Editorial
Creative Writing and Arts

Anthropocene Sublimes

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In 2024, Chilean-born artist Alfredo Jaar, in collaboration with human geographer and political geologist Adam Bobbette, created a site-specific installation titled *The End of the World* for the Kesselhaus at the KINDL in Berlin. Drawing on Timothy Morton's notion of the "hyperobject," Jaar's work confronts the scale and abstraction of global issues, using the sublime not only as an aesthetic experience but also as a means to grapple with the unspeakable magnitude of planetary crises. At the center of the vast room dominated by an overpowering red lighting, sits a glass display case reminiscent of a jewelry exhibit, protecting a 4×4×4 cm cube composed of ten layers, each made of a raw material: cobalt, rare earths, copper, tin, nickel, lithium, manganese, coltan, germanium, and platinum. These so-called "strategic metals" appear deceptively innocuous in the form of a sculpture, yet their role in both the military sector and the production of civilian technologies, including their extraction from lunar landscapes, remains largely unseen. As curator Kathrin Becker observes, Jaar's radical staging "creates a space of contrasts and discrepancies that extend beyond the physical oppositions of space and object: the cube's almost absurd diminutiveness vs. the immense scale of the ecological, social, and political upheavals it represents; the emptiness and silence of the darkened Kesselhaus vs. the explosive nature of the subject matter" (4).

As the genocidal powers of modern nation-states and corporations unfold in real time, posing a threat to multispecies ecologies worldwide, the traditional experience of the sublime, where an observer safely contemplates the spectacle of nature from a distance, is no longer possible. As noted also in the fieldbook *Reset Modernity!*, curated by Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel, "in the twenty-first century, this kind of safe haven no longer exists" (28). Landscapes once idealized as pristine representations of wilderness and untainted magnificence are now ravaged by anthropogenic forces: we are all involved, affected, and responsible to varying degrees, which leaves no room for passive spectatorship. What does an aesthetic of the sublime look like in the Anthropocene? Confronted with these spectacles of terror, we need new frameworks that not only move beyond the canonical sublime but also

offer a redefinition of the subject experiencing it. This shift requires acknowledging the sociopolitical disparities shaped by histories of domination, war, land theft, and exploitation, that cannot be encapsulated by the collective notion of the human species, the *Anthropos*. Gene Ray suggests that we focus on "the social terror of history and on the sublime's proximity to trauma," while also embracing "a plurality of sublimes, each describing the exposures of particular times, places, and subjective positioning" (12).

In this spirit, the creative writing and arts section of this special issue pluralizes the experiences of the sublime within the Anthropocene, here understood as an all-encompassing concept that includes its various declinations, such as the Plantationocene, Capitalocene, Terracene, among others. Art emerges as a powerful vehicle for ethically representing the tension between awe and destruction, exploring new ways of being and relating in a rapidly changing world, and urging active reflection on our role in the face of socioecological crises. Eva Horn defends the sublime as an artistic strategy for producing "bodies of evidence" (8) in a planetary situation whose scales and abstractions defy traditional representation. The contributions in this issue aim to create precisely such bodies of evidence, making visible and perceptible concepts and conditions that are often invisible, yet pervasive in their toxicity. Echoing the plural in the title of the journal's issue, these works span various media, genres, languages, and geographies, ranging from Mexican landscapes and Mongolian imaginaries to Italian peripheries and Siberian winters. This plurality extends to the issues they engage with, which include the ethics of technological advancement, the geopolitical violence of colonial extraction, pollution, and the threats of extinction.

The first contribution comes from Mongolian artist Urjinkhand Onon, who exhibited the two paintings featured in *Ecozon@* in "Mongol Zurag: The Art of Resistance" at the Garibaldi Gallery, in conjunction with the 60th Venice Biennale, Italy. Drawing on the iconic techniques of *Mongol Zurag* painting, characterized by bright colors and flattened perspective, Urjinkhand rejects Eurocentric ideals of the pictorial sublime, positioning her work as a form of resistance to Western aesthetic norms by maintaining a commitment to traditional Mongolian techniques. While her works may not seem overtly political, they engage deeply with contemporary ecosocial issues, using abstraction and symbolism to invite an engaged audience. In *Our Life-3* (2021), Urjinkhand employs the Nagtan style of black paintings from Tibetan Buddhist tradition to critique humanity's overreliance on technology and the breakdown of communication during the COVID-19 pandemic. Rather than seeking transcendence or idealized beauty through the detached perspective of the "distant viewer," she challenges conventional representations of the sublime by placing the human subject at the heart of the crisis. Similarly, in *Immunity-2* (2019), Urjinkhand draws on Buddhist teachings of inner peace and harmony, using the flower motif to represent a protected sphere of spiritual wealth. The color palette evokes the vastness of fiery terrains across lands and waters, contrasted with famished mouths subtly hidden in an ethereal landscape. By positioning the human once again at the

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center, *Immunity-2* offers a critical perspective on the Anthropocene sublime, urging viewers to confront the destructive forces unleashed by humanity, while evoking an atmosphere that resonates with Donna Haraway's concept of "staying with the trouble."

Shifting from pictorial representation to lyrical expression, the second contribution, *The Miner's Daughter*, is a poem by Venezuelan poet and scholar Santiago Acosta, translated from the Spanish in a collective workshop that included poet and translator Tiffany Troy, the Women in Translation Project (WIT) at University of Wisconsin-Madison, and the author. The poem engages with the coloniality of the Anthropocene and the destructive scale of mega-mining projects from the perspective of the Global South. Amid a "sandy wasteland," Acosta confronts the obscene wealth generated from the unmaking of Indigenous futures. With sharp logic and surrealist imagery, the poet evocatively writes: "Minerals […] float in the air, accumulating on the skin and in the nostrils, frolicking in the blood and lungs." This description illustrates the visceral toll of environmental contamination, juxtaposing destruction with a haunting beauty emanating from wounded landscapes. The result is a mixture of hope and despair, unescapable scars and terrifying beauty: "Beauty is the red dust that covers the city at sunset. […] Beauty is what remains. These scraps. This stillness." The poem thus echoes Jennifer Peeples's concept of the "toxic sublime," which is neither detached nor purely aesthetic but instead "rooted in the slow violence of extraction," as Acosta states in his artist's statement, "where chemicals seep into skin and tissue, infiltrating bodies and ecosystems."

Continuing the exploration of settler-colonial histories and the harsh realities of extraction, Carlos Manuel Del Castillo Rodríguez's prosaic poem offers an intimate meditation on environmental degradation, existentialism, and the interplay of natural and human-made systems. Through artistic collaborations with the collectives *Un río en el río* and *Zenderio,* the author seeks to reconnect with the Santa Catarina River in Mexico. Using the mapping tool *What3words*, he charts an emotional and conceptual prospection that uncovers the intimate connections between personal, collective, and geological histories. In doing so, he emphasizes how memories and trauma are embedded within the landscape itself, with the river serving as a wise keeper of fragments of history. The poem juxtaposes the life-giving qualities of the river with the raw destruction it witnesses. Through the list of scattered images that include "cables junto a los pilotes del metro" (cables next to the subway pilings) and "un cadáver de perro pudriéndose abierto" (the decomposing corpse of a dog), the author conveys the paradox of progress and decay. At the same time, references to a lunar eclipse and geomagnetic storm ("se aproximan un eclipse lunar y una tormenta geomagnética") suggest a sublime landscape caught in a constant cycle of ecological disruption. Driven by a lingering sense of existential threat, the poem also delves into metaphysical reflections that, with an introspective tone, elicit humanity's confrontation with the larger rhythms of the natural world and the cosmos. Yet, one of the poem's central metaphors, the "río imaginario lleno de monarcas" (imaginary river full of monarchs), introduces the possibility of migration and transformation. By

blending the fantastical with the real, this mythical river further amplifies the sublime, suggesting a hopeful potential for rebirth even amidst ongoing decay.

Catherine Greenwood, the fourth contributor, presents five poems from *Siberian Spring*, an ecoGothic work-in-progress set in present-day Siberia, which reimagines Arctic spaces altered by global warming. Drawing on the corpus of Arctic Gothic texts, Greenwood engages with literary tradition through speculative narratives that blend fascination with the existential horrors revealed by permafrost exhumations, which materialize body parts from the Pleistocene epoch: a "rhino-horn spongy and punk / as a hunk of sodden wood" and "a precious pair of tusks" compared to "a god's set of handlebars / with no vehicle to steer" (*Unearthed*). These Anthropocene unburials elicit an uncanny tension between familiar and strange, further embodied in the image of a dog who "barks as if she's home, / her echo harkening back from barren cliffs – / bleakness, a hellish grey void" (*Theme Song*), a scene that contrasts the dog's familiar presence with a desolate setting, amplifying the sense of disorientation. The recurring image of the scientist, caught between a desire for knowledge and helplessness in the face of environmental catastrophes, serves as an embedded witness implicated in the unfolding of events ("the scientist cannot fathom the cold cogitations of reptilian deep" *Snake*). Similar to the previous contribution, vivid natural metaphors play a crucial role, especially the depiction of the river as a snake "swallowing its own tale," where the wordplay between *tail* and *tale* intertwines the physical act of swallowing with the consumption of histories, linking the inevitability of collapse and the potential for renewal.

Building on this imagery, Alan Arias Diosdado (Universidad de Guanajuato, Mexico) combines poetry and photography to offer a multifaceted perspective on the sublime nature of urban parks. At its core, this work is about mourning. The tone is melancholic and nostalgic, expressing sorrow over the loss of original forests in the name of landscape domestication and the ongoing destruction of habitats under the guise of modernization. Through a series of imperative statements, the author explores the paradox of the curated design of parks, "rodeados del romántico misticismo" (surrounded by romantic mysticism), alongside the transformation of nature into what he calls "museísticos espacios de naturaleza muerta" (museum-like spaces of still life), a metaphor that conveys a sense of isolation and artificiality tied to a lack of vibrancy. The three black-and-white photographs that accompany the poem aim to capture the statuary presence of tree stumps juxtaposed to streetlights that rise like skyscrapers, making their way through the branches of urban trees. These images, along with the poem, act as a sort of cautionary tale urging reflection on the consequences of urbanization and deforestation. This contribution also raises vital questions about multispecies coexistence: can we form a deeper connection with the Land and halt the relentless commodification of nature? Can multispecies communities thrive without erasing local histories? Ultimately, the artist calls for the protection of Indigenous trees and the mindful stewardship of biodiversity.

Closing the arts section of this issue is a photographic essay by cultural ecologist and psychoanthropologist Alessandro Balzaretti, who once again weaves

together visual and textual elements to explore the psychosomatic experience of liminal landscapes: the sublime space between here and there. Engaging with Kantian and Post-Kantian aesthetic theory, Balzaretti introduces the notion of "spazi obbligati" (compulsory spaces), that is landscapes one must traverse out of necessity or obligation, such as those encountered during daily commuting. Through the interplay of *passaggio*/*paesaggio* (transition and landscape) the author redefines the social and cultural value of these often overlooked environments, which may seem bare or neglected but are in fact teeming with life. Balzaretti poignantly highlights the diverse forms of multispecies coexistence that enliven these marginal spaces: humans, other mammals, plants, fungi, mold, and insects are here united in ecosystems ("umani, altri mammiferi, piante, funghi, muffe e insetti sono qui uniti in ecosistemi"); fishes travel beneath the waves created by cruise ships and ferries ("sotto le onde create dalle crociere e dai traghetti"); weeds grow out of the cracks of sidewalks ("erbe solitarie fioriscono dai bordi del marciapiede"). As Cal Flyn would argue, these are not abandoned islands (2021). Through his photographs of the outskirts of Milan, mostly taken from a train window, Balzaretti captures the elusive nature of these spaces from the perspective of those passing through them, constrained by the frenetic pace of contemporary capitalist life. By freezing these fleeting moments, he invites viewers to reconsider the architectural and emotional significance of these spaces. Through his kinesthetic and phenomenological approach, Balzaretti generates new networks of meaning and multiple perspectives, thereby reconfiguring the viewer's relationship to the observed landscapes and their ontological essence.

While Balzaretti's exploration of overlooked yet familiar landscapes invites us to reconsider the significance of these spaces through a multispecies lens, Trevor Paglen's photographic practice, exemplified by the image featured on the cover of this special issue, takes us into hidden territories that force us to confront the surveillance apparatus embedded within the natural world. Trained as a geographer, Paglen is renowned for investigating covert infrastructures, particularly those tied to the military-industrial complex. The cover image, *They Watch the Moon* (2010), resists easy interpretation and, as such, evokes a sense of alienation, perplexity, curiosity, and unease. What may initially appear as a verdant setting of trees, buildings, and lights, gradually reveals itself as a site of secret observation. Using high-powered telescopic lenses designed for astronomical scopes, Paglen draws attention to layers of concealment and power within the landscape. His long-exposure photograph captures a classified NSA listening station in the forests of West Virginia, a restricted area where communications are intercepted, sent to the moon, and reflected back to Earth. The eerie quality of the photograph, distorted by atmospheric haze, blurs the boundaries between technology and nature, while heightening the tension between familiar and unknown, which stirs the sublime discomfort of confronting spaces that are both concealed and yet central to the maintenance of contemporary power structures. As Suneel Meehmi notes, "From within nature, they contemplate nature and the natural. But they contemplate nature only to understand humankind" (2016),

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emphasizing the anthropocentric mindset that shapes the dominant approach to engaging with nature in the Anthropocene. In Paglen's work, nature is revealed as a tool, a reflective surface for understanding and controlling humanity itself, thus prompting questions about how to ethically relate to more-than-human worlds in an age of mass surveillance.

The pluralized sublime presented in the creative writing and arts section underscores an urgency that challenges traditional notions of the sublime. These contributions offer original modes of representation and narration expressed as bodies of evidence that reject passive observation. Instead, they create a space for ethical questioning and direct confrontation with the violence of colonial extraction and militarism inherent to contemporary times. While the Anthropocene may not be the end of the world, as suggested by Alfredo Jaar, it undeniably marks a point of no return. As we continue to seek ways to articulate the sublime nuances of the Anthropocene, the imaginative paths forged by the contributors of this issue offer valuable frameworks for navigating its socioecological and ethical challenges.

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