui travaillent pour nous; ceux qui s'efforcent de nous tenir compagnie; ceux que nous mangeons." (101)

[42] "il y a une sorte de schizophrénie à élever certains hommes pour les aimer et partager notre quotidien avec eux, et d'autres hommes pour les tuer et les manger." (101)

[43] "élever un grand nombre d'entre eux pour consommer leur chair." (104)

[44] "leurs côtes, saisies à feu très vif et retournées à la spatule plutôt qu'à la fourchette pour ne pas que le sang se perde, peuvent réserver des moments de délice." (104-105).

[45] "des maternités, des couveuses, des parcs d'engraissage, des abattoirs, des usines de découpe" (106).

[46] "nous aimons croire que les hommes qui finissent dans nos assiettes ont vécu en plein air, entre pâturages et bois." (108)

En estas frases citadas podemos reconocer los discursos habituales de los humanos sobre los animales: son del campo semántico de la cocina y de la cría. En lugar de criticarlos, Vincent Message recoge y repite estos discursos para invalidarlos con la sustitución del animal por el humano. El resultado es prácticamente insoportable: la descripción neutra de la matanza y el maltrato de los humanos, en la mayoría de las veces a una edad muy temprana, desvela la crueldad de las prácticas actuales de la cría intensiva de animales. Por el contrario, el narrador es un filántropo que ya casi no come carne y que salva a Iris, destinada a terminar en el matadero, la acoge y la trata como a una igual. Es decir, el autor nos muestra también que otra actitud es posible: el filantropismo de la novela es el animalismo de nuestra sociedad. Por consiguiente, nos lleva a la conclusión de que hablar en términos generales de extraterrestres, humanos o animales, sin tener en cuenta los individuos, también resulta problemático.

Este relato es un típico ejemplo de las novelas de anticipación que, al describir un mundo situado en el futuro, en realidad habla de nuestro presente y lo critica. Se trata de una experimentación mental, un desplazamiento (Murzilli) que permite tomar una distancia crítica frente a la condición de los animales y llevar las consecuencias de nuestros actos a un extremo para hacer reflexionar al lector.

Message quiere denunciar justamente la ideología que nos permite creernos los dueños y propietarios de la Tierra. Por un lado, la Tesis de la excepción humana parece ser validada por la superioridad de la especie *alien*, convertida en la "nueva humanidad". Su superioridad tecnológica le permite explotar a los otros seres vivos, en particular a los "nuevos animales", los humanos. Podríamos pensar que es inevitable entonces que alguna especie domine sobre el resto. Pero, por otro lado, el mero hecho de que esta posición dominante dependa de las circunstancias pone en cuestión la consideración de la excepcionalidad como una esencia del ser humano. A pesar de su capacidad de hablar y de razonar, este no consigue transcender su condición de "animalidad" en la novela.

En efecto, el escritor francés critica muy explícitamente la Tesis de la excepción humana, ya desde el título que recoge el célebre lema del *Discours de la méthode* de René Descartes según el cual seríamos los dueños y poseedores de la naturaleza. El narrador Malo Claeys critica también esta ideología típicamente humana, que los extraterrestres adoptaron por imitación:

> Pensar, para ellos, es pues separar. Clasificar. Hacer que las cosas y los seres entren en categorías que, una vez cerradas, excluyen a los recién llegados. Es afirmar que la continuidad de la vida, líquida como el agua que siempre forma parte de su composición, invisible como los átomos, no es más que una apariencia ilusoria, que es posible y necesario trazar líneas divisorias en ella. Y la primera de esas fronteras, por supuesto, la más importante, era aquella que los separaba del resto de los seres vivos, que los hacía sentarse en la cima de la creación como niños que un vago grupo de dioses—imaginados a su imagen y cuyo discurso extrañamente siempre se volvía a su favor—habría elegido para representarlos y llevar a cabo sus designios. (103)[47]

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[47] "Penser, pour eux—donc—c'est découper. Trier. Faire entrer les choses et les êtres dans des catégories qui une fois refermées repoussent les nouveaux arrivants. C'est affirmer que la continuité du vivant, liquide comme l'eau qui entre toujours dans sa composition, invisible comme les atomes, n'est qu'une apparence illusoire, qu'il est possible et nécessaire d'y creuser des lignes de partage. Et la première de ces frontières, bien sûr, la plus importante, était celle qui les séparait du reste des vivants, qui les faisait trôner au sommet

Este punto de vista exterior ridiculiza las ilusiones de los humanos, que se imaginan dioses, y afirma la continuidad de toda vida. El narrador sugiere también que si los extraterrestres comen a los humanos es también para castigarlos por este orgullo: "Desde esta perspectiva, al revertir la situación, al reintegrarlos por la fuerza en este reino animal del que querían excluirse a toda costa, hacemos justicia a los no humanos" (123).[48] Como, de alguna manera, los humanos se habían vengado de los animales a quienes temían, porque temían ser devorados por ellos. Si bien este rol de justiciero que se autodesignan los extraterrestres podría de nuevo confirmar su superioridad, en este caso moral, creemos que lo que se sugiere en la novela es que estas categorías de superioridad e inferioridad son relativas. De hecho, la actitud de los *aliens* es criticada por el propio protagonista, por ejemplo, después de que su iniciativa de reforma por el bienestar humano se rechaza: "Era como de costumbre. Era el dinero. Estábamos defendiendo a los débiles, una causa que no le reportaba nada a nadie. Por otro lado, los industriales de la cría debieron sobornar a todos, de manera sobria y discreta" (175).[49] La única manera de salir de esta lógica sería que los que están en una posición de poder rompan el círculo de la violencia: como dice el narrador, la ley del talión puede parecer justa o atractiva, pero no resuelve nada: "El problema es que este tipo de acciones se ajusta a la ley del talión, que nunca me ha parecido una invención de gran sutileza y que, creo yo, no es la forma más beneficiosa de codificar las relaciones entre los seres vivos que somos" (123).[50]

Eliminación de la jerarquía: *Les métamorphoses* de Camille Brunel

Camille Brunel también es militante vegano y animalista activo en redes. Asume abiertamente su compromiso ético y la necesidad de expresarlo en la literatura (ver BNF). En su *Guérilla des animaux* de 2018 donde un activista lleva al extremo la lucha por la vida de los animales, ya pudimos ver este compromiso, así como en su análisis de la representación de animales en películas (*Cinéma des animaux*, 2018).

Les métamorphoses, publicada en 2020, es una novela que refleja en cierto modo la crisis de la Covid-19: una pandemia se apodera del mundo y cada vez más humanos se convierten en animales. El resto de los humanos confrontan la necesidad de redefinir su relación con los animales y prepararse a su posible transformación. Este relato fantástico, similarmente al de Vincent Message, no habla de peligros reales —aunque la pandemia en

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de la création comme des enfants qu'une poignée floue de dieux—qu'ils fantasmaient à leur image, et dont le discours étrangement tournait toujours en leur faveur—auraient élus pour les représenter et pour accomplir leurs desseins." (103)

[48] "De ce point de vue, en renversant la donne, en les réintégrant de force dans ce règne animal dont ils voulaient à tout prix s'excepter, nous faisons justice aux non-humains." (123)

[49] "C'était comme d'habitude. C'était l'argent. Nous défendions les faibles, une cause qui ne rapportait rien à personne. En face, les industriels de l'élevage avaient dû graisser la patte à tout le monde, sobrement, discrètement." (175)

[50] "Le problème, c'est que ce genre d'agissements ressortit à loi du talion, qui ne m'a jamais paru une invention d'une grande subtilité, et qui n'est pas je crois la manière la plus profitable de codifier les rapports entre les êtres vivants que nous sommes." (123)

sí ha sido una realidad en el momento de la publicación de la novela— sino que quiere hacernos reflexionar sobre nuestro lugar en el mundo.

Les métamorphoses adopta la estructura clásica de un thriller: un comienzo aparentemente normal donde, no obstante, empiezan a surgir indicios de un cambio; luego llega la evidencia de que algo anormal está pasando, para desembocar en una crisis. Finalmente, un nuevo orden se establece. La relación entre las desapariciones de humanos y la aparición de animales exóticos por todas partes se establece casi a la mitad de la novela.

Sin embargo, la cuestión de la animalidad y los derechos animales están presentes en la novela desde el principio, ya que la protagonista es una chica vegana que adora a su gata y cuya vida gira en torno a los animales. Conforme a su ideología antiespecista, a la vez que considera que los animales tienen inteligencia ("Dinah tampoco habla, pero eso no le impide ser tan sensible e inteligente como un humano apenas salido del barro" [27][51]) y hablándose de ella misma destaca su propio carácter animal ("mis sonrisas de primate" [15])[52] y corporal: "Tengo ideas revoloteando en la cabeza, un enjambre de moscas alrededor del cerebro, ese pedazo de carne del tamaño de dos puños juntos que, por ser mío, me distingue de los cadáveres y las cosas" (17).[53] Incluso se la podría considerar una planta, todo depende del punto de vista: "vista desde el cielo soy apenas una planta" (15).[54]

Como más tarde explica explícitamente, Isis cree desde siempre que los animales son también personas: "Siempre he considerado a los animales como personas, a diferencia de las masas que solo lo han comenzado a hacer recientemente, cuando se volvió literal" (158).[55] En efecto, al principio de la novela, todavía la mayoría de los humanos no cree en la humanidad de los animales o en la animalidad de los humanos, como las discusiones en la comida familiar de Isis lo atestiguan. Pero cuando las transformaciones se vuelven cada vez más numerosas, los humanos metamorfoseados y los animales se confunden, no se les puede distinguir. De allí surge una nueva duda ética: si no sabemos qué animal era humano y cuál no, ¿podemos seguir tratándolos como antes?

Si bien al principio tardan en responder a esta pregunta, al final los humanos tratan a los animales como si fueran sus hermanos, ya que lo son literalmente en muchas ocasiones: "*And remember. If you see an animal… Don't hurt him, don't hurt her! Don't yell at him, don't yell at her! They might just be people you used to know. They might just be people you miss*" (123), dice Beyoncé en un concierto justo antes convertirse en guacamayo. Al final, los "supervivientes" incluso dejan de matar a los animales por su carne: "Llegó el momento en que dejamos de matar a los animales como si estuviéramos

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[51] "Dinah non plus ne parle pas, ça ne l'empêche pas d'être aussi sensible et intelligente qu'un humain à peine sorti de la glaise." (27)

[52] "mes sourires de primate" (15)

[53] "J'ai des idées plein le crâne, un essaim de mouches autour du cerveau, ce morceau de viande gros comme deux poings unis qui, parce qu'il m'appartient, me distingue des cadavres et des choses" (17).

[54] "vue du ciel je ne suis guère qu'une plante." (15)

[55] "J'ai toujours considéré les animaux comme des personnes, contrairement aux masses qui ne s'y sont mises que récemment, quand c'est devenu littéral." (158)

repeliendo una invasión enemiga—los mataderos dejaron de funcionar: los empleados desaparecían con frecuencia y empezamos a preguntarnos hasta qué punto la fábula del verdugo convertido en víctima no era una realidad" (121).[56]

En esta novela, se produce un desplazamiento muy parecido al de *Défaite des maîtres et possesseurs*: por una razón exterior, la humanidad tiene que ponerse en la piel de los animales, aquí literalmente, para poder dar cuenta no sólo de la fragilidad de su posición en la cima de la cadena alimentaria, sino de sus similitudes con el resto de los seres vivos, ya que también pueden ser matados y devorados. Pero esta toma de conciencia tardía es criticada en la novela: se denuncia, a través del personaje de Isis, que no sólo por haber sido alguna vez humano, la vida de un animal cuenta: cuando su amiga dice que "esta liebre podría haber sido el hijo, el hermano, la hija o la madre de alguien," Isis responde: "Era alguien de todas formas" (86).[57]

En efecto, ¿qué diferencia hay entre un animal y un humano convertido en animal? En la novela se describen muchas metamorfosis, y en todos los casos parece que después de haberse transformado, los humanos pierden completamente sus atributos humanos: las arañas tejen telarañas, los pájaros se van volando y los depredadores devoran a las presas. En unos segundos—la mirada del humano se convierte en la de un animal: "el pico abierto de una tortuga marina, con encima, en el centro de unos ojos rodeados de escamas de color antracita, la mirada de Dounia que aún suplicaba. Esto duró unos segundos, luego el blanco de su ojo se volvió completamente negro y adquirió esa expresión de dolor que conocemos en las madres que llegan a poner sus huevos en las playas" (88).[58] Como lo vemos en este ejemplo, la ruptura de isotopía se realiza en el interior de una misma frase, acompañando la metamorfosis del personaje que en un momento todavía tiene una mirada humana para después convertirse en una madre que pone huevos.

No obstante, no saber qué ocurre en el interior de estos seres híbridos, no significa que no tengan ningún recuerdo de su vida humana. Isis se pregunta en varias ocasiones sobre la posibilidad o no de guardar alguna memoria humana, pero sólo es al final, cuando ella también se convierte en animal y podemos seguir el relato contado por ella misma en primera persona, vemos que tiene también pensamientos y sentimientos. Sin embargo, ya sólo su gata la ve igual que antes: "Sigo siendo la persona con la que ella se siente más cercana, y la modificación de mis órganos no ha sido un obstáculo suficiente para el cariño que ella me tiene" (188).[59]

Sin embargo, si hacia la mitad de la novela se plantean los dilemas éticos que conciernen a la relación con los animales, al final se vuelve cada vez más evidente que las

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[56] "Vint le moment où l'on cessa d'abattre les animaux comme on repousse une invasion ennemie—les abattoirs eux-mêmes cessèrent de fonctionner : les employés y étaient fréquemment sujets aux disparitions et l'on en venait à se demander dans quelle mesure la fable du bourreau devenu victime n'était pas réalité." (121)

[57] "ce lièvre pouvait avoir été le fils, le frère, la fille ou la mère de quelqu'un", "C'était quelqu'un de toute façon." (86)

[58] "le bec entrouvert d'une tortue marine—avec au-dessus, au centre d'yeux cernés d'écaille anthracite, le regard de Dounia qui suppliait encore. Cela dura quelques secondes, puis le blanc de son œil vira au noir complet, et prit cet air de douleur que l'on connaît aux mères venues pondre sur les plages." (88)

[59] "Je reste la personne dont elle se sent la plus proche, et la modification de mes organes n'a pas formé d'obstacle suffisant à l'affection qu'elle me porte." (188)

metamorfosis significan el fin de la humanidad. Durante un tiempo, parece que los hombres están más afectados por la pandemia y que será posible construir una nueva sociedad ecofeminista que respeta a todos los seres vivos, como lo sueña la amiga de Isis:

> Enseñar a las generaciones futuras que los animales ya no son primos lejanos, como en la época de Darwin, sino parientes cercanos. Esto será más radical, espero que sea más claro también. Y por lo demás yo no me preocupo: como te dije, esta pandemia ha puesto el mundo en manos de personas sensatas. Los caminos fotovoltaicos y los campos de eólicas serán suficientes para nuestra felicidad; no viajaremos tanto como antes, pero el mundo volverá a ser amplio, y no necesitaremos aviones para tener la sensación de partir. (182)[60]

Pero finalmente todos y todas se convierten en animales, incluso la propia Isis. Las últimas en transformarse, esta vez en árboles, son sus sobrinas y la amiga de Isis que no encuentra a nadie en el gineceo que servía de refugio y donde tenían que estar las supervivientes— ya convertidas en vegetales. Estas últimas transformaciones hacen aún más porosas las fronteras entre las especies e incluyen explícitamente las plantas en la continuidad o círculo de la vida. Incluso podríamos suponer que la relativa inocencia de las mujeres y de las niñas que son las que quizás menos se identificaban con una visión antropocéntrica sugiere que la existencia vegetal es un premio, una tranquilidad y conexión pacífica con los otros: "Se deslizó alrededor de las hermanas convertidas en árboles durante unos minutos más, luego se detuvo cuando una auténtica red de flores moradas las unió una a la otra" (195).[61] Estos destinos diferentes de los humanos, finalmente, muestran que estos, como los animales, son también distintos entre sí, están de maneras diferentes en el mundo.

En resumen, todo apunta a que los humanos tienen que desaparecer, en una evolución inversa[62] parecida a la que aspiraba el narrador de *Sans l'orang-outan,* para que el mundo pueda sanarse. Sin embargo, no tenemos que entender esta transformación como una "vuelta atrás" a un estado inferior de la evolución, sino como un regreso a un estado más natural de la Tierra. Podríamos hablar incluso simplemente de darwinismo en el sentido en que el ser humano, al no ser suficientemente fuerte o capaz de gestionar su entorno, tiene que mutarse para sobrevivir bajo otra forma. Si Isis tiene razón, es el orgullo humano lo que causa las transformaciones: "Fue la vanidad la que hizo las primeras víctimas, llenas del sentimiento de valer más y mejor que lo mejor de aquellos y aquellas a quienes menosprecian sin siquiera darse cuenta" (169).[63] Las metamorfosis serían la manera en la que la naturaleza vuelve a equilibrarse, deshaciéndose de los humanos que son los verdaderos virus: "Y la vida comenzó a reequilibrar la cantidad de

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[60] "Enseigner aux générations futures que les animaux ne sont plus de lointains cousins, comme à l'époque de Darwin, mais des parents proches. Ce sera plus radical, j'espère que ce sera plus clair. Et puis je ne m'en fais pas: comme je t'ai dit, cette pandémie a remis le monde entre les mains de personnes sensées. Les routes solaires et les champs d'éoliennes suffiront à notre bonheur ; on ne voyagera plus autant qu'avant, mais le monde sera redevenu grand, et nous n'aurons plus besoin d'avions pour avoir l'impression de partir." (182)

[61] "Elle glissa quelques minutes encore autour des sœurs faites arbres, puis s'immobilisa lorsqu'un véritable filet de fleurs mauves les eut liées l'une à l'autre." (195)

[62] "Darwinisme inversé" (183).

[63] "C'est la vanité qui a fait les premières victimes, gorgées du sentiment de valoir plus et mieux que le meilleur de celles et ceux qu'ils méprisent sans même s'en rendre compte." (169)

humildad también / al reducir la cantidad de humanidad / al devolvernos a la tierra, como un diluvio / recordándonos su presencia" (169).[64]

Este relato se puede entender como una metáfora de la necesidad de volver a ser animales: para salvarse hay que darse cuenta de la continuidad de toda la vida. En esta novela, como en la de Message también, se cita explícitamente a Descartes y se proclama el fin del cartesianismo: "La física de Einstein está *dead*. La de Descartes, aún más" (104).[65] En un postfacio, Camille Brunel explica también de esta manera su libro:

> Este libro habla sobre animales y reitera, ya que es la verdad más grande que nuestro mundo aún ignora o finge ignorar, que los humanos no tienen el monopolio de la conciencia, que hay gente en otros organismos a nuestro alrededor, y que es absurdo esperar restaurar la biodiversidad disuelta por el Antropoceno sin cambiar radicalmente nuestra relación con estas especies que nos gustaría ver regresar. (197)[66]

Pero, como explica justo después, la novela también es, de una manera más general, una crítica de la desconexión del mundo real que se produce hoy en día, y el refugio en la virtualidad y en las redes sociales. Como Isis, porque incluso ella tiene que compartir cada pensamiento, cada imagen con su comunidad virtual, los humanos en general tienen un desinterés hacia la realidad, "el verdadero reino animal" (197),[67] que les impide reconocer sus semejanzas con el animal.

Conclusión

Después de demostrar que "el proyecto cartesiano fracasa en su tarea auto-fundamentadora" (Schaeffer 137), Jean-Marie Schaeffer afirma que los conocimientos "externos" (no internalistas) "confirman pues la comunidad no sólo de destino sino también óntica de la humanidad con el orden viviente como tal, y más concretamente con la vida animal" (138). En las novelas, esta comunidad se visualiza de diversas maneras: mientras que en la de Brunel es literal, en las otras dos se trata de un cambio en el orden jerárquico. Sin embargo, en todas se denuncia la omnipresencia del punto de vista antropocéntrico: en *Sans l'orang-outan* la desaparición de la perspectiva del primate desvela su importancia; en *Défaite des maîtres et possesseurs* se señala que todo es cuestión de relaciones de fuerza y de punto de vista y, finalmente, en *Les métamorphoses* la fusión de los puntos de vista nos recuerda, con esta metáfora, que al fin y al cabo los humanos—una categoría que ya es problemática en sí misma por la diversidad de los individuos con sus perspectivas diferentes—también son animales.

¿Significa eso la descentralización completa de nuestra mirada? ¿La "desantropocentrización" total del relato? A Chevillard se le reprocha por ejemplo su

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[64] "Et la vie s'est mise à rééquilibrer la quantité d'humilité aussi / En réduisant la quantité d'humanité / En nous ramenant au sol, comme un déluge / En nous rappelant à lui." (169)

[65] "La physique d'Einstein est dead. Celle de Descartes, encore plus." (103-104)

[66] "Ce livre parle d'animaux, et répète, puisque c'est la plus grande vérité que notre monde ignore encore, ou feint d'ignorer, que les humains n'ont pas le monopole de la conscience, qu'il y a des gens dans d'autres organismes tout autour de nous, et qu'il est absurde d'espérer restaurer la biodiversité dissoute par l'anthropocène sans changer radicalement notre rapport à ces espèces qu'on aimerait voir revenir." (197)

[67] "le vrai royaume animal" (197).

antropocentrismo: según Sermet (151), *Sans l'Orang-outan* es una variación sobre el tema del especismo, porque las reacciones del narrador y de la sociedad que se describe siguen siendo antropecéntricas.

¿Pero podemos salir totalmente de nuestra piel? "Es realmente posible un pensamiento no antropocéntrico?", se preguntan Ignacio Quintanilla y Pilar Andrade en su ensayo *Los cien ecologismos* (213). Constatando el carácter inevitable del antropocentrismo, estos autores afirman que "la pregunta no es si somos antropocéntricos o no, sino cómo y desde qué modelo de ser humano queremos concebir también lo humano" (220). De manera similar, Anne Simon recuerda que querer renunciar a toda costa a la antropomorfización—o, si queremos, *antropismo*—es otra forma de continuar con la idea de la excepcionalidad humana y olvidarse de que los seres humanos también forman parte de la naturaleza, tal como su lenguaje que les permite precisamente entender a otras especies (*Une bête entre les lignes* 73). Así, los relatos analizados que ofrecen ejercicios o experiencias mentales para poder ponernos en la piel de los animales justamente son eficaces porque no podemos hacerlo: en cada una de las novelas lo que llama la atención sobre los animales es que el mundo de los humanos se derrumba. Aunque no se renuncie a este punto de vista, se muestra que existen otros que tienen el mismo derecho de existir que el nuestro.

El fin del mundo que aparece en cada una de las tres novelas es, por consiguiente, una manera muy interesante de transmitir una crítica de la sociedad actual. Según la clasificación de Rumpala (*Hors des décombres du monde* 107) este tipo de relatos con una fuerte reflexividad y también fuerte reactividad, tienen la función de capacitación o de emancipación donde la representación de mundos apocalípticos produce una anomalía que facilita el cuestionamiento del orden establecido. Por consiguiente, incluso *Sans l'orang-outan*, la menos comprometida de las tres novelas, es una literatura comprometida. Comprometida con un mundo donde el ser humano, definido por su diversidad, se considerará como un ser vivo que forma parte de la red de la vida en la Tierra.

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Editorial
Creative Writing and Arts

Plant Tendrils in Children's and Young Adult Literature

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Since the inception of storytelling, plants have been woven into the very fabric of our cultural production. As integral members of global ecosystems, living in a vibrant state of cross-species interdependence, they play a vital role in human daily experiences, including through their permeating presence across creative forms of expressions. While plants ubiquitously inhabit our imagination, in real life, they are going extinct at an alarming rate, representing an imminent threat that gets lost in the "semantic texture of urban, technological consciousness" (Laist 10).

The self-centered habit of turning all non-human life into resources to be exploited and (over)consumed goes hand in hand with the on-going settler colonial project and a logic of supremacy, which benefit from denying personhood to more-than-human beings. Within the cultural and artistic spheres, the systemic reduction of plants to reified metaphors anchored to anthropocentric ends is symptomatic of this denial. In other words, as Giovanni Aloi suggests, "to gain our attention, they have to ventriloquize the transcendental side of the existential" (69).

Yet, Indigenous storytelling testifies to the possibility of building kinship with plants through different relational premises, that is by viewing them as relatives, ancestors, and "animate persons" from whom we are meant to learn (McDaid Barry et al. 3). If we were to fully embrace this mode of thinking, we could confidently walk the ecocentric path of the "Planthroposcene," an aspirational episteme according to which communities of photosynthetic creatures are recognized as our most powerful allies in designing new possible worlds and in breaking free from mitigating Anthropogenic violence using Anthropocene logics (Myers).

The "vegetal turn" in the humanities reflects this renewed and growing attention towards our plant kin, thus contributing to amplifying silenced botanical histories. In accordance with Frederike Middelhoff and Arnika Peselmann, I contend that by expanding our sensorium to plant being and centering more-than-human ontologies that transcend colonial approaches to dealing with vegetal worlds, we create powerful yet challenging avenues for "questioning what constitutes and what is knowledgeable about plant life and vegetal narrative cultures but also, more

specifically, about vegetal forms of communication and interaction" (178). Storytelling is thus key to forging new trails not only for this kind of enchanted adventure, but also for passing down through generations ideas of kindness, stewardship, and justice that can offer to our youth new cultural paradigms. At the same time, storytelling can help us set strong foundations to (re)root ourselves in forgotten, erased, or ignored multispecies teachings.

The cover image by children's author and illustrator Trace Balla, a self-described "story catcher," perfectly encapsulates this commitment to honoring more-than-human agency through creative praxis.[1] The visual narrative invites viewers to shift perspective beyond the human scale and immerse ourselves into enlarged worlds full of vitality and animacy. The combination of abstract elements and more-than-human motions and voices made visible through lines of color, all contribute to questioning mechanistic worldviews emerged in western cultures, while presenting a choral scene that brings affective attention to multispecies coexistence.

Trace Balla is mostly known for her award-winning books featuring Australian landscapes and the local flora and fauna, animated by using storytelling conventions typical of graphic novels, such as sequential art and speech bubbles. Melanie Duckworth describes her drawing style as "informal and intimate" (3) and views her practice of mapping ecosystems as an "anti-colonial engagement with vibrant multispecies worlds" (11), offering experiential visualizations that appreciatively acknowledge and celebrate Indigenous perpetual custodianship of the Land.

With the purpose of entering into conversation with the journal's scholarly segment dedicated to plant tendrils in children's and young adult literature, the Creative Writing and Arts section offers a selection of works by international artists that challenge normative (western) ways of viewing plants. Rather than stories *about* plants, these are stories *with* plants. Both contributions are the fruit of a collaboration between a writer and an illustrator who shared and combined their knowledges to make new meanings, just like underground networks.

The first contribution is an ecofeminist retelling of a Flemish folktale foregrounding nettles. The text is written by Wendy Wuyts, who defines herself as an eco-communicator rewilding folktales and restor(y)ing places. In discussing her fascinating methodology, Wuyts mentions that she purposefully lists all the people—including machines assisting with the translation process—who have introduced narrative variants to the fairytale over the past centuries, to emphasize that a fairytale is a fluid, ongoing artwork, often calibrated to actual themes and interests of the storyteller and contemporary audience. This statement confirms what Melvin Konner argues in his book *The Evolution of Childhood*, namely that "even the simplest and most static of human cultures is an engine of inventive mutual influence and change" (590).

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[1] The artist's work is accessible also on her Instagram page: https://www.instagram.com/traceballa/?hl=en

Wuyts's superb intervention lies precisely in recognizing the personhood of plants by turning the communities of nettles in the story into active protagonists who become powerful allies of the heroine's liberation from patriarchal power. Instead of portraying nettle as an "invasive species," Wuyts adheres to Gilles Clément's reframing of so-called weeds both as vital inhabitants of the lands they populate and as inspiring freedom seekers. In fact, while "everyone rails against the vagabonds" (Clément 276), in Wuyts's version of the story, they rightfully become holders of a lost knowledge rooted in cooperation, resilience, and mutual care. As the human female characters relearn how to converse with nettles, the plants are acknowledged as valuable teachers who help re-establish "the sacred bond between the people and the land."

Besides reclaiming the active role of plants on a narrative level, the text also challenges dominant patriarchal dynamics that traditionally govern fairytale plot structures, especially in the rewriting of the ending, which exemplifies ecofeminist principles in action. In fact, the female characters join forces to "attune themselves to the whispers of nettles and the desires of their hearts," blending "craftsmanship, intuition and openness to the magic of plants." In so doing, readers—virtually of all ages—are exposed to a story of rebellion and newfound independence that holds the potential to reshape cultural and social practices surrounding questions of gender and ecology.

The three illustrations accompanying the text beautifully bring to life the spirit of the revisited folktale. They are realized by [Yule Hermans](#), a Belgian illustrator who curated the visual storytelling of several children's books, including Tom Mariën's picture book *Geef Wacht!* (Give Guard!, Van Halewyck, 2020). Her love for myth and legend manifests in a sophisticated and highly recognizable style blending magic and reality. The use of acrylic paint, combined with the choice of an earthy color palette mixing shades of greens and purples, further contribute to creating a poetic, dreamy atmosphere that centers the empowering bond between women and plants.

The second contribution features an introspective piece by Bijal Vachharajani, a writer and editor of young adult literature, a certified climate worrier, and a [blogger](#) of various topics ranging from animal rights to environmental literature. For this special issue of *Ecozon@,* she wrote an insightful reflection on her latest young adult novel *Savi and the Memory Keeper* (2023), a moving story set in Shajapur, India, that connects personal loss with planetary loss by exploring the nuanced dynamics of grief from the perspective of an adolescent. Another prominent thematic thread in the book is the interconnection between humans and the natural world, which signals a joyful triumph over corporate greed and ecological devastation.

The opening dialogue between the author and the houseplants, featured as co-protagonists in the novel, presents the same humorous and witty tone found in the book. Dismissing the presence of talking plants as purely anthropomorphic would risk losing sight of the special role they play as companions and witnesses to the young protagonist's life. In fact, after the sudden loss of her father, Savi enters in a relationship of memory sharing through touch with the potted plants that have

outlived him. By evoking past memories, the plants take on the role not only of memory keepers but also of actual storytellers. And just like Savi processes the loss of her father through the act of tending to his plants, so does the author in her reflective piece reminisce about her late partner through the same process within the intimacy of the domestic sphere.

Rajiv Eipe, the illustrator of the novel, contributes three drawings to complement the text, specifically referencing the conversation between the author and her forty-two potted plants.[2] In his artist statement, he shares that in composing the full-page illustration at the end of the piece he wished to create a non-anthropocentric composition that did justice to the variety of shapes, sizes, and colors of the individual plants, while also trying to encompass the author's eagerness of stepping into the refuge and companionship of these plants at a difficult time in her life. Eipe's perceptive art, which straddles a variety of genres from animation and children's books to comics, combines crayons, pencils, inks, and digital media to create a sensitive illustration that brilliantly grasps the collective sociality of plants without losing sight of their individual features and personalities. By offering a visual depiction of the houseplants that goes beyond an ornamental function, they are deliberately reframed as "models of resilience at the limits of more-than-human social life in late capitalism" (McHugh 194).

As already mentioned, the novel also deals with ecological loss, touching upon pressing issues like global warming, pollution, forced migrations tied to climate change, and deforestation, which the author evokes in her commentary to emphasize the dramatic loss of collective knowledge linked to the accelerating loss of biodiversity. In the same line of thought, Vachharajani points out the growing disconnect between nature and childhood by citing mental health conditions such as "shrinking roaming radius" and "environmental generational amnesia." Within this context, trees are recognized as cultural beings who carry histories of our entangled ecologies and, as such, must actively participate in our collective endeavor of strengthening ecosystem resilience. Similarly to the first contribution, in which women and nettles build interspecies alliances, here too human teenagers and tree elders come together to offer a vision of the future beyond crisis, which reject infantilizing views of young adults who vigorously refuse to perpetuate the current status quo. They are not afraid to dream; they have not lost hope.

In conclusion, both contributions feature narratives that center empowered female characters who prioritize interspecies care and mindful stewardship. Together, authors and illustrators promote an ontological realignment of the vegetal world towards personhood that diverges from a relational model based on disposability and exploitation. The range of perspectives on the subject of plant life explored by these various artists provides a vision of interspecies interdependence that honors the emerging subjectivities of plants. Their textual and visual stories thus

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[2] The first two illustrations are reproduced from the back cover of the book *Savi and the Memory Keepers.*

serve as a gentle reminder that we must (re)learn not just how to collaborate, but also how to *conspire with vegetal beings,* to breathe with them, always keeping in mind that "they breathed us into being" (Myers).

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The Nettle Spinner

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A rewilded retelling of a Flemish and French fairytale,
collected by Charles Deulin in Contes du roi Cambrinus
under the title "La Fileuse d'orties",
included by Andrew Lang in *The Red Fairy Book* (1890),
retold by many women,
rewilded by Wendy Wuyts,
assisted by machines for translation.

Illustrations by Yule Hermans

Once upon a time, both in days of old and still today, Ghent was a land abundant with nettles, and home to skilled women who had an intrinsic bond with the terrain. It was their careful stewardship of the land, and their collaboration with its natural inhabitants like nettles, that propelled Ghent to prominence. While many attribute Ghent's rise in the 19th century to the advent of textile machinery, I would argue differently. Machines, after all, are merely tools. Without the skilled hands to guide them, they are inert. What truly set Ghent apart was its legacy: centuries prior, women had mastered the art of spinning stinging nettles. They possessed the knowledge to transform a mere plant into a magnificent rug. It could even be said that Ghent's ascendancy was due to the shamans who resided there, individuals who communed with nettles long before the city's first homes were constructed. These shamans, living in symbiosis with the nettles, aided one another, sharing their resources and expertise in both hemp and flax.

However, as time passed, the intricate skills associated with nettles diminished, and the sacred bond between the people and the land began to wane. This decline was hastened by the arrival of men from the south, clad in unfamiliar helmets and armor, and thereafter by the peregrines from the west. They introduced new ideologies: ones that diminished the role of women, casting their ancient knowledge as the devil's work. Over the ensuing centuries, this valuable knowledge and set of skills faded into obscurity.

But not all knowledge was lost as long the nettles thrived and young girls and old ladies were willing to listen to them. There was a time, even before the rise of textile machines, when counts held sway over Ghent, and among them, one of the most notorious was Burchard. The townspeople knew him as Burchard the Wolf. So wicked was Burchard's heart that whispers spread about him chaining his peasants to ploughs, forcing them to till the land with their bare feet, the sting of his whip urging them onward.

In stark contrast stood his wife, a beacon of kindness and compassion. Whenever she caught wind of her husband's latest cruelties, she'd discreetly right his wrongs, earning her the adoration of the people. Where he was reviled, she was revered.

On a day when Burchard was out hunting, he found himself wandering through the forest of Malemmeersen. There, he came upon a solitary cottage where a young woman sat, spinning hemp.

"What is your name?" he inquired.

"Renelde, my lord," she replied with a courteous nod.

"Such a secluded place must surely weary you?"

"I've grown accustomed to it, my lord, and find solace here."

"Perhaps, but if you come to the castle, you could serve as a maid to the countess."

"My lord, I cannot. My ailing grandmother needs my care," Renelde explained.

"Insist as you might, I expect you at the castle by nightfall," he declared, continuing on his way.

Yet Renelde, promised to a young woodcutter named Guilbert, had no plans to heed the count's command. Her duty lay with her frail grandmother.

However, three days passed, and the count returned, displeasure evident in his features.

"Why haven't you come to the castle?" he demanded of the resolute young woman.

"As I informed you before, my lord, my grandmother needs my care," she reiterated firmly.

"Return tomorrow, and you shall be appointed as the countess's chief lady-in-waiting," he proclaimed before continuing his journey.

Yet, just like his previous offers, this too held no sway over Renelde, and she did not make her way to the castle.

On his subsequent visit, the count attempted a bolder proposition. "Should you come with me," he announced, "I'll send the countess away and take you as my wife."

However, Renelde remembered the kindness the countess had shown her family two years earlier when her mother had succumbed to a prolonged illness. The countess had extended a helping hand during their darkest hour. Thus, even if Burchard had genuinely desired to wed Renelde, she would have declined.

Weeks drifted by without any sight of the count. Renelde began to nurture the hope that he had finally relinquished his pursuit. But that hope was shattered when he suddenly appeared at her doorstep one day, bearing a duck gun and a hunting bag. On this occasion, Renelde wasn't spinning hemp but rather flax.

"What work are you engrossed in today?" he inquired gruffly.

"It is for my wedding attire, my lord," Renelde replied softly.

"You intend to wed?"

"Yes, my lord, if I have your permission," she said, recalling that in those times, peasants required their lord's consent to marry.

"I shall grant you this permission," Burchard began, his voice dripping with malice, "but only if you fulfill a condition. Notice the tall nettles growing over the graves in the churchyard? Gather them, and from them spin two exquisite lengths of cloth. One shall be your wedding dress, and the other, the shroud to cover me. You may marry only when I am buried beneath the earth." With those chilling words, accompanied by a scornful smirk, the count departed.

Renelde felt a cold shiver down her spine. The task of spinning nettles was unheard of in Malemmeersen.

Every evening, once his labor for the day concluded, Guilbert would come to visit his betrothed. That evening was no different, and upon hearing of Burchard's bizarre demand, he responded in heated passion. "Shall I confront the Wolf and cleave his head with my axe?"

Renelde recoiled at his violent proposition. Was Guilbert, the man she intended to marry, no different from the aggressive drunk villagers?

"No," she said firmly, "I won't have any bloodstains accompanying my wedding flowers. Moreover, we mustn't harm the count. Think of the kindness the countess showed my mother during her time of need."

In the midst of this exchange, a frail, aged voice broke the silence. It belonged to Renelde's grandmother, a wise hag who had spent most of her days in silent contemplation.

"My dear ones," she began, "in my long life, I've never witnessed nettles being spun. However, I've heard ancient tales of goddesses and their priestesses who graced this land before the arrival of clergymen. These wise women were believed to communicate with nature, understanding the essence of each plant and its purpose. Why shouldn't Renelde attempt the same?"

Renelde pondered this, then asked, "But how can I converse with nettles? They lack the means to speak."

The elderly matriarch, drawing from her reservoir of old wisdom, told her what to do.

As dawn's first light kissed the earth, Renelde found herself amidst a thicket of nettles growing over the graves in the churchyard. Before approaching, she respectfully sought permission from the place, subsequently pouring out her heart, sharing her challenges and concerns. The nettles stood in silent vigil, offering no verbal response.

"Could you be transformed into a wedding dress and a shroud?" she inquired.

Yet again, the nettles remained silent.

Following the advice of her grandmother, Renelde sat amongst the nettles, intently observing them until the moon, in its full glory, began to illuminate the night. Overwhelmed by exhaustion, she reclined and soon drifted into a deep sleep. In her dreams, as I was foretold, the spirit of the nettles appeared, elucidating the mysteries she sought to unravel.

When Renelde awoke and put the spirit's teachings into practice, she was astounded. The nettles, once processed, yielded a thread that was simultaneously soft, sturdy, and ethereal. In no time, she had crafted the first garment intended for her wedding.

With hope that she might not be compelled to create the second, she hastily completed the sewing. Just as she was admiring her handiwork, Burchard the Wolf arrived.

"So," he began with a smirk on his face, "how progress the garments you promised?"

"Behold, my lord," Renelde responded, unveiling the gown that radiated an unmatched purity and elegance.

Burchard's complexion drained of color, yet he managed a begrudging acknowledgment, "Impressive. Now, commence the crafting of the second."

Reluctantly, Renelde resumed her work. Meanwhile, an eerie sensation overtook the count upon his return to the castle, as though a spectral shadow had just traipsed over his grave.

His appetite vanished, and every morsel on his dinner plate became unpalatable. As he retired to bed, he was consumed by shivers, as if a fever was taking hold. Sleep eluded him, and the next morning, he was ensnared in the grips of his malaise. This rapid decline in his health, intensifying with each passing moment, deeply unnerved him. Surely, it was linked to Renelde's spinning—was fate ensuring that both he and his shroud would be prepared for the upcoming burial?

Burchard's initial response was to dispatch soldiers to Renelde, demanding an immediate halt to her weaving. Compliantly, Renelde ceased her work. That evening, Guilbert inquired, "Has the count finally consented to our union?"

She sighed, "No, he hasn't."

"Resume your spinning, love," Guilbert urged. "It's our sole hope. He's bound by his own word."

The subsequent day, after ensuring her home was tidy and her grandmother was fed, Renelde returned to her spinning wheel. Observing her defiance, the soldiers, acting on Burchard's orders, seized her, binding her limbs. They then dragged her to the river's edge, its waters raging from recent downpours. Without hesitation, they thrust her into the turbulent depths, waiting to see her vanish beneath. But fate had different plans. Renelde, against all odds, emerged, gasping for breath. Though not versed in the art of swimming, sheer willpower guided her to safety.

Back in her abode, with unwavering spirit, Renelde resumed her spinning. Yet, the relentless soldiers soon returned. This time, they weighed her down with a heavy stone, intending to ensure she wouldn't resurface, and cast her back into the turbulent waters.

The instant the soldiers' attention wavered, the weighty stone unexpectedly detached. With determination, Renelde navigated through the water, retraced her steps to her dwelling, and resumed her craft.

This tenacity prompted Count Burchard himself to intervene. Due to his frailty, walking was out of the question. Thus, attendants carried him in a sedan chair to the village. Yet, undeterred, Renelde continued her spinning.

Upon witnessing her defiance, he aimed his firearm and released a bullet in her direction, as one might target a menacing predator. Remarkably, the bullet ricocheted, leaving Renelde untouched, her focus unbroken on the spinning wheel.

Blind fury surged within Burchard. The intensity of his rage was such that he seemed on the verge of meeting his end. He lashed out, shattering the wheel into fragments. Overwhelmed, he collapsed and was hastily conveyed back to his abode, unconscious.

Yet by the following morning, the spinning wheel stood whole once more, and Renelde was back at her task. Sensing his life force wane with every rotation of the wheel, the count commanded that Renelde's hands be bound and insisted on constant surveillance over her.

Yet fate intervened. The guards, succumbing to fatigue, slumbered, and the chains that bound her inexplicably loosened. Unhindered, she resumed her spinning.

In a desperate bid, Burchard ordered the uprooting of every nettle plant within a significant radius around the churchyard. Yet nature seemed to conspire against him. No sooner were the nettles plucked from the earth than they seemed to rejuvenate, regrowing with an uncanny speed. Eerily, these resilient plants even sprouted on the well-trodden grounds of Renelde's cottage. Each time they were removed, more appeared, providing a relentless supply for the spinner, always ready for her craft.

With each passing day, Burchard's condition deteriorated, the shadow of death looming ever closer.

His devoted wife, the countess, out of deep compassion for her sick husband, unraveled the mystery behind his affliction. Desiring his recovery, she implored him to approve the union between Renelde and Guilbert. Yet, in his stubbornness, Burchard refused to yield.

Taking matters into her own hands, the countess, unbeknownst to her husband, approached Renelde. Invoking the memory of Renelde's late mother, she beseeched the young spinner to cease her craft, hoping to halt the curse that plagued the count. Out of respect and empathy, Renelde agreed.

That evening, when Guilbert visited and noticed no progress on the fabric, he sought an explanation. Upon hearing of the countess's plea, he questioned, "Has the count agreed to our union?"

"No," Renelde replied.

"Then let fate take its course."

"But how will the countess feel?"

"She will realize you're not to blame. The count alone is the architect of his demise."

"Let's be patient a while longer. Maybe he'll relent."

Months dragged on—one, two, six, then a year. Renelde refrained from spinning, and while the count ceased his pursuit, he remained unyielding in his decision. Guilbert's patience waned. Renelde's heartache deepened. She yearned for Guilbert's embrace.

"Perhaps we should end our engagement," Guilbert finally suggested.

"Just a little more time," Renelde pleaded.

However, Guilbert's patience waned. His visits to Malemmeersen grew sporadic, until they ceased entirely. The weight of their unfulfilled love weighed heavily on Renelde's heart, yet she remained resolute.

Fate brought Renelde face to face with the count at a bustling market in Ghent. She approached him, her hands clasped in a desperate plea. "My lord, show mercy!" she pleaded.

But Burchard the Wolf merely averted his gaze, dismissing her with chilling indifference.

She could have reclaimed her power, returning to her spinning wheel to challenge his pride. But she chose restraint.

The heartache deepened when she heard of Guilbert's decision to leave the country. He didn't bid her farewell.

She relegated her once-busy spinning wheel to a desolate corner, surrendering to her grief for three days and nights.

Time continued its relentless march. As the cold grasp of winter released its hold, nettles once again claimed the land. Before long, word spread that the count had taken gravely ill. The countess, suspecting that Renelde had resumed her spinning in her weariness, visited the cottage. Yet, she found the spinning wheel untouched and silent.

Still, the count's condition worsened, baffling even the most seasoned physicians. They proclaimed his imminent demise, and the mournful toll of the death bell echoed through the castle. Yet, death eluded him. While he lay trapped in a liminal state between life and death, he was consumed by anguish, unable to find relief. His pleas for death to end his suffering went unanswered.

In his torment, a memory surfaced: his words to the young spinner. The realization dawned on him that his unresolved fate was tethered to the absence of a shroud for his final rest.

Without delay, he summoned Renelde to his bedside, urging her to resume her task of spinning his shroud. The moment her hands touched the wheel, a subtle transformation began. The count's excruciating pain began to wane.

As the wheel turned, a profound change overcame the count. He was overwhelmed by remorse for the injustices he had inflicted out of unchecked pride. With a softened heart, he sought Renelde's forgiveness, and without hesitation she forgave him. She then diligently continued her task, spinning day and night.

Once the nettle thread was spun, she took to weaving it, the rhythmic motion of her pendulum crafting the fabric of the end. Finally, as she sewed the shroud, each stitch seemed to ease the count's pain, drawing him closer to the inevitable conclusion. And as her needle made the final stitch, imbued with the essence of nettles, sealing the destiny intertwined with the fabric, the count breathed his last, finding peace.

At the very same moment, Guilbert found his way back to the village. His desire for Renelde led him straight to her doorstep, where he proposed, hoping to make up for the lost time.

He was in for a surprise. Renelde, having grown stronger and wiser in her solitude, responded with a firm "No. You broke my heart when I needed you. I am worthy of more."

And she embarked on a new journey.

Joining forces with the countess, they established a unique academy. Here, young girls weren't just taught the art of spinning but were also guided to attune

themselves to the whispers of nettles and the desires of their hearts. This academy soon became renowned for producing the most exquisite dresses, each one a blend of craftsmanship, intuition and openness to the magic of plants.

And because of these young girls and the nettles, I tell you, Ghent became a rich place.

And the spinning wheel bends, and the story ends.

Meaning Making with Plants
From Our Memories and Imagination

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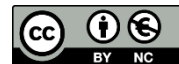
Plants: We have a bone to pick with you.
Me: You do realise it is hard to pick a bone? You all are plants.
Plants: Excuse me, your own species has done research to have to convince you that we talk, we scream and we have better taste in music than you for sure, what with your constant listening to Bollywood songs. So we can definitely pick a bone.
Me: OK, OK, that was a bad joke. So why are you upset? Tell me, I am all ears.
Plants: No, that's corn.
Me: Eye roll.

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[1] A version of the illustrations has been published in Bijal Vachharajani, *Savi and the Memory Keeper*, Hachette India and Blackstone Audio, USA, 2023.

Plants: We digress. How come we don't see any profits from these books that are about us?

Me: We?

Plants: Yes, very much we.

Me: Umm, you didn't write them.

Plants: Sure, but we were the muses.

Me: Right, but then I give you sun, water, and all.

Silence.

Me: What?

Plants: We are all shaking with laughter. Can you see the white larvae? What about that oozing snail. And all those brown tips of ours. Look at my soil, it's so dry, it's a victim of climate change.

Me: I literally just fed you fresh compost.

Plants: Half of the compost has fallen on the tiles, but sure. Anyhow, back to the matter at… ahem… hand. What we mean is the money plant needs feeding.

Me: Dude, really.

Aloe Vera: YOU CALLED ME A ZOMBIE IN YOUR BOOK.

Me: You're literally waving your thorny tentacles at me as we speak!

Here, let us show you, literally how we made your book happen.

A while before the pandemic took over our lives in 2020, I began writing a story about a girl grappling with the loss of her father. For me writing *Savi and the Memory Keeper* was a way of making sense of my grief—I lost my partner to a heart attack in 2019. Writing is the only thing I knew, especially because the act of reading was returning to me only in fits and bursts after a year of fugue.

And then the pandemic took hold. I didn't see a human being I knew for 21 days, the duration of India's first lockdown. Yes, like many, I was holding virtual meetings with my colleagues, getting on video calls with family and friends, and

watching actors on the shows I binged on. But I didn't physically meet a person who I actually knew.

Coupled with my grief, I turned to haunting my apartment's balcony. From the eighth floor, I watched the clouds change daily—gossamer wisps in the morning shot with golden sun rays, fat cumulus ones in the afternoon and a delicate Bauhinia pink in the evening as the sun set on yet another Groundhog Day. I started tending to my plants—it was better than talking to my mural—and not just giving them a sip of water every few days.

The thing is, I have always loved the idea of plants. My mother had a gorgeous array in our Delhi balcony. Then, we moved to what was then Bombay (now Mumbai) and most of her leafy babies got smashed en route. I still remember her loading them onto the truck, bequeathing them to the care of the bemused movers. I don't think she ever told us this, but the fact that most of her plants didn't make it, broke her heart just a little bit. She consoled herself by saying our flat was way tinier than our Delhi one—fact and how—so there was very little room for plants. She made do.

But every once in a while, she would reminiscence about the jasmine. That's when I realised how much meaning that plant held for her. Because my grandmother loved the smell of jasmine. It was something the women in our extended family would often do—buy strings of jasmine flowers to put in their hair—and giggle at the finery. It was a moment she remembered with love, having lost her mother to a sudden illness in the hospital. One day as my mother talked about her mother while folding clothes, she swore that the smell of jasmine flowers hung thickly around her. The twelve-year-old me sniffed deeply, disappointed to only smell the fresh laundry and the dal cooking on the stove.

These little moments found themselves in my young adult novel, *Savi and the Memory Keeper*. It was perhaps an attempt of meaning-making from memory and imagination, a sense of both our griefs coming together on the pages of the manuscript. In the book, Savi is determined to take care of her father's 42 plants legacy, despite her stubborn brown thumb.

Children often ask me if I put myself into my stories. I do. But Savi is nothing like me. She's an angry teenager, I was an introverted one, terrified of everything and everyone. But our brown thumbs were definitely the same.

Something my plants attested to.

When my late partner moved into this flat, we excitedly began growing plants. Arugula spilled out of the pot, basil gave out a heady aroma, and the mint grew like weeds. And of course, weed showed up, but we always let it be. They are so pretty, he would say, as he watered them daily. And they were. They made me think of Paro Anand's *Weed* (Roli Books, 2008), a YA book about the conflict in Kashmir from the point of view of young Umer who is caught between his love for his parents and their conflicting ideals. 'We are the weeds,' she writes. 'The wild, unwanted things. Who wants weeds? Thrown out. Out of everyone's lives. I can't help sinking into the sticky mess of self-pity and hopelessness. I can't help it. There doesn't seem to be anything else to do.' How then could I remove those weeds?

The week we went on a holiday, we came back to carnage. The entire plant family had been destroyed by pigeons. We cleaned up the mess—upended roots of rosemary, torn of leaves of palm, and soil everywhere. The only plants the survived were the aloe vera, two pots of cactus, and a jasmine that never seemed to blossom. And yes, pigeons do keep making special appearances in my books for this very reason. Call me Count Monte Cristo if you will.

That was it. No more plants, I decided.

And then, he died.

I was running on empty. All I was left holding was memories, tangible and the intangible, and so many of them rooted in our home. My home. With an abundance of time on my hand, where evenings stretched like yawns, I had the terrifying thought that most grievers have. What if I lost those memories?

Already, his voice was an echo. His footsteps in the house had faded. His things were gathering dust. In his book *Insomniac City: New York, Oliver Sacks and Me* (Bloomsbury, 2018), photographer Bill Hayes recalls meeting a fellow griever who doesn't use the word 'died' when talking about his loss. Instead he says 'disappeared'. Hayes then replies, 'That's exactly how it feels for me, too.'

Disappeared. Cambridge Dictionary describes it as, 'to no longer exist/ (of a person or thing) to go to a place or into a condition where the person or thing cannot be seen.' That fits. Months later, a fellow widower pointed out that I used the word death some thirteen times in our conversation, a word he was struggling to comprehend. I told him about the other word, disappear. And like Hayes, he too agreed.

It fits.

The erosion of memories is such a big part of loss. And the fear of the erosion as well. The more you reach into a memory, the more faded it seems to become, like a Polaroid over time. Yet, the plants, they had become my memory keepers. Something I didn't actually realise until my editor, Nimmy Elize Chacko began brainstorming titles for the book. My working title had been *Definitely Dead,* mirroring my mood and also Savi's, and the finality of the disappearance. Then, she pointed out that the plants and the trees in my stories could be defined as memory keepers.

I realised that's what I was doing. Unconsciously in my life. And consciously on paper.

As I tended to the aloe vera, I remembered his smoke breaks on the balcony, our languorous weekend breakfasts, and sometimes silent evenings where we stared at the clouds. The jasmine was now all brown and stubby, but I couldn't throw it away. I admired its resilience in refusing to die despite my brown thumb. The cactus offered a strange solace, of remembering very human moments of arguments and loud cricket on TV.

Savi's story formed a bit more. Her father's plants were not just evoking memories for her, they were telling her the stories. The smell of a jasmine pulled up one. The rosemary, which denotes memory, did its job as it reminded snippets of food

cooked together, an activity that Savi loved sharing with her father. The zombie aloe vera, it offered kinship with its thorny tentacles.

And then, enter Tree.

I was obsessively reading about mother trees, and their mind-blowing ability to communicate with other trees using the mycorrhizal network to share excess carbon and nitrogen as described by Canadian scientist Suzanne Simard. I had always loved hugging the trunks of trees, I went chasing sturdy baobabs to embrace in Madhya Pradesh, chatted with a mighty oak in Binsar, and met an ancient and wise banyan in Ranthambhore Tiger Reserve. I knew that was the story, Tree who held the climate of Savi's new fictional city Shajarpur together, and was now under threat.

I chose a ficus based on my tree friend Radha Rangarajan's recommendation. After all, to me, they are the owls of the tree community. The wise ones.

Similarly, in *Afo and I* (Pratham Books, 2023), picture book maker Canato Jimo plants cosmos flowers across the story of a boy rushing home to say goodbye to his sister who is leaving for the big city. A climate book, the boy vends his way—through a forest, a hill, all of which are facing the brunt of the climate crisis—to his village, pausing to pick a handful of cosmos flowers. 'Things are changing,' he writes. 'I wish things would stay the same. I wish Afo would stay…We could play among the cosmos flowers. Jump over puddles in the rain.' At the end, he makes his peace with his sibling leaving, but he hopes his sister will come back, and the flowers will be a reminder of home.

When Savi first meets Tree, she's dealing with a new fancy school full of Very Cool and Hip People, the fact that the Earth continues to spin even though her father is not on it, and she's lonely with her family being on their separate planets of grief. Tree welcomes her to their shade, and much more.

Yet, when I read this section out to children and young people, I realise that most of them have never climbed trees. Ever.

Nature deficit disorder.

Environmental generational amnesia.

Shifting baseline syndrome.

Shrinking roaming radius.

Scientists have found many names for the growing disconnect between nature and childhood. I see it in my classroom conversation as they describe their city as—

Smelling of garbage

Tasting of cement

Looking crowded

Feeling icky

So loud

Their perception of their homes now are increasingly smog-filled, noise-choked, and full of natural disasters like flash floods and heat waves. They can't name common trees like gulmohars or identify a myna, but can tell me the latest video game and its features.

That's not surprising. As writer Robert Macfarlane pointed out in his book *Landmarks* (Penguin), nature words had begun disappearing from the dictionary, replaced by technological ones. His response was to team up with artist Jackie Morris to create *The Lost Words* and then *The Lost Spells* (Penguin), books that have magical spells in the form of poems to be read aloud so as to conjure nature back into your lives. So compelling was the first book that it led to 'mass participation of primary and secondary schools in learning 'nature literacy'.'[2]

Naturalist Yuvan Aves, a writer based out of Chennai, often takes children on tree observation walks. Before that he reads from *Savi,* he told me, the part where she connects with Tree, merging literature with nature walks.

All of this reveals that children have an inherent curiosity and fascination for the natural world. As biologist Rachel Carson wrote in her *The Sense of Wonder* (Harper, 1998)*,* 'If a child is to keep alive his inborn sense of wonder, he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with him the joy, excitement, and mystery of the world we live in.'

Fact.

Prod a little and children suddenly start squealing with enthusiasm about spiders and snakes, crows and eagles, puppies and cats, and elephants and tigers. Something that picture book maker Rajiv Eipe beautifully captures in *Hello Sun!* (Pratham Books, 2023), where a boy impatiently waits for the rain to stop and goes out for a nature ramble. It's a joyous celebration of nature as he meets touch-me-nots, wildflowers and other plant denizens and greets them with a loud hello. All in the backyard of his urban house.

In all of these books, illustrations and photographs become a placeholder, an archive of nature in the face of environmental generational amnesia. Together, they tell infinite stories that hold memory and meaning.

Plants: See?
Me: What?
Plants: All us! All. Your books. Those other books. We're the heroes.
Chorus strikes up: 'We are the champions'.
Me: You know I can just stop giving you water.
Plants: Then what will you write about? HA!
Me: Fine, you win.
Plants: YAY! YAY! We won, we… ummm she's left. Hello? We do travel but not so quickly.
Hello, come back. At least play us some music, ideally jazz.

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[2] "The Lost Words: a 'spell book' that closes the gap between childhood and nature" by Louise Walsh, https://www.cam.ac.uk/stories/thelostwords

Review Essay: Postcolonial Literatures and Climate Change

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Russell McDougall, John C. Ryan, and Pauline Reynolds, eds. *Postcolonial Literatures of Climate Change* (Brill, 2022), 408 pp.

Justina Poray-Wybranowska, C*limate Change, Ecological Catastrophe, and the Contemporary Postcolonial Novel* (Routledge, 2020), 236 pp.

Human induced climate change is closely linked to the territorialising and exploitative practices of colonisation. Although differing greatly in its details between disparate colonised regions and colonising powers, wherever it occurred, the European-led colonial enterprise appropriated land and redirected natural resources towards the colonisers, destroyed previously existing land care practices, fragmented cultural relationships that were interconnected with those practices, and established extractive, industrialised modes of engaging with the land. These activities established economic networks, legal frameworks for property ownership, social institutions, and social and moral values that have continued to frame environmental attitudes and practices in exploitative terms, even after the colonising relationships have ended. In regions negotiating with their environmental relationships in the aftermath of colonial control, the legacy of those colonial practices and institutions is profound. Furthermore, colonial relationships are not limited to those of the past, but continue in many parts of the world, taking many different forms. As widespread environmental exploitation has begun to dramatically change earth's climate systems, it has become clear that many of the most adversely affected regions have a recent colonial past or are still embroiled within colonial practices. Further, the people most affected by climate change in these regions are those who suffer or have suffered most from the colonial experience. It is not surprising, therefore, that many powerful recent literary engagements with climate change have been written by authors with direct experience of disadvantage or loss within postcolonial societies.

The two books reviewed here both respond to a rapidly growing interest within academia and policy development in approaches towards understanding and responding to climate change from postcolonial perspectives. Justina Poray-Wybranowska's *Climate Change, Ecological Catastrophe, and the Contemporary Postcolonial Novel* (2020) is a monograph focussing on six novels out of which three

are set in South Asia and the other three in Australasia. *Postcolonial Literatures of Climate Change* (2022), edited by Russell McDougall, John C. Ryan, and Pauline Reynolds is an edited collection spanning many areas of the postcolonial world and a wide range of literary texts. Between them, the texts explore a wide range of postcolonial literary responses to climate change. The two texts share largely similar underlying motivations. Both provide introductions that link climate change to the extractive dynamic of colonialism and embrace the hope that literature can change attitudes and action. They moreover identify postcolonial literature as having a notable capacity to encounter climate change in ways that are affective, personal, and connected to everyday reality. In doing this, they position themselves as furthering a discussion raised by Amitav Ghosh in *The Great Derangement* (2016) relating to the inadequacy of literary responses to climate change.

Reading these books together provided me with a valuable depth and breadth on this topic I would have missed from reading either one alone. This is because the two works approach the topic differently and discuss a different selection of texts. Out of the two works, the monograph is more politically and historically focussed. Poray-Wybranowska explores in depth six postcolonial novels, all published between 1999 and 2015, representing Indigenous, marginalised, or dispossessed perspectives from two regions, the South Pacific and South Asia, both of which were British colonies. For each novel, she provides a relevant and concise historical and political context and a thematically structured discussion. On the other hand, the edited collection has a much wider geographical, historical, and literary scope. It scans literature across disparate global regions which have widely varied relationships to colonial pasts and presents, from the Caribbean to Antarctic icebergs. The chapters are loosely organised by geography moving through riverine, island, tropical, desert, and polar geographies. The specific locations reflect current climate change concerns, with significant attention to islands and the polar regions. The narrative perspectives of the literature discussed through the chapters is much broader and not limited to Indigenous or disenfranchised perspectives, novels, or recent works as it includes historic literary texts and works by well-established white male authors from settler colonial backgrounds as well.

Poray-Wybranowska's C*limate Change, Ecological Catastrophe, and the Contemporary Postcolonial Novel* is scholarly, with a well-articulated argument supported succinctly by relevant theory. In the manner of a monograph derived from a thesis, a problem is established, relevant theory and the political, historical, and social contexts of the problem are investigated, and an argument for a potential solution is suggested. The author argues that the colonial imagination has developed within the protection of the privilege of colonial occupation and is therefore disconnected from the everyday suffering and continued destruction that affords it its protected position. Following Amitav Ghosh, she therefore suggests that colonial literature is unable to cope with the everyday reality of the catastrophe that is the current state of this climate changed world. These colonial narrative forms and styles fail in this regard because they consider catastrophe as unusual, isolated events that

cause a change to otherwise normal affairs, which remain essentially comfortable and predictable. By contrast, postcolonial literature from the perspectives of people who are Indigenous and dispossessed does not assume a predictable and comfortable normal state of being. Novels such as those discussed in her book provide ways of knowing catastrophe as everyday lived experience because this is the reality for many marginalised peoples within postcolonial situations. The author's central point is that narratives capable of the imaginative possibilities needed to live within a climate changed future must be able to express catastrophe as everyday lived experience, and that therefore postcolonial novels from the perspectives of Indigenous and dispossessed people are well equipped for this challenge.

Each of the six novels take place within situations where individuals, groups, and families are living out the legacies of colonial violence in settings where environmental, political, social, cultural, and personal histories were destroyed and rewritten through the changes imposed through British colonial impositions, both directly and indirectly. Three of the works, Kiran *Desai's The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004) and Uzma Aslam Khan's *Thinner than Skin* (2012) are set in South Asia. The other three, Kim Scott's *Benang* (1999), Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* (2006), and Patricia Grace's *Potiki* (1986) are set in Australia/New Zealand. Each thematic discussion is aligned with the most relevant pair of novels and supported by relevant theory. All six plots recount experiences of traumatic survival in environments and social and political structures made barely liveable by the legacies of colonial exploitation and extraction. These are stories in which lives are dismantled, trauma repeated and multiscalar, and the experience of catastrophe is constant and sustained for at least some of the characters. Through varying degrees, all of them reflect the reality of survival among postcolonial legacies of environmental and social destruction. Wright's *Carpentaria* is not a realist novel in the way in which Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* is realist, but its magical elements and fictionalised environments communicate the visceral experience of trauma, loss, and disempowerment of First Nations people in Northern Australia.

The discussion of these novels is structured around three broad themes: catastrophe, vulnerability, and human relationships; catastrophe and human-non-human relationships in degraded environments; and land justice, resistance, recovery. Poray-Wybranowska's analysis focuses on uncovering the literary and narrative devices that these postcolonial writers have used to make real the experiences of living in a permanent catastrophe. Some of the narrative features she considers are the various approaches the authors use to convey trauma, the significance of the role of non-human animals, the use of rhythm and cyclicity to invoke connection to land, and the alignment of bodies and the land to demonstrate vulnerability and damage and as a source of hope. These literary methods, she suggests, might support the kinds of thinking human societies and individuals will increasingly need as we all find ourselves surviving within constant climate-change-induced catastrophe. They may offer clues to the kinds of imaginative strategies that can enable recognition, support grieving, and sustain hope, resistance, and recovery.

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For me, this interest in narrative devices capable of supporting new imaginaries for a climate changed future was the most exciting and innovative aspect of the work, as it offers genuine analytic insight that can promote change. However, this aspect could have been further developed by way of some detailed recounting of the plotlines of the selected novels.

A range of historical documents are discussed alongside the textual analysis to add depth to the historical contexts of these novels. Likewise, analytic frames and theory from disaster studies, animal studies, postcolonial studies, and ecocriticism are drawn upon for the analysis. At times, the discussion struggled to live up to its ambitious goals, offering an overview of some substantial theoretical traditions, while ignoring debate or counterclaims. The intent of the approach however is to show how the multitude of theoretical frames support each other, and together strengthen and deepen an analysis in order to address climate change concerns alongside issues of power and justice. The book generally succeeds in achieving this goal. Its limited historical and geographical scope raises questions as to the applicability of the analysis beyond these two regions, however Poray-Wybranowska is careful and thorough in justifying her choices and the limits selected for this work.

Postcolonial Literatures of Climate Change extends the scope of postcolonial literature beyond conventional limits, illustrating the extent and diversity of climate-change related challenges emerging within postcolonial political, economic, and cultural contexts. The chapters collect twelve varied and sometimes unconventional perspectives on postcolonial writing that encounter climate change. Chapters about the exploitation of Nauru for phosphate and for the detention of asylum seekers (by Paul Sharrad), rising waters in Hawaii (by Craig Santos Perez), activist responses to climate change in Inuit lands (by Renee Hulan), and the destruction of Nubian homelands through dam construction (by Amany Dahab) remind readers that colonial impositions continue to impact environments and communities in many guises, alongside postcolonial resistance and critique, which also take many forms. Entries about Antarctica (by Hanne E.F. Nielsen) and Antarctic icebergs (by Elizabeth Leane) suggest that even the most remote regions must acknowledge past and ongoing colonial impacts and escape the embedded tropes of colonial literary representations—in this case as the ultimate heroic or pristine destination—and struggle to develop a postcolonial literary presence better able to confront climate change. Chapters which focus on the Southern Beech (the Gondwanan tree genus *Nothofagus*) within poetry from South America, New Zealand, and Papua New Guinea (by John C. Ryan); the monsoon in Malaysian literature (by Agnes S. K. Yeow); Sargassum seaweed in writing from the Caribbean (by Kaisa Mika and Sally Stainier); and writing that expresses the personhood of the Whanganui River (by Chris Prentice) all foreground non-human agency in eliciting and shaping literary responses, thereby successfully integrating a material ecocritical perspective through the book. These contributions highlight the importance of non-humans as communicative leaders in creative works that aspire to move beyond Anthropocentric perspectives and assumptions.

The volume does not aim to be a comprehensive overview of the field. Rather, the chapters predominantly offer intense dives into one or a few literary responses to specific climate-change related contexts. Apart from the first piece by Geoffrey V. Davis, which is a general discussion of the relationship between activism and literature, the texts make solid contributions within their particular regional or topical literary contexts, many of which are specific and local. They do not review the postcolonial literary responses to climate change pertaining to their region or issue of concern, nor is there any suggestion that they would. While all the works do justice to their topics, their connections to postcolonial literary responses to climate change are varied. Davis' chapter is notable for having little reference to climate change, perhaps partly explained by its posthumous publication.

The substantive introduction explains the need for a broad review of postcolonial literatures of climate change read as a literature of resistance. It presents a valuable summary of work in this area including a discussion of several important texts and concepts that are not included elsewhere within the volume, before introducing the sections. A coda situates the discussion within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, reflecting upon the role of pandemics within literatures of political resistance and critique. Taken as a whole, the book feels fragmented, with little sense of themes building across or between parts, and little attention from the editors towards pulling out insights distilled from across the contributions of this collected work. I would have appreciated such an addition in the Introduction as, without it, the work is harder to engage with. Like most of the chapters, the Introduction has a forward-looking sense. The focus is upon exploring literary attempts in order to think into a postcolonial awareness that can contribute towards surviving climate change and mitigating its damage. It is less concerned with providing a detailed historical or political review of the damage (although this is also provided, particularly in Dahab's piece). Perhaps this lends the volume an overall optimistic or at least hopeful tone, with the suggestion that, if colonialism has been the problem, postcolonial literary approaches are aligned with solutions in terms of thinking, knowing, and relating that can potentially sustain a future beyond environmental and social exploitation.

Where Poray-Wybranowska postulated that contemporary postcolonial literature points the way towards surviving climate changed futures because these works portray disaster as an everyday reality and suggest narrative responses to survival within a lived catastrophe, *Postcolonial Literatures of Climate Change* seems to make a different claim regarding the efficacy of postcolonial literature in this context. In this publication the emphasis steers towards relational ways of knowing and being with the more-than-human milieux. The tone is often more optimistic as there is a sense across many of these chapters that postcolonial writing as resistance can achieve something stronger than mere survival and that it may still yet lead to transformation.

Together, these two books establish a thought provoking, theoretically and textually grounded basis for the study of postcolonial literatures of climate change.

This is an avenue of enquiry of increasing importance that has the potential to connect cross-disciplinarily with studies in social theory, ecocriticism, literatures of climate change, and interdisciplinary studies across the environmental humanities.

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Peter Remien and Scott Slovic, eds., *Nature and Literary Studies* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge UP, 2022), 418 pp.

Ecocriticism has an unashamedly vexed relationship with the term nature. On the one hand, nature plays a historically central role in the field to the degree that it developed academically out of responses to nature writers and other nature-oriented literatures, and that these responses are themselves predicated on a functional notion of an "out-there" and our concern with—and somehow separate from—a nature we owe meaningful responsibility. On the other hand, it is also by this point well established that nature is a wildly capacious term that covers over as much as it reveals: too slippery to obtain in discussions in any consistent or universally consonant fashion, but always there as a (semi)functional shorthand for a (nonetheless nebulous) concatenation of social and ethical concerns. For ecocritics to accurately tarry with nature, then, is not to embrace or overthrow it, but merely to recognize the bearing it has—and will continue to have—on the field and on the wide range of specialists and laypeople who invoke it to do intellectual and political work of varying kinds. Any student of the field, or any scholar wanting to be taken seriously in environmental circles, therefore requires their own sense of how nature (whatever we mean by it) functions in their own practice. It is into this needful space that Peter Remien and Scott Slovic's excellent new collection enters. Both a valuable introductory overview for the neophyte ecocritic, as well as an up-to-date map of the term's practical uses, *Nature and Literary Studies* provides an array of vantages on the historical development of the term's critical linkages and the contemporary ways in which nature weaves into literary and cultural studies concerns going on at this moment. While the editors make clear that their purpose is neither encyclopedic or wholly definitive, Remien and Slovic are nonetheless equal to the challenge of wrangling their unruly topic into usable shape. Indeed, the high quality and concision of the introduction's overview of the term is more than enough reason to give the book a look; the unswervingly first-rate essays that provide the scope and depth of coverage make the work essential.

Part of the Cambridge Critical Concepts series, the collection is arranged into three sections standard to the series: Origins, Development, and Applications. In the first section, the contributors explore the historical underpinnings of the term nature as far back to the origins of orderly recorded human thought—from the Ancients,

through the "book of nature," and into the early modern era's concern with natural philosophy and history. In this section, one could do no better than summoning Terry Gifford to overview the role of the pastoral in negotiating the human/nature relationship. Likewise, Debbie Lee's interrogation of nature's not-so-distant cousin wilderness ably navigates the semantic slippages that attend both terms that nonetheless slip away, often dangerously, in the face of the need to make concrete policy. In Development, chapters explore the modern era's preoccupations with imagination and industrial development, from the romantic movement to the more recent establishment of new epochs of human thought and influence. To this end, as just two examples: Timothy Sweet and Ken Hiltner provide effective, efficient accounts of (respectively) extinction and the Anthropocene. In all essays through the first two sections, authors expertly lay out the tropes and points of discussion with regard to nature that should be familiar to veteran ecocritics, while also updating the basis of this scholarship for that same constituency and their students, establishing the foundational understanding of nature for the next generation of scholarship.

No mean textbook, however, what makes the collection an excellent addition to the veteran critic's bookshelf and will encourage others to continue pushing the boundaries of the field are the chapters of the Application section, which take up problems and texts in pointed detail. Greta Gaard, for example, continues to enliven the role that ecofeminism can play in exposing the utopian and dystopian impulses inherent in environmental literature; in an entirely different vein, Lai-Tze Fan makes headway beyond the page into non-traditional (dare we say, un- or post-natural?) digital environmental texts, and so widens our field's vision. On this first reading (for this reader and others will doubtless find much to return to), however, two chapters especially drew my attention. First, I appreciated the richly informed pedagogical focus of Erin James's use of narratology with regard to climate-change fiction, especially the ways that James uses the latticework of narrative theory to help students view more perceptively climate change's making strange of our world in space and across time—a truly unnatural way of thinking, to the degree that it transcends our more materially-focused cognition. Likewise, in an entirely different register but immediately following James, Pramod Nayar's chapter, on biocultural precarity, theorizes the mutual constitution of the representational regimes of biotic toxicity along with the framing discourses that make such regimes comprehensible. This theorization assesses the limits and potentials of nature's (and "the natural's") ability to understand illness and care-giving in response to environmental catastrophes such as the Bhopal disaster, but also Huntington's Disease, caused as it is by the (unnatural?) mutation of a single gene. These two chapters do wildly different, yet wholly satisfying, things—and thereby also illustrate the surprising breadth of the text as a whole, as writers take up various positions across the theory/praxis continuum and urge us to do the same.

It would be too easy in this publishing environment for less rigorous scholars to churn out just another book that covers the same tired terrain about nature—a "once more around the block with Nature," one might say. This is not that book, for

the value of the individual contributors' pieces are simply too engaging and too dependably high. To be sure, there are some very small quibbles I might raise. A very minor lament is that Cambridge has left the index wanting, as it is dominated almost entirely by proper names. I recognize, of course, that this is an old-fashioned complaint given that we are fast approaching a digital singularity, and the majority of users will interact with the book online and have no need for such things, as I see from the publisher that it is included in the Cambridge Core (a service to which major research collections already maintain access). Of more central concern, however, is that while it is the case that the book collects chapters from scholars representative of institutions on five continents who are reading a highly globalized literature, the presence of Latin America is quite thin, as well as that of certain regions of Asia (especially China). Given that the work is not meant to be exhaustive, the omission, if in this light one can even call it that, is entirely forgivable. More to the point, the perceptive reader who *does* find themselves wondering about these parts of the world might find their way back to, say, Patrick Murphy's more purposively comprehensive *Literature of Nature: An International Sourcebook* (1999) to fill in the gaps—but then return to Remien and Slovic's to keep building, as Murphy's is now some twenty-five years old. In this sense, the omission might be seen as a boon, precisely the sort of propulsion of new scholarship the editors would invite.

Certainly, neither of these issues should stand in the way of one's adopting the book for their own research, courses, or institutional collections. *Nature and Literary Studies* is well-suited to become a touchstone in the formation of ecocritical minds as it provides an overarching schema of a central term's development and re-energizes approaches to nature's insistent, troublesome presence in environmental literature. As such, one notes Remien and Slovic's understated humility in closing their acknowledgements with the simple hope that, in a world of more and more ecocriticism, "readers will find this book…to be a unique contribution to the field" (xix). They and their contributors have more than hit the mark: unique it is, not in some esoteric or idiosyncratic sense, but in its singular and very fine overall quality.

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Ignacio Quintanilla y Pilar Andrade, *Los cien ecologismos: Una introducción al pensamiento del medioambiente* (Ediciones Encuentro, 2023), 294 pp.

Hay libros cuyos títulos pueden llevar a engaño a sus potenciales lectores, creando expectativas quizás excesivas para el texto que se lee posteriormente. Sin embargo, existen otros que sorprenden gratamente, ofreciendo mucho más de lo que su portada promete. Este es el caso de *Los cien ecologismos: Una introducción al pensamiento del medioambiente* (2023) de Ignacio Quintanilla y Pilar Andrade. Aunque el ensayo está dirigido a un público académico, no necesariamente especializado en Humanidades Ambientales pero interesado en "una transición [ecológica] a un mundo distinto al actual" (12), su contenido resulta esencial, estimulante e interesante, especialmente para quienes se dedican a la ecocrítica y, en particular, dentro del contexto español.

El libro se estructura en dos partes diferenciadas. Los primeros capítulos honran su subtítulo ofreciendo una introducción histórica y filosófica a las diversas interpretaciones del pensamiento ecológico en Occidente. Inicialmente, contextualizan cómo surgieron distintas perspectivas sobre la Naturaleza y su relación con el ser humano durante los siglos XIX y XX, ya sea como un ente opuesto o integrado. Posteriormente, los autores describen las características del variado contexto ambiental actual, que reúne más de cien ecologismos con sus propuestas, inconsistencias y debates. Aunque los expertos en las filosofías tratadas pueden encontrar puntos a discutir—por ejemplo, la mención exclusiva del problemático Pentti Linkola en el apartado sobre poshumanismo (105-106), omitiendo a figuras como Rosi Braidotti, Donna Haraway o Cary Wolfe—, esta sección cumple su propósito introductorio: resumir, organizar e incentivar a los lectores a profundizar en sus intereses ecologistas.

El valor especial de este libro, sin embargo, no recae tanto sobre la exploración filosófico-histórica del pensamiento ambiental sino en la segunda parte, en la que Quintanilla y Andrade proponen soluciones para, precisamente, hacer avanzar de manera productiva nuestras conversaciones en torno a la lucha ambiental. Para ambos autores (que en ocasiones apuntan que discrepan entre sí), un mejor acercamiento al ecologismo (y por tanto, a la forma de afrontar problemas como el cambio climático) es necesaria una reconfiguración mucho más profunda del pensamiento filosófico sobre lo natural, recuperando la idea clásica de la "filosofía de

la naturaleza", una que nos haga transcender las dinámicas muchas veces antihumanistas que colonizan el pensamiento del medioambiente tanto a escalas teóricas como activistas. Este es precisamente uno de los puntos más fuertes de la crítica formulada en el libro: ya sea de manera espiritual, científica o filosófica, se entiende al planeta Tierra como una entidad inteligente superior a proteger y en la que integrarse. Esto, siguiendo su hipótesis de partida, genera un binario primordial que distingue entre humanidad y Naturaleza (y que acaba desarrollado de múltiples formas), el cual gran parte del ecologismo actual intenta abandonar clamando por un escape del antropocentrismo. Quintanilla y Andrade se preguntan si esto es posible, y si, de serlo, sería realmente útil abandonarlo (así como si deberíamos plantearnos formas de pensamiento antropocéntrico no necesariamente gobernadas por inercias neoliberales).

Los autores argumentan que es imposible escapar del antropocentrismo, y que, de hecho, se ha de abrazar de forma crítica, recuperando sinergias kantianas en torno al racionalismo que puedan hacer que nuestra relación mediada por el entorno se adecue no solo a una supervivencia en la Tierra en el Antropoceno, sino a una que también implique una existencia ética sobre el planeta. Esta forma de comprender el pensamiento ecológico, que denominan "antropismo crítico", conecta con otras filosofías desarrolladas en espacios filosóficos alternos al del pensamiento ambiental tradicional. Desde hace años, aceleracionismos progresistas descendientes de la escuela de la OOO (Ontología orientada a objetos) como los de los filósofos continentales Reza Negarestani, Thomas Moynihan o Timothy Morton[1] (este último sí que llega a ser citado en el libro) llevan defendiendo una recuperación de distintas visiones de un paradigma racionalista para hacer frente a la crisis ambiental. Estas visiones "neoilustradas" destacan por sus enlaces entre la filosofía de la naturaleza y la de la técnica, entendiendo estos dos elementos como ramificaciones de un mismo eje conceptual.

El texto de Quintanilla y Andrade desarrolla su propia argumentación de estas lógicas llegando a las mismas conclusiones que los filósofos que menciono. Sin embargo, el interés de su ensayo se ve incluso más evidenciado por el contexto cultural en el que se engloba su publicación. El espacio de discurso ambiental español ha sido dominado en los últimos años por corrientes ecológicas que se engloban de manera genérica como decrecimientos (o en algunas ocasiones, colapsismos). Estas corrientes (con figuras como Jorge Riechmann, Yayo Herrero, o Alicia Puleo) ven la Naturaleza no antrópica como una entidad a respetar, separada ontológicamente del industrialismo y el desarrollo tecnológico y entienden que la solución a la catástrofe pasa únicamente por un abandono (a veces total, a veces ligeramente moderado) de las lógicas tecnoenergéticas que dominan la geopolítica global. El libro de Quintanilla y Andrade, en este sentido, no busca desmontar por completo estas filosofías asumidas en el contexto español, sino construir sobre ellas, ofreciendo una perspectiva que evita tanto el tecnoidealismo transhumano como aquellos

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[1] Véase Negarestani (2020), Moynihan (2019) y Morton (2018)

ecologismos que idealizan lo tradicionalmente entendido como Naturaleza. *Los cien ecologismos* se presenta así como una contribución singular a los debates sobre la naturaleza y la tecnología, enriqueciendo el diálogo académico.

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Terry Gifford, *DH Lawrence, Ecofeminism and Nature* (London, New York: Routledge, 2023), 193 pp.

Shortly before his death, DH Lawrence (1885-1930) wrote the cosmological poem "Prayer" which, like much of his work, may be read both as a manifestation of human-/man-hood (man with his foot upon the moon crescent, man-lord, man-God) and as a song to human enmeshment with the elements, oneness of human and celestial body (man bathed in moonlight, gravitating moonlit to the moon, abandoning human gravitation for the lunar one), both empowered and humble in the face of the red lion of the sun (Lawrence 684). For decades, the image of DH Lawrence has been as exposed in Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1970): a man taking pride in his manhood, an apologist of the subjugation of women, seeing the root of social discord in the female emancipation. However, as seen in his poem "Snake", featuring a man encountering a majestic snake, an "earth-golden" "lord of life" (Lawrence 349, 351), there is a persistent conflict between his "accursed human education" (351), the great patriarchal superego coupled with the anthropocentric rational mind, and an unconscious affinity for nature, leading to a sense of "pettiness" rather than pride (351). Such an analysis of Lawrence's complexities, him being a product of his time and a thinker with a sensitivity beyond it, is possible in the field of New Modern studies, where canonical modernists are examined beyond established critical boundaries. Terry Gifford's recent monograph contributes to this discourse, proposing a reconsideration of Lawrence's work from an ecocritical and ecofeminist perspective. Ecofeminism merges the lenses of gender (as well as class, race and ability) with those of the environment, while analysing the mechanisms of domination that result in "backgrounding" of the unprivileged, "irrational" Other by the western "rationalist paradigm" (Plumwood).

Gifford provides a panoramic view of Lawrence's oeuvre through 14 compact chapters, moving freely between the different genres Lawrence engaged in, from poetry to novels, short stories and non-fiction, presenting them thematically rather than chronologically. As the Introduction promises, the book surveys Lawrence's multifaceted engagement with nature, "the more-than-human, from flowers, trees and animals to the cosmos" (3). This nuanced and insightful analysis is doubtlessly the strong point of the book.

The book follows the tradition of earlier Lawrentians in including a strong biographical element, as it is not possible to discuss Lawrence the writer outside Lawrence the man. Yet, the argument, while moving along the axis of the writer's biography, rather evokes his "moments of being" insofar as they pertain to the close reading of the particular novels and other texts he wrote over his relatively short but remarkably vivid career. For example, Lawrence's disengagement from the repressive English environment and his extensive travels, which echo in his writings inspired by Italy, Australia and South America. In Chapter 13, the author follows in the writer's footpaths on his trip to New Mexico, which resulted in *The Plumed Serpent*, discussed from the point of view of "radical animism" (147-163, *passim*), the "spirit of place" and its "living cosmos" (149).

Theoretically, the study resorts to the ideas of Val Plumwood, Greta Gaard, Serpil Oppermann, Patrick Murphy and, briefly, early Stacy Alaimo—all valid readings in ecofeminism. The author seems to centre his argument around the idea of Otherness as both a manifestation of separations and a drive to establish organic connections between characters, their cultural contexts, places, "genders and their perception of nature", as well as "voices and stances" (5). Gifford argues for a distinction between "the alienated 'Other' and the relational 'Other'" (7). He makes effective use of Patrick Murphy's concept of "anotherness" to suggest a "relational position" between "fellow inhabitants on the planet" (48-49), which he terms "ecological interdependence" (49), to describe the keen sensitivity of Lawrence's writings. A variety of further concepts are employed to explore terms such as *psychogeography*; *psychic geography*, and the original concept of *ecological affect* (50). By developing these concepts and offering their critical exploration of fictional case studies, the book at hand may be seen as an original and valuable contribution to Lawrence studies, as well as the field of ecocriticism.

However, the "feminist" aspect of Gifford's eco*feminist* argument appears problematic at times, in its falling short of a truly feminist critique. Thus, Chapter 2, discussing gender fluidity in *Trespassers*, attempts to challenge the male-female dichotomy, yet it feels throughout that what is called gender fluidity (also in Chapter 9, rather misleadingly titled "Gender Dialogics"), is in effect still a play around the dichotomy and the degree in which the normative deviates from the non-normative or doesn't. Several notable feminists are cited, but the ideas of Judith Butler are conspicuously absent, although Butler would serve as a connecting tissue to explore the constructed nature of gender as well as its fluidity, to view gender as a "possibility" and not a category "written in stone" (Butler 29), with this possibility hidden in nature. Chapters 3-4 contain a productive discussion of flowers and, later, birds and animals as Lawrence's agents to "loosen boundaries" and "conflate dualities" (41), moving towards a "connective otherness" and "anotherness". This aspiring for a "nourishing relation to the cosmos and the universe" (32), abandoning the domination of human symbolic language to engage in the language and laughter of flowers are among the most enchanting sides of Lawrence's writings as appreciated in ecocriticism, and their foregrounding in the current book is engaging. However, the

gender dimension in the analysis is flawed at times. As is well known, ecofeminism goes a step further than ecocriticism, by combining gender with environmental concerns and viewing sexism, racism, class exploitation, and environmental destruction as interconnected pillars on which patriarchal society is based. Therefore, while ecofeminism adds the environmental component to feminism, it does not abandon the feminist principles. These flaws transpire, for instance, in Chapter 5 of the book, which interprets Lawrence's fascination with rural life in *Sea and Sardinia* as material ecocritical and affective-ecological. However, we must not overlook markers of gaze as distancing and othering, even in its admiration and elevation of the "grey-bearded peasant" (56) and local women (59). Further, in the analysis of *The Lost Girl* in Chapter 6, the author makes insightful observations about the "range of masculinities" Alvina confronts and the subtleness of their depiction in the novel. However, the controversial sex scene that an (eco)feminist reader would condemn for normalising sexual violence, is not only uncritiqued but seen as purifying and even necessary for Alvina's evolution away from her former emancipated self and towards a willingness to be submitted and subjected. The critic dismisses the problem with a blunt "it is not rape" (66), although the earlier scholars he cites (Ellis qtd. in Gifford 66) had rightly seen it as such. The exoticising and otherising of Ciccio's animality is likewise unproblematised and the interpretation of the ending as a potential subversion of the character's misogyny (71) is debatable. The theme of patriarchy and colonialism are further examined in Chapter 8, focusing on Lawrence's 1924 novel *The Boy in the Bush*, which was derived from a manuscript by a female "apprentice" Mollie Skinner, whose co-authorship, as the reader is pleased to learn, Lawrence scrupulously acknowledged, ensuring shared royalties. The discussion of power struggle, and especially of man and animal symbiosis in an Australian landscape is much more insightful, not least due to the writer himself being more mature and nuanced in his writing. The character's extractivism is analysed alongside his degrading address to women, who he sees as "creatures"—an attitude termed "nasty patriarchy" by Gifford, in an ecofeminist manner. A dialogic, carnivalesque laughter is proposed as a way out in the next Chapter, dealing with *Kangaroo*, as the book moves towards a compelling and fitting exploration of human animality and a relationship with the non-human "anotherness" in chapters 10-12.

To conclude, Terry Gifford's book is a provocative attempt to make waves with a re-evaluation of DH Lawrence from a risky ecofeminist perspective. It is a refreshing reading, despite its "feminist" agenda being questionable. The ecocritical angle is well developed, though it would have benefitted from a more recent new materialist theoretical base, especially for Lawrence's later writing, when he was at home with the elements and textures of the earth and cosmos, which Gifford's book duly observes in the concluding chapter.

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Joshua Trey Barnett, *Mourning in the Anthropocene: Ecological Grief and Earthly Coexistence* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2022), 473 pp.

Joshua Trey Barnett's monograph *Mourning in the Anthropocene: Ecological Grief and Earthly Coexistence* explores the link between planetary loss and the role of affect. Central to Barnett's project is the political and ethical value of affective dispositions to generate capacities for environmental stewardship. Focusing on North American environmental history and present-day multispecies ecologies, and using a hybrid narrative methodology that combines personal experience, critical analysis, and theoretical departures, Barnett's monograph is an effective demonstration of the significance of rhetoric in practice. Barnett's book rests on a twofold premise. Firstly, he asserts that the propensity to mourn losses is not innate to humans as a cognitively superior species; rather, grief is an orientation that needs to be cultivated through conscious mediation, pedagogic intervention, and performative reiteration. Secondly, Barnett establishes a fundamental connection between forms of cultural expression and planetary conditions, particularly those of protracted ecological endangerment and extinction that index the Anthropocene as an era of unprecedented loss. The Anthropocene, as Barnett's introduction to the book argues, is not merely a time of large-scale extinction of flora and fauna; it is also marked by affective impoverishments conditioned by the cultural myopia imposed by neoliberal capitalism and its extractivist ideologies.

Barnett exposes loss as the common ground that humans and nonhumans collectively inhabit in the contemporary age. In our contemporary era of the sixth mass extinction, loss also becomes an anticipatory horizon that simultaneously imperils and implicates a shared locus of multispecies entanglement. *Mourning in the Anthropocene* parses the contours of loss—what it looks like in the present, its historical inheritances and moorings, and the possibilities it might harbour to elicit ethical and pragmatic responses towards questions of accountability, mitigation, recompense, and obligation. Serving as a corollary to the conceptualisation of loss is Barnett's investment in a series of 'hows': how to make loss visible, legible, and legitimate in the first place; how do our habitual systems of meaning-making fall short in comprehending and adequately translating the scale of certain kinds of epochal losses; and, how can alternative mnemonic and commemorative imaginaries that

depart from the logic of instrumentalist rationality be configured to accommodate such incomprehensible scales.

Barnett selects three rhetorical modalities for articulating loss—naming, archiving, and visualising—to unpack how rhetoric's expressive repertoire generates modes of witnessing the familiar with critical lenses. Barnett's goal in *Mourning the Anthropocene* is thus to articulate points of convergence between rhetorical habituses and planetary ecologies, showing (and also effecting) how rhetoric's kinesthetic affordances and worldmaking possibilities can narrow the culturally mandated gap between the two through the generation of relational grief beyond the human. In doing so, he joins a tradition of environmentalist thought going back to Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Jakob von Uexküll that approaches questions of ecological coexistence and justice by highlighting the links between ethology (the study of how specific, unique environments or relational worlds are produced by specific beings through daily situated existence) and ethics.

In "Anticipating Loss: On Naming" (33), Barnett's chapter on the political and rhetorical potential of naming, he draws on Jacques Derrida's theorisation of the proper name as a hauntological structure implicating us in ongoing and persistent mourning. The name is an anticipatory device that not only indexes a particular entity, but also is something that is meant to outlive the possessor. This device indexes the space of the latter's finitude and potential absence, thus marking both the subject's concrete presence and temporal fragility. Names are enunciatory acts that not only refer to what is being nominated, but also embed particular histories, ways of living, cultural knowledges, and relational structures within which the nominal subject is located. More significantly, as modes of articulation and enunciation "by which some humans carve up, categorize, organize, and manipulate the earth" (36), names like other rhetorical toolkits are phenomenological modulations and embodied carvings of acoustic and mnemonic sites. They use particular linguistic, epistemic, synaesthetic, and cognitive formulations to shape a certain structure of experience.

The artworks that Barnett analyzes negotiate with such enforced amnesias through the anticipatory power of utterance and naming's function as an instrument of commemorative mourning for losses. By creating a participatory aesthetic whereby the spectator is called to intimately connect with loss through a sensuous and personal encounter with the shape of names and their subliminal histories of endangerment and extinction, Ackroyd and Harvey's *Seeing Red…Overdrawn* (2016) enacts a process of resignification. Similarly, Robert Macfarlane's weaving of an illustrated narrative around lexically excised words in *Landmarks* (2015) is a form of funerary resistance and melancholic activism.

In chapter three, "Revealing Loss: On Archiving," Barnett provides a detailed analysis of phenology—the art of witnessing, documenting, and recording seasonal changes through careful attention to local biospheric, climatic, and elemental phenomena. Phenology is a historical practice popularized in North America by Thoreau, Leopold, and Carson in the twentieth century, as well as a component of ongoing citizen science and public knowledge building. As with naming, what makes

phenological data generative sites for environmental awareness is the archive's particular capacity as a rhetorical force field to document, preserve, memorialise, and, thus, make visible and legible the Anthropocene's extinction cascades. Such data are not mere records of ecological changes; they also produce ways of encountering, perceiving, and relating to losses through specific bodily, emotional, and cognitive orientations.

Extinction's relationship with perceptual optics and representational frames is further elaborated in chapter four, "Imagining Loss: On Making Visible." Focusing on a range of visual, installation, and performance art, along with design and architectural projects that mobilise public spaces as commemorative arenas, Barnett explores visual rhetoric's ability to recalibrate the limits and possibilities of what is visible and imaginable, "the rhetorical means of accomplishing salience" (108). From analyses of Jeff Orlowski's documentary *Chasing Ice* (2012), based on James Balog's efforts to document deglaciation in the poles through the use of time-lapse photography, Olafur Eliasson's *Ice Watch* (2014), a site-specific, participatory installation that involves transporting glacial ice from Greenland, to Robert Graves and Didier Madoc-Jones's futuristic photomontages offering dystopian, post-apocalyptic images of familiar cities—*Mourning in the Anthropocene* returns to a classical Aristotelian conceptualisation of rhetoric as an evocative force that elicits feelings in order to influence judgement. Rhetoric indexes grief's larger political function of disrupting normative representational matrices of legitimacy and legibility or what Judith Butler (2009) calls "grievability." As a politically mediated affect, grief passes through a system of distribution that arbitrates on the worthiness of a particular presence to be mourned and remembered in its absence. Barnett's excursus into the affective-ecological potential of rhetoric places him within a critical constellation of recent scholarship in affect and extinction studies, particularly by Kathleen Stewart (2007), Stewart and Lauren Berlant (2019), Thom van Dooren (2019, 2022), and Deborah Bird Rose (2011), whose shared focus on the less spectacular dimensions of loss recalibrate the Anthropocene beyond standard definitions of catastrophe and universal human geological complicity. The book's scholarship also references other explorations of the domain of environmental affect; for instance, Glenn Albrecht's work on the uncanny and unpredictable ecological emotions central to the affective topography of the Anthropocene, and Ashlee Cunsolo and Karen Landman's engagements with generationally transmitted traumatic effects of indigenous habitat destruction by settler colonial violence. As van Dooren's work on scavenger species has shown, acknowledging losses also entails recognition of the limits of discourse. It generates a willingness to be redirected towards emergent discursive possibilities that begin with enmeshments rather than separation as the precondition of an ethically informed discursive praxis. *Mourning in the Anthropocene* grounds itself in such discursive reconfigurations, their rhetorical implications and ethico-political possibilities, offering in the process a nuanced and complex cartography of epistemic humility. Barnett's book is a useful resource for scholars interested in affect studies, rhetoric—particularly, new directions in rhetoric studies

after the ecological turn in the humanities—extinction studies, and indigenous histories.

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Killian Quigley, *Reading Underwater Wreckage: An Encrusting Ocean* (London, United Kingdom: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023), 184 pp.

Killian Quigley's *Reading Underwater Wreckage: An Encrusting Ocean* begins and concludes its interdisciplinary exploration of the submarine not with the ocean's multispecies matrix itself, but with exhibitions of eco-artifacts procured from its sunken depths. From the Victoria and Albert Museum's display of "sea sculpture" ceramics from an 18th-century merchant shipwreck to the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco's 2019 show *Lost at Sea: Art Recovered from Shipwrecks*, Quigley's analysis of these marine and manmade concretions reveals these aquatic ecosystems' potent alchemical agencies. Throughout *Reading Underwater Wreckage*, Quigley seeks to establish "a rhetoric and imagery of encrusted and encrusting things [that] partakes of wider and heterogenous representational patterns, patterns that also involve the ornamental, the exterior, the superficial, the secondary, and even the bejeweled" (12). His book takes up these subaqueous reconstitutions, to wrestle with the ontological mutations of shipwrecks and their wrecked fragments as they interact with and integrate into defamiliarizing submarinal environments. Spanning the realms of the aquatic, linguistic, literary, artistic, and the biological, this ambitious title examines how submerged materials become encrusted, extracted, studied, and displayed as more-than-human matters imbue them with new meanings.

Organized across three central "habits"—fouling, concrescing, and artmaking—Quigley establishes encrusting as methodology, not just as an aesthetic affect but as a critical tool "sensitive to concrescent growths [which] contributes to the emerging project of complicating and pluralizing our sense of what constitutes oceanic matter" (26; 98). To embark on such oceanic natureculture studies, Quigley argues, involves a rejection of terracentric assumptions and requires new adaptations to our forms of scholarly description, sensorial understanding, and cultural heritage interpretation—a suspension, if you will, that embraces symbolic, perceptual, and ontological fluidity. Among the new vocabularies Quigley introduces are "wrecky assemblages" and "growings-together." These are linguistic ways to theoretically untangle the ocean as a site of disorientation and defamiliarization without entirely unraveling these entangled undersea sensibilities. Microbiological phenomena, human material histories, and more-than-human marine temporalities play out

across these submerged artifacts' growing, corroding, and contaminated surfaces (21; 32).

Quigley's critical study of encrusted histories and marine aesthetics does not just seek to articulate the material properties of these dynamic tidal flows and living compositions of aquatic organisms. To discuss the sea, one must also wrestle with a larger, global history of oceanic imaginaries, how the sea has operated as a cultural and commercial resource marked by circulations of colonial trade networks and imperial economies. These unruly underwater spaces disrupt our sense of time and relationality, rendering the objects that sink into its depths estranged through encrustation's generation and destruction. While it might be a challenge to balance discussions of the biological, material, and ecological with the theoretical, historic, and symbolic, Quigley deftly weaves together these maritime events and poetic narratives without sacrificing the ocean's weird, disorienting complexity. Where a scholar might prefer to scrape off these encrustations as excess and ornament, Quigley employs this methodology to reflect on how wrecked objects can become materially illegible to our conventions of human understanding, reshaped by literal tidal pressures, transformed into marine habitats, objects of manmade pollution, unruly and precarious. This survey spans eras of Romanticism and Enlightenment, early marine science, and devotes significant attention to the emergence of diving and wreck salvaging as professionalized, yet highly exploited, forms of maritime labor. Quigley takes a critical look at how the ocean has been framed as a wild frontier, an opportunity for colonial conquest, and an untapped resource for anthropocentric expansion. The introduction of scholarly voices and texts such as Rachel Carson's 1937 essay "Undersea," Adrienne Rich's 1973 poem "Diving into the Wreck," observations by Jacques Cousteau, and Caitlin DeSilvey's reflections on decay's potential for new knowledges in heritage preservation all offer invaluable subversions and ruptures in our oceanic understanding. This submerged, salvaged poetics, one of storytelling through the diving and the drowned, charts a new critical course through long-standing circulations of oceanic storytelling and academic study.

Some of *Reading Underwater Wreckage*'s most impactful and promising insights can be found towards the end of the book as Quigley wrestles with the role of encrustation in marine archeology, aquatic heritage preservation, and museum conservation. Quigley presents a fascinating tension in the field: "the preservative tendencies of algal, bryozoan, spongy, and other-than-animate concretions appear to make them exceptional assistants to reading the artifactual identities of seafloor stuff. At other times, they are critically antagonistic to legibility" (112). Where encrustment prohibits clear categorization, it also provides an unexpected kind of underwater preservation as a living archive that reinterprets these wrecks on its own tidal, other-than-human terms. These concretions, despite altering the appearance of artifacts, keep their fragmented integrity partially intact by fusing to the coralline seabed. Quigley underscores the importance of not disregarding or devaluing these marine processes of dis- and re-articulation, to see these submerged processes as practices of ecocultural stewardship. Where our anthropocentric notions of conservation

would be quick to remove these ornamental substrates, Quigley argues that heritage scholars should view recovered objects as part of an active material interrelationship with the sea. While water has historically been the conservator's and the curator's nightmare, Quigley urges the heritage preservation field to embrace encrusted matter's ambiguous, indeterminate identifications, to address these transformations and give credit to the marine species that kept these objects intact underwater. As these systems of identification become unstable and unruly in the submarine, perhaps we must expand our conventions of description and perception to encompass the totality of their encrusted assemblages.

Reading Underwater Wreckage's interdisciplinary odyssey from the depths of our oceans to terrestrial gallery displays and across vast temporal swaths of maritime colonial histories and artistic, academic, and poetic contemplations provides a necessary intervention into practices of subaquatic ecocriticism. By refusing anthropocentric legibility for his encrusted subjects, Quigley embraces new forms of marine heritage mutualism, ones that challenge tropes of sea exploration, extraction, and frontierism. Quigley's analysis of encrustment, manifested through biocultural processes of fouling, concrescing, and artmaking, does not center on one particular species or system. Rather, he focuses on the ocean's matrix as a transformative site for, in the words of Karen Barad, "intra-active becoming" (2014, 231). These studies of the bottoms of harbors, along maritime trade routes, and circulations across imperial ocean geographies wrestle with histories of marine environmental aesthetics that have influenced the fields of literature, art history, philosophy, and archeology for centuries.

The hybrid forms of language and methods of interpretation presented in *Reading Underwater Wreckage* give new meanings to sunken debris without requiring human rescue and intervention, unsettling generations of maritime research conventions. This book's revelations will profoundly transform approaches to multispecies scholarship within the environmental humanities, cultural heritage studies, marine science, and beyond. Quigley's text invites an "immersive unknowing," an acceptance of the sea's denial of traditional knowledge collection, a turn to more-than-human enactments that at times bear the mark of human histories (151). In a time when renewed interest in the ocean as a potential extractive resource demands novel assertions of protection, *Reading Underwater Wreckage* provides critical tools for a more fluid understanding of the undersea's uncanny transformative, preservative, and interpretive potentials. From within these aquatic disorientations, a new kind of encrusted spatiotemporal sense-making emerges.

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Dominic O'Key, *Creaturely Forms in Contemporary Literature: Narrating the War Against Animals* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), 206pp.

Creaturely Forms in Contemporary Literature drives the attention of animal studies towards modern prose fiction in order to interpret the presence and significance of animals within modernist literary narratives to expose the "war against animals" in the same milieu (3). The book's opening query revolves around how it is possible to engage in an interpretive practice attuned to animals in literature, and embedded within this enquiry is a significance that extends beyond a mere understanding of semantic and symbolic roles animals assume in fiction. While this is not charting new territory, the novelty in Dominic's work lies in his engagement with the thematic terrains of creaturely melancholia, trouble and love, which offer innovative reading practices that may aid in tackling the "representational problems of animals" in literature (4). O'Key reinterprets selected works of W.G. Sebald, J.M. Coetzee and Mahasweta Devi and redirects attention to the structural aspects of their literary composition—which he refers to as 'creaturely forms' (5)—that exhibit a heightened sensitivity towards the existence of animals in these works. O'Key engages with Eric Santner's and Anat Pick's respective conceptualizations of creaturely to forge a pathway where he introduces the pivotal role of literature which can provide a nuanced understanding of creaturely life that goes beyond the dichotomy of human exceptionalism and animal vulnerability. Essentially, O'Key's understanding of 'creaturely' extends the examination of animals in literature beyond their mere existence, directing attention to their portrayal, reception, and engagement within the narrative.

The first chapter, titled "The War Against Animals"—inspired by Dinesh Wadiwel's titular book from 2015—examines the contemporary global crisis, when commercialization renders animals disposable. O'Key expands on the war against animals that points to both the commodification and depletion of animals for human gain coupled with persistent cognitive-material distribution of the concept of humanity—a construct that disregards other life forms classified as animal, whether or not they are human. While addressing and also critiquing the war against animals—an approach that may fail to recognize the realities of human-animal cohabitation (9), I believe that O'Key's undeterring focus on capitalism's extractive nature regarding animals reinforces Derrida's notion of violence on animals (2002)

as well as Krithika Srinivasan and Rajesh Kasturirangan's notion of care infused with violence (2017). He references Sylvia Wynter and Judith Butler, who flesh out the idea of exclusive appropriation of the notion of humanity, and carves out the underlying goal for the consecutive chapters on Sebald, Coetzee and Devi, analyzing how their works engage with the themes of "colonialism, anti-semitism and apartheid" (18). These writers, O'Key maintains, strive to reassert the agency and dignity of the animals, all the while scrutinizing the exploitative control modern society exerts over their lives.

The second chapter, titled "W.G. Sebald's Creaturely Melancholia," argues how Sebald's writings bear witness to the ways in which modernity has simultaneously eliminated and exhibited creaturely life. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn* (1995) and *Austerlitz* (2001) are both located in an environmentally scarred world in the late twentieth century, that serves as a testimony to his creaturely melancholia, driving his efforts to "re-member" (43), therefore highlighting the shared suffering between humans and animals and cultivating a heightened creaturely awareness. More precisely, these assertions allow to construe Sebald's strategy of establishing connections as a mode of memorializing fractured existence within modernity and embodying a melancholic endeavor to resist the prevailing anthropocentric influences. In *The Rings of Saturn*, pointing at the confusion between distinguishing a Herring and a Cod fish in the novel, O'Key foregrounds Sebald's use of images that "misrepresent its supposed linguistic referent" (64), which may also be read as a manifestation of modernity's broader tendency to exploit, instrumentalize and/or neglect animals. O'Key's attention to this elision of difference does seem to pay attention to the stabilization of the stereotype of the nonhuman animal where the animal individuality is neglected and the animal is typecast into homogenization. In *Auzterlitz,* on the other hand, the zoological garden underscores a disjunction in human-animal interactions and paves the way for a new kind of melancholic rapport between human and nonhuman realms.

In "J.M. Coetzee's Creaturely Trouble" O'Key conceptualizes the challenges inherent in integrating pro-animal perspectives within the fabric of fiction. O'key's attention to Coetzee's literary works, acknowledging and rejecting the expectations set by literary realism—which often requires a sacrificial element involving animals as a part of plot development—warrants further examination. While In *Disgrace* (1999) Coetzee recognizes the inescapable implications of the prevailing human-animal conflict, the author also leaves room for a narrative possibility where survival of the animal (Driepoot in this case) becomes conceivable. This interpretation also offers a vision of posthumous posthuman relationality (DeFalco). By locating Driepoot's death in an "extra-textual future" (106), O'Key may be hinting at the limitations of a biocentrism of care and alludes to the potential for care that transcends life itself. O'Key observes that trouble encompasses both ethical dilemmas, faced by the characters in their relation to animals, and the artistic challenges inherent in conveying these dilemmas.

The final chapter, titled "Mahasweta Devi's Creaturely Love," centers on Devi's array of formal techniques that function as counterforce against the prevailing anthropological mechanisms inherent in postcolonial advancements. Devi uses the concentrated and intense nature of short stories to counteract the predictable narrative progression of postcolonial development. O'Key argues that Devi's short stories portray interspecies solidarity through creaturely love that does not align with the traditional ideas of love (130). Reading the subaltern as not mere victims, and shifting traditional views of "postcoloniality as planetarity" (155), makes O'Key's analysis compelling by offering a reimagining of postcoloniality that acknowledges the complex nature of life on this planet and seeks to foster a sense of multispecies care and love. O'Key's interpretation of the animal's otherness, however, seems confined by the animal's physical vulnerability, where the animal needs to die in order to maintain its incomprehensible alterity.

O'Key, in his conclusion, offers a brief analysis of creatureliness in few other contemporary literary works, closing on the observation that, while literature cannot directly alleviate the animal suffering, it can at least bear witness to it and resist in perpetuating enduring narratives of human superiority. Thinking of modernist literature, in Rancierian fashion, "a regime of visibility" (24) and the one that "unsettle(s) the logic of representation" (64), O'Key forces a reconsideration of animal presences and significance within literary narratives, contemplating the subjective nature of representation and questioning how animals are symbolically and metaphorically constructed in texts. Overall, O'Key's volume is an important text for readers interested in literary animal studies, postcolonial animal studies and environmental humanities, as it offers, without being preachy at any point, a peek into our affected planetary present.

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Liam Lewis, *Animal Soundscapes in Anglo-Norman Texts* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2022) pp. 197.

Liam Lewis's monograph on animal sounds in Anglo-Norman literature offers more than a welcome contribution to medieval studies. The text's major arguments also supply productive avenues for enriching ecocriticism at large. The book's four chapters each develop a close reading of a French-language text composed in medieval England. Chapter one offers detailed analysis of passages from *Le Bestiaire* of Philippe de Thaon, a twelfth-century verse catalogue featuring allegorical interpretations of animals. Lewis maintains that the textual description of specific animal sounds matters as much as visual illuminations for the overall representation of animality in the *Bestiaire* (39). To substantiate this claim, Lewis looks to the cries of lions and the calls of sirens. The latter works to remind the medieval reader of sounds that might tempt, ensnare, or corrupt human listeners. Lewis interrogates this association to reveal the siren as a challenge to male authority, since the siren's call initiates sounds whose power threatens masculine sovereignty (50-51). This reading draws support from the bestiary's illuminations which depict the siren with an unopened mouth: even in the bestiary's visual mode, the document deprives the female siren of her agential voice which is simultaneously consigned to a signifier of nefarious seduction in the text. Lewis's reading of the mandrake offers a creative effort to identify the mandrake's *cri* as an interruption of the bestiary's allegorizing tendencies. Whereas nearly all other plants and animals described in the text yield up fodder for Christian exegetical interpretations, the mandrake's cry does not belong to this schema. Lewis therefore positions the mandrake as a non-human creature who resists anthropomorphism, refusing to be pressed into the service of biblical hermeneutics.

In chapter two, Lewis turns to Walter of Bibbesworth's thirteenth century *Tretiz*, a language learning manual featuring lists of animal sounds rendered in English and French. If imitating animal sounds is a useful tool for learning different human languages, Lewis maintains, it follows that the entire pedagogical approach of the *Tretiz* calls into question any clear distinction between humanity and animality (82-83). Working from recent theories of sound and language, Lewis sets out to explore these animal noises through "sound zones," which refers to the "linguistic and cultural environment" from which sound emerges (74). Lewis persuasively argues

that these lists elevate the status of animal sounds to something closer to human language. For instance, the list begins by asserting that "man speaks" (76) before elaborating the moos of cows and other animals; by generating a list of animal sounds from the primary example of human speech, animal noises seem to approach interspecies intelligibility (76-77). Plants, no less than animals, participate in the text's high regard for the status of non-human voices. This is especially apparent in the example of the hazel tree whose audible shaking evidently belongs to the same class of sounds that animals make (78).

Chapter three investigates animal noises in an Old French hagiography of St. Francis. According to Lewis, this *Vye de Seynt Fraunceys* (dated to the 1270s) represents animal sounds as part of a broader effort to link animals to Francis's journey of sanctification. Lewis shows that the verb *chaunter* (to sing) is shared by both humans and animals in the *Vye*. Crickets and humans (among other creatures) therefore share in a common vocal capacity for praise of the divine (105). Close reading, therefore, reveals the common doxological character of sound production shared by humans and their animal counterparts, manifesting their common capacity to vocalize "communal praise" (112).

Chapter four investigates animal utterances in the *Fables* of Marie de France. Following Howard Bloch's research, Lewis identifies the fable with the animal capacity to deceive through speech. One such fable features the bleats and cries of hunting dogs in pursuit of a deceptive wolf. The verbs denoting those cries—*escrier* and *huër*—are shown to be terms derived from the contemporary English legal practice whereby citizens would raise up "the hue and the cry" (142) in pursuit of a criminal. Thus, Marie de France's anthropomorphizing of her canine subjects casts a complex web of analogies between human legal procedures and the realm of wolves and dogs. From this arrangement, the poet produces literary animals who do, in fact, demonstrate some form of animal subjectivity by virtue of their ability to utter, speak, and bark. Turning to the Middle English lyric "Sumer is icumen in," the book's coda sustains Lewis's analysis of the interdependent and reflexive nature of animal and human sounds in medieval English sources.

Among the book's virtues, Lewis elaborates compelling insights about his theme across a diverse range of primary source genres. The book sidesteps the pitfalls of interdisciplinary overreach, instead elaborating complex arguments that reveal tight connections between hagiography, grammatical texts, encyclopedic literature, and fables. Lewis refuses to artificially segregate medieval animals into the silos of genre, and the reader reaps the rewards of this methodological commitment. Most importantly, Lewis's book is instructive insofar as it refuses to reduce his medieval sources to exponents of an exaggerated anthropocentrism or as transgressive efforts to abolish the distinction between animals and humans. Lewis's careful reading of the chosen sources draws out the fluid representations of animal sounds between these two extremes. We come to appreciate how these Anglo-Norman texts connected humans and animals along a spectrum of adversarial and cooperative relations, often

with ambiguous results that simultaneously preserve and trouble the boundary between humans and non-humans.

Lewis's book, therefore, successfully identifies a broadly shared Anglo-Norman understanding of animals and humans as creatures with ineluctably shared destinies. As the chapter on St. Francis makes especially clear, humans and animals become subjects by making meaning through the production of noise, song, and sound. This thesis—well defended throughout the book—may be especially generative as a contribution to contemporary ecocritical debates. If ecocriticism aims to formulate cultural frameworks with practical application in policy and activism, then Lewis's book helps to show the evident value of medieval sources to better understand the mysterious affinities and differences that related humans and animals in the centuries that preceded our own.

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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.

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