Editorial *Ecozon@* 17.2 2026
"Eco-Crip Cultures: Disability and the Environment"

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Literature, culture and environment, the broad subjects of *Ecozon@*, are terms that have increasingly become sites of debate regarding their singular status, that is, the effect of using them in the all-encompassing, abstract singular that some might think of as 'merely' grammatical. However, while the intention of speaking of literature, culture and environment—perhaps more prominently even, of the human– in the singular might suggest not only unity and connectedness, but also exclusivity. For at least two decades, the discussion of the effects of a concept such as "the Anthropocene" (another significant singular) has directed attention to humans as a collective agent. As Dipesh Chakrabarty points out in his seminal essay "The Climate of History" (2009): "To call human beings geological agents is to scale up our imagination of the human" (206). This process of scaling is intriguing in many ways. It allows for the kind of "species thinking" in which Chakrabarty is interested and which recognizes that agency emerges from collective actions at a level where individuals are mostly unaware. But as ecocritic Timothy Clark has shown, this view probes the limits of historical imagination (Chakrabarty 2009, 2020) but also challenges the very foundation of literary analysis and criticism. Clark's concept of "scale framing" (2015, 97), later developed into "scale reading," suggests that literary critics in general, and ecocritics in particular, would do well to take the planetary perspectives into account and develop reading frames that are able to account for the different scales on which humans act as agents: the personal, the national and the planetary. All different scales yield different readings of the same story, yet even on the scale of the personal, individual, "the human" appears as if it were uniform. The, as Clark aptly calls it, "critically naïve" (99) assumption that readers know and understand the personal level is not as innocent as it might appear in its heuristic use. Rather, ecocritics and environmental humanists such as Ursula Heise, Rob Nixon, Stacy Alaimo, to name but a few, have pointed out that scaling brings with it a tendency to equalize what is not equal and, thus, distribute not only agency between

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the human and more-than-human, but also runs the risk of misattributing or outright negating responsibility. While it is not necessarily a result of bad faith to do so, it is a critical junction for the study of "literature, culture and environment" in a broader humanist/humanities context. As Chakrabarty has summarized with regard to historiography: "All disciplines have to create their objects of study. If medicine or biology reduces the human to a certain specific understanding of him or her, humanist historians often do not realize that the protagonists of their stories—persons—are reductions, too. Absent personhood, there is no human subject of history" (215).

To assume "the human" as a singular and, consequently, literature, culture and environment, in singular form, thus, produces a certainty that amounts, thinking with Roland Barthes, to a myth of 'humanity' that rejects the very possibility of challenging its validity and uniformity. To put it bluntly, what happens if human (singular) and environment are not only opposed, but that thinking in terms of the singular can not only evoke a lack of connection and complexity, but also an active ignorance of the diverse beings who are part of both and have a right to take part in both? Holding on to and promoting plurality and diversity, then, is a task and a challenge that affects all disciplines concerned with environments and particularly calls on literary, cultural and ecocritical thinkers, because it adds to the necessary skill of scale reading the equally necessary ethics of questioning one's own assumptions about access, equality and justice. Current scholarship reflects these goals by exploring the diversity of human and more-than-human bodies and relationships and challenging notions of health as a goal or condition for care and protection.

While scaling to the planetary and thinking in the abstract remain central for our work, we need not forget the conditions which allow us to imagine ourselves able to leave the ground and/or access all kinds of environments at will. Questioning one's own position of writing and thinking, challenging notions of ability and wholeness while attempting to work towards livable worlds, requires careful balancing, cautious communication and also acts of decisive dissent against harmful notions of homogeneity and singular ideas of humanity, not least because the protection and celebration of difference is the hallmark of anti-fascist environmentalism.

Doing away with assumed certainties of homogeneity of "the human," culture and environment, whether in singular or plural, the guest editors of *Ecozon*@'s 2026 fall issue's special-focus section "Eco-Crip Cultures: Disability and the Environment," Shanna Lino (York University, Canada) and Maryanne L. Leone (Assumption University, USA) aim to explore the intersection of disability and ecology. Reclaiming the derogatory "crip," crip theory, the editors point out in their call for papers, engages and "deepens the critique of homogenization to defiantly salvage and resituate the derogatory term that it reappropriates. The merger of crip theory with ecocriticism expands the assertion of the material intersectionality of race, gender, and sexuality to also engage with ecology, thus exploring the potential for mutually beneficial existences of disabled bodies and communities with the natural environment."

The seven contributions of the special-focus section bring together ecological thinking and disability on different scales, in different linguistic and historical contexts and take care to bring together the highly specific with broader environmental pictures. Angela Conzo, University of Salento, Italy, opens the section with a consideration of "Bodily Disability and Ecological Disaster" through a reading of Christa Wolf's *Störfall* (Disaster) (1987) in which the generic hybridity of the text becomes a means for critiquing cultural norms that, in the face of environmental disaster, increase the harm of environmental disaster. Conzo argues "that *Störfall* articulates a temporality of crip latency—a suspended time in which futures are uncertain, and bodies remain exposed to delayed, invisible harm" and thereby calls for an "embrace of the crip body" and an "ethics of fragility" in and through which it becomes possible to extend care to and beyond the human in all its forms. In "Floating at the Edge: Eco-Crip Perspectives on Disability and Nature in Muhammad Makhzangi's 'He Was Chasing a Butterfly in the Sea'," Mila Fantinelli, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Italy, explores a "rare example" of eco-crip literature in Arabic and finds in it a "model of disability that is neither tragic nor inspirational but ecological: a record of environmental force, a recalibration of perception, a critique of autonomy, and a form of knowledge." Where the body becomes a medium for environmental traces, connections abound in ways that defy and complicate Eurocentric assumptions about disability as well as environments. Protichi Chatterjee, Jawaharlal Nehru University, India, makes "a case for a neurodivergent gaze" by investigating possibilities of "Co-Composing with Laura Aguilar's 'Nature Self-Portrait'" series. Moving away from normative and discriminating ways of seeing and experiencing more-than-human worlds and ecological textures, the artist achieves a mode of communicating with nonhuman others that is affective rather than linguistic. This form of engagement, Chatterjee shows, has the potential to displace the phantasm of a "neurotypical human" from the center of meaning-making. In "Cripping the Post-Disaster Cityscape," Lisa Cristea, TU Braunschweig, Germany, compares mutual human and more-than-human vulnerabilities in two Indian novels by Veena Nagpal and Indra Sinha. Building on Stacy Alaimo's call for "cripping environmental studies" and adding "multispecies perspectives" to Disability Studies, Cristea explores post-disaster cityscapes as both "disabled 'environment[s]' due to its trans-corporeal enmeshment with toxic matter, but it also functions as a disabling 'space' for human bodies." By attributing the emergence of both environments and (human) bodies as disabled as "a result of neocolonial and neoliberal notions of 'development'," the novels and their reading in this contribution serve as important steps in decolonizing Disability Studies and in reconsidering environmental ethics in light of social, political, ecological and bodily diversity.

Employing what is both metaphor and material reality, "Breathing through Catastrophe," Somak Mukherjee, University of Manchester, UK, investigates the role of respiratory illness in Sarah Crossan's young adult dystopian novels *Breathe* and *Resist.* In dialogue with a wide range of scholars, this contribution asks how what philosopher Peter Sloterdijk has elsewhere called "the assumption of breathability,"

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causes breathing to emerge as "a counter-practice grounded in shared vulnerability, precarity, and interspecies interdependence." Being forced to understand breathing as precarious and collective fundamentally changes how lives can be lived and what assumptions about livability can be made. Focusing on oil exploitation in the Niger Delta, Khawla Bendjemil, University of 8 May 1945-Guelma, Algeria, investigates in her contribution "Debilitating Ecologies: Eco-Crip Resistance in Saro-Wiwa's *A Month and a Day* and Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*" both paradoxes of resistance and care-practices in toxic spaces. Following the notion of toxicity and toxic pollution and disability as systemic harm from "slow violence" (Jasbir Puar via Rob Nixon), Bendjemil connects fictional and real-life activism in all its complexity. Concluding the themed section, Christian Hummelsund Voie, University of South-Eastern Norway, Norway, asks whether there is such a thing as "Crip Nature Writing?" and investigates the ableist bias and the "corporeal unconscious" of nature writing, respectively. Reading Elisabeth Tova Bailey's *The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating*, Hummelsund Voie points out how "Bailey's bedside becomes a site of profound genre-innovation and reappraisal of ecological values." This reconsideration is essential in a context where gendered and ableist notions of "wild nature" still abound.

The general section of this Fall 2026 issue of *Ecozon@* connects in many ways to the topics raised in the themed section's eco-crip focus, particularly the necessary broadening of perception and alternative insights afforded by thinking on an individual scale of bodily and ecological diversity. The general section offers an especially rich array of studies on generic, geographical, linguistic, ecological and perspectival questions with six articles in English, ranging from the rhetorical and narratological analysis of writing styles to different genres, forms of activism and being (non-)human and methods of investigating and representing environmental knowledge and critique in scholarship and popular media.

Diving into the practices of noticing more-than-human nature and presenting them convincingly to a (mostly) human audience, Fredrik Appel Olsen, University of Copenhagen, Denmark, analyses Rachel Carson's "superb use of parataxis" in his article "Environmental Parataxis. Writing Hyperabject Patterns of Death in the Web of Life in Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring.*" In this fine-grained investigation, Olsen not only demonstrates both the rhetorical prowess as well as the pitfalls of a seductive writing style and its elements. Critiquing Carson's tendency to overlook "the inequality and injustice of this distribution of toxic waste," Olsen formulates a pointed call for (future) science communicators and writers: "The task of the writer employing the environmental parataxis to write about the PFAS crisis, then, is to compose and amplify a pattern of death in the web of life to overwhelm the reader and inspire action, while avoiding representing this web as encompassing all equally."

Nandita Ghosh, Fairleigh Dickinson University, USA, also looks for streams and flows, paying special attention to their distribution in "Hydropolitics, Colonization, and Frontiers: Reading Dystopian Landscapes in Hawai'i and India." Through a comparative approach, Ghosh connects Hawai'i and India as geographically and environmentally specific sites through poetry and theatre as a means of engaging the

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imperialist practices of hydropolitics as well as the local activism against these forms of injustice. Conceptualizing writing as a form of activism, Ghosh interweaves literatures, cultures and environments in a decidedly pluralistic way.

Going beyond generic difference, Amélie Aubert-Noël, Université de Lille, France, looks at metamorphoses of the human form itself. In a reading of two Italian novels, Aubert-Noël explores "Metamorphosis Towards Human-Vegetal Hybrids, From Utopia to Dystopia and Back," clearly demonstrating how the figure of the plant-human hybrid is not in itself subversive, but rather that its subversive status depends on the (ideological) context of the text in which it appears. This is far from self-evident, and Aubert-Noël insightfully shows how harmful preconceived notions of subversion (however well-meaning) can be, because they miss important aspects and opportunities of critique.

In "The Art of Change: Decolonization and Gendered Indigenous Environmental Artivism in Works by Elle-Máijá Tailfeathers and Ann-Helén Laestadius," Juliane Egerer, University of Augsburg, Germany, turns the attention towards Indigenous knowledges as they emerge and form filmic and literary works. The gendered perspective on activism that Egerer employs makes apparent how activism and art intersect with place-and person-specific knowledge-making practices that are essential parts of human/more-than-human relationships and the ways in which they affect minority and Indigenous environmental justice.

A methodological question lies at the heart of the collectively authored article "Sensoriographic Sensibilities: Immersing, Recording, and Storying the Senses in Multispecies Worlds" by Maya Hey, KTH Royal Institute of Technology, Sweden; L. Sasha Gora, University of Augsburg, Germany; Sevgi Mutlu Sirakova, LMU Munich, Rachel Carson Center, Germany; Philine Schiller, University of Augsburg, Germany; Lena M. Schlegel, Albert Ludwig University of Freiburg, Germany; and Penelope Volinia, University of Augsburg, Germany. The authors develop strategies to realize an often-called-for practice, namely the integration of "multisensory methods to know other earthly beings." Building on feminist thinkers who already are engaged in the practice and ethos of decentering humans, the author-collective works out the concept of "sensoriographic sensibilities" accompanied by "recursive writing" in a both impressively practical and conceptually sound piece that balances the multiple "tensions between sensing the world and writing its complexities."

Concluding the general section, Massih Zekavat, University of Groningen, The Netherlands, offers an analysis of the role that the mode of satire can play in contemporary environmental discourse. In "*Rumours* and Realities: Employing Satire to Navigate the Blah Blah Blah of Neoliberal Environmental Politics" Zekavat offers a thoughtful interpretation of the 2024 film *Rumours* and its satirical rendition of world (climate) politics. With a careful focus on the paradoxes of a film that must necessarily navigate being part of the very capitalist system it critiques, this contribution offers a perspective that productively meshes with the multiperspectival and diverse approach of the current issue of *Ecozon@.* That is, satirizing alone might not be

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enough when it does not make room for "nuanced and inclusive dialogue[s] on environmental and multispecies justice and emancipatory worlding."

The Creative Writing and Arts section of *Ecozon@* vol. 17.2 begins with editor Eli Tavella's powerful musings on the specificity of experience and artistic communication. Tavella invokes humming via artist Mel Bagg's video "In My Language" (2007), and follows then their own perception of the piece to question meaning-making practices beyond the heteronormative and homogenizing of experience in favor of a multispecies sensorium that allows for both specificity and connectivity to emerge from relationships among humans and more-than-human beings. Engaging with the theme of the volume, the creative writing and arts section features contributions that negotiate and engage with the challenges and promises of daring to engage with disability ecologically and with ecologies through crip theory or, as Tavella puts it: "Across poetry, experimental nonfiction, autotheory, speculative fiction, visual art, installation, photography, and multimedia practice, the common thread lies in cultivating situated relations with agential beings whose singular histories resist abstraction, and in practicing care-full attentiveness as an ethical stance grounded in specificity and a commitment to collective flourishing. *This* river, not *a* river. *This* beetle, not *a* beetle."

Naomi Ortiz, Author, Poet and Visual Artist, observes the desert (and the inability of their camera to capture its brilliance) from a wheelchair-accessible concrete table in "#LifeIsForLiving," challenging the seemingly easy way of predicting collapse instead of observing and being part of lives lived. Ortiz, thus, creates a strongly challenging notion of being *there* that defies nature writing conventions as well as ableist views of encounter and value. The visual essay from Petra Kuppers, University of Michigan, USA, "'Disable the River': Eco Soma Methods of Painting and AI Surrealism" explores "Crip Drifts [as] methods for moving through the world as a disabled artist living with pain." In direct dialogue with AI, Kuppers explores what it means to disable a river, a view, and the complex implications of collaborating with a potentially harmful technology. Yet, side by side, the images evoke powerful disagreements as well as a collaboration that, in its uncanniness, catches the eye and invites its viewer into the "in-between."

Rejecting restorative fantasies in "Fake Lake Intimacies," Stephanie Heit, Independent Artist, USA, seeks solidarity between broken worlds and bodies. From the generative friction of "mad ecopoetics" emerge ways of adapting and reading worlds and ecological connection as continuous processes of adaptation. Gaelle Chassery, Sensory Artist, Writer and Advocate, Scotland, presents an entangling of texts and sensory installation in "Mapping, Tending and Bridging the Environments of Chronic Illness: Inner, Outer and In-Between," and explores the intersections of chronic illness, multispecies companionship and sensory art. She thereby puts into question the ableist assumptions underlying concepts of sustainability as well as creativity and collaboration:

> Disabled autistic creativity is often misread as solitary, private, or inaccessible because institutions recognise community mainly through visible participation. My

> practice shows another model: community made through attention, materials, ecosystems, sensory access, and the visitor's embodied encounter. But for this kind of creativity to enter public spaces, institutions must understand access as infrastructure, not rhetoric. Connection does not always require physical presence.

Paying tribute to nature, our ecological realm, as Chassery writes, is a way of connecting that does, indeed, forego physical presence and might thereby offer relief to environments under stress from humans, who, though they love it, overstretch its capacity to yield (like the lake in Heit's piece) or to give even more.

Alex Dolores Salerno, Independent Artist, USA, forms and follows chains of coffee beans materially and metaphorically. Asking about the supply chains and growing conditions, Salerno connects with coffee in a way that leads to a call for a "Eco-Crip revolution, or in other words, the refusal to abandon." Instead of abandoning, Salerno embraces connections in their paradoxical closeness and distance: "As a consumer, the utmost transparency around how coffee is processed after it's harvested does not alleviate my concerns around how it is grown, and these concerns are not disconnected from my chronically ill life or my transness. My bodymind is nature itself, as is yours."

Sarah Hopfinger, Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, UK, offers a contribution enacting a struggle with expectations and a refusal of productivity; it questions ways of moving through the world through an encounter with a beetle. An everyday possibility, seemingly mundane, this encounter offers, however, a significant change of perspective and, importantly, joy.

Lena M. Schlegel, Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg, Germany, offers a poem related to the co-written essay on sensoriography, "Thinking with Leaves: Poetic Resonances with Nocturnal Creatures." It listens to the stories that leaves tell and shares her work on the sensoriography team (see Hey et al.) in a deeply wondrous language that both celebrates the gliders and mourns the "double death" (Deborah Bird Rose) of ash forests. Yet "all is not lost while there is still 'shimmer'," Schlegel reminds us, and attending to the tension between loss and hope yields not only poetry but room to grow for plants and people.

In "All Day, Waiting for Another Sun to Rise," Molly Wickett, Artist, UK, presents and discusses her sculptures that evoke disruptions of normative temporal orders "through forged fungal forms, oxidized surfaces, gravity, texture, scale, and the bodily experience of moving through the installation." By confusing time scales and creating a space that allows for a "multisensory encounter with a world 'that continues after what should have been a world-ending event'," Wickett points out how the present holds the future without determining it. Closing the section is the short story by Lorraine Boissoneault, Freelance Writer, USA, "The Lake Erie Sisters," which portrays an encounter with a monster embodying the connection, exchange and hurt between humans and the lake out of which it emerges. As Tavella writes in the arts introduction: "Cure here acts by moving the lake's harm into the bodies of those who

seek repair, thus exposing the promise of a return to wholeness as a redistribution of burden. By unsettling distinctions between harmless and harmful, native and non-native, ordinary and monstrous, the story exchanges restoration for newly negotiated forms of kinship and interdependence."

The volume concludes with four book reviews, one in Spanish, one in German, and two in English. José Manuel Marrero Henríquez, Universidad de las Palmas de Gran Canaria, España, reviews the edited volume on petro-cultures by Manuel Silva-Ferrer, *Paisajes del subsuelo. Mapas y pliegues de las culturas del petróleo en la Venezuela del siglo XX*, (De Gruyter 2026), 407 pp. The second review also addresses petro-cultures: Philipp Sperner, Universität Wien, Austria, reviews the edited volume by Antonia Villinger, Universität Wien, Austria, *Fossile Fiktionen: Kohle als Energiequelle in der Literatur von 1850 bis zur Gegenwart*. The third review is by Paul Cockburn, Durham University, United Kingdom, and it discusses the climate book by Johan Höglund, *The American Climate Emergency Narrative: Origins, Developments and Imaginary Futures* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), 214 pp. The final contribution is by Faezeh Mohajeri, The State University of New York at Albany, USA, who reviews Stacy Alaimo's new blue humanities book, *The Abyss Stares Back: Encounters with Deep-Sea Life* (University of Minnesota Press, 2025), ix+256 pp.

Keeping in spirit with the changes of perspective throughout this volume, *Ecozon@* is a site of change as well. After six years of invaluable work for the journal, Heather I. Sullivan will move on to other endeavors and we thank her from the bottom of our hearts for her service and keeping up with the growing number of contributions and ensuring the quality of a journal that is committed to collaboration, ecologies beyond the human and, above all, to connection. Thank you, Heather, for keeping this spirit alive and sharing the joy of our work!

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Eco-Crip Cultures: Disability and the Environment
An Introduction

Cripping Solastalgia:
Cultural Responses to Bodily and Planetary Disability

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Eco-crip cultural engagement is urgent. It forms an integral part of a broader resistance to what ecofeminists and documentarians Naomi Klein and Astra Taylor have termed "supremacist survivalism" ("The Rise of End Times Fascism"). In their 2026 book, *End Times Fascism: And the Fight for the Living Word*, the social activists argue that, currently, an apocalyptic alliance of religious fundamentalists, Silicon Valley technologists, and ethno-nationalists are intentionally bringing about a planetary demise, striving to make the world unlivable while seeking to protect themselves from the fallout, whether on Mars or in bunkers. While "they are choosing to let the Earth burn," say Klein and Taylor, "[o]ur task is to build a wide and deep movement, as spiritual as it is political, strong enough to stop these unhinged traitors. A movement rooted in a steadfast commitment to one another, across our many differences and divides, and to this miraculous, singular planet" ("The Rise of End Times Fascism"). "Eco-Crip Cultures: Disability and the Environment" responds to that call with essays that dismantle fantasies of autonomy and technological mastery, centre more-than-human attunement and interspecies care practices, and elucidate fragility, impairment, and dependence as ethical resources that displace hyper-capitalist delusions of strength, immunity, fitness, and progress, and that are, therefore, more aptly poised to counter the genocidal and treasonous values that seek to bring about the Holocene extinction.

This special focus of *Ecozon@: European Journal of Literature, Culture and Environment* explores the intersection of ecology and disability by recognizing the materiality of both human and more-than-human bodies and by considering the possibilities afforded by eco-crip theory: first, to examine the marginalizing cultures of normalization, ableism, and speciesism; and second, to positively value wide-

ranging understandings, experiences, and contexts of embodied disability and environment. The literary, photographic, and critical texts showcased in "Eco-Crip Cultures" interrogate culturally situated power structures that devalue sentient and non-sentient beings and that cement exploitation through institutionalized, pathologized systems. Whereas nonhuman tropes have long been employed to derogate people with disabilities, the essays here comprised deploy critical strategies from the fields of disability studies and the environmental humanities that together argue for non-hierarchical appraisals of differing abilities and of embodiment along with affirmations of interdependence. Crip theory deepens critiques of homogenization, defiantly salvaging and resituating the derogatory term that it reappropriates. Its merger with ecocriticism expands the material intersectionality of race, gender, and sexuality to likewise engage ecology. Thus, eco-crip cultural criticism explores the potential for symbiotic existences of disabled bodies and communities with the nonhuman natural environment and, in so doing, defies erasure by those seeking Armageddon.

"Eco-Crip Cultures: Disability and the Environment" moves beyond treating the environment as a setting for disabled characters or disability as a metaphor for ecological degradation, instead investigating the processes through which bodily and ecological conditions become mutually constitutive. The essays in this special focus vary significantly in their generic and geographic orientation, studying from an eco-crip lens East-German diary and reportage, contemporary American nature writing, Egyptian Arabic short fiction, Chicana photography, Irish dystopian young-adult literature, Indian post-disaster narrative, and Nigerian memoir and novel. The articles expound the intricate connection between environmental damage and disabled bodies through analyses of eco-crip manifestations that intersect with various subdisciplines, including post-disaster studies, cli-fi, queer and Latinx studies, postcolonial studies, and animal studies.

Contributors to the special focus consider, for example, how eco-theorists Stacy Alaimo's trans-corporeality, Karen Barad's relational ontology, and Donna Haraway's multispecies ethics shed light on literary and photographic representations of the material entanglement of human bodies with oil and nuclear pollutants, aquatic and terrestrial landscapes, wild and domesticated animals, as well as industrial, economic, and sociopolitical infrastructure. Through Rob Nixon's slow violence and Jasbir Puar's debility framework, the studies illuminate how more-than-human enmeshments are structured by racial capitalism, colonial histories, and unequal distributions of environmental risk in order to articulate how toxic exposure, chronic illness, respiratory impairment, and other consequences of ecological degradation occur more often incrementally than they do through a single spectacular event, and are not individual manifestations of contamination, but part of a broader organization of vulnerability. Essential to the theoretical positioning of "Eco-Crip Cultures" is the work of critic, painter, and disability rights activist Sunaura Taylor—sister to Astra—whose groundbreaking *Disabled Ecologies: Lessons from a Wounded Desert* (2024) provides a model for analyzing how damaged ecosystems and

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impaired human and nonhuman bodies emerge through shared histories of contamination and exploitation. Taylor's book offers a case study of industrial and military-related pollution in Tucson, Arizona, particularly the contamination of the aquifer beneath the city's predominantly Mexican American Southside, and argues that disability justice and environmental justice must be pursued together. Taylor builds on Alison Kafer's foundational *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (2013) to conclude that care must be understood as a sustained collective responsibility, not simply as individual rehabilitation or environmental restoration. For ecocritics who may be new to contemplating the ways in which their environmental humanities research intersects with disability, Taylor's work shows that knowledge-making and activism in this field offers valuable lessons about adaptation, interdependence, and mutual assistance that are key to engaging with ecologically embedded cultural production. Conversely, critical disability scholars considering the incorporation of ecological perspectives into their studies will enrich their understanding of disability as they consider jointly the environmental conditions and the political structures that distribute exposure, vulnerability, and access to care.

Woven throughout the special focus is the imperative of a spatiotemporal reconceptualization that allows us to grapple with our collective disability and debility, caused by and experienced through ecological crisis. We refer to this notion as an eco-crip timespace and, from within it, we acknowledge that our paradoxical existence requires both urgent (climate) action and a (crip) slowing down. Spatially, we are faced with another apparent contradiction. We have been tasked with apprehending the very localized experience of environmental disability, that which is felt in our bodies, lakes, and forests, while simultaneously responding to injuring forces that are produced on a planetary scale. If Timothy Morton's hyperobject describes phenomena so spatially and temporally vast that they cannot be apprehended as complete, bounded objects within ordinary human experience, a cripped hyperobject necessarily becomes bodily in its manifestation. To think through the spatial articulation of disability and ecology is to recognize the body as a site where planetary processes become intimate. In an eco-crip epistemology, dominant accounts of environmental knowledge that frequently privilege large-scale measurements, aggregate data, and abstract representations of planetary change are accompanied by an attunement to the palpable ways in which ecological transformations are registered in everyday life and on disabled bodies. Cripping nonlocality means holding both scales together. It means respecting embodied knowledge while tracing the political, economic, and ecological relations that catalyze our individual experiences.

It is within this eco-crip timespace, that eco-anxiety gives way to solastalgia. Emotional responses to present-day planetary conditions are no longer adequately captured by eco-anxiety, the anticipatory distress about future ecological harm. Solastalgia, the anguish of a very present environmental degradation and dislocation, has taken hold. Eco-crip perspectives invite us to reimagine temporal frameworks that are more attentive to inhabiting disabled bodies and a disabled planet, and to

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shifting from futurities measured by progress, resilience, and recovery and which presume uniform bodily capacities, linear development, or the inevitable restoration of supposedly healthy bodies and environments, to a presentness that attends to the lived, embodied, and affective experience of our collective now. Kafer's crip time denotes the zigzagging, flexible, and irregular pace of time governed by disability, and her notion of crip futurity challenges assumptions about which bodies and minds are imagined to belong in the future. Here lies a call for us to attune to a crip present, one that counters the ableist, supremacist forces destroying our planet while planning for the salvation of a select few.

This special focus attends to such a crip present. Its seven articles model the value of reading disability and ecology together to contest the structures that generate environmental degradation and debility, while imagining alternative forms of interdependence, accessibility, care, multispecies solidarity, and collective survival. Their work elucidates counter-narratives that, for example, turn bed-ridden nature writing into a method for accessing a domestic wildness; that see fragility not as a lack, but as a way of inhabiting damaged worlds and bodies; that celebrate the heroism of embracing human-(non)human dependence rather than climbing the highest summit or overcoming illness; and that respond to the ableist assumption that one can control one's own health with eco-crip proposals that find power in vulnerability and agency in dependence.

With "Bodily Disability and Ecological Disaster: Eco-Crip Reflections in Christa Wolf's *Störfall*," Angela Conzo provides an eco-crip reading of the post-Chornobyl novel in which the act of witnessing affirms interdependence and ethics of care is not understood as the technical repair of a malfunction, but as a practice of attention and responsibility toward the (non-)human other. In "Crip Nature Writing? Domestic Wildness in Elisabeth Tova Bailey's *The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating*," Christian Hummelsund Voie proposes the subversive concept of a crip nature writing that is inclusive of underrepresented places and perspectives, while Mila Fantinelli's "Floating at the Edge: Eco-Crip Perspectives on Disability and Nature in Muhammad Makhzangi's 'He Was Chasing a Butterfly in the Sea'" analyses interspecies care in response to the impulse to dominate nature. Protichi Chatterjee's article, "Co-composing with Laura Aguilar's *Nature Self-Portrait* Series: A Case for a Neurodivergent Gaze," deploys ecosomatic and enactive paradigms to elucidate the entanglement of our affective, somatic, and cognitive constitution with our surroundings, as well as the potential of a neurodivergent gaze to participate in eco-crip co-composition. Somak Mukherjee's "Breathing through Catastrophe: Respiratory Disability in Sarah Crossan's Fiction" critiques the systematic conversion of ecological crisis into a logic of atmospheric infrastructure and bodily incapacitation through the production and control of respiratory dependency. With "Cripping the Eco-Disaster: Imagining Disability Ecologies in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* and Veena Nagpal's *Radius 200*," Lisa Cristea identifies material-discursive entanglements in disaster-ridden environments in two novels that contribute to the production of knowledge about specific disability experiences in the Global South. Finally, Khawla

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Bendjemil's essay "Debilitating Ecologies: Eco-Crip Resistance in Saro-Wiwa's *A Month and a Day* and Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*" critiques the ableist and extractive norms perpetuated by oil companies and state complicity, situating the Niger Delta's struggle within broader African environmental justice discourses.

A note about process: it was non-negotiable for us as guest editors of this special focus of *Ecozon@* that the preparation of "Eco-Crip Cultures: Disability and the Environment" follow an eco-crip scholarly praxis. Not only do the seven articles analyze literary and photographic texts that practice an ecological engagement with disability, in several cases, the primary sources are the compositions of disabled artists. "Eco-Crip Cultures" also consciously makes space for articles written by disabled scholars, each of whom discloses to varying degrees the ways in which their disabilities inform their critical readings. Finally, the peer review process sought the participation of disabled critics, intentionally cultivating room for dialogue about critical disability that values and is informed by lived experience. Thus, and inspired by Sunaura Taylor's own scholarly praxis, this special focus aims to contemplate ecological disability and disabled ecologies by foregrounding not only eco-crip art and theory, but also method.

In normative ableist discourse, disability is construed as a deviation, an anomalous body ill-equipped to navigate an environment that is imagined or built with ablebodiedness in mind. However, when an environment is purposefully disabled, when the political and economic order manufactures dependency to access water or air, then disability is no longer an anomaly but an intended yield. Manufactured disability, like manufactured environmental collapse, require the type of collective eco-crip resistance that essayists of this special focus examine. Given the apocalyptic authoritarianism that Klein and A. Taylor have identified, "Eco-Crip Cultures: Disability and the Environment" takes seriously the political stakes of representing ecological crisis and of determining whose survival matters. The interdisciplinary framework of the special focus builds on the well-documented notions that ecological damage is experienced unevenly and that disability is shaped by material environments and sociopolitical frameworks. The cultural representations studied by the authors whose essays we gather here help determine how these eco-crip relationships become legible, meaningful, and politically consequential.

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Bodily Disability and Ecological Disaster: Eco-Crip Reflections in Christa Wolf's *Störfall*

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Abstract

This paper proposes a (re)reading of Christa Wolf's *Störfall. Nachrichten eines Tages* (1987) through the lens of eco-crip theory, focusing on how the text juxtaposes bodily illness and ecological disaster to challenge normative conceptions of health, temporality, and resilience. Written in the aftermath of the Chornobyl[1] catastrophe, *Störfall* records a single day in which two *accidents* occurred: the narrator's brother undergoes brain surgery, while radioactive clouds spread across Europe. This temporal coincidence enables Wolf to trace a web of shared vulnerability between human and more-than-human bodies, exposing the porous boundaries between individual suffering and planetary crisis. The narrator's reflections resist both medical normalisation and state-sanctioned technocratic narratives, engaging instead in a form of eco-crip witnessing that affirms interdependence and care. Drawing on disability studies and post-Chornobyl environmental humanities, this paper argues that *Störfall* articulates a temporality of crip latency—a suspended time in which futures are uncertain, and bodies remain exposed to delayed, invisible harm. Wolf's hybrid text, blending diary, reportage, and personal meditation, performs a cultural critique of Western ideals of control, productivity, and bodily integrity. It thus contributes to an eco-crip ethics that values fragility not as lack, but as a condition for alternative ways of inhabiting damaged worlds. In doing so, *Störfall* prefigures twenty-first-century discourses around environmental illness, slow violence, and toxic embodiment.

Keywords: Christa Wolf, Chornobyl, eco-crip theory, crip latency, critical disability studies.

Resumen

Este artículo propone una (re)lectura de *Störfall. Nachrichten eines Tages* (1987) de Christa Wolf desde la perspectiva de la teoría *eco-crip*, centrándose en cómo el texto yuxtapone la enfermedad corporal y el desastre ecológico para cuestionar las concepciones normativas de la salud, la temporalidad y la resiliencia. Escrito inmediatamente después de la catástrofe de Chornobyl, *Störfall* registra un único día en el que se producen dos accidentes: el hermano de la narradora se somete a una operación cerebral, mientras nubes radiactivas se extienden por Europa. Esta coincidencia temporal permite a Wolf trazar una red de vulnerabilidad compartida entre cuerpos humanos y más-que-humanos, poniendo de relieve los límites porosos entre el sufrimiento individual y la crisis planetaria. Las reflexiones de la narradora resisten tanto la normalización médica como los relatos tecnocráticos legitimados por el Estado, y se inscriben, en cambio, en una forma de testimonio eco-crip que afirma la interdependencia y el cuidado. A partir de los estudios de la discapacidad y de las humanidades ambientales posteriores a Chornobyl, este artículo sostiene que *Störfall* articula una temporalidad de latencia *crip*: un tiempo suspendido en el que los futuros permanecen inciertos y los cuerpos quedan expuestos a daños diferidos e invisibles. El texto híbrido de Wolf, que combina diario, reportaje y meditación personal, lleva a cabo una crítica cultural de los ideales occidentales de control, productividad e integridad corporal. De este modo, contribuye a una ética *eco-crip* que valora la fragilidad no como carencia, sino como condición para formas alternativas de habitar mundos

[1] Throughout this article, it will be used the spelling "Chornobyl" rather than "Chernobyl," as the latter is the transliteration from Russian which has become less common in English texts.

dañados. Al hacerlo, *Störfall* anticipa discursos del siglo XXI en torno a la enfermedad ambiental, la violencia lenta y la corporalidad tóxica.

Palabras clave: Christa Wolf, Chornobyl, teoría eco-crip, latencia crip, estudios críticos de la discapacidad.

The Accident and Crip Latency

April 26, 1986, marks an epistemological and ontological rupture in recent European history, a moment—defined by its delayed manifestation—when the invisible manifested itself with unprecedented violence.

In *Störfall. Nachrichten eines Tages* (1987; *Accident: A Day's News*), written between June and September 1986, Christa Wolf does not merely chronicle the macroscopic event of the Chornobyl disaster; rather, she engineers a radical juxtaposition of two seemingly distant scales of destruction, anticipating what Emily Jones defines as the representational challenge of the "hyper-disaster" (94). Drawing upon Timothy Morton's concept, Jones frames Chornobyl as an event operating on the scale of "hyperobjects", which are entities "massively distributed in time and space relative to humans" (93). Consequently, the nuclear catastrophe outstrips anthropocentric scales of understanding and representation, "resisting our comprehension" (93), precisely due to temporalities and geographies that exceed immediate phenomenological experience. While a radioactive plume traverses national borders, ignoring political customs of national sovereignty and ideological demarcations of East and West, the narrator's brother undergoes a delicate operation for a brain tumour. The incipit of Wolf's text immediately establishes an atmosphere for this collision. Before mentioning the specific events, Wolf enacts an epistemological rupture within language itself, rejecting the metaphor of *explosion* for the blooming nature:

> On a day about which I cannot write in the present tense, the cherry trees will have been in blossom. I will have avoided thinking, "exploded", the cherry trees have exploded, although only one year earlier I could not only think but also say it readily, if not entirely with conviction. The green is exploding. Never would such a sentence have been more appropriate in describing the progress of nature than this year, in this spring heat, following the endlessly long winter.[2] (3)[3]

[2] This and all subsequent English quotations from Christa Wolf's text are taken from *Accident: A Day's News,* translated by H. Schwarzbauer and R. Takvorian (1989). Quotations in the original German refer to *Störfall. Nachrichten eines Tages* (1987). The page numbers refer to the respective original German or translated publications.

[3] "Eines Tages, über den ich in der Gegenwartsform nicht schreiben kann, werden die Kirschbäume aufgeblüht gewesen sein. Ich werde vermieden haben, zu denken: "explodiert"; die Kirschbäume sind explodiert, wie ich es noch ein Jahr zuvor, obwohl nicht mehr ganz unwissend, ohne weiteres nicht nur denken, auch sagen konnte. Das Grün explodiert: Nie wäre ein solche Satz dem Naturvorgang angemessener gewesen als dieses Jahr, bei dieser Frühlingshitze nach dem endlos langen Winter" (9).

On the one hand, there is the explosion of reactor four, the apotheosis of technological failure unearthing the nucleus of matter; on the other, the surgical opening of the skull, the necessary violation of bodily integrity to excise a malignancy: "That goal in a very distant future toward which all lines had run till now had been blasted away, was smoldering, along with the fissionable material in a nuclear reactor. A rare case… Seven o' clock. Where you are now, brother, they begin punctually" (4).[4] On this specific day, the *Nachricht* (news) is not singular, but dual and entangled: the body of the Earth and the human body are simultaneously opened, rendered vulnerable, and penetrated by forces that elude immediate sensory control. Wolf constructs her narrative upon this agonising simultaneity, where the bright blue spring sky of Mecklenburg conceals lethal isotopes, and the silence of waiting by the telephone conceals the precariousness of the brother's life: "This immaculate blue sky, this incarnation of purity, where the uneasy glances of millions are meeting today, is lost to you" (19).[5] This parallelism serves as the initial point to dismantle the binary distinction between the external environment and the internal body. In Wolf's reflections, the event of April 26 becomes a point of rapture where biology and technology, the personal and the planetary, collapse into one another. This collapse reveals a truth that modernity had attempted to suppress: the absolute porosity of boundaries.

To fully grasp the magnitude of Wolf's narrative project, it is necessary to situate *Störfall* within the cultural and ideological context of its genesis. The ideology of the GDR at the time was predicated on a teleological narrative of linear progress. As scholars like Julia Hell and Anna Kuhn have noted, the healthy, productive, and hermetic body represented the microcosm of an efficient State (Hell 19-21; Kuhn 9), protected by secure borders; parallel to this, nature was conceived as a resource to be mastered through technology, culminating in nuclear energy as a symbol of autonomy and so-called peaceful power. The very concept of security relied on the illusion of immunity: the notion that the human being could exist as a separate, closed entity, impermeable to unwanted external agents (Klocke 151). Within this framework, Wolf's chosen title, *Störfall*, assumes critical theoretical relevance. In German, the term designates an incident, a technical malfunction, an interruption of regular flow. However, read through the lens of systems theory and cybernetics, the *Störfall* is a *glitch*: an error that not only halts the machine but reveals its internal architecture, exposing its structural fragilities (Kuhn 210). Chornobyl acts as the definitive glitch in the operating system of anthropocentric modernism. It ruptures the narrative of control over nature and, simultaneously, invalidates the rhetoric of bodily integrity. The brother's body under the knife and the citizens' bodies exposed to radiation are no longer sovereign entities, but open bodies, subject to a toxic

[4] "Jenes Ziel in einer sehr fernen Zukunft, auf das sich bis jetzt alle Linien zubewegt hatten, war weggesprengt worden, gemeinsam mit dem spaltbaren Material in einem Reaktorgehäuse ist es dabeigewesen zu verglühen. Ein seltener Fall—Sieben Uhr. Da, Bruder, wo du jetzt bist, fängt man pünktlich an" (10).

[5] "Dieser makellos blaue Himmel entgeht dir, dieses Sinnbild von Reinheit, auf dem sich heute die bangen Blicke von Millionen treffen" (31-32).

interdependence. Writing from the heart of this crisis, Wolf documents the failure of the Promethean promise: the technology meant to liberate humanity (nuclear power) now threatens it with invisible death; the medicine meant to save (surgery) requires an invasive intervention that, while clinically necessary, disrupts bodily integrity and suspends life on a razor's edge. *Störfall* is, therefore, the text that records the moment when the culture of immunity collapses under the weight of its own hybris, giving way to a reality of inevitable contamination.

Reading *Störfall* today requires a theoretical apparatus capable of navigating this complexity without reductionism. Traditional ecocritical readings risk focusing excessively on the external environment, neglecting the somatic and medical dimension of the brother's experience; conversely, a purely biographical or medical reading would miss the structural connection to the ecological disaster. It is here that an eco-crip perspective becomes methodologically advantageous. Eco-crip theory emerges at the intersection of environmental humanities and critical disability studies. While ecocriticism interrogates the relationship between the human and the non-human, and disability studies deconstruct bodily normativity and the ideology of "compulsory able-bodiedness" (McRuer 2), the eco-crip approach fuses these concerns.[6] It allows us to analyse how the categories of natural and healthy have been historically constructed to exclude deviant or vulnerable bodies, and how the ecological crisis produces new forms of disability and shared vulnerability. In the context of *Störfall*, the eco-crip lens offers a particularly interesting approach. Wolf presents a world where the distinction between the able and the disabled body, or between the healthy and the sick body, becomes untenable in the face of the radioactive threat. As suggested by Stacy Alaimo in *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (2010), there is no such thing as a "closed body" in a toxic environment (15). We are all, potentially, crip bodies—impaired, invalidated, vulnerable—before the agency of uncontrollable environmental forces. By utilising this lens, we can read the brother's body not as a tragic exception, but as the materialisation of a universal condition in the Anthropocene: "trans-corporeality" is the recognition that the environment is not merely what surrounds us, but what *crosses* us, *constitutes* us, and, in the case of Chornobyl, *alters* us at the cellular level (Alaimo 2).

Through the application of the eco-crip lens to Wolf's text, the central thesis of this article emerges: *Störfall* is neither a narrative of healing nor an apocalyptic chronicle of immediate end, but rather a phenomenology of latency. I propose to define this state as crip latency. Unlike heroic narratives that anticipate a return to the previous state of health, or tragic narratives culminating in death, Wolf constructs a suspended space-time. Latency is the invisible interval between exposure to harm and the manifestation of the symptom. It is the time during which Cesium-137 settles in the grass and milk, invisible to the eye but lethal in the long term; it is the time

[6] Being crip means occupying a position of non-compliance with rehabilitation regimes that seek to fix bodies to make them productive for capital: "*Crip Theory* comes along to show that another world is possible" (McRuer XI).

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during which the brother lies in the operating room, in a state of unconsciousness, suspended between life and death, with an outcome that will not be immediately clear even upon waking. This phenomenological suspension is grounded in what Barbara Adam calls the "timescape" of hazards, where "time acts as an invisible 'other' working beyond the reach of our senses" (1).[7]

This paper argues that Wolf uses writing to give form to this invisibility. Crip latency is the refusal of narrative closure. In *Störfall*, the damage has already occurred (the reactor has exploded, the tumour has grown), but its consequences are deferred. This concept resonates with the slow violence theorised by Rob Nixon, a violence that occurs out of sight, dispersed across time and space (2). However, Wolf brings this violence inside the domestic and familial sphere. Crip latency challenges the normative temporality of progress: one does not move forward toward improvement, but stays in uncertainty, inhabiting a body and an environment that have been irrevocably altered. It is within this latency that the author unmasks the precarity of the human condition, forcing the reader to look not at the after (resolution), but at the during (exposure).

This study, thus, states that crip latency operates as the supporting structure of *Störfall*, redefining our conceptions of the body, time, and ethics. The first section will analyse how latency unmasks the illusion of immunity. Through an analysis of Wolf's descriptions of contaminated food, and the surgical intervention, it will be shown how the text deconstructs the idea of the hermetic body, proposing instead a subjectivity that is porous and radically exposed. The second section will examine how latency alters the perception of narrative and existential time. It will be highlighted how Wolf contrasts the time of news (frenetic, immediate) with the time of radiation (geological, slow) and the time of illness (suspended), creating a crip temporality that rejects the productive rhythms of industrial society. Finally, in the third section, it will be discussed how this awareness of shared vulnerability and temporal uncertainty establishes a new ethics of care. This care is not understood as the technical repair of a malfunction, but as a practice of attention and responsibility toward the other (human and non-human) precisely in the moment of incurability or waiting. In conclusion, *Störfall* emerges not only as a testimony to a past disaster but as a manual of ethical survival for the ecological present.

Spatial Porosity: Dismantling the Fortress Body

If the concept of crip latency defines the temporal suspension of *Störfall*—time between exposure and symptom—then this latency is ontologically grounded in a specific spatial condition: porosity. The anxiety that permeates Wolf's text arises from

[7] Adam identifies a radical disjuncture between the "Merkwelt" (the world of perception) and the "Wirkwelt" (the world of latent impacts), noting that nuclear hazards are characterised by a temporal gap where causes and symptoms are severed (22). In the case of Chornobyl, she poignantly observes that "the injured of Chernobyl are today, years after the catastrophe, not even all born yet" (36), a reality that underscores the intergenerational magnitude of crip latency.

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the realisation that the modern ideal of the "fortress body" (Nelkin and Andrews 16; Martin 30)—the autonomous, bounded subject, securely separated from its environment—has been rendered obsolete by the material realities of the atomic age.[8] In the Western humanist tradition, and particularly within the hygienic narratives of modernism, health was synonymous with integrity and closure. The healthy body was a sealed vessel, and the environment was an external stage upon which human agency acted. *Störfall* systematically dismantles this topography. The glitch of Chornobyl reveals that spatial safety is an illusion. The danger can't be shut out because the very mechanisms of life—breathing, eating, the cellular exchange of fluids—are the vectors of contamination: "One was supposed to shower the children after they had been outside. Bathing relaxed the skin, opening the pores and washing the radioactivity into the body with a vengeance. Exaggerated? If only one knew" (16).[9] This collapse of the fortress body resonates with Alexis Shotwell's critique of the "metaphysics of purity" (16). Shotwell argues that in an era where beings are "born pre-polluted," the pursuit of personal purity is not only impossible but represents a "de-collectivizing politics of despair" (7-9). In this light, the porous body is the starting point for an ethics of "toxic interdependence" (79) that refuses the illusion of being separate from the environments that sustain and, simultaneously, sicken us.

Wolf maps a geography of radical openness, where the boundaries between the biological self and the toxic landscape dissolve. To understand this dissolution, we must turn to the framework of material ecocriticism, specifically Stacy Alaimo's concept of "trans-corporeality" as a theoretical site where "the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world," and that emphasizes that "the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from 'the environment'" (2). Unlike the abstract interconnectedness often celebrated in romantic nature writing, trans-corporeality in the Anthropocene is a perilous intimacy.[10] It acknowledges that we are permeable to flows of toxicity that rewrite our biology. Wolf writes of the isotopes cesium-137 and iodine-131 not as abstract scientific data, but as physical entities seeking habitation within human tissue. This perspective shifts the locus of the narrative from the event (the explosion far away) to the contact zone (the skin, the digestive tract, the exposed brain). By juxtaposing the brother's surgery with the

[8] The concept of the fortress body refers to the biopolitical and socio-cultural construction of the body as a sealed, autonomous unit, protected by boundaries against external threats. Dorothy Nelkin and Lori Andrews (in *Homo Economicus. Commercialization of Body Tissue in the Age of Biotechnology,* 1998) used this term to describe the legal and defensive enclosure of the body in the age of biotechnology. Similarly, Emily Martin (in *Flexible Bodies* 1994) analysed the historical shift from a fortress model of the immune system to a more flexible and porous one. In this article, the term is used to signify the collapse of the humanist illusion of bodily integrity when faced with the pervasive, invisible infiltration of radioactive particles.

[9] "Das Bad weiche die Haut auf, öffne die Poren und schwemme die Radioaktivität erst recht in den Körper" (27).

[10] Wolf observes about the difficulty of writing nature poetry after Chornobyl: "But now, I thought while peeling the boiled potatoes, it should be interesting to see which poet would be the first to dare sing the praises of a white cloud. An invisible cloud of a completely different substance had seized the attention of our feelings—completely different feelings" (55).

radioactive fallout, Wolf illustrates two distinct but related modes of bodily breach. The brother's body is opened by the scalpel, a deliberate, localised, and visible violation of the fortress body that the procedure is meant to heal. The narrator's body, conversely, is permeated by the invisible penetration of ionising radiation, a diffuse, involuntary, and toxic violation. While the brother, is not directly affected by the radioactive fallout in the same immediate sense, his body is subjected to another form of radical exposure through surgery, which involves a deliberate and invasive intervention into bodily integrity. While clinically necessary, this medical opening of the body suspends the boundaries of the self, rendering the organism dependent on external technological and human intervention, and thus producing a structurally comparable condition of vulnerability.

This systematic dismantling of the fortress body finds its theoretical counterpart in Ursula K. Heise's analysis of how global risk is integrated into the ordinariness of the everyday. Heise argues that the Chornobyl disaster represents a crucial turning point where the natural and domestic can no longer be decoupled from the technological and transnational (185-186). The most poignant application of this spatial porosity occurs in Wolf's treatment of the domestic garden in Mecklenburg. The countryside, traditionally a *locus amoenus* of retreat and healing in German literature, is transformed into a zone of cognitive dissonance (Goodbody 19). Wolf constructs a stark contrast between the visual evidence of health and the material reality of toxicity. The garden, once a space of separation from the industrial world, reveals itself as thoroughly entangled with the technosphere. There is no away to which one can retreat; the global circulation of toxicity has abolished the concept of a safe space:

> How am I supposed to know with which sense, or senses, you may be taking in everything I am imagining ever so furtively. Seeing hearing smelling tasting touching—and that's all there is? Who believes that, anyway. We can't have been sent on our way with so little sensitivity back then. Although the demand for a built-in Geiger counter does sound rather pretentious, even humorous. Who could have predicted all those millions of years ago that it would one day enhance our species' chances of survival, although, on the other hand, I wasn't really dying to know how the lush green meadow in front of the house would have registered on a Geiger counter today. (14-15)[11]

The transformation of the Mecklenburg garden into a zone of toxicity reflects what Christine L. Marran terms the "domestic turn in Environmental Literature" (91). Wolf shifts the focus from a distant, spectacular disaster to the "unremarkable world

[11] "Woher soll ich wissen, mit welchem Sinn oder mit welchen Sinnen du vielleicht alles, was ich mir noch so verstohlen vorstelle, in dich aufnimmst. Sehen hören riechen schmecken tasten—das soll alles sein? Wer glaubt denn so was. So unempfindlich wird man uns einst doch nicht auf den Weg geschickt haben. Wenn auch das Verlangen nach einem eingearbeiteten Geigerzähler eher anmaßend klingen mag, sogar humoristisch. Wer hätte vor diesen Millionen von Jahren voraussehen sollen, daß gerade er einmal unsere Überlebenschance als Gattung verbessern würde—obwohl ich andererseits nicht dringend habe wissen wollen, wie die überaus saftige grüne Wiese vor dem Haus sich auf der Skala eines Geigerzählers heute ausgenommen hätte" (25-26).

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of any home" (105), where the kitchen and the garden become the primary sites for witnessing the "systemic inundation" of chemical and isotopes (101).

Within this domestic sphere the radio news reports a world of invisible danger:

> But they can search for a long time, they won't see anything. It is only the suspicion gnawing within them that colors the innocent sky such a poisonous shade. The malignant sky. So the mothers sit down by the radio and attempt to learn the new words. Becquerel. Explanations by scientists who, unimpeded by any sense of awe as to what holds nature together there at its innermost core, wish not only to know but also to implement. Half-life is what the mothers learn today, Iodine 131. Cesium. Explanations by other scientists who contradict what the first ones said; who are furious and helpless. Now all of that was drizzling down upon us together with the carriers of radioactive substances, such as rain, but you, brother, and may the steady hand of your surgeon preserve your eyesight, will no more get to see it than we will. (27)[12]

This disconnect creates an epistemological crisis. The inferred enemy has no shape, no smell, no sound. It is here that the porosity of the body becomes terrifying. The narrator recounts her desire to eat a fresh salad or drink milk, fundamental acts of nourishment that connect the human body to the earth. Yet, in the wake of the fallout, this connection becomes a death sentence. Wolf dwells on the ritual of washing the salad:

> However, I did decide to throw away those few dandelion leaves, the smallest and most tender, that I had automatically picked in passing, as I did every other day, for my noonday salad. That is also what both the small and large radios, which were tuned to different stations, again advised unanimously on the hour: no green. No fresh milk for the children. A new name for danger is being circulated: Iodine 131. It turns out that thyroid is one of our most sensitive organs for storing radioactive iodine. (15)[13]

She describes the water running over the leaves, a frantic attempt to cleanse toxic contamination off the food. But the possibility of contamination exceeds what can be fully controlled through ordinary acts of cleansing. The lettuce, the milk, and the soil become vectors of gradual trans-corporeal harm. When the narrator eventually eats, she does so with the consciousness of ingesting the disaster. The boundary of the mouth, the ultimate threshold of the fortress body, is breached. The outside (the

[12] "Aber da können sie lange suchen, sie sehen nichts. Allein der Verdacht, der in ihnen bohrt, macht es, daß die unschuldige Himmelsfarbe diesen giftigen Ton annimmt. Der bösartige Himmel. So setzen sich die Mütter vors Radio und bemühen sich, die neuen Wörter zu lernen. Becquerel. Erläuterungen dazu—von Wissenschaftlern, die, von keiner Ehrfurcht gehemmt, was die Natur im Innersten zusammenhält, nicht nur erkennen, auch verwerten wollen. Halbwertszeit, lernen die Mütter heute. Jod 131. Caesium. Erläuterungen dazu von anderen Wissenschaftlern, die, was die Ersten sagten, bestreiten; die wütend und hilflos sind. Das riesele nun alles, zusammen mit den Trägern der radioaktiven Substanzen, zum Beispiel Regen, auf uns herab—aber du, Bruder, dem die sichere Hand deines Chirurgen das Augenlicht erhalten möge, wirst es so wenig zu sehen kriegen wie wir" (43-44).

[13] "Aber die paar Löwenzahnblätter, die kleinsten, zartesten, die ich aus Gewohnheit im Vorbeigehen abgepflückt habe, um sie, wie all die Tage schon, zum Mittag als Salat zu essen, habe ich dann doch lieber weggeworfen. Dazu haben auch nochmals das kleine wie das große Radio, die auf verschiedene Stationen eingestellt gewesen sind, einmütig zur vollen Stunde geraten: Nichts Grünes. Keine Frischmilch für Kinder. Ein neuer Name für Gefahr wird in Umlauf gesetzt: JOD 131. Die Schilddrüse, hat sich herausgestellt, ist also eines unserer sensibelsten Organe zur Speiche rung radioaktiven Jods" (26-27).

reactor's core) becomes the inside (the narrator's cells). This scene is crucial for an eco-crip reading because it invalidates the ableist assumption that one can control one's health through proper choices. In a trans-corporeal reality, the environment dictates the body's condition (Alaimo 22). The narrator, despite being healthy in a clinical sense, is forced to inhabit a body that is chemically compromised.

Parallel to the invisible permeation of the narrator's body is the literal, graphic opening of the brother's body. If the radiation represents the insidious porosity of the skin and gut, the brain surgery represents an invasive exposure of the body's core, producing a comparable condition of bodily vulnerability and suspension. Wolf describes the operation with a mixture of clinical detachment and profound empathy:

> After the clean, hook-shaped incision above your right eyebrow, after all the blood vessels have been meticulously clamped, the scalp stretched apart as far as possible to both sides, the brain pushed aside and wrapped in foil, your doctors are presumably concentrating on getting as close to the root of evil as possible without damaging the pituitary gland. Namely because, as the young nurse informed you, even personality changes can result from damage to certain parts of the brain. (19)[14]

The removal of the skull bone—the helmet designed by evolution to protect the brain—is the ultimate dismantling of the fortress. The brother lies exposed, his most intimate biological machinery laid bare to the gaze and the instruments of the surgeons. Here, the boundaries of the individual are suspended by the medical apparatus; he is kept alive by machines, his blood circulated by pumps, his consciousness extinguished by anaesthesia. This surgical opening serves as a somatic echo of the exploded reactor. Just as the reactor's lid was blown off, exposing its radioactive core to the world, the brother's cranium is opened. Wolf draws a subtle but powerful line between the technological fix attempted on the brother and the technological failure of the reactor. Both scenarios involve a perilous navigation of the interior. However, from an eco-crip perspective, the brother's state is not just a metaphor. It is the materialisation of absolute dependency. His survival depends on the permeability of his body to oxygen, and the surgeon's hands. He is not the autonomous liberal subject of the Enlightenment; he is a porous assemblage of flesh and technology. Wolf seems to use this extreme vulnerability to stage a comparison between two distinct regimes of bodily openness: the surgical exposure of the brother's body and the environmental exposure of the population under the radioactive cloud. While the brother's body is opened in a controlled clinical setting with the aim of saving his life, this openness nevertheless entails a temporary suspension of bodily sovereignty, in which survival depends on external intervention.

[14] "Deine Ärzte, nach dem säuberlichen haken förmigen Schnitt über der rechten Augenbraue, nachdem sie alle Blutgefäße sorgfältig abgeklemmt, die Kopfhaut nach beiden Seiten so weit wie möglich auseinandergezogen haben, die Hirnmasse beiseitegeschoben und in Folie verpackt, konzentrieren sich vermutlich darauf, dem Kern des Übels so nahe wie möglich zukommen, ohne die Hypophyse zu verletzen. Wenn nämlich, hat die junge Schwester dich wissen lassen, bestimmte Teile des Gehirns beschädigt werden, können sogar Persönlichkeitsveränderungen vorkommen" (32).

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The citizens, by contrast, are exposed to an uncontrollable and non-therapeutic form of permeability. What links these two conditions is not equivalence, but the shared destabilisation of the fantasy of bodily closure under radically different conditions of exposure.

By establishing this spatial porosity, *Störfall* effectively attacks the normative categorisation of bodies. In the pre-disaster narrative, there was a clear distinction: the brother is affected by a severe medical condition (a brain tumour) requiring surgical intervention, while the narrator and the wider population are initially healthy (able-bodied, autonomous). The spatial collapse caused by the radioactive event erases this binary. If we accept Alaimo's premise that we are "trans-corporeal", and we accept Wolf's depiction of an environment saturated with invisible poisons, then the normal, hermetic, healthy body is revealed to be a fantasy. In a toxic ecosystem, impairment is not an exception; it is the latent baseline of existence. The radiation acts as a universal cripping agent. It introduces a level of biological compromise into every living organism. In Wolf's text it is suggested that the very idea of health—understood as independence from the environment—is a dangerous myth. The narrator is no less vulnerable than the brother; her damage is simply slower, more insidious, less visible. By dismantling the fortress body, Wolf forces us to rethink disability not as a deviation from a norm, but as a shared condition of ecological entanglement. We are all impaired by the industrial alteration of our biosphere. The brother's body, rendered open and dependent through surgical intervention, thus becomes a powerful figure through which to think the broader condition of embodied vulnerability in the Anthropocene: a condition of radical exposure in which the illusion of immunity is finally, irrevocably, collapsed.

Temporal Suspense: Crip Time and Slow Violence

If the spatial dimension of *Störfall* is defined by porosity, its temporal dimension is defined by suspension. The glitch of Chornobyl does not merely break the machinery of the reactor; it derails the linear progression of time itself. Wolf constructs a narrative of crip latency that fundamentally resists the normative, productive temporalities of Western modernity. The text forces the reader to inhabit a distinct temporal mode: a state of agonising waiting where the future is not promised but indefinitely deferred. To understand this, we must first contrast the two temporal regimes that collide on April 26, 1986. On one hand, there is "industrial time" (or "normative time") (Kafer 27; Adam 7-10). This is the time of the news bulletins, the train schedules, the surgical appointments, and the socialist state's demand for progress and productivity, which in the GDR was linked to a planned economy that organised time through logics of efficiency, discipline, and teleological development. This time is linear, segmented, and teleological; it moves forward toward a resolution. On the other hand, there is the time of the disaster and the body. This is a recursive, sluggish, and unpredictable temporality. In disability studies, this non-normative experience of time is conceptualised as crip time. Theorists such as

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Alison Kafer and Ellen Samuels describe crip time not merely as slower time, but as a bending of the clock to meet the needs of the body rather than the demands of production (Kafer 27). It involves "acceleration, deceleration, and the reorganization of the stages of life" (Kafer 27). In *Störfall*, Wolf seems to expand this concept beyond the individual body to the planetary scale. The radioactive cloud imposes crip time upon the entire population. It forces a deceleration of life (children are kept indoors, food is discarded, movements are restricted) and traps the narrator in a waiting room-like existence.

Wolf masterfully orchestrates the friction between these temporalities through the motif of the radio. Throughout the day, the narrator is tethered to the broadcast, seeking information. The news cycle operates on a hyper-accelerated industrial time. Updates are promised every hour, creating a rhythm of frantic consumption:

> It also makes it difficult to hear the NEWS on my little Sanyo transistor radio chopped up and refashioned every hour into the news. The wayward trout. Fish for storing radioactive waste. Depending on his affiliation with one of the factors into which the public has predictably divided, whether he was an optimist or a pessimist, the expert would say: No. Under no circumstances will the core melt down. Or: But of course. Yes, yes. Even that eventuality cannot be excluded [. ...] As long as the fire hasn't been extinguished—and, brother, you probably don't know that although it may be hard for graphite fires to start, we have been forced to learn that it is incredibly difficult to put them out—as long as the chain reaction continues, the reaction core can remain active, melting through the earth's core until it reemerges in the antipodes. Transformed, perhaps, but still glowing. (5-6)[15]

The media attempts to package the catastrophe into digestible, chronological units—an accident that happened is being managed and will be concluded. However, the material reality of the disaster refuses this pacing. The radiation operates on a geological and biological timescale that mocks the hourly news bulletin. This is the domain of slow violence, defined by Rob Nixon as "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (2). In *Störfall*, the event of the explosion is instantaneous, but the violence is "incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussion playing out across a range of temporal scales" (2). The latency of the radiation effects—the cancer that might develop in ten or twenty years—introduces a disconnect between the *now* of the experience and the *then* of the consequence. Wolf juxtaposes the frenetic now of the radio (which insists on immediate answers) with the silent forever of the isotopes.

[15] "Auch erschwert es, aus dem kleinen Radiogerät Marke Sanyo die Nachrichten zu empfangen, in welche DIE NACHRICHT jede Stunde umgemünzt und zerkleinert wird. Die launische Forelle. Speicherfisch für radioaktive Zerfallsprodukte. Je nachdem, welcher der Parteien, in die auf vorhersagbare Weise die Öffentlichkeit zerfällt, der Experte angehört hat und ob er Optimist oder Pessimist gewesen ist, hat er gesagt: Nein. Keinesfalls wird der Reaktor kern durchschmelzen. Oder: Aber doch. Doch, doch: Auch das ist gar nicht ausgeschlossen [...] Solange der Brand nicht gelöscht gewesen ist—und Graphitbrände, Bruder, das wirst du nicht wissen, sind, so schwer sie entstehen mögen, unglaublich schwer zu löschen, haben wir erfahren müssen—, solange die Kettenreaktion weitergeht, kann der Reaktorkern, sich durch den Erdmittelpunkt schmelzend, aktiv bleiben, bis er, verwandelt sicherlich, aber immer noch strahlend, bei den Antipoden wieder herauskäme" (12-13).

This clash produces a sense of unreality. The narrator is stuck in the middle, in the crip time of suspension. The text documents the psychological violence of having to live in this temporal gap, where the damage is done but not yet felt. In *The Future of Fallout* (2021), Joseph Masco further theorises this temporal gap as the "politics of lag," the defining fallout of the nuclear age where subjects live in the interval between an environmental event and the eventual embodied experience of injury (12). This lag creates a "nuclear uncanny," a condition in which a world that appears sensory-normal is simultaneously infused with totalising, invisible danger (3).

In Wolf's text, this temporal and perceptual disjunction is not only represented as an environmental condition but is also inscribed onto the human body, where uncertainty, exposure, and delayed consequences become equally central experiences. The radiological suspension is mirrored perfectly by the neurological suspension of the brother. If the environment is suffering from the slow violence of radiation, the brother is suspended in the crip time of anaesthesia and coma. The surgery is a profound interruption of biography. For the duration of the operation, the brother ceases to be a subject with a future; he becomes a body in a state of precarious immediacy. The narrator, waiting by the telephone, shares in this suspension. Waiting is, in both the capitalist and socialist imagination, a waste of time. It is unproductive, passive, and empty. However, Wolf reclaims this waiting as an intense, laborious activity. In the framework of crip theory, the time spent in waiting rooms, in recovery, or in the management of chronic illness is often dismissed as dead time (Wendell 37-40; Samuels). Wolf subverts this by filling the waiting time with the labour of memory and care. While her brother's brain is being operated on, the narrator reconstructs him through memory, effectively holding him in existence through her thought-work:

> Now I summon up your head before my inner eye and seek out the most vulnerable spot where my thought can penetrate to your brain, which they are about to expose [...] Effortlessly, they [the beams] penetrate the powerful force field of the glowing, pulsating core. They retard the ebbing flow of your strength in a way which defies language. (4)[16]

The parallelism is striking: just as the scientists watch the reactor (hoping the core doesn't melt), the narrator watches the telephone (hoping the brother doesn't die): "I've opened all the windows wide, not only to let in the heat but also to be sure of hearing the telephone" (21).[17] Both are vigils over a volatile, damaged system. The latency here is the terrifying interval between the incision and the waking. Will he wake up? Who will he be if he does? Wolf refuses to speed up this process. The narrative dwells excruciatingly on the hours passing, forcing the reader to endure the

[16] "Jetzt lasse ich deinen Kopf vor meinem inneren Auge erscheinen, suche den verletzlichsten Punkt, den mein Gedanke durchdringen kann, um dein Gehirn zu erreichen, das sie gleich freilegen werden [. ...] Mühelos durchdringen sie die dichte Abwehr deiner Bewußtlosigkeit, auf der Suche nach dem glühenden, pulsierenden Kern. Auf eine Weise, die sich der Sprache entzieht, stehen sie jetzt deiner schwächer werdenden Kraft bei" (11).

[17] "Alle Fenster habe ich aufgerissen, nicht nur, damit die Wärme Eingang findet, auch, um in jedem Fall das Telefon zu hören" (35).

same uncertainty as the narrator. This refusal to cut to the chase is a stylistic enforcement of crip time: we must endure the duration of the trouble.

Regarding the brother, the surgery is technically successful, but the text does not end with a triumphant return to able-bodied normalcy. He survives, but he is altered. He enters a new state of being that will require adaptation, as the surgery, while technically successful in removing the tumour, leaves him in a condition of heightened neurological vulnerability. His recovery is marked not by full restoration but by uncertainty regarding cognitive and bodily functions, requiring ongoing adjustments in perception, memory, and bodily coordination, as well as a sustained awareness of physical and existential fragility. He has become a crip subject, one who has touched the limit of life and carries the mark of that encounter. Regarding the environment, the rejection of the cure is even more radical. There is no cleaning up Chornobyl in a way that restores the past. The glitch has become a permanent feature of the system. The radiation has merged with the soil and the genetic code. By ending the text without a false resolution, Wolf insists that we must learn to live *within* the latency, *within* the contamination. This is the ultimate ethical implication of crip latency. It demands that we abandon the fantasy of total immunity and eternal progress. Instead, we must inhabit the crip temporality of the aftermath. In this suspended state, the narrator finds a new way to relate to the world: not as a master of time who directs the future, but as a witness who attends to the fragile, unfolding present.

Fragility as an Ethical Resource

If *Störfall* diagnoses the breakdown of spatial boundaries and the suspension of temporal progress, its ultimate intervention is ethical. Having established that we live in a state of crip latency—porous, exposed, and waiting—the text poses a fundamental question: How should we act? The answer Wolf offers requires a radical rejection of the archetype that has dominated Western modernity: the Faustian controller.[18] In the context of the GDR, the prevailing response to crisis was the technological fix. This mindset, deeply rooted in patriarchal ideology, views both the human body and the natural world as machines that, when broken, can be repaired by the imposition of superior will and technical expertise. Wolf frames this drive to master the secrets of matter (nuclear fission) and life (brain surgery) as a modern Faust variation, characterized by a desire to reach the innermost core of nature to achieve a god-like invulnerability (Kuhn 220-221). However, *Störfall* exposes the

[18] Wolf embodies this archetype in the figure of Peter Hagelstein, the real-life scientist involved in the Star Wars defence initiative, whom the narrator reads about in a magazine. Hagelstein represents a nuclear-age Faust: unlike the Goethean model driven by a thirst for knowledge, he is motivated by ambition—specifically, the desire to win the Nobel Prize. Hagelstein illustrates the negative dialectics of the Enlightenment: his original goal of creating a peaceful X-ray laser is co-opted for military ends, turning a potential benefit for humankind into a tool of destruction. Through him, Wolf questions the evolutionary crossroad where humanity "coupled the satisfaction of our desires with the compulsion to destroy" (65).

catastrophic failure of this impulse. The nuclear engineers—the ultimate fixers of energy scarcity—have produced an unfixable disaster. The clean energy has become dirty matter that no amount of engineering can scrub from the soil. Similarly, while the surgeons are depicted with respect for their precision, Wolf subtly critiques the societal reliance on the medical miracle: "For some reason the belief in a technological solution to each and every problem kept being resurrected" (54).[19] The surgeon cuts and repairs, but he operates in a sealed room, disconnected from the fallout outside. His method is one of domination: he conquers the pathology of a brain tumour, treating a condition that, even after surgical intervention, leaves the brother in a state of neurological vulnerability and uncertainty. Wolf suggests that this model of *Unterwerfung* (subjugating) is precisely what led to Chornobyl: "intelligent humanity creates the means of subjugating nature and its own kind. It seeks to break the rules and norms which it has imposed upon itself by means of open or concealed aggression, even at the cost of self-annihilation" (45).[20] The desire of the technical system to dominate nature creates the risk; the desire of the doctors to fix the body obfuscates the necessity of living with mortality.

Against the figure of the hero/scientist/fixer, Wolf positions the narrator. She is not an expert; she is a sister, a consumer of news, a gardener. She feels helpless. Yet, within the eco-crip framework, this helplessness is not a deficit; it is an ethical resource. In a culture obsessed with strength, immunity, and fitness (both biological and political), admitting fragility is a subversive act. To be crip (i.e. to be impaired, vulnerable, or dependent) is usually seen as a failure to be corrected. However, *Störfall* flips this script. It is precisely the narrator's sense of vulnerability that allows her to perceive the reality of the situation. The scientists in charge of the reactor deny the danger to protect the system's image; the narrator, feeling the danger in her own anxious body, acknowledges the truth: "it is only the suspicion gnawing within them that colors the innocent sky such a poisonous shade" (27).[21] Fragility, therefore, becomes an epistemological tool. It is a way of knowing. This conception finds significant theoretical support in Emily Jones's analysis of the "hyper-disaster" (99). Jones suggests that Wolf recognises the female body, specifically the paradigm of motherhood, as a crucial medium for Haraway's term "situated knowledge" (97). In *Störfall,* this corporeal focus acts as a bridge between the abstract world of the men of science, who often view nuclear risk as a manageable statistic, and the devastating material reality of environmental harm. Jones argues that Wolf's narrator practices a form of "feminist objectivity" (97), a rationality that validates subjective bodily experience as a means of witnessing the invisible.

[19] "Aus irgendwelchen Gründen stehe der Glaube, daß es für all und jedes eine technische Lösung gibt, immer wieder auf" (83).
[20] "Der intelligente Mensch schafft sich die Mittel zur Unterwerfung der Natur und seiner Artgenossen. Die Regeln und Normen, die er sich selbst auferlegt hat, sucht er, und sei es um den Preis der Selbstvernichtung, unter Anwendung offener oder versteckter Gewalt zu durchbrechen". (70)
[21] "Allein der Verdacht, der in ihnen bohrt, macht es, daß die unschuldige Himmelsfarbe diesen giftigen Ton annimmt" (43).

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By recognising her own body as penetrable and precarious (a crip body), the narrator is able to recognise the precarity of the ecosystem. This aligns with Sunaura Taylor's argument in *Beasts of Burden*: *Animal and Disability Operation* (2017) that the devaluation of disabled people and the devaluation of nature are linked (201). Both are seen as lacking or mute resources to be managed. Wolf disrupts this by suggesting that the healthy desire for invulnerability is a form of self-delusion. Only by accepting our shared fragility—our "trans-corporeal" openness to harm—can we begin to act ethically. The crip subject, who knows they cannot control their body or environment fully, is better equipped to survive the Anthropocene than the Faustian subject who deludes themselves into thinking they are in charge.

This re-evaluation of fragility leads to a shift in the definition of care. In the medical/technocratic model, care is often synonymous with cure—the restoration of the norm. But what happens when the cure is impossible? The radiation can't be removed from the earth; the brother's brain has been irrevocably touched. Wolf proposes an ethics of accompaniment: if we cannot fix the world (in the sense of returning it to a pristine state), we must care for it in its damaged state. The narrator's actions throughout the day serve as a model for this. She does not wear a hazmat suit to clean the garden (a futile attempt at control); instead, she observes the garden with a mixture of grief and love. She does not try to intervene in the surgery; instead, she accompanies her brother through the labour of her thoughts and memories. This form of care is non-productive in both capitalist logics of accumulation and socialist logics of planned productivity, but it is ontologically vital. It acknowledges the interdependence of all living things. The narrator realises that she is allied with the brother (vulnerable under the knife), with the cherry trees (vulnerable under the cloud), and with the contaminated milk (vulnerable to industrial misuse). In this alliance, the ethical act is to remain present in the face of the unfixable, to bear witness to the damage without looking away, and to maintain a relation of love toward a world that has become hostile. Wolf calls for a humility that stands in stark contrast to the arrogance of the atomic age. This humility recognises that human agency is limited and that our survival depends not on mastering nature, but on aligning ourselves with its fragility. The brother's survival depends on the care of others; the narrator's survival depends on the mercy of the wind direction. This creates a horizontal web of responsibility.[22]

In conclusion, the ethics of fragility found in *Störfall* suggests that the only way to counter the "Störfall" (the accident/glitch) of modernity is to embrace the crip body—the body that knows it is part of the mess, the body that hurts, and therefore,

[22] This notion of mutual responsibility is reinforced by Wolf's opening reference to the ethologist Konrad Lorenz ("The long-sought missing link between animals and the really humane being is ourselves", 13). As Anna K. Kuhn observes, Wolf quotes Lorenz to establish a link between self-knowledge and moral agency, suggesting that human survival relies on redirecting our capacity for invention: we must counteract the destructive trajectory of progress and engage our imagination "to make the world a proper home for truly human beings" rather than utilising it for "inhuman ends" (225).

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the body that cares. It is an ethics grounded not in the power to change the world, but in the responsibility to cherish the damaged remains of it.

Conclusion: Inhabiting the Glitch

In the opening pages of *Störfall*, Christa Wolf presents the accident, the *Störfall*, as a rupture that interrupts the normality of a spring day. However, through the eco-crip reading proposed in this article, it becomes evident that the accident is not a temporary deviation from the norm, but the revelation of a new norm entirely. By superimposing the exploded reactor onto the opened skull, Wolf does not merely narrate a double tragedy; she constructs a unified theory of vulnerability in the late modern age. This article has traced the contours of what I have termed crip latency: the suspended state of existence between exposure and consequence, between the incision and the scar. By analysing the collapse of spatial boundaries (in the first section), we have seen how the fortress body of the humanist tradition is rendered obsolete by the trans-corporeal reality of radiation. By examining the distortion of time (in the second section), we have observed how the slow violence of isotopes and illness resists the productive, linear temporalities of industrial society. Finally, by interrogating the ethical response to this condition (in the third section), we have argued that Wolf rejects the Faustian impulse to conquer nature, proposing instead an ethics of accompaniment and shared fragility. The trajectory of *Störfall* thus leads us to a stark ontological conclusion: vulnerability is not an accident of history, nor is it the exclusive domain of the disabled minority. The glitch is no longer a bug in the system; it *is* the system. Wolf demonstrates that in the nuclear age, there is no such thing as an able-bodied subject, if being able-bodied implies an autonomous existence free from environmental contamination. We are all, to varying degrees, crip bodies—chemically altered, genetically exposed, and dependent on a biosphere that we have ourselves wounded.

The crip latency that the narrator experiences—the anxiety of breathing invisible poison, the waiting for symptoms, the distrust of the senses—is now the collective psychological baseline of the Anthropocene. Wolf's text serves as a genealogy of our present predicament. It anticipates the collapse of the distinction between natural history and human history. Reading *Störfall* through the eco-crip lens engages with an already circulating vocabulary in environmental studies and disability studies for navigating this permanent crisis. The radiation did not disappear; it decayed and dispersed, becoming part of the background radiation of our lives. Similarly, the climate crisis is not a problem to be solved in a way that restores the past; it is a new condition to be inhabited.

Ultimately, *Störfall* leaves us with a difficult but necessary pedagogical imperative. Wolf teaches us not to turn away. Throughout the text, the narrator fights the urge to close her eyes, to ignore the news, to retreat into the illusion of the idyllic garden. She forces herself to use her intellect and her empathy to comprehend the invisible damage. She cultivates instead a sustained form of attention, what Rob Nixon

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might call a mode of "apprehension" (14-16), that binds perception to uncertainty, delay and distributed causality. This act of paying attention, of witnessing the glitch, is the foundation of a new form of community. In this light, the figure of the brother, the patient and crip subject not just during the actual surgery, but also in the immediate aftermath, becomes the guide. He survives not because he is invincible, but because he is cared for in two ways: first via a medical-technical form of care oriented toward the removal of tumour; and, second, through an affective, relational form provided by the narrator, who accompanies rather than corrects bodily vulnerability. He represents the necessity of interdependence, which is intensified by the brain surgery: although already dependent on medical intervention before the operation, his post-operative condition makes this dependence more visible and ongoing. The eco-crip ethic derived from *Störfall* suggests that our survival as a species depends on extending this care beyond the human family to the more-than-human world—to the soil, the water, and the air which constitute our own porous bodies.

To inhabit the glitch is to accept that we are damaged but not destroyed. It is to reject the stunned despair of the apocalypse and the arrogant optimism of the technological fix. In the suspended time of latency, where the outcome is uncertain and the danger is invisible, this shared capacity for care is the only immunity we have left.

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Crip Nature Writing? Domestic Wildness in Elisabeth Tova Bailey's *The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating*

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Abstract

This article cautiously proposes the concept of "crip nature writing" as a subversive challenge to American nature writing's troublesome legacy of ableism, or its "corporeal unconscious," in Sarah Jaquette Ray's terms, and its pattern of abandonment. Drawing on the eco-crip theories of Alison Kafer, Sunaura Taylor and Jaquette Ray, the essay analyzes the way Elisabeth Tova Bailey's *The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating* (2010) models an investment in what Barney Nelson terms "domestic wildness" as a generative space from which she levels a subtle critique of the genre's cult of effort and remoteness, ultimately offering an approach to nature writing that is inclusive of underrepresented places and perspectives.

Keywords: Crip nature writing, corporeal unconscious, ableist ecologies, disabled ecologies, domestic wildness.

Resumen

Este artículo propone con cautela el concepto de 'escritura de la naturaleza crip' como un desafío subversivo al problemático legado de capacitismo de la escritura de la naturaleza estadounidense —o su «inconsciente corporal», en términos de Sarah Jaquette Ray— y a su patrón de abandono. Basándose en las teorías eco-crípicas de Alison Kafer, Sunaura Taylor y Jaquette Ray, el ensayo analiza cómo la obra de Elisabeth Tova Bailey *The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating* (2010) pone de manifiesto una apuesta por lo que Barney Nelson denomina «salvaje doméstico» como un espacio generativo desde el que la autora formula una sutil crítica al culto al esfuerzo y al alejamiento propio del género, ofreciendo en última instancia un enfoque de la literatura sobre la naturaleza que incluye lugares y perspectivas infrarrepresentados.

Palabras clave: Escritura de la naturaleza crip, inconsciente corporal, ecologías capacitistas, ecologías de la discapacidad, naturaleza salvaje doméstica.

The notion of "crip nature writing" may seem like a contradiction in terms. The ableist bias is on display right there in the title and substance of one of the genre's foundational publications, Henry David Thoreau's essay "Walking" (1851). Or in the legendary example of John Muir climbing a 100-foot Douglas Fir to ride out the wildness of a storm while clinging to its quaking crown as he describes it in "A Wind Storm in the Forest" (1878). Alison Kafer has also shown how ableist bias saturates Edward Abbey's scornful exhortation for drivers to "get out of those motorized wheelchairs […] And walk-walk-WALK upon our sweet and blessed land" (233). More

recently it can be seen in David Gessner's apology in *Leave It as It Is* (2020) for not strolling far enough outside of civilization on his evening walk to break free of its soundscape. Gessner does not walk far enough, in other words, to escape what Sunaura Taylor calls the "disabled ecology" of nature intermingled with humanity. Nature writing clearly comes with a fitness requirement that applies to both people and places, and near-perfect health is the minimal expectation. A hale and hearty—and often male—body capable of vigorous and extensive hiking is often simply taken for granted as a key component to unlocking the most moral and meaningful connections with an equally healthy nature.

Challenging this notion, this paper will show how Elisabeth Tova Bailey's *The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating* (2010) models a form of what I tentatively call "crip nature writing" that centralizes the crip experience of nature in ways that fundamentally contest the uninterrogated hegemony of nondisabled wilderness experiences as well as the genre's ecophobic dismissal of both disabled experiences and impaired nature. The essay proceeds by first examining the corporeal unconscious of nature writing, before moving on to Bailey's inversion of its conventions, and then finally exploring the eco-crip ethic it suggests. In addition to the framework of crip theory, this essay also reads Bailey's project through Barney Nelson's concept of "domestic wildness," which troubles dichotomizations between the wild and domestic, showing how it introduces nearby, accessible and human-impacted nature as a worthwhile subject for nature writing in the Anthropocene. Together, these frameworks illuminate how Bailey's crip nature writing revalues the confined, hybrid and impaired as sites of genuine ecological connection and awakening.

The Corporeal Unconscious of Nature Writing

In his foundational study of American nature writing *Dramas of Solitude: Narratives of Retreat in American Nature Writing* (1998), Randall Roorda defines what he perceives as "the central dynamic of the genre" as "the writer's movement from human society toward a state of solitude in nature. This movement and state I refer to jointly as retreat" (xiii). Roorda's condensing of nature writing to the retreat motif, is to some extent a first wave ecocritical perspective on the genre, and the point is neither here nor in Roorda, to suggest that it articulates an understanding sufficient to the breadth and scope of the present state of the genre. And yet, although nature writing has greatly diversified and branched out, Roorda is right to suggest that his definition covers what remains an essential—if not the essential—style of nature writing, when he claims that "readers of nature writing, like those of popular fiction genres, seek out repeated instantiations of a certain core *story*, and it is this I am concerned to delineate" (3). The phenomenal success of Cheryl Strayed's retreat narrative in *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail* (2012) supports Roorda's claim that this core story is actively sought by the genre's readership. Strayed's nature writing memoir of mental recuperation in the wilderness, itself

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worthy of an eco-crip reading, is the genre's all-time bestseller, shifting more than four million copies in addition to being adapted into the blockbuster movie *Wild* (2014) starring Reese Witherspoon as Strayed. So even though there is more experimentation and innovation in the genre than at any previous point of time, the audience's thirst for reading reiterations of the traditional core story about solitary retreat into the wilderness is demonstrably stronger than ever.[1] This is why *The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating*, as an exemplar of revisionary nature writing, positions itself in a complex relation to specifically this type of conventional core story.

The retreat, which Roorda refers to as an integral "narrative movement" (2) in nature writing, also implies a fairly comprehensive capacity for bodily movement. Roorda claims that "nature writing is most itself when its object is least human" (2), and this minimalization of the human sphere "must mean *entering* 'the wilderness,' however understood" (18).[2] While the phrase "however understood" leaves open a space for interpretation, in most of the example he discusses the mental movement outwards is sustained by bodily movement in the same direction. The able-bodied foundation that seems an essential support for this core story of the genre has been subjected to succinct eco-crip scrutiny. In "Risking Bodies in the Wild" (2009), for example, Sarah Jaquette Ray refers to "ablebodiedness" as the "corporeal unconscious" or "hidden attachment" of environmental thought and traces how this ableist unconscious disqualifies disabled bodies from partaking in what "adventure culture" (260) recognizes as truly transcendental wilderness spaces and experiences. She historicizes the emergence of this ideal in the Progressive Era, a period of social, political, and economic reform in the United States during the late nineteenth- to early twentieth-centuries, as a "romantic reaction to modernity" which privileged "an environmental 'ethic' toward pristine nature" and the ideology of retreating "into the wilderness as a palliative for both the individual and the nation." The notion of the ideal American testing and proving himself against an unspoiled wilderness was seen as "essential to moral, racial, and national 'purity'" (258). Physical fitness was interlaced with the notion of moral fitness in ways that would both exclude and cast doubt on disabled experiences of the natural world. Disability was seen as antithetical to the moral project of proving oneself in the wild, and Ray suggests that this logic has subsisted structurally in the logic of wilderness and adventure writing as unaddressed baggage in its subconscious.

Making a similar point in *Disabled Ecologies* (2024), Sunaura Taylor describes the standard narrative of nature writing as centered on ablebodiedness, fitness and

[1] See for example Lyanda Lynn Haupt's *The Urban Bestiary* (2013), which celebrates everyday nature experiences in urban landscapes, or John Marzluff's *Subirdia* (2014), which takes nature writing to the extremely modified setting of American suburbs, or Lauret Savoy's *Trace* (2015), which explores racial legacies in American landscapes, or David George Haskell's *Sounds Wild and Broken* (2022), which introduces readers to the soundscapes of nature.

[2] Critics like William Cronon have problematized the tendency in environmental thought to valorize untouched wilderness as "the natural unfallen antithesis of an unnatural civilization … the ultimate landscape of authenticity" (np). Wilderness, Cronon argues, is often held to an ideal of purity that cannot tolerate human presence or interference at all, with the occasional exception of "contemplative sojourners enjoying their leisurely reverie in God's natural cathedral" (np).

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physical achievement, presenting those as prerequisites for attaining "an authentic connection to the more-than-human world" (66). Unsurprisingly then, Taylor also notes that there are precious few examples of nature writing from a disabled perspective, and that those few narratives that do exist tend to focus on the figure of the "supercrip," portraying individuals "overcoming their disabilities to climb an impossible peak or hike an endless trail while blind or paraplegic" (65), in other words presenting both nature and disability as something to be conquered through exceptional determination and willpower. While Taylor does not want to detract from the accomplishments of such writing, she troubles the waters by arguing that they preserve the narrative pattern in which nature "becomes a proving ground rather than a site for connection" and in which ability is "a prerequisite for having an authentic connection to the more-than-human world" (66). This entrenched narrative pattern prompts her frustrated question of "[h]ow was I to write myself back into nature? I am hardly capable of climbing or hiking" (66).

In *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (2013), Alison Kafer likewise suggests that nature writing holds what is considered worthy connections with nature hostage to "norms that were based on bodies, minds, or experiences unlike our own" (143). Like Taylor's more recent "vision of living with," Kafer goes on to question whether it is possible to imagine "a crip interaction with nature, a crip engagement with wilderness, that doesn't rely on either ignoring the limitations of the body or triumphing over them" (142). She further maintains that "what is needed in ecofeminism, ecocriticism, and environmentalism in general" and this paper would add nature writing to this list, "are the narratives of people whose bodies and minds cause them to interact with nature in nonnormative ways" (135). While the nature writing genre is branching out and diversifying, having become far more pluralistic and inclusive over the past ten years, much of its popular mainstream remains invested in what Roorda defines as its core story and what Kafer refers to as "an exclusionary framing of nature" (132) that is doubly prejudiced against both the ways disabled people experience nature and against the types of nature they are able to access. Such a framing, Kafer contends, celebrates "walking as the only way to access 'the original, the real'" (132). This framing is exclusionary in its very core because it essentializes both healthy bodies and healthy nature in ways that prohibit impairment of either. As Kafer suggests, "[i]n such a construction, there is no way for the mobility-impaired body to engage in environmental practice; all modalities other than walking upright become insufficient, even suspect. Walking is both what makes us human and what makes us at one with nature" (132). Impaired ecosystems, or what Taylor refers to as "disabled ecologies" fare no better in this construction. She defines disabled ecologies as "networks of disability that are created when ecosystems are corrupted and profoundly altered," which means that on a definitional level a "disabled ecology" is not "the original, the real" that this exclusionary framing of nature seeks (7). The solitary retreat of the healthy body into unspoiled landscapes is cemented into the nature writing canon as the optimal, if not only, way of truly learning a place in its particulars.

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While Ray, Kafer and Taylor unmask the ways that the corporeal unconscious of environmental thought leads to the exclusion and othering of impaired bodies from wilderness spaces, the next sections of this paper extend their less developed challenge to the notion of wilderness itself as the only meaningful site of connecting with nature through Taylor's notion of "ableist ecologies" (26). Talila A. Lewis defines ableism as "a system of assigning value to people's bodies and minds based on societally constructed ideas of normalcy, productivity, desirability, intelligence, excellence, and fitness" (qtd. in Taylor 27). For Taylor, ableism extends even further "into the more-than-human world as well, shaping how lands, water, animals, and ecological relations are valued, treated, and perceived" (27). The hierarchical enthronement of wilderness as the supreme terrain of nature writing is an expression of this form of ableism extended "into the more-than-human-world."

Drawing on these critiques in the following discussion enables an analysis of Bailey's crip nature writing that unveils how it challenges the supremacy of nondisabled experiences in nature writing while engaging with the question of what types of nature merit literary attention through purposeful subversions of central tropes. Ultimately it helps clarify how Bailey offers an alternate model of nature writing that rejects the logic of the proving ground, the hidden attachment of healthy embodiment, and the unimpaired wilderness, and instead embraces disability and domestic wildness as generative sites for a broader and more inclusive nature aesthetics for the Anthropocene, or "the Age of Disability," as Taylor reframes it.

Regaining a Future: A Stationary Moral Migration

In *The Wild and the Domestic: Animal Representation, Ecocriticism, and Western American Literature* (2000), Barney Nelson traces how nature writing has construed nature as sacred and a space for "leisure time activity" since the time of Thoreau (8). Bailey's first point may be to do away with any such association of crip nature writing with leisure and luxury. Whatever lofty rationalization the nature writer tends to provide, sojourning in the wilderness comes with an aura of a wilderness vacation, a temporary visit that is contingent on a cash surplus and time off from work, later written up as a momentous pilgrimage. That is not the crip perspective presented in *The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating*. Bailey is emphatically not a volunteer. Her project of reappraisal is forced upon her, and her mental wellbeing is at stake in the outcome. In this, and multiple other ways, her book reads like a subversion of the upright healthy body's solitary retreat into the wilderness that dominates the genre's popular core.

In a stunning piece of something as inconceivable as indoors bedridden nature writing, Bailey replaces the genre's conventional wilderness terrain with a terrarium inhabited by a woodland snail that sits on the nightstand next to the bed to which she is almost completely confined. The plot, centered on the bedbound author's yearlong cohabitation with an ordinary snail, is the very antithesis to the genre-defining machismo of the reigning Abbey school of nature writing, described by Tim

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Hauserman in his review of Gessner's *All the Wild That Remains* as a "no excuses" love of wilderness, a desire to "run into the wilderness naked and alone" to experience its un-sanitized and unplacated dangers (n.p.). Nothing like the frivolity of an adult man running pell-mell into the wilderness exists in Bailey's crip nature writing. This is not because the author willingly relinquishes the adventurous "no excuses" mode of exploring the natural world to undertake random experiments with alternative perspectives and values, but because she is forcibly expelled from such an approach when she falls inexplicably ill. Her moral migration is, in other words, a necessity that is thrust upon her as she finds herself bereft of any other option. Her crip nature writing is not leisure, it is survival. What Amit R. Baishya describes as "an exercise in radical humility" ("Gastropods, Viruses" 63) becomes Bailey's mechanism for writing herself meaningfully back into the world.

Once a hiker and fitness enthusiast herself, Bailey struggles to come to terms with the "bizarre and bewildering place" (14) her body has become and the loss of access to the wilderness spaces that used to replenish her. Solitude, that celebrated ideal for Roorda's conception of a nature writer, has been warped for Bailey into the isolation that comes with living in "crip time" (Taylor 30) while the world marches on without her. Feeling as much a captive as the snail on her nightstand, trapped "far from the things that delighted me, the wild woods that sustained me, and the social network that enriched me" (15), Bailey must undergo a migration of the mind towards a space in which she "could still fulfill dreams, even if they were changed dreams" (146). This she can only achieve by bending the entrenched conventions of nature writing as a space of able-bodiedness and remote wilderness. Far from the conventional terrain of wilderness writing, her drama of solitude must play out in the bedroom. With an ordinary snail as her guide, and from the unlikely space of her sheets and pillows, Bailey claims her voice as a nature writer while proposing a series of overdue value-adjustments to the genre.

Nature writing is often referred to as the literature of place, and this ideal of embeddedness in location is among the first that Bailey troubles. While nature writing has long fancied itself as a tonic to a rootless and restlessly peripatetic culture by familiarizing readers with the natural environment and thereby somehow grounding them in it, creating a sense of at-home-ness in nature, Bailey's crip nature writing examines a life that has been reduced primarily to root and rest. She explores this situation contrastively through the concepts of time, of which she has been given an endless surplus, and speed which she has lost. An Emily Dickinson quote from a letter to Charles H. Clark stating, "*[t]he velocity of the ill, however, is like that of the snail*" (qtd. in Bailey 37, emphasis in original) serves as the epigraph to the chapter "Time and Territory," in which she ruminates on her situation in terms that strongly resemble Taylor's concept of "crip time" (30). Life lived at "the velocity of the ill" means being "homebound" (117), which for Bailey represents "a sort of vanishing" (117). The desynchronization of her life from that of others forcibly roots Bailey in place and imposes solitude on her in ways that have nothing to do with Roorda's conception of solitude and retreat as the chosen situation for nature writing

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creativity. While Bailey herself never directly addresses the nature writing genre, her portrayal of her own experiences and situation seems to intentionally invite readers to reexamine what these ideals of the genre actually mean and how her crip perspective might diversify and reinterpret them. The immersive nature writing she is able to produce from her rootbound condition performs a timely and deeply necessary vindication of the rich experiential worlds that too often exist in wilderness nature writing's exclusion zones. As such, *The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating* provides a broadly relevant reminder to practice wonder as a restorative way of everyday life, rather than a recreational activity reserved for visits to national parks.

There is of course the open question of whether *The Sound of a Wild Snail* can justifiably be called nature writing in the first place. Thomas J. Lyon's "taxonomy of nature writing" identifies three essential genre-defining features: "natural history information, personal responses to nature, and philosophical interpretation of nature" (3). Importantly, although he draws most of his examples from wilderness writing, Lyon does not prescribe a remote and unspoiled terrain for nature writing, and Bailey demonstrates how all three taxonomic features are as practicable from a crip perspective as from that of a hiker. The unassuming snail, the totem animal around which Bailey's narrative revolves, in and of itself, represents a challenge to the type of charismatic nature that usually occupies the center stage in nature writing.[3] Its confinement to a terrarium—a domestic space within a domestic space–makes it an even unlikelier vehicle for nature writing. Kafer notes the gatekeeping function inherent in the genre's strict ideals of "unmediated" experiences of primal, unspoiled nature (132). The snail browsing supermarket mushrooms in the entirely manufactured environment of Bailey's terrarium fails to measure up to an unmediated and obviously charismatic wild in any shape or form. It also represents a total reversal of the type of easily appreciable big and bold wildernesses that have reigned supreme in the genre. To make things worse, Bailey's encounter with the snail is stripped of that all-important ingredient of effort, ennobling toil, for rather than venturing out to meet nature in some remote and difficult location, the snail has been brought to Bailey. She did not seek it out, conquer it, initially connect with it or play any active role whatsoever in it coming into her presence. Both author and subject end up cocooned in states of domesticity they neither wanted, nor can escape. Even so, Bailey proves more than capable of gathering "natural history information," providing "personal responses" and "philosophical" perspectives on her shared situation with the snail.

Mirroring the accidental circumstances that caused her disablement, Bailey's intense relationship with the snail is born through happenstance. In part one of *The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating*, shortly after the reader learns of how the author at 34 was struck down with what would turn out to be an undiagnosed chronic affliction,

[3] Charismatic nature possesses easily appreciable properties that coincide with cultural conventions for what is considered aesthetically pleasing. The concept is closely linked to conceptions of beauty and has figured centrally in nature writing because it appeals more readily to readers than uncharismatic subjects such as wastelands or scavengers.

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the reader also learns of how a friend brings her this woodland snail along with a bouquet of wildflowers because the friend assumes both will bring her enjoyment. The gift, and the responsibility that comes with it, nearly precipitates a panic attack from Bailey, who at this point is not ready to care for another being and is struggling to adjust to her radically transformed circumstances: "Why, I wondered, would I *enjoy* a snail? What on earth would I do with it? I couldn't get out of bed to return it to the woods. It was not of much interest, and if it *was* alive, the responsibility—especially for a snail, something so uncalled for—was overwhelming" (4, emphasis in original). It is a crucial paragraph because in questioning and even dismissing the value of a snail, the author also questions and scoffs at the experiences it represents, both the limited wild in a broad sense and the type of nature experience that she can have in her new set of circumstances. The panic attack is, in other words, a crisis of values. The bedridden Bailey, who is first introduced to us as the very picture of physical ability "[h]igh on an outcrop" in the Alps, casually munching on "bread and cheese" (xi) after a strenuous hike, at this point represents a lingering ableist mindset confined to a now disabled body. She has not come to terms with her own situation, and she cannot conceive of a way to, as Taylor calls on readers to do, "make life livable and vibrant" when living "with disablement" (30). The snail seems almost a darkly satiric representation of what her possibilities have become in her own eyes, and she rejects it and everything it signifies on sight.

Even so, the snail will prove a more prescient gift than it at first seems. It represents an injection of nature into what amounts to a forced retreat, adding the natural component that has been missing for a nature writer to thrive. Bailey's crip nature writing is firmly grounded in changed and immutable corporeal realities. Her body anchors her in what resembles Kafer's concept of "crip time" (27), which Taylor crucially directs towards a form of perspectival "misalignment" based on diverging bodily realities: "a misalignment between a disabled person's capacities and experiences and the constant expectations of a culture that privileges uniformity, productivity, and predictive life patterns" (30). Bailey, for example, has a dog, which as the companion of her former hikes is now something of a living relic of her healthier life. In its energetic liveliness the dog cannot participate in the horizontal terrain of prone illness the way the snail, living in slow time, is able. The same goes for her human companionship, which has gradually been dwindling: "WHEREAS THE ENERGY OF my human visitors wore me out, the snail inspired me. Its curiosity and grace pulled me further into its peaceful and solitary world. Watching it go about its life in the small ecosystem of the terrarium put me at ease" (41, original capitalization). While Bailey is incapable of returning to the nature experiences she used to enjoy, there is also a sense that that kind of nature cannot fully enter her new world either. The snail, however, will eventually help prove that worthwhile connections can still be made as its snail time synchronizes better with Bailey's crip time. Bailey's challenge, then, is with rearranging her inner moral terrain into a state in which a sense of wonder can be drawn from other scales of perception and other modes of being.

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Bailey's moral struggles do not last long before her curiosity wins out, but they are significant in laying the groundwork for the ethical migration her book performs. At the time when the snail is brought to her, Bailey wrestles with having physically become disconnected from what she believes as generative of meaning: "Given the ease with which health infuses life with meaning and purpose, it is shocking how swiftly illness steals away those certainties" (5-6). The casually effortless locomotion of the nature writer is key to the types of nature experiences that have enriched her life up until this point, and she cannot see her disability in anything but the most negative of terms as the thing that made "off with nearly all my plans for the future" (166). There is no question that Bailey experiences a genuine and dramatic loss of ability that would leave anyone grasping. But the barrier to seeing anything generative or positive on her future horizon is partly ideological. It is to some extent because of her own internalized ableism that Bailey feels as if she has been locked out of meaningful engagement with worthwhile nature, which is outdoors, remote and apart, and only reachable for the fit and healthy, and certainly not in any way represented by a snail in a flowerpot: "From where I lay, all of life was out of reach" (10). This is not a notion she will hold throughout her book, but importantly one she holds where the book begins.

Bailey's struggle to see meaning in the snail on her bedside table reflects her own struggle to find value in the disabled life she now leads. This challenge echoes Taylor's question of how to write herself into the natural world when the game is ideologically rigged against a disabled person being able to do any such thing. While her contemplative deliberations about her challenges are bookworthy in and of themselves, Bailey's involvement with the snail also speaks more universally towards what types of nature are validated and whose nature experiences are valorized in environmental thought and writing. As an example, Bailey's healthy hiking former self is unaware of snails in an almost contrived way, having never noticed them on her "countless hikes in the woods" (8). The crip nature writer she will later become elevates the previously discounted snail to the very highest importance and obsesses over it. The chapter describing the snail's arrival performs these contrastive values by staging a clear discrepancy between ways of experiencing nature with a shift from one paragraph to the next, formerly the "acres of forest" behind her house that stretched to "a hidden, mountain-fed brook" and now "the pot at my bedside" (8). With the easily appreciable charismatic nature that her able-bodied self is accustomed to now out of reach, Bailey must look to the diminutive "nondescript brown creature," an uncharismatic description if there ever was one, in her flowerpot and later terrarium, to generate a new set of values for herself (8). The wilderness writer's ableist scorn for mediated, nearby and easily accessed nature is an evaluative pose she can no longer inhabit. With few other options at her disposal, Bailey must look for a new type of Walden on her nightstand.

At this point it might seem as if Bailey is writing a bleak tale about someone confronted with such a radically altered embodiment that their experiential domain shrinks down to staring into a flowerpot, but this is only how it begins and not at all

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where she is going. Bailey's reduced motility and her struggle to come to terms with it are of course essential features of the book, and she fully acknowledges how consequential they are for her, how disability is an "author" that "rewrote my life" (166). Among those consequences is the need for reorientation, discovering that her life is not without possibilities, and that those include meaningful contact with the natural world. She can only do so by overcoming the fervent dichotomization that undergirds wilderness nature writing. As Ray observes, "the wilderness body ideal" that underpins environmental thought, and I would add much of the most popular and influential nature writing, has cemented as canonical the idea that proper nature is characterized by its apartness and remoteness, and that a proper nature experience can only be attained through physical strain and effort, as a reward that stands somehow proportionate to the effort put in. It is the logic of an elite sport, one that implies that the longer and tougher the hike, and the fewer people who have, or would be able to make it, the better quality of nature and nature experience one is likely to receive. As Kafer puts it: "Nature, wilderness, mountain ranges: all are described as separate from 'us,' but we can bridge that separation by rugged, masculine individualism" (134). It is only through "the hiker's body" that the separation with nature can temporarily be overcome. Readers of traditional nature writing are somewhat condescendingly invited to experience overcoming separation from nature vicariously through the author's exploits and prose. There is little expectation that they should be able to emulate the author's example for themselves. To accommodate a common snail in a terrarium, Bailey's crip nature writing jettisons any such elitism, championing an inclusive and accessible way of engaging with nature, and the last page before her bibliography even provides instructions and encouragement for readers who want to get terraria of their own. These should be impossible subjects for nature writing, but Bailey shows how people of diverse bodies can experience nature in alternative settings.

In contrast to diminutive, captured gastropods in terraria, the ecosystems of typical nature writing are not merely expected to be remote, but also as close to perfect health as can be found in the Anthropocene. This exclusionist metric disqualifies far more landscapes than it qualifies. Kafer discusses how, in *Rejected Body* (1996), Susan Wendell raises the question of "how far one must be able to walk to be considered able-bodied" (7). The corporeal unconscious of nature writing similarly invites a double question regarding how far one must hike to have an authentic nature experience in sufficiently authentic landscapes. While there is a notable ongoing Anthropocenic turn in nature writing, its persistent preference for purity still devalues enormous amounts of terrain, ecosystems and countless organisms as insufficiently remote, apart or pristine. But while J.B. MacKinnon in "False Idyll" frets over a future in which we find all the wildness we need in the tamed, Bailey's study of her terrarium problematizes that proposition, and shows how constructive it can be to do precisely that—enjoying the tamed and nearby—especially when the option of exploring the remote locations MacKinnon visits is outside of one's physical capacities. Subverting the language of remoteness and

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apartness, Bailey claims a voice of authenticity for her solitary observations of the nearby snail on her "distant planet of illness," contrasting the recreational isolation of nature writers with the isolation of captivity that she feels she shares with the snail (34).

Although Bailey understandably pines for the active healthy life she used to live, and the nature experiences it used to offer, it is important to note that her dawning fascination with the snail is in no way presented as secondary to those experiences: "The tiny, intimate sound of the snail's eating gave me a distinct feeling of companionship and shared space" (12). This sense of shared space becomes of inestimable value to Bailey, suffering as she is from a doubled sense of homesickness; she has been relocated from her home to a white sanitized space in the caregiving facility that provides virtually no stimuli to her hungry senses, and she has become un-homed in her own body, which has ceased to react and behave in the ways that were familiar to her. She writes that "[s]urvival often depends on a specific focus: a relationship, a belief, or a hope balanced on the edge of possibility" (15). Since becoming ill, Bailey has been rudderless and adrift both in her body and in her life, with no sense of anything to look forward to: "[w]hereas the future had once beckoned with many intriguing paths, now there was just one impossible route" (11). She spends her time immersed in the landscapes of her past, exploring old memories in the belief that she cannot fashion worthwhile new ones. The insertion of the small bit of wildness the snail represents provides her hungry mind with something to seize upon in the present, something to draw her out of her unhealthy obsession with what life used to be. More importantly, it begins to provoke a reappraisal of her circumstances: "I thought of the terrarium's limited space, and how the snail had seemed content as it ate, explored, and fulfilled a life cycle. This gave me hope that perhaps I, too, could still fulfill dreams, even if they were changed dreams" (146). With the snail as her guide, Bailey eventually begins exploring the notion of "living with" as Taylor formulates it, of living a rich life with disability. In recognizing the possibility for new dreams, Bailey reclaims her ability to look forward. In this sense the snail shatters the despair that has held Bailey in backwards-looking stasis and returns a sense of progression and potential to her life.

Audacious Adventures in Bed: Subverting the Cult of Effort and Remoteness

Effort is essential to the ennobling endeavor of wilderness nature writing. In Strayed's bestselling *Wild*, her journey of emotional recovery is partly contingent on facing and overcoming the physical challenges presented by the difficult terrain of the Pacific Crest Trail. As Jaquette Ray observes: "Work displays correct the moral atrophy associated with bourgeois privilege; they fulfill a Puritan work ethic through bodily toil" (269). In nature writing, work displays function as purification ritual and they also places an ableist emphasis on sensory engagement with place, as David Abrams claims: "direct sensuous reality […] remains the sole solid touchstone for an experiential world, […]; only in regular contact with the tangible ground and sky can

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we learn how to orient and to navigate in the multiple dimensions that now claim us" (x). Nature writers love putting on "work displays" for their readers as some form of reifying activity that is part purification and part ecological education, and which not infrequently borders on the braggadocios.

American contemporary nature writing continues this tradition. Robert Macfarlane's recent *Is a River Alive?* (2025) fronts effort as essential to his understanding of the rivers he explores. The chapter "The Living River" particularly foregrounds the drudgery of paddling for miles in his canoe as sacramental and gradually epiphanous:

> Mile after mile. Our little line of boats spreads out again. We each enter a private cell of labour. Time and space begin to do odd things, expanding so that each hour seems surely two or three, each mile seems surely ten. The water is working on me. I am learning to recalibrate my eagerness, to settle into a present-tense state of not anticipating, of not-knowing […] I pick a point on the shore, a mile or two distant, and make for it. Then another. Then another. I begin to discover a ritual aspect to the labour, a metronomic pleasure in the pain. (242)

Here Macfarlane exemplifies the close alignment between effort and receptive perception in nature writing. The toil puts him in a ready, almost trancelike state at the utmost extent of his physical capacity, a mental state that is somehow outside of normal time and space, in which the water is able to "work on him" through his recalibrated senses, teaching him.

The work display is a clear performance for Macfarlane's readers to demonstrate that the author earns what he receives. The waterscape he traverses is laid out as his proving ground, in Taylor's terms above, and the hand-blistering drudgery of paddling demonstrates his exertion and gradual worthiness. Macfarlane's reward is an eventual state of near-rhapsodic connection:

> I realize again […] that along with the exhaustion a deep, strange serenity, unlike any I have known before, is emerging, as if I am somehow being … slowly flooded from within. That is the best account of it I can find. *As if I'm being slowly flooded from within.* (246, emphasis in original)

It is effort that puts Macfarlane in this state of connectedness. Only by struggling with wind and currents and portaging around rapids can he come to an intimacy with the river. His achievement, in other words, requires excellent physical fitness, and the author struggles heroically to measure up. Ability is the entrance ticket to Macfarlane's enlightenment. Ray critiques the narrative structure and self-sustained logic behind such embodied wilderness encounters and the work displays they rely on, suggesting that such narratives substitute "performance for the ecological sensitivity that the wilderness encounter *claims* to cultivate. Thus, there is no necessary relationship between the wilderness encounter and an environmental ethic" (274, emphasis in original).

There are times when Bailey's crip nature writing approaches deliberate parody of work displays of the type exemplified by Macfarlane above. In the chapter

"Time and Territory," Bailey puts on her own work display, but, for her, both scale and landscape are radically different from Macfarlane's remote wilderness:

> Given its tiny footprint, the snail had plenty of territory in the terrarium to survey in minute detail, finding endless nooks and crannies of interest. I, on the other hand, rarely moved beyond the familiar section of my sheets. Occasionally, when the snail slept and an urgent need for change—no matter the cost—swept through me, I would slowly roll from my right side over to my left side. This simple act caused my heart to beat wildly and erratically, but the reward was a whole new vista. The other side of the room was spread out before me like a map with countless possibilities of faraway adventures, including the most tantalizing of things, a window and a door. Nothing, of course, was in reach. (42)

What constitutes effort is of course contingent on what kind of effort you are capable of putting out, and it would be possible to read this passage as Bailey staging her own work display based on what the realities of her physical limitations allow. But the way she appropriates the structures, vocabulary and tropes of adventure writing suggests that there is also both subversion and subtle critique. The passage is structurally reminiscent of Macfarlane's river efforts, hitting many of the same thematic beats. Like Macfarlane's, it begins with the urge to explore, followed by extreme exertion, intense bodily reactions, and the payoff of a sublime landscape unfolding before her. The parody lies in what the ennobling effort in this case is—rolling over in bed—and what the sublime vista it provides consists of, namely the most ordinary of things - doors, shelves, books and a window. Bailey describes the perfectly mundane view unfolding before her in tones reminiscent of an adventuring nature writer on the edge of discovery after a bold ascent to some panoramic outlook: "Across the room there was a shelf that held many books, each a cover of possible interest if I only I could decipher them, but the distance was too great" (43). Perhaps of most note is the way epiphany is withheld from Bailey's work display. The endeavor is undercut by the repeated observation that Bailey cannot get to any of the things she beholds, neither books, doors nor windows. The work display then is not only parodied but undermined as a meaningful endeavor because all rewards are ultimately withheld.

The conclusion to the chapter expresses both parody and rejection: "Then, exhausted and empty from my audacious adventure, I'd make the slow roll back toward the kingdom of the terrarium and the tiny life it contained" (43). Describing the act of rolling over in bed as an "audacious adventure" is an act of drawing attention to types of nature experiences she cannot have and types of nature writing she cannot access. Stressing the fact that the audacious adventure leaves her empty is ideologically important, because the terrarium does not. Having yearned for the faraway bookshelves, bathtubs and windows, described in the language of someone viewing distant landscapes of endless opportunity, rolling back to the terrarium and its "tiny life" may strike one as an admission of defeat, an acknowledgement that her own life is now tiny. But that does not mesh with the type of nature writing that unfolds over the following pages as Bailey's preoccupation with that tiny life grows into a profound and invigorating study that draws on both direct experience of the snail and deep dives into libraries and archives to exhume its cultural footprint. A more likely

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reading would be that this—the terrarium—is where life *is*. Perhaps as Bailey rolls over in bed, literally turning her back on "audacious adventure," on doors and windows to the outside world, the reader witnesses a reorientation of values. It is not the trackless wilderness that sustains Bailey, but a piece of nature that is not only close to home, but inside of the home.

While Bailey does not refute that nature can be found outdoors, she also affirms that nature can be found inside, in the terrarium with her gastropod roommate. Rolling over in bed becomes her act of rebellion against work displays and fitness adventures that hold bodies to standards only the healthiest among us can ever measure up to. In refocusing on the terrarium, Baily finally jettisons the toilsome wilderness adventure and, alongside it, the ecophobic disdain for the impaired or human-impacted landscapes that it codifies. Indeed, turning over in bed stands as Bailey's literal turning point—over the course of the following chapters she begins her true crip nature writing, an immersive study of the snail's life in its terrarium, that is as rich and lively as anything written by a sweaty hiker. The next chapter tellingly presents the most extensive study of snails up until that point. This reorientation towards the tiny and confined paves the way for an inclusive crip nature writing ethic that affirms domestic wildness and disabled ecologies without prejudice, qualification or reservation.

Shrinking Nature Writers, Domestic Wildness and a Sense of Wonder in the Great Indoors

In *The Wild and the Domestic*, Nelson makes a persuasive case for how Mary Hunter Austin's nature writing and fiction utilized "animal stories to reimagine" many of the central tenets and convictions of wilderness writing (132). Arguably, Bailey's crip nature writing about her gastropod companion species furthers a similar project of reimagination, of pushing the boundaries of what constitutes a fitting and arresting subject for nature writing. Recent years have seen revisionist nature writers introducing settings and subjects that only decades ago would have been considered anathema to the genre. Going further than most, Bailey takes the genre to its perhaps most alien setting of all—the domestic sphere, the unnatural landscape of the great indoors. This aligns her work with explorative subgenres such as, for example, urban, suburban or new nature writing, and positions *The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating* as another driver in the genre's reluctant, but steadfast movement into the new and altered environments of the Anthropocene, reinfusing the genre with both originality and a deepened, diversified and more universally accessible sense of wonder.

Such experimentation with setting, literally transporting nature writing out of its tried-and-true comfort zone, situates Bailey's work at a confluence between ecocritical and eco crip critiques of the genre. As an ecocritic, Nelson notes how the "wilderness worship" (18) of nature writing has erected "a hierarchical ranking of one landscape over another" (19). In this hierarchy the most striking wilderness spots reign supreme over less impressive locations. She also blasts the visual bias that

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ungirds the wilderness adventure, citing Rebecca Solnit's claim that when landscapes are understood primarily as "visual spectacle" a touristic relationship with nature is the only possible outcome (7). Ann Ronald pursues an adjacent line of critique in her essay "Why Don't They Write about Nevada?" in which she lambasts the conservative impulse in nature writing to seek adventure and immersion in the same types of resplendent wilderness. Rather than accepting the American West as the spiritual heartland for the genre, Ronald provocatively questions whether, given the sameness of its aesthetic output, the wilderness genre possesses any spiritual facility at all anymore. In an entertaining, but pointed example of what Gessner would later, in "Sick of Nature," call "the Incredible Shrinking Nature Writer" (10), Ronald asserts that "[w]here John Wesley Powell and Everett Ruess once explored, Edward Abbey followed, trailed closely by Ann Zwinger, David Douglas, Rob Shultheis, and countless others –so many others […] that their terrain begins to look familiar and what was once wilderness has become commonplace" (10). Anticipating Gessner's irreverent comparison of modern nature writers to ants when measured against their literary forebears, Ronald evokes the mental image of a queue of nature writers strung out across the same "spectacular untracked landscapes" (16), waiting for their moment to write about them in a process of steadily diminishing returns: "Using the imagery of their predecessors, they simply discover new arches, alcoves, glens and grottoes […] each waiting to be pictured in the same words, more or less" (10). Seeking out the same setting over and over again diminishes the possibility of the genre to evoke a wild sense of wonder and shrinks the creativity of the nature writer. Ronald describes the process as unintentionally civilizing, a form of literary "overcrowding and aesthetic destruction," suggesting that "American wilderness writing is destroying the very places it loves" (19). The excessively monogamous fidelity to a few chosen places can thus be reconceived as a cause of creative paucity rather than imaginative enrichment.

Against this horizon, the thematic outliers like Bailey's crip nature writing represent a desperately needed creative reorientation. She successfully makes her featureless sickroom and terrarium vibrate with more originality than the commonplace terrain of wilderness writing. With her different core story and its sense of domestic wildness, Bailey injects some of the diversification ecocritics like Ronald and Nelson have suggested the genre needs. From her bedroom, she practices a sense of wonder that is vital specifically because it is ordinary and accessible, not in the sense of being lesser, but laying claim to wonder as something within easy reach of readers in their everyday lives, suggesting that Walden can be an everyday experience.

While ecocritics have targeted what amounts to an elitist landscape aesthetic in the core story of nature writing, eco-crip critiques approach wilderness writing along related trajectories targeting its implicit rejection of certain sets of experiences and many types of environments. Critics, such as Taylor, stress that the genre others differently abled bodies in a striking parallel to the way it others impacted environments. Through her transportation of nature writing into the domestic

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sphere, Bailey dramatizes her challenge to what Kafer refers to as the assumption that "nature only exists 'out there' as opposed to in everyday spaces" (144). Kafer notes as highly consequential such a conceptual displacement of nature from "our houses and neighborhoods" (145), because it enshrines only a few landscapes and generally able-bodied behaviors in relation to those landscapes. Taylor's eco-crip skepticism towards the wilderness branch of nature writing similarly probes deeper than its visual bias towards beautiful and unspoiled locations. She notes how wilderness writing performs near perfect health, both in the sense of nature writers putting on work displays and rigorously screened visually unblemished landscapes, in ways that gatekeep which bodily experiences and which physical environments are suitable. She further claims that ableist ecologies "purge disability and dependency from ecological futures" (26). Using Tracy Brynne Voyles' concept of "wastelanding," Taylor suggests that ableist ecologies classify people and places alike into categories of disposability along gradients of fitness, "constructing some landscapes and peoples as pollutable," in the sense of "sacrifice zones" (25). Fitness, health, purity, and undisturbed wilderness are necessary qualifications for protection. What fails to measure up is more likely to be sacrificed or abandoned. Bailey's celebration of the snail repudiates these biases as she performs her own gradual reorientation from them, towards a receptive state in which she becomes able to find the wildness she needs in domesticated circumstances: "The life of a snail is as full of tasty food, comfortable beds of sorts, and a mix of pleasant and not-so pleasant adventures as that of anyone I know" (98).

In place of the figure of the nature writer as a solitary—and usually male—wanderer, striding away from any location he deems unfit for his hiking boots, Bailey trains herself to see wonder in precisely the circumstances and places of which she was reflexively dismissive before. The chapter "Explorations," which establishes how Bailey and the snail fall into a pattern of cohabitation, more importantly dramatizes how the snail functions as a swivel, shifting Bailey out of her accustomed pattern of despair and into a generative focus on the animal on her nightstand. Within the span of two pages, there are three instances of the snail transmuting Bailey's outlook, not in a way that erases the challenging nature of her illness, but which enables her to recognize the ways in which her days still have meaning. The first is perhaps the most poignant, as Bailey details how each morning she awakens to an interlude of "pure, sweet, uncontrollable hope" that her health has "returned magically with daybreak" (21). Reality then reasserts itself in a pattern that starts every day with bitter disappointment. The arrival of the snail breaks this cycle, not as the fairytale healing magic she yearns for, but nonetheless as a meaningful point of engagement for a despairing mind that becomes fundamentally restorative through a gradual reorientation of values and perspectives. Bailey's bleak moment of realizing that nothing has changed for the better is overcome in the very next sentence as she notes "And then I thought of the snail" (21). The pattern is the same in each three occurrences, starting out with a despair informed by her habitual outlook and entrenched values, which are then immediately derailed as her thoughts turn to the

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snail, which "comes to her rescue" and gives her "a fresh perspective" (21-22). This trinity of snail-rescues concludes with Bailey's recognition that they are "officially cohabiting" and that the snail has endowed her life with "a new focus" (22). Bailey's fascination with this state of cohabitation signals her readiness to begin true domestic nature writing in Part II, titled "A Green Kingdom."

Through her own developing sense of wonder, Bailey erodes the wild/domestic dichotomy that troubles critics from Nelson to Taylor. The opening chapter of "A Green Kingdom," titled "The Forest Floor," stages a meditative synchronization between the nature writer and her gastropod subject that seems as beneficial as the transcendence sought by others in remote wildernesses: "my often frantic and frustrated thoughts would gradually settle down to match its calm, smooth pace" (26). The chapter title itself seems almost ironic, as both author and snail are very far removed from any forest. And yet, it performs the deliberate positioning that can be seen threaded throughout *The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating* against the more traditional subjects and spaces of wilderness writing. The forest floor in question is of course the terrarium, an anthropogenic space if there ever was one, fully crafted and designed through human intention. Importantly, Bailey insists on this microcosm and its denizen as an inspirational space for the nature writer's contemplation: "While the snail slept, I explored the terrarium from my bed, letting my eyes wander through the miniature hills and dales of its fresh green landscape" (28). Unlike the satire that colors Bailey's audacious adventure of turning over in bed, here the domestic nature writing she begins is entirely earnest. The language she brings to bear on this hand-crafted environment vibrates with an honesty that easily surpasses the repetitious "managed remoteness" and "planned romance" of wilderness writing (Ronald 11). While the terrarium exemplifies the very pinnacle of a "planned" and "managed" environment, Bailey subjects it to all of Lyon's three features of nature writing, demonstrating how wild domesticity, and thus many other forms of human-impacted landscapes, may elevate the spirit if the mind is receptive: "The variety of mosses was so satisfying, from a deep, loose softness to dense mounds with fuzzy and velvety textures. Their hues ranged from bright grass greens to deep dark greens and from sharp lemon greens to light blue greens" (11). This is a landscape put together by Bailey and her caregivers within the four walls of her bedroom, and yet she visualizes it for the reader with an attention to tactile detail and nuance of color palette that rivals a wilderness nature writer's enjoyment of similar features far away from human habitation. Bailey is tellingly not oblivious to this seeming incongruity. In the next paragraph, she performs a journey through memory, to describe how the same ferns that grace her terrarium live by the brook she used to hike along behind her home. Here she provides some classic natural history information about the ferns, acknowledging the magical nature of their survival and evolutionary adaptations. And yet, by taking her reader on this mental excursion into the terrain of conventional wilderness, Bailey brings the focus back to the domestic wildness of the terrarium, insisting that "[t]he fresh terrarium at my side was lovely all by itself—a green and growing ecosystem; that it provided a magnificent backdrop for the humble brown

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snail was all the better" (29). The wilderness out there may be magical, but the domestic ecosystem of the terrarium is "magnificent" too. Bailey's placement of the botanical information about ferns next to her observations about the terrarium's plant life puts them on equal footing. The snail itself does not stay a "humble brown" for long either, as Bailey comes to write about it in increasingly glowing terms as their linkage grows.

Nelson argues that the transcendentalists saw a clear correlation between the character of a landscape and the writing to which it gave rise: "The wilder the landscape, the more romantically superior the writing would be" (3). Ronald similarly identifies a contemporary pattern in wilderness writing in which the visually biased hierarchy of settings determines the quality of the writing: "When a landscape calls for grandiose terms, an author will find the appropriate words; when a scene is less majestic, lesser language will do" (13) to the point of sometimes being "actually denigrating" (15). As Bailey's perspective on the snail shifts, as her values undergo their reorientation, she breaks from this pattern of denigration, and we see her descriptions undergo a commensurable adjustment towards celebration. Already in the following chapter "Life in a Microcosm," the snail becomes a being "that seemed to defy physics" (32). Here Bailey chronicles how the snail itself puts on work displays that beggar anything even the most physically fit nature writer would be able to perform as it moves "over the very tips of mosses without bending them, and it could travel straight up the stem of a fern and then continue upside down along the frond's underside" (32). Soon the humble brown has become "my elegant snail" (70), "a creature of Olympic caliber" (33) belonging to a more "critical" (87) ecological "niche on earth" than mammals (87). Bailey not only personally benefits from her change in perspective on f the small-scale domestic wildness of the snail, gradually shifting from despair towards adjustment, acceptance, and, eventually, contentment. She also indirectly comments on the possibility of fulfilling the objectives of nature writing from a bedridden domesticity, where it should be doubly impossible.

Bailey's writing explores the potential for being open to finding unanticipated wonder in the unlikeliest of places and messiest of meshes between wild and domestic. Neither terraria nor horizontal confinement are commensurable with the popular core story the shrinking nature writer has sought while hiking in Abbey's shadow. Rather than copying an established script that relies on a prescribed aesthetic and codifies rugged individualism, Bailey's crip nature writing enacts a migration of the genre from its typical scales and terrains to foment values and perspectives that are stripped of exceptionalism and far more inclusive of ordinary experiences and human-influenced terrains than core wilderness adventure writing. Kafer notes the multiple unrecognized ways that nature reaches into the domestic sphere, such as through water in the tap (145). Bailey's terrarium is of course such a space, an oasis of profoundly altered nature within Bailey's apartment; the snail is of a common species and subjected to partial domestication, and Bailey herself is dependent on care and support from other people. Crip nature writing broadly might require more overt mediations of the human-nature experience than the wilderness

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adventure which tends to downplay any diversity of experience, pretending the human is not there in every piece of equipment utilized by the adventuring writer from shoes to notebooks. And yet, the terrarium throbs with Waldenesque force and freshness in Bailey's sentences, and the snail asserts its wildness and lives its self-willed life in this space that also serves as a metaphor for wildlife more broadly in the Anthropocene. From her bedside, Bailey unapologetically shapes an aesthetic that dignifies different settings and different scales of perception, such as minute, ordinary, nearby and limited wilds.

Perhaps Bailey's accomplishment with her domestic wildness ultimately returns us to Thoreau's essay "Walking," briefly critiqued above as an example of ableism. Famous for its claim that "in wildness is the preservation of the world" (71), this essay especially may seem culpably implicated in the erection of the wild/domestic dichotomy, facilitating an evaluative separation of "the places where people live and a pristine, wild nature" that only a select few visit (Nelson 7). And yet that impression may be due to a legacy of distortive readings. While "Walking" may be part of the origin story of this troubling dichotomization, Nelson outlines how this stems from a sometimes deliberate truncation of "Thoreau's complicated wild ideas" that does "American literature a sad disservice" (7).[4] Contrary to what has become a conventional reading of Thoreau's thoughts on wildness, Nelson argues that Thoreau neither denigrated nor sought to expunge the domestic from his concept of wildness. Wildness was not a contrast to domesticity, but rather a force that could be found in all things just waiting to erupt (4). The snail oozing its way into Bailey's life triggers this eruption of wildness that both sets her on a path to spiritual healing and generates her crip nature writing. Thoreau's complicated wildness is more than spacious enough to productively align with Bailey's domestic wildness. It is precisely the capacity for wildness Thoreau believes is inherent to all things that Bailey taps into. Against the context of her illness, the most enduring contribution of Bailey's crip nature writing may be taking nature back home and showing just how powerful the tonic of domestic wildness can be if only you scratch the surface.

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Conclusion

In *The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating*, Bailey's bedside becomes a site of profound genre-innovation and reappraisal of ecological values. The crip nature writing that emerges from her confinement to solitude and enforced rootedness provides a poignant and challenging alternative to narratives of able-bodied adventuring and physical transcendence in immaculate wilderness spaces. The disabled body, originally dismissed as a bizarre and unknowable landscape from which only one dismal avenue into the future could unfold, is inverted as a generative vantage point from which profound and meaningful meditations on nature are possible.

[4] Nelson analyses Roderick Frazier Nash's editing of "Walking" as an example of deliberately reshaping Thoreau's richer and more complex ideas about wildness into a simplified paean for wilderness.

Rejuvenation and ecological awakening come in the unlikeliest of shapes, the most ordinary and unassuming of woodland snails, whose swelling importance to the author stages an intervention in nature writing's favoritism towards organisms and landscapes with more traditionally obvious charismatic features. Far from being a passive object of observation, the snail becomes Bailey's "true mentor, its tiny existence had sustained me" (160). As Bailey's condition marginally improves, she finds that snail time requires more patience and concentration than before. This suggests that with improved physicality, the hard-won lessons imparted by the snail become trickier to sustain, so Bailey writes the following note to herself: "*Lots to do at whatever pace I can go. I must remember the snail. Always remember the snail*" (161, emphasis in original). Scott Slovic writes that one of the achievements of the Renaissance of American nature writing was cultivating an ability to "appreciate the unappreciated" dimensions of the arid landscapes of the desert Southwest. However, those landscapes have since been appreciated into tedium by shrinking nature writers producing iterative texts. Bailey's crip nature writing suggests ways of restoring nature writers to size by expanding the horizon of engagement to include ordinary creatures, local nature, limited wilds, other scales of being, alternate time frames, domestic wildness, disabled ecologies, and, most importantly, by learning to live deeply and meaningfully immersed in what surrounds us rather than in exclusionary sites of seemingly immaculate nature located so far away that only a privileged able-bodied few may experience them.

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Floating at the Edge: Eco-Crip Perspectives on Disability and Nature in Muhammad Makhzangi's "He Was Chasing a Butterfly in the Sea"

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Resumen

This paper explores Egyptian writer Muhammad Makhzangi's short story "He Was Chasing a Butterfly in the Sea" ("Kāna yuṭāridu farāshatan fī al-baḥr; كان يطارد فراشة في البحر") from his collection *Animals in Our Days* (*Ḥayawānāt ayyāminā*; حيوانات أيامنا) (2006) through an eco-crip lens, examining how it intertwines disability, ecological vulnerability, and interspecies care. The story follows a man who, mesmerized by the beauty of a fish in the Red Sea—described as fluttering like a butterfly—ventures dangerously far from shore. Upon realizing his isolation and exhaustion, he attempts suicide using his harpoon; however, he is left paralyzed from the waist down and loses the use of his legs. The narrative is framed by scenes of the protagonist in a wheelchair, which transforms into a floating chair yet remains confined to the water's edge. This image bookends the story, highlighting the tension between the desire to conquer nature and the constraints imposed by both body and environment. The sea resists romanticization: it is alluring, unforgiving, and ultimately indifferent. Yet, at his most vulnerable moment, the protagonist is saved not by human intervention, but through an unexpected assistance from dolphins, suggesting alternative, more-than-human models of care and survival. Rather than portraying disability as lack or tragedy, Makhzangi's story reconfigures it as a site of ecological revelation. The protagonist's journey critiques the impulse to dominate nature and dramatizes the emotional and physical costs of such hubris. In doing so, the text challenges extractive and ableist narratives, offering a vision of ecological attunement rooted in humility, bodily limitation, and unexpected solidarities. This reading positions "He Was Chasing a Butterfly in the Sea" as a rare example of eco-crip literature in Arabic, expanding the possibilities for imagining disabled bodies in relation to natural environments, risk, and relational survival.

Keywords: Eco-crip theory, disabled ecologies, posthumanism, Arabic literature, metaphor analysis.

Resumen

Este artículo analiza el cuento del escritor egipcio Muhammad Makhzangi "He Was Chasing a Butterfly in the Sea," ("Kāna yuṭāridu farāshatan fī al-baḥr; كان يطارد فراشة في البحر") incluido en su colección *Animals in Our Days* (*Ḥayawānāt ayyāminā*; حيوانات أيامنا) (2006), desde una perspectiva *eco-crip*, examinando cómo entrelaza la discapacidad, la vulnerabilidad ecológica y el cuidado entre especies. La historia sigue a un hombre que, hipnotizado por la belleza de un pez en el mar Rojo—descrito como revoloteando como una mariposa—se aventura peligrosamente lejos de la costa. Al darse cuenta de su aislamiento y agotamiento, intenta suicidarse con su arpón; sin embargo, queda paralizado de cintura para abajo y pierde el uso de sus piernas. La narración se enmarca en escenas del protagonista en una silla de ruedas, que se transforma en una silla flotante, pero permanece confinada a la orilla del agua. Esta imagen rodea la historia, resaltando la tensión entre el deseo de conquistar la naturaleza y las limitaciones impuestas tanto por el cuerpo como por el entorno. El mar se resiste a la idealización: es seductor, implacable y, en última instancia, indiferente. Sin embargo, en su momento más vulnerable, el protagonista no es salvado por la intervención humana, sino por la ayuda inesperada de los delfines, lo que sugiere modelos alternativos de cuidado y supervivencia más allá de lo humano. En lugar de retratar la discapacidad como una carencia o una tragedia, la historia de

Makhzangi la reconfigura como un lugar de revelación ecológica. El viaje del protagonista critica el impulso de dominar la naturaleza y dramatiza los costes emocionales y físicos de tal arrogancia. Al hacerlo, el texto desafía las narrativas extractivas y capacitistas, ofreciendo una visión de la sintonía ecológica basada en la humildad, la limitación corporal y las solidaridades inesperadas. Esta lectura posiciona "He Was Chasing a Butterfly in the Sea" como un raro ejemplo de literatura *eco-crip* en árabe, ampliando las posibilidades de imaginar los cuerpos discapacitados en relación con los entornos naturales, el riesgo y la supervivencia relacional.

Palabras clave: Teoría *eco-crip*, ecologías discapacitadas, poshumanismo, literatura árabe, análisis de metáforas.

Introduction and Theoretical Underpinnings

In recent years, the environmental humanities have increasingly turned toward bodies marked by vulnerability, impairment, and interdependence, foregrounding the ways ecological crises disproportionately impact those rendered fragile by social, political, or material structures (Clare 15). This intellectual shift, crystallized in eco-crip theory and crip ecologies, questions long-standing assumptions that frame disability as an individual deficit and nature as a domain of purity or health. Disability is indeed profoundly ecological: it emerges from toxic environments, colonial infrastructures, and extractive systems that degrade both landscapes and bodies (Chen 15). At the same time, disability illuminates relational forms of survival and care that unsettle dominant imaginaries of self-sufficiency or mastery over the natural world (Taylor 62; Kafer 150). These perspectives have opened a field in which ecological entanglement and embodied vulnerability are thought together, generating what theorists now call disabled ecologies (Chen 202; Kafer 25; Taylor 3). Despite the rapid development of eco-crip studies in North American and European scholarship, its application to Arabic literature remains remarkably limited. Whereas overall studies of ecological thought in Arabic fiction have grown in scope, addressing desert imaginaries, water scarcity, animal narratives, and posthuman motifs, such as Sharif S. Elmusa's reflections on Bedouin environmental ethics in Arabic culture, Haneen Ewaidat's ecocritical reading of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Sharqāwī's *al-Arḍ* (*The Land*) (2020), and Ebtihal Mukattash's analysis of ecological displacement and transnational environments in Fadia Faqir's *My Name Is Salma* (2022), disability rarely appears as an ecological category or as a critical lens for reading human–nonhuman relations. Indeed, in emergent work on disability in Middle Eastern and North African contexts, impairment is often shaped by war, environmental degradation, infrastructural inequality, and social stigma rather than by the institutional ableism emphasized in Western crip theory, as portrayed in assessments such as *Disability in the Arab Region: An Overview* (2018).

Nevertheless, the literature of the Egyptian physician-turned-writer Muhammad Makhzangi appears as a singular voice within this paradigm, emerging from a life shaped by precarious ecologies and vulnerable bodies and reframing these

dynamics by shifting the origin of disability away from social or medical structures and situating it within an encounter with the natural world.[1] In doing so, it opens space for theorizing Global South disability ecologies that do not neatly map onto Western concepts of access, cure, or technological mediation. Born in Mansoura in the Nile Delta in 1950, trained as a doctor, and later specializing in psychology and alternative medicine in the Soviet Union, Makhzangi lived in Kiev during the Chernobyl disaster, an event he would later reconstruct in his memoir *Memories of a Meltdown* (1998). The experience of witnessing bodies altered by radiation, infrastructures collapsing under invisible forces, and the daily uncertainty of inhabiting a contaminated landscape marks his writing with an acute sensitivity to the fragility of life. His decision to abandon medicine for journalism and fiction after 1986 suggests a shift from treating bodies to narrating their entanglement with damaged environments. Across his work, Makhzangi repeatedly returns to the question of what it means to live, and survive, within unstable ecologies. During his years in the Soviet Union, and later through his travels documented in *Southward and Eastward* (2011), Makhzangi observed extensive fish exploitation, industrial fishing zones, and fishponds in China, where the illusion of controlling aquatic life was intertwined with environmental degradation and the commodification of marine species. His recent book *The Smell of the Sun* (2025) continues these concerns, depicting the intensive fishing of sharks and portraying the sea as a liminal, transformative space in which humans merge with the environment, momentarily dissolving the boundary between body and nature. These experiences form a conceptual thread running through his writing, that is the repeated spectacle of humans trying to master the sea and its creatures, and the equally repeated revelation that the sea remains an autonomous, resistant, and often unforgiving force. In this context, the short story "He Was Chasing a Butterfly in the Sea," which appears in the collection *Animals in Our Days* (2006),[2] can be read as a distillation of Makhzangi's lifelong preoccupation with bodily vulnerability as an ecological condition. The story's narrative arc—a man enchanted by a Red Sea fish, drawn into danger, and ultimately surviving through a spinal injury that leaves him paralysed—reflects not only the moral paradoxes he witnessed during Chernobyl, but more broadly his sustained encounters with human attempts to dominate, manage, and rationalize

[1] Critical scholarship on Makhzangi remains relatively limited but has approached his work from several perspectives. Monica Ruocco examines his animal narratives as a contemporary reworking of the classical Arabic tradition of writing about animals, with particular attention to *Ḥayawānāt ayyāminā* (*Animals in Our Days*) (Ruocco 371–88). Ferial J. Ghazoul situates Makhzangi within the broader "greening" of contemporary Arabic literature, considering his work in relation to ecological consciousness and the transformation of inherited motifs in postcolonial discourse (Ghazoul). More recently, M. Litvin has examined Makhzangi's representations of Ukraine across his 1986 and 2022 writings, extending scholarship on the author toward questions of travel, memory, and post-Soviet space (Litvin). While these studies demonstrate growing interest in Makhzangi from ecological, animal-studies, and transnational perspectives, his short story "He Was Chasing a Butterfly in the Sea" has received comparatively little sustained critical attention, and its representation of disability has not, to my knowledge, been examined through an eco-crip framework.

[2] The story was originally published in Arabic by the Cairene publishing house Dar al-Shorouq in 2006 and later translated into English by Chip Rossetti in *Animals in Our Days: A Book of Stories* (2022).

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nature across different cultural and geographical contexts. Because this study focuses closely on metaphor, sensory imagery, and ecological language, the analysis relies primarily on the Arabic original in order to preserve the semantic and figurative nuances of Makhzangi's prose. I provide my own translation for the majority of quotes from the text. Rossetti's translation is used for selected longer quotations in English and is cross-referenced in the works cited list with his name first to clearly distinguish this source from the original.

Thus, this article brings together eco-crip theory and multispecies studies to analyse how Makhzangi's "He Was Chasing a Butterfly in the Sea" reimagines embodiment as relational, permeable, and ecologically embedded (Alaimo 2). Eco-crip theory provides the primary conceptual frame, as the story opens and closes with the protagonist seated in his wheelchair at the water's edge; an image that positions disability as the interpretive vantage point through which the narrative's ecological relations become visible. Alison Kafer's relational and political understanding of disability directs attention to how bodily states emerge from interactions with material environments (62). Sunaura Taylor's theorization of crip interdependence informs the study's focus on how embodiment, assistive technologies, and ecological settings co-produce forms of dependence and agency (150). Ria Cheyne's work on wonder and disability in speculative fiction provides a vocabulary for considering how bodily transformation can function as a catalyst for shifts in perception and ecological understanding (2).

Multispecies studies form a second methodological pillar, offering a framework for analysing how human–nonhuman interactions structure the narrative. Drawing on Donna Haraway (262) and Kirksey and Helmreich (1), this approach treats the fish, the dolphins, and the sea not as symbolic elements but as actors whose presence and behaviour contribute to the story's ecological dynamics. A multispecies methodology enables the analysis to explore how relations across species boundaries might be depicted, how agency may be distributed, and how survival, vulnerability, and care are configured within these interactions. This perspective also aligns with Alaimo's notion of trans-corporeality (2), which emphasizes the permeability of human and nonhuman bodies and the material exchanges that occur between them.

Thirdly, the textual analysis, particularly of metaphors of luminosity, dissolution, machinery, and engulfment, reveals how ecological and embodied dynamics are encoded at the level of narrative form. In Makhzangi's story, disability emerges through a sensory and affective encounter with the sea: an overwhelming moment of wonder triggered by a butterflyfish draws the protagonist into environmental rhythms that exceed bodily control, reframing impairment as a new mode of ecological attunement rather than a moral or personal failure. At the same time, the narrative dismantles fantasies of autonomy and technological mastery by showing how the protagonist's imagined body-as-machine collapses when confronted with the scale, force, and opacity of the marine environment. The sea itself appears as an indifferent yet agentive presence whose pressures and temporalities

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reshape the swimmer's body without intention, exposing the limits of anthropocentric perception, which has "been too exclusively oriented towards humans (Latour 19) and the fragility of human control. Indeed, Merleau Ponty's phenomenology starts from the "liberty of indifference" (Merleau-Ponty 36) to show how "meaning inhabits the word" (224). Within this ecology of indifference, the dolphins' intervention introduces a contrasting mode of environmental agency: not benevolent or symbolic, but relational and co-present, enacting a form of survival dependent on multispecies coordination rather than human strength. Central to this study is metaphorical analysis, drawing on Lakoff and Johnson's understanding of metaphors as conceptual frameworks that structure perception rather than decorative language. In Makhzangi's story, metaphors of light, dissolution, machinery, and predation do not merely embellish the narrative but actively shape the reader's experience of ecological agency and bodily vulnerability. Following Eve Sedgwick's insistence that minute textual textures can reveal entire affective and epistemological structures, this method attends to sensory density, rhythm, chromatic shifts, and focalization in order to trace how narrative performs the dissolution of human–environment boundaries. Caroline Levine's theorization of form as a system of constraints and affordances further illuminates how the text's imagery organizes ecological relations.

Within Makhzangi's oeuvre, "He Was Chasing a Butterfly in the Sea" stands out as a compact yet profound meditation on the limits of human control, the costs of environmental misreading, and the potential of multispecies care. It extends the ecological sensibility of his earlier Chernobyl writings into a different register: from nuclear disaster to marine awe, but with the same attention to the fragile, permeable boundary between body and world. At the same time, the story is deeply rooted in the ecology of the Red Sea itself, a space historically imagined as both abundant and dangerous, where dazzling biodiversity coexists with strong currents, coral formations, predatory species, and increasingly intensified forms of human exploitation through tourism, fishing, and extraction. Makhzangi mobilizes this marine environment not as an exotic backdrop but as an autonomous ecological force whose beauty, opacity, and indifference reshape human embodiment and perception. In this sense, the story offers a contribution within contemporary Arabic literature and environmental humanities alike: a narrative emerging from a specifically Arab marine ecology that imagines disability not as marginal or metaphorical, but as central to ecological understanding.

Disability as Ecological Event

"He Was Chasing a Butterfly in the Sea" constructs disability as an ecological event, a bodily transformation produced not by pathology or moral failure but through a direct, sensory, and affectively charged encounter with the natural world. Makhzangi announces this from the very first paragraph, which stages disability not

as a narrative afterthought but as the central lens through which the marine environment is perceived. The story opens:

> At the water's edge, at a time when the beach was empty of people, in the early morning toward dawn, when the sea had receded to its lowest ebb, I paused to watch the man in his wheelchair as he pushed its wheels with the remaining strength in his arms. He left two deep tracks, parallel and separate, imprinted in the wet sand [...] The chair seemed as though it would gently sink beneath the rising tide, but something surprising swelled up from below the seat and made it float like a raft rising and falling on the water: the man had equipped his chair with an inflatable cushion [...] The chair bobbed on the water as he directed it where he wanted to go [...] the two wheels beneath his hands were transformed into both rudders and propellers together. (Rossetti 25–26)

This quiet yet meticulously rendered scene introduces three core elements that structure the story's ecological logic: disability as framing perspective, disability with the subsequent transformation, and environmental temporality.

Firstly, the disabled body is not isolated but visibly entangled with tidal rhythms: the wheels mark the sand, the tide fills and empties their tracks, and the chair's flotation depends on the precise timing of the right moment. Rather than depicting disability as lack, Makhzangi shows the man as an active environmental reader, someone who enters the sea by aligning himself with its cycles. His mobility device itself becomes a tidal technology, a "crip" apparatus in Taylor's sense, who uses the term "crip" to refer to specificities of time, that is "crip time," based on different abilities we may have (18) whose function is activated only in relation to the sea's movement. The disabled body and the marine environment co-produce the scene: neither is fully intelligible without the other. Indeed, the vocabulary of the sea in the previous paragraph ("ebb," "tide," "beach," "water") finds an explanation only in the vocabulary connected to disability ("wheelchair," "tracks," "inflatable cushion," "chair," "wheels"). Immediately after establishing this ecological frame, the story pivots into memory: "Now he is riding on the surface of the sea, but he isn't going far out from shore—rather, he is going deep into the memory of a day that he once told me about… a day when he would go out into the sea on two living, healthy legs […]" (Rossetti 26). This transition is crucial: the narrative makes explicit that the disabled present self is the narrative subject, while the able-bodied past self exists only as a remembered state whose disappearance must be explained. Furthermore, the mediating third-person narrator creates a distance between body and discourse that mirrors the ecological distance the story explores between humans and the nonhuman world. In this sense, the narrator functions less as an authoritative voice than as a listener attempting to translate an embodied ecological experience that exceeds language, through a witnessing narrator who observes the disabled man at the shore and later recounts his story through memory and narration. Disability is therefore not the crisis to be solved; it is the starting point of perception, experience, and ecological attunement. The analeptic movement into the past is triggered by the physical act of floating, suggesting that memory itself is ecological: the tide lifts him, and memory rises as well; a memory that is filtered through the awareness of the disabled present self. The origin of the disability is then revealed: "But that day he

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noticed it in the water. A surprising shudder and warmth overcame him; his conscious mind went blank as the water grew turbulent" (Rossetti 26). Here, disability emerges from wonder, not from catastrophe in the conventional sense. The protagonist's paralysis originates in a moment of aesthetic arrest, an overwhelming attraction to the sight of the vivid yellow butterflyfish. In the original Arabic, this moment is even more sensorially charged, literally: "the butterfly […] the butterfly of the sea."[3] The repetition underscores that what he perceives is not merely a fish but a cross-species aesthetic metaphor: something fragile, bright, and airborne, made marine. This structural choice resonates closely with Cheyne's theorization of disability and wonder, where bodily transformation often arises from moments that suspend or disarm the subject's perceptual routines.

Secondly, the narrative structures time through ecological rhythms associated with the protagonist's disability. The structure moves from: (1) disabled present → (2) remembered able-bodied past → (3) disabled present restored. This cyclical rhythm mirrors tidal movement: approach, withdrawal, return. The disabled body is narratively synchronized with environmental cycles in ways that the able-bodied past self was not. When young and able-bodied, he enters the sea at the wrong time; misreading the calm of low tide as safety, he fails to perceive ecological signals. The disabled present self, by contrast, acts in harmony with the sea's patterns: he arrives "towards dawn" (25) enters only during the lowest ebb, and leaves before the beach fills. Disability, therefore, becomes a state of ecological attention, a form of knowing the environment through physical limitation. The ecological consequences of this disorientation are articulated through a broader figurative and sensory system in which color, light, and bodily perception mark the protagonist's loss of environmental orientation. As he swims after the butterflyfish, the sea is rendered not as a backdrop but as an agentive medium that absorbs and transforms the body. The underwater world appears as "blue and green suffused with light" (24), a chromatic saturation that overwhelms his senses and prevents him from accurately perceiving distance, depth, and direction. The colors are therefore not merely decorative; they register the breakdown of ecological perception itself. Because the protagonist can no longer interpret the marine environment correctly, he misjudges his position, exhausts his body, and becomes increasingly vulnerable to the forces of tide, pressure, and water. This sensory disorientation produces material ecological consequences: panic replaces orientation, self-rescue becomes impossible, and the body loses its capacity to respond effectively to the environment. The later flash of "white, then green, then red" (24), marks the culmination of this perceptual collapse, transforming sensory overwhelm into bodily injury as the harpoon pierces his spine and permanently alters his relation to the sea.

Thus, disability in the story functions as an ecological mode of embodiment shaped by tidal rhythms, sensory transformation, and environmental vulnerability. By framing the narrative through the disabled present self, Makhzangi redefines

[3] "فراشة البحر...فراشة" (Makhzangi 23; my translation).

disability not as rupture or deficiency but as ecological attunement. In doing so, the story dissolves anthropocentrism: the human body is no longer the stable center of the marine world, but a vulnerable organism dependent on nonhuman rhythms, forces, and temporalities beyond its control.

Human Hubris as Ecological Ignorance

The story's systematic dismantling of human hubris is articulated through the protagonist's overconfidence in his own physical power, sensory perception, and technological augmentation. Whereas the previous section traced the ecological emergence of disability through wonder and sensory immersion, this section addresses a different dynamic: the protagonist's belief that he can command the sea through effort, intention, and mechanical force. Makhzangi embeds this hubris in the metaphors the swimmer uses to imagine his own body. From the moment he begins to pursue the butterflyfish, he frames his limbs not as organic, fallible members but as mechanical parts capable of propulsion and control. His legs beat the water "like the propellers of a pursuing boat,"[4] and his strokes cut the surface with the force of engines, until his movements resemble "the ploughing of a tracked vehicle across a terrain whose hardness and softness intermingle."[5] These metaphors do not simply exaggerate his strength; they encode an anthropocentric fantasy in which the human body becomes a self-sufficient machine, insulated from the vulnerabilities and contingencies of its environment.

This fantasy becomes the conceptual core of his hubris. He imagines the sea as something his mechanical body can traverse, overcome, or outpace, treating its waters as passive material rather than active medium. What he misrecognizes is not simply the butterflyfish's allure but the premise that human propulsion, muscular or technological, can dominate an element whose scale, rhythm, and force far exceed the limits of human physiology. Makhzangi gradually reveals the instability of this fantasy by allowing the protagonist's metaphors to turn against him. The more he imagines his limbs as engines, the more he exhausts them; the harder he presses his mechanical body forward, the less responsive it becomes. His overreliance on mechanical logic blinds him to ecological cues: the shifting currents, the rising tide, the cold that begins to constrict his muscles, the distance he has already traveled. In this sense, hubris is not merely arrogance but misalignment: a cognitive and sensory failure to recognize the sea's agency.

The narrative articulates this misalignment not through sudden catastrophe but through a slow, accumulating process of spatial disintegration. After paralysis, disability emerged through an ecological temporality; his body becoming synchronized with tides, ebb and flow, and cyclical rhythms, as disability merges with

[4] "كرفاصات زورق مطارد" (Makhzangi 25; my translation).

[5] وكأن زحفه عائما على الماء قد استحال إلى حرث عربة مجنزرة، لأرض تختلط قسوتها بالليين" (Makhzangi 25; my translation).

ecological temporality. By contrast, the dismantling of human hubris unfolds through the erosion of spatial certainty. The first sign of collapse is not pain or injury but the disappearance of orientation: when he turns back, the shoreline has vanished, replaced by an unbroken field of water that offers no coordinates, no depth cues, no directional anchors. This loss of spatial reference is the beginning of the end of mastery, for the machine-body he imagines cannot function without a knowable grid, without stable points in relation to which propulsion makes sense. The sea refuses to provide such structure. What follows is a cascading series of bodily and environmental breakdowns: saltwater entering the breathing tube, cold numbing his limbs, strokes losing force, breath faltering. As spatial certainty dissolves, the metaphors shift accordingly. Images of engines and vehicles give way to metaphors of organic struggle: gasping, choking, sinking. The narrative no longer describes his actions through mechanical analogies because the body itself no longer behaves like a machine but like something porous, vulnerable, and unmoored. Therefore, hubris dissolves not through moral revelation but through spatial and physiological evidence: the human body requires orientation to act, and orientation is an ecological gift the sea can withdraw at any moment.

Crucially, this transformation is not a moral lesson but a reorientation of sensory and ecological perception. The machine-body he once imagined could dominate the sea becomes the disabled body that now moves only in dialogue with it. In this revised ecological and embodied modality, the sea is no longer a site of mastery but a dynamic environment that structures possibility and limitation. The protagonist's disability, rather than marking a fall from capacity, becomes the condition that allows him to inhabit this ecological truth. Through the collapse of the machine-body and the emergence of a relational body, Makhzangi reframes hubris not as an ethical failure but as an epistemological one: a misreading of the world that can only be corrected through the body's encounter with the more-than-human.

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Sea as Indifferent Force

The text's construction of the sea as an indifferent, agentive, and inhospitable environment narrates it as a force that resists anthropocentric framing and undermines human claims to mastery. Rather than portraying the ocean as a romantic site of beauty or sublime awe, Makhzangi renders it as an active participant in the protagonist's transformation, a material and affective presence whose rhythms, movements, and pressures shape the narrative's ecological and existential stakes. Through a series of metaphors that depict the sea as predatory, sentient, or consuming, the text positions the marine world not as a passive backdrop but as an autonomous entity that exerts agency in ways the protagonist cannot anticipate or control. Situating this analysis within Arab ecologies also highlights how Makhzangi's narrative emerges from material marine environments that differ sharply from the Euro-American landscapes where eco-crip theory first developed. The Red Sea's unique combination of biodiversity, dangerous currents, and extractive economies—

ranging from industrial fishing to tourist-driven reef degradation—creates a seascape where human–nonhuman encounters are structured by risk, precarity, and sensory intensity. These material conditions shape not only the story's events but the very epistemology through which the sea is understood as a force that resists domestication, destabilizes anthropocentric assumptions, and reconfigures bodily vulnerability. Integrating this marine context brings a distinctly Middle Eastern dimension to eco-crip studies and expands the geographical terrain of Blue Humanities beyond its usual North Atlantic focus.

The most striking metaphor is the depiction of the sea as a gaping mouth: "the sea was open-mouthed."[6] This metaphor performs multiple operations simultaneously. It animalizes the sea, suggesting a vast organism capable of engulfing or devouring, and it expresses the protagonist's acute vulnerability within this environment. Unlike the earlier metaphors that cast the protagonist's body as a machine, this metaphor emphasizes the animate power of the environment itself. The open mouth is not directed specifically at him; it is not malicious. Rather, its indifference is precisely what makes it terrifying: it does not notice him, does not care, and will swallow anything that crosses its threshold. In this sense, the sea's predatory framing is a device that dramatizes environmental indifference, not intentional hostility. The protagonist confronts a world that surpasses human perspective, revealing what posthuman ecologists describe as environmental agency without intention that operates beyond moral frameworks and human comprehension. As Timothy Morton argues, ecological forces destabilize anthropocentric notions of scale and mastery precisely because they exceed human frameworks of meaning and intentionality (160). Makhzangi's sea operates in this way: not hostile, but indifferent, reshaping the protagonist's body through forces that neither recognize nor prioritize the human. This theme deepens with the metaphor of "water swallowing him."[7] Here, the protagonist is absorbed into the sea's agency; water acts, he is acted upon. The verbs of engulfment, dragging, lifting, and striking emphasize the one-sidedness of agency: the sea moves, the human body responds. This dynamic aligns with Stacy Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality: "Imagining human corporeality as trans-corporeality, in which the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world, underlines the extent to which the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from the environment" (2).

The protagonist's body becomes a membrane through which ecological pressures pass, saltwater entering his mouth, cold tightening his limbs, waves propelling him in unpredictable directions, as "he found his body growing heavy."[8] The sea's movements penetrate bodily boundaries, dissolving the illusion of a self-contained, autonomous subject. His very physiology is restructured by environmental contact: breathing becomes swallowing, swimming becomes thrashing, sensation becomes panic.

[6] "وكان البحر فاغرًا" (Makhzangi 26; my translation).
[7] "والماء يوشك على الابتلاع" (Makhzangi 26; my translation).
[8] "وجد الجسد يتثاقل" (Makhzangi 26; my translation).

If the sea's physical actions reveal its agency, the protagonist's emotional responses reveal its inhumanity. When he experiences "a nonhuman fear" (27) the text suggests a double displacement. First, the fear is described not as his own but as something alien that takes hold of him, signaling the collapse of his psychological defenses. Second, by calling the fear nonhuman, the text grants the environment an affective power that supersedes human categories. Fear becomes a medium through which the sea acts upon the protagonist, producing an affective state that belongs to the environment as much as to the body. His terror is not simply psychological; it is ecologically induced. The sea generates a new, destabilized emotional register that stands outside human comprehension. In this sense, the narrative aligns with posthuman affect theory, where emotions emerge relationally through bodily and environmental encounters rather than solely within the human subject (Massumi 27). The protagonist's fear is ecologically generated through the sea's pressure, movement, and sensory overwhelm, becoming what Alaimo would describe as a trans-corporeal affective experience (2).

From the sea's ecological indifference, disability emerges not from violence but from misunderstanding. The waters engulfed him not because he failed to recognize that his body, no matter how strong it seemed, was always subordinate to environmental conditions. The sea did not attack; the protagonist misinterpreted its cues, mistook its silence for consent, and entered a domain he could not control. It becomes the agent that breaks his illusion of autonomy and reveals the fragility of bodily control. In this sense, the sea acts as a teacher, not through intention, but through consequence. Philosophically, this dynamic resonates with Bruno Latour's claim that the human is always produced through relations with nonhuman forces, because "without the nonhuman, humans would not last a minute" (Latour 91); in the story, the protagonist becomes intelligible only in relation to the sea's pressure, rhythms, and movements. Likewise, the dissolution of bodily boundaries under water recalls Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of embodiment, in which the self is constituted through its sensorimotor exchanges with the world rather than through internal coherence (10-11). The sea's indifference thus performs a kind of ontological recalibration: within the Red Sea's ecologically intense and precarious seascape, it demonstrates that the human is not self-enclosed but porous, contingent, and shaped by what lies beyond it.

Crip Multispecies Interdependance

The story's elaboration of multispecies relations represents a counterpoint to human hubris and a central element in the protagonist's ecological and crip transformation. While much of the narrative dramatizes the sea's indifference and the protagonist's bodily vulnerability, the rescue scene, where dolphins intervene to save the injured swimmer, introduces a qualitatively different kind of environmental agency: not hostile, not neutral, but relational. Through this moment, the text imagines a mode of ecological care that exceeds human boundaries and foregrounds

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interspecies collaboration as a condition for survival. The dolphins function not as symbols of harmony or romanticized nature but as co-actors within an ecological assemblage. As Donna Haraway argues in *When Species Meet*, lives emerge through processes of "becoming with," in which humans and nonhumans are constituted through relations of mutual entanglement rather than autonomous existence (16–17). Similarly, Eben Kirksey and Stefan Helmreich's concept of multispecies relations emphasizes that meaning, agency, and survival are produced through interactions among different forms of life rather than residing within a single species (545–46).

This multispecies intervention gains force precisely because it follows a sequence dominated by human error, human desire, and human misreading of environmental cues. After the protagonist's harpoon misfires and pierces his spine, disabling his legs, he becomes newly dependent on environmental forces and ultimately on the actions of other animals. The narrative describes his injured state with striking physical immediacy: "he was dragging his dead legs" (my translation). This phrase does not merely describe paralysis; it signals the collapse of the human body's autonomy and the emergence of a form of embodiment that requires external agents to achieve mobility. The protagonist's body is no longer a self-contained system but a distributed organism, dependent on the environment in order to move, breathe, and survive. This vulnerability creates the narrative conditions necessary for a multispecies encounter: it is precisely because he cannot save himself that another species enters the scene.

The moment the dolphins appear is rendered through a blend of sensory fragmentation and epiphanic clarity. The protagonist hears "chirping, creaking, whistling"[9] sounds that he initially perceives as distortions of his own terror. But the text then aligns these sounds with the visual emergence of dolphin bodies. Their arcs, tails, and breaths—materialize gradually, as though his sensory system must recalibrate to register their presence: "He saw the smooth circles following him and saw the eyes; among the eyes, he was surprised by fountains glistening in the light."[10] This sensory recalibration mirrors his ecological recalibration: he shifts from perceiving the environment as hostile and absorbing to perceiving it as relational and responsive. The dolphins' movements form circular patterns which contrast with the earlier metaphors of the sea's engulfing and predatory motions. The circularity gestures toward coordination, choreography, and intentional proximity. The dolphins do not accidentally intersect with him; they adjust their trajectories to lift him. Crucially, the text avoids anthropomorphism. The dolphins' actions are not framed as compassion, nor as the execution of a moral duty. Their rescue remains within the register of species-specific behavior; protective herding, curiosity, perhaps a response to distress signals, but the effect on the human protagonist is transformative. The narrative positions dolphins as agents who "raise" him (29), emphasizing both their instinctual behavior and the relational effect of that behavior.

[9] "زقزقة، صرير، صفير" (Makhzangi 28; my translation).

[10] "يرى الدوائر الناعمة تتبعه ويرى العيون، وبين العيون استغرب وجود نافورات تتلألأ في الضوء" (Makhzangi 28; my translation)

This multispecies intervention also reframes the meaning of disability within the story. Instead of marking the protagonist as degraded or diminished, disability becomes the condition that opens him to relational forms of ecological care unavailable to the able-bodied self. His earlier body-as-machine metaphors precluded interdependence; he imagined himself propelled, directional, and solitary. After the injury, however, his embodiment becomes relational: his survival depends on the coordinated forces of dolphins, waves, and human rescuers. This aligns closely with Taylor's theory of crip interdependence, which argues that disability renders visible the webs of support that all bodies rely upon, but that able-bodied ideology conceals. Taylor, citing Paul Longmore, a disability studies writer, indeed argues: "that they prize not self-sufficiency but self-determination, not independence but interdependence, not functional separateness but personal connection, not physical autonomy but human community" (33). Here, the dolphins become part of those webs. They are not "helpers" in a moral sense but co-actors in an ecological assemblage that includes the protagonist, the sea, human rescuers, and the assistive technologies that will later mediate his marine experience.

Conclusion

"He Was Chasing a Butterfly in the Sea" demonstrates that Makhzangi's story does far more than depict a disabled character within an environmental setting; it offers an ecological-crip vision in which bodily vulnerability and environmental agency become mutually illuminating. A central contribution of the story lies in its reconfiguration of autonomy, and this becomes most visible when the narrative's two human-facing results are placed in relation with one another. On the one hand, disability emerges as a mode of ecological attunement: a bodily state through which the protagonist learns to read environmental rhythms and inhabit the sea with responsiveness rather than mastery. On the other hand, hubris functions as its conceptual opposite, exposing how fantasies of autonomy, mechanical strength, and sensory certainty distort the human relationship to the environment. As Kafer argues, identities and forms of agency do not pre-exist relations but emerge through them. Coalition is a process in which interests and identities are continually reshaped through encounter and interdependence (151). Makhzangi relocates this collapse to the moment of physical contact with the sea. The protagonist's imaginary machine-body fails not because society prevents him from moving but because the environment reveals the fiction of his independence. Shifts in pressure, luminosity, and depth dismantle his belief in propulsion, power, and control. In this tension between hubris and crip embodiment, the narrative advances a post-anthropocentric frame in which bodies are understood as materially contingent, inherently limited, and dependent on the rhythms of more-than-human worlds. Becoming a crip, n this sense, is not only a sociopolitical identity but an ecological orientation grounded in limit, vulnerability, and interdependence.

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A similar complementary tension shapes the story's environmental axis. If disability and hubris represent opposing human positions, indifference and multispecies cooperation represent the dual environmental forces that act upon them. Makhzangi's portrayal of the sea expands eco-crip conversations by imagining a natural environment that is agentive without being malicious. The sea disables not because it intends harm but because it is disinterested. This perspective complicates a significant strand of eco-crip scholarship that has emerged through environmental justice frameworks, where disability is often examined in relation to toxic exposure, pollution, and other anthropogenic forms of harm that foreground questions of responsibility and accountability (Kafer 131–32). By contrast, Makhzangi's sea operates outside human moral frameworks. Yet within this ecology of indifference, the dolphins' intervention introduces a reciprocal, contrasting dynamic: multispecies cooperation. Their appearance does not redeem the sea's indifference nor erase its dangers; instead, it offers a glimpse of an alternative ecological logic in which survival becomes distributed across species, bodies, and movements. Their improvised, instinctual intervention transforms the protagonist's relation to the environment, revealing that ecological life is shaped not only by dispassionate forces but also by contingent, affective, and embodied interspecies encounters. While eco-crip scholarship often emphasizes interdependence through social or technological networks (Taylor 25), Makhzangi extends this insight into the marine world, showing how more-than-human agents can become partners in survival not through intention but through ecological proximity and co-presence.

By bringing these paired dynamics into view—disability versus hubris on the human side, environmental indifference versus multispecies cooperation on the ecological side—the story articulates a model in which transformation occurs through tension rather than resolution. More importantly, positioning the story within eco-crip studies highlights the importance of Arabic fiction for expanding the field's geographical and ecological scope. Makhzangi's narrative emerges from the specific marine ecology of the Red Sea, from years of observing human attempts to manage and control nature, and from an authorial trajectory marked by encounters with nuclear disaster, industrial farming, and environmental extraction. In this context, disability shaped by natural rather than industrial environments becomes a means of complicating eco-crip assumptions developed primarily in Euro-American contexts. This contribution invites broader engagement with Global South ecologies, where disability and environment are entangled in ways that resist Western paradigms of environmental injustice or medicalization. Ultimately, "He Was Chasing a Butterfly in the Sea" offers a model of disability that is neither tragic nor inspirational but ecological: a record of environmental force, a recalibration of perception, a critique of autonomy, and a form of knowledge. The protagonist's transformation demonstrates that disability can open onto new forms of environmental attention and multispecies connection, and that ecological understanding often arises precisely when human control collapses. Makhzangi's story thus suggests an eco-crip ethics shaped by limit, responsiveness, and relational

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survival. In doing so, it signals a direction for eco-crip criticism grounded not in terrestrial toxicity alone but in marine encounters, sensory vulnerability, and Global South environments—where disability becomes not only something to be represented, but a way of reading and inhabiting the world.

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Co-Composing with Laura Aguilar's *Nature Self-Portrait* series: A Case for a Neurodivergent Gaze

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Abstract

This article develops a theory of neurodivergent gaze via a mode of environmental awareness by engaging with Laura Aguilar's *Nature Self-Portrait* photographic series (1996). I do so through my positionality as a neurodivergent spectator and autotheoretically argue that a neurodivergent gaze manifests affectively and texturally as I develop an overclose proximity with Aguilar's self-portraits. I draw on Ann Cvetkovich, Lauren Berlant, and Erin Manning to first situate Aguilar's photographs as neurodivergently-coded by taking into account her state of depression, dissociation, and suicidiation at the time when the photographs were taken. Through Matthew J.C. Cella and Alan Jurgens, I claim that depression can be understood via ecosomatic and enactive paradigms that consider an individual's affective, somatic, and cognitive constitution as deeply entangled with one's surroundings. I argue that these self-portraits are a cripistemology of depression that Aguilar then mobilizes to dismantle the anthropocentric, able-bodyminded, and neurotypically-inflected subject-object, human-nonhuman division by highlighting how the New Mexico landscape and her body constantly appear to co-compose each other. I define this movement of co-compositionality as the environmental awareness of a neurodivergent gaze in operation. This, as Manning argues, attends to both human and nonhuman elements nonhierarchically and indiscriminately, therefore dismantling the vertical hierarchy between the two in anthropocene spectatorship of the genre of self-portraiture. Lastly, as I theoretically enflesh my neurodivergent gaze's operation via Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Tina Campt, I, too, co-compose a self-portrait in a spectatorial response to Aguilar's photographs.

Keywords: Neurodivergent gaze, environmental awareness, co-compositionality, cripistemology, depression.

Resumen

Este artículo desarrolla una teoría de la mirada neurodivergente a través de un modo de conciencia ambiental, partiendo de la serie fotográfica *Nature Self-Portrait* (1996) de Laura Aguilar. Lo hago desde mi posición como espectadora neurodivergente y defiendo, desde una perspectiva autoteórica, que la mirada neurodivergente se manifiesta de forma afectiva y textural a medida que establezco una proximidad excesiva con los autorretratos de Aguilar. Me baso en Ann Cvetkovich, Lauren Berlant y Erin Manning para, en primer lugar, situar las fotografías de Aguilar como codificadas desde una perspectiva neurodivergente, teniendo en cuenta su estado de depresión, disociación y tendencias suicidas en el momento en que se tomaron las fotografías. A través de Matthew J.C. Cella y Alan Jurgens, sostengo que la depresión puede entenderse mediante paradigmas ecosomáticos y enactivos que consideran que la constitución afectiva, somática y cognitiva de un individuo está profundamente entrelazada con su entorno. Sostengo que estos autorretratos constituyen una *cripistemología* de la depresión que Aguilar moviliza para desmantelar la división antropocéntrica, basada en la idea de un cuerpo y una mente 'capaces' y con un sesgo neurotípico entre sujeto y objeto, y entre humano y no humano, al destacar cómo el paisaje de Nuevo México y su cuerpo parecen componerse mutuamente de forma constante. Defino este movimiento de co-composicionalidad como

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la conciencia ambiental de una mirada neurodivergente en acción. Esto, tal y como sostiene Manning, aborda tanto los elementos humanos como los no humanos de forma no jerárquica e indiscriminada, desmantelando así la jerarquía vertical entre ambos en la contemplación antropocénica del género del autorretrato. Por último, al plasmar teóricamente el funcionamiento de mi mirada neurodivergente a través de Maurice Merleau-Ponty y Tina Campt, yo también co-compongo un autorretrato como respuesta espectatorial a las fotografías de Aguilar.

Palabras clave: Mirada neurodivergente, conciencia medioambiental, co-composicionalidad, cripistemología, depresión.

Introduction

Theories on spectatorship that mobilize the conceptual category of the gaze have noted how power relations function in a unidirectional, hierarchized manner from the spectator to the spectacle. Particularly vis-à-vis the camera, the relationship between the photographer, the spectator, and the photographed is vertical wherein the photographed resides in the realm of passivity and objecthood.[1] Although visual studies theorists have challenged the status of passivity and objecthood of the photographed and called for an ethics of spectatorship that nuances agency within the event of photography, such theories often presuppose, firstly, a human actor who is being photographed and whose agency must now be restored by the ethical spectator; and secondly, an able-bodyminded, neurotypical spectator who is capable of ethical engagement.[2] As Hanna Bertilsdotter Rosqvist, Anna Stenning, and Nick Chown argue in the introduction to *Neurodiversity Studies* (2020), it is most often "the construct of the neurotypical as an ideal ethical subject" that is "exclusionary of those who may be able to offer alternative conceptualizations" (1). This paper takes up both such presumptions within the discourse of ethical modes of spectatorship and asks, what happens when we displace the neurotypical ideal ethical subject as the one who gazes and instead consider a neurodivergent gaze in operation? What happens when we take the human actor who is being photographed and whose agency must now be restored via ethical spectatorial practices, in tandem with the presence of nonhuman actors within the photograph's frame, and therefore destabilize the anthropocentrism inherent within the genre of self-portraiture?

To flesh out the workings and ethics of an alternative conceptualization of gaze via neurodivergence that mobilizes a particular mode of environmental awareness, I

[1] See Laura Mulvey's conceptualization of male gaze in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975); and Susan Sontag's inhibition regarding photograph's objectification of people as properties in *On Photography* (2005/1973).

[2] In "What is a photograph? What is photography?" (2010), Ariella Azoulay writes that the spectator faces the photograph's event from an externalized, vertical view which affords a limited understanding of the photograph's potentiality. Instead, as she proposes in *The Civil Contract of Photography* (2008) regarding photographs of Palestinians, the ethical spectator needs to "watch" the photograph for movements, thereby entering the photograph's frame and restoring citizenship and subjecthood to the dispossessed Palestinians.

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engage with the works of Chicana-American photographer Laura Aguilar (1959-2018). I especially take up the photographs titled *Nature Self-Portrait #5* and *Nature Self-Portrait #12* from her *Nature Self-Portrait* series (1996). I argue that an environmental awareness attends to the textures within the photographic frame indiscriminately and without forming a vertical, hierarchical relationship between the spectator and the photographed. By theorizing the co-compositionality within Aguilar's self-portraits, this article demonstrates how the actions of the nonhuman elements, which Aguilar then doubles as, are what constitute the events captured by the photographs. I develop this concept of gaze via my positionality as a neurodivergent spectator of Aguilar's equally neurodivergently-coded self-portraits, and claim that her photographs become generative sites of alternate knowledge-production from a cripped or disabled position. As the Laura Aguilar Trust notes, Aguilar often used photography as a medium to explore her marginalized identities, including being Native Californio, Chicana, lesbian, and auditorily dyslexic ("The Life of Laura"). The fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (2013) categorizes auditory dyslexia as a learning disability involving a difficulty in parsing acoustic stimuli. Her studio manager and friend Christopher A. Velasco points out that Aguilar "decided to put the camera on herself because she couldn't communicate like she wanted to with language, so she was like, 'Let me use the camera on myself and make these self-portraits'" (Duron). From the *Nature Self-Portrait* onwards, Aguilar also experiments with the nude form embedded in natural landscapes. The Laura Aguilar Trust notes that, at a time when Aguilar was struggling with "mounting depression and, increasingly, suicidal thoughts," this series, along with Aguilar's decision to finally try medication for depression, proved to be "healing for the photographer, who could draw upon her familial ties to nature, open space, rivers, rocks, and woodlands" (*Nature Self-Portrait*). In an interview, Aguilar herself opens up about how her trip to rural New Mexico to photograph *the Nature Self-Portrait* stemmed from, and became a part of, mourning the death of one of her closest friends (*Interview by Carolina Miranda* 107).[3]

[3] In this series, the photographer Delilah Montoya assisted in clicking the photographs as Aguilar, guided by her inverted image on the camera's lens, assumed her postures. However, Aguilar insists that these are indeed self-portraits and not photographs of hers taken by Montoya. Adhering to Aguilar's nomenclature, this article will also treat these photographs as self-portraits. For more information on Aguilar's artistic practice, see *Interview by Carolina Miranda* (2018). Information regarding Aguilar's usage of medication during the production of the series was provided to me by Christopher Velasco in personal correspondence.

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Figure 1. Laura Aguilar. Nature Self-Portrait #5, 1996, Gelatin silver print, 16 x 20 in.
© Laura Aguilar Trust of 2016.



Figure 2. Laura Aguilar. Nature Self-Portrait #12, 1996, Gelatin silver print, 16 x 20 in.
© Laura Aguilar Trust of 2016.

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This article takes up Aguilar's undulating depressive state as a form of neurodivergent cripistemology and asks, what can depression, dissociation, and, suicidiation, reveal about the structure of the world in which we live?[4] More specifically, how does depression expose the structural injustice of a neurotypically-oriented world-order, especially when accounting for Erin Manning's (2016) and

[4] Lauren Berlant differentiates suicidiation from suicidal ideation (2022). They argue that suicidiation as an ongoing and ceaseless affective condition brings to relief the inconvenience of living in constant proximity to structural violence. Suicidal ideation, on the other hand, is often invoked in medical and psychiatric discourses as a manageable symptom of clinical depression.

Lennard J. Davis' (2013) reframing of depression within the neurodiversity spectrum? If "depression might [indeed] be capable of producing other kinds of writing and knowledge besides science," how can we produce cripistemologies via states of depression and suicidiation as seen in the photographs (Cvetkovich 95)? To entangle myself in Aguilar's photographic world-building, I mobilize Ann Cvetkovich's notion of depression as a "response to a fucked-up world or a fucked-up life" (15). This article therefore adds to existing scholarship on Aguilar's works by prompting an eco-cripistemological engagement with her self-portraits following Matthew J.C. Cella's ecosomatic and Alan Jurgens' enactive paradigms of understanding depression, which foreground the enmeshment and embodiment of our somatic, affective, and psychic states of being with the environment that co-affects us into presence.[5]

The specificity of the neurodivergent gaze posited in this article involves my particular experience of multiple neurodivergence, both diagnosed bipolar affective disorder and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and the spectrum of undiagnosed traits that accompany these diagnoses.[6] I theorize the relational, ecosomatic, and enactive haptic-tactility and affectivity of my neurodivergent gaze by invoking the phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty's abstractions on gaze as a function of an indiscriminate universal flesh. However, I argue in the last section of the article that a neurodivergent gaze also has the capacity to enfold differing resonances of relationality present in the neurodiversity spectrum. I thereby extend Tina Campt's theory of a Black gaze, which, via its indefinite article 'a', suggests tentativeness, capaciousness, and polyvalence (ch. 1, para. 40). I also take into account Erin Manning's expositions on neurodivergent perception as being available to anyone who deviates from the norm of enforced neurotypicality that, like most normative frameworks, structures the world.[7] What remains as an operative function of a neurodivergent gaze is that it unstructures the position of power occupied by the

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[5] See Amelia Jones's "Eternal Return" (2002), which argues that Aguilar performs the self as other through "a tune of difference" (968); Jones's *Body Art* (1998), which explores the posthuman videographic performance of depression as embodied emotion; Jay Buchanan's "Object-Selving" (2022), which looks at Aguilar's co-performance with inanimate elements to create an object-self instead of a subject-self; Ann Marie Leimer's "Creating a Space" (2021), which demonstrates how the female nude form in Aguilar's self-portraits blurs the distinction between human body and natural landscape; and Dana Luciano and Mel Y. Chen's "Has the Queer Ever Been Human" (2015), which conducts a non-anthropocentric reading of "queer connections between flesh and stone […] human and nonhuman" (184).

[6] See Robert Chapman's "Neurodiversity and the Social Ecology of Mental Functions" (2021) for a discussion on the neurodiversity spectrum including, but not limited to, the oft-pathologized conditions of autism, bipolarity, learning disabilities, and other mental disorders categorized in the fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (2013). This article invokes both usages of neurodivergence: the depathologizing of mental illnesses and the broader political usage that recognizes neurodivergence as deviating from the norm of White, able-bodyminded, heteropatriarchal, majoritarianism.

[7] Since I find some, but not all, frequencies of autistic perception to resonate with my particular mode of neurodivergence, I have refrained from using Manning's term "autistic perception," itself shortened from what Manning has called "neurodiverse forms of perception" (15).

human spectator, thereby recalibrating normative and anthropocentric understandings of gaze.[8]

This article follows a method of deep resonance and affective vulnerability with and in front of Aguilar's photographs. I co-create with Aguilar across time and space as a way of co-interpreting the self-portraits and I produce a self-portrait of my own in spectatorial response. In a way, my academic and personal life co-mingle here, on the surface of this article. I write it while the Supreme Court in India has passed a judgement that enables mining activities in 90% of the Aravali hill range (Shah). The Southern Ridges of the Aravali run through and around my university campus. I have often snuck into its folds, away from the prying eyes of the security and administration, to sit with my thoughts, mull over the condition of the country and the world, be sad and depressed. This current context has inevitably altered the resonance of my engagement with Aguilar's *Nature Self-Portrait*. I now approach her photographs with a sense of loss and dread—loss of a safe space where I could decompress uninhibitedly, and dread for the inevitable changes to the climate that the mining activities will bring. I respond to Aguilar's self-portraits while being caught in the limbo of mourning and anxiety. In mobilizing this resonance between Aguilar's affective-psychic states and my responding bodymind into a conversation, I open up spaces for producing knowledge about our lived realities from a cripped or disabled position.

Photographic Subject-Object: A Dissolution of Normative Frames

Critical discourses on photography usually describe it as an event and, sometimes, as a document of an event that promises its continuity in the future (Sontag, *On Photography* 7; Azoulay, *Civil Contract* 14; Butler 83). It is an event insofar as it is an "experience captured," with the camera becoming "the ideal arm of consciousness in its acquisitive mood" (Sontag, *On Photography* 2). Therefore, a photograph captures, acquires, and possesses an experience, turning it into an event that must be gazed upon. However, it is precisely because it "bears the seal of the event itself" that the photograph can open up to the potential variations of the event-in-formation (Azoulay, *Civil Contract* 14). "The event is where experience actualizes" in its current form (Manning 3). However, experience itself is quite volatile, replete with the nonconscious welling of affect, that indeterminate, difficult-to-articulate facet of sensation that cannot be quantified or parsed for meaning. In the work regarding autonomy of affect and how it shapes politico-cultural sensibilities, philosopher Brian Massumi equates affect to the intensity with which the skin reacts to sensation. He argues that affect differs from emotions precisely because the former is indefinable and therefore, unnameable. Contrarily, emotion "is a subjective content, the sociolinguistic fixing of the quality of an experience which is from that point

[8] See, bell hooks' "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators" in *Black Looks* (1992) and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's *Staring: How We Look* (2009) as two of the many works challenging the unidirectional, hierarchical theory of gaze.

onward defined as personal" (28). Emotion is "qualified intensity," bound semiotically and semantically, thus, flattening the intensity of sensation by qualifying it into "narrativizable action-reaction circuits" and bringing it to the threshold of consciousness (28). This subjective qualification of intensity into a catalogue of emotions presumes a neurotypically-inflected, human actor. Manning calls this narrativizing action "parsing." She writes that "[p]arsing, so allied with the neurotypical, not only reduces our capacity to feel the event in the event, it perpetuates the hierarchy of conscious experience over nonconscious experience, reason over affect" (22). The nonconscious welling of the affective force is capable of reorienting one's experience in ways that are also often involuntary and nonconscious in their movement. Maybe, this is why Sontag argues in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003) that photographs relay affect, but not meaning. To understand the context of a photograph as meant by the photographer, one has to provide captions and therefore foray into the structured realm of language (ch. 2, par. 14). Moving photographs from disarticulation to articulation also involves a kind of parsing or narrativization that contains the unexpectedness of the photograph within semiotic and semantic qualifications. But what happens when photographs are not supplied with explanatory captioning, as seen in Aguilar's *Nature Self-Portrait*? What sensory epistemologies can be generated from the photographic surface?

My bipolarity and ADHD also bring me too close to zones of disarticulation, which refer to a concentration of "feeling-forms" within any experience that I find difficult to "organize… into manageable bits" (Manning 135). Scenes of intense psychic distress often cause an affective trembling within me that is difficult to encapsulate within the norms that structure language, relegating me into the figure of what Jackson-Perry et al. term as a sensory stranger in a neurotypical world (125). These language norms presuppose a neurotypical subject who is able to cognize, perceive, and feel 'normally.' Aguilar's foray into the landscapes of New Mexico for the *Nature Self-Portrait* series is a visual record of her struggles with depression and therefore a mode of cripistemology, defined by Merri Lisa Johnson and Robert McRuer as an approach that produces "first-hand, and in some cases, first-person knowledge about topics that concern disabled people and communities, broadly conceived" by "structurally placing crip(s) at the beginning or center of the production of knowledge" (158). Cripistemology stands to correct the epistemic injustice of diminishing the cripped, disabled, and/or neurodivergent sensory strangers as bearers and producers of valid knowledge. Via the technology of self-portraiture, Aguilar finds within the rocks and trees a way of producing knowledge. Her photographs become a visual first-person narrative of the ongoing, though fluctuating, intensity of her depression, and are a reflection of her ecological milieu. My zones of disarticulation resonate with Aguilar's self-portraits in ways that produce meaning, without flattening the photographs' affective intensity. Indeed, the visual medium is often a more welcoming avenue for crip knowledge-production for those neurodivergent individuals who find the norms of oral or written language

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restrictive. Jackson-Perry et al. relay how one of the authors appropriates visual languages to convey their sensory divergence:

> […] the way [the author] portrays sensory experiences has given me almost some form of late-onset synaesthesia […] [they] turn into pictures and sounds […] they created a vocabulary in my head that is in pictures and sounds (not words) that are attached to sensory experiences. (130)

For Aguilar, who is auditorily dyslexic, the sonic properties of language resemble a phonetic babble. She remains a disarticulated figure, dismembered from the neurotypical linguistic loop (Berger 1-2). Within her self-portraits, Aguilar explores visually and affectively her intersectional identities as a neurodivergent, Indigenous, Chicana, and lesbian bodymind. I have taken the liberty to add neurodivergent as one of her identities. It is a form of recognition from a fellow neurodivergent individual to another, across time and space.[9] In its most un-pathological sense, neurodivergence "simply means a brain that diverges" from the norm (Asasumasu).[10] More concretely, the term usually refers affirmatively to those individuals who fit the diagnoses of neurodevelopmental, neurocognitive, and/or mental disorders under the medico-psychiatric regime. The term neurodivergence attempts to undo the deficit/disorder-based language of medical science by borrowing from the social model of disability, and the term's deployment engages in a politics of affirmation (Walker, Davis). Neurodivergence challenges the often-backgrounded presumptions of neurotypicality that serve as the foundation for everyday experiences. In the manner of a much-needed rant, Manning polemicizes the definition of neurodivergence while showing the pervasiveness of neurotypicality as a structuring and othering tool in almost all foundational identity politics.

When do we honor significantly different bodies and ask what they can do, instead of jumping to the conclusion that they are simply deficient? When is the fat body, the immobilized body, the blind body, the deaf body, the old body, the spastic body celebrated? Yours, mine, the life of the autistic…yours, mine, the life of the schizophrenic, of the psychotic, the depressed, institutionalized and out of sight, yours mine, the First Nations, disenfranchised by a settler colonialism that refuses to recognize political practices neurodiverse at their core, yours, mine, the drug addict, the drunk, the black man, treated last in the emergency ward (if treated at all), yours, mine, the transgender, the transsexual, the gay or lesbian, our rights too rarely recognized as they should be, yours, mine, lives deemed less worthy, less worthy not just because of our visible difference, but because […] we have already been situated, aligned in opposition to the dominant ideal of life, to the majoritarian discourse of neurotypicality, and we fall short. (4)

[9] Neurodiversity Studies often prefers to use an identity-first language to emphasize the importance of one's neurocognitive trait to one's selfhood. See, for example, Robert Chapman in "Neurodiversity and the Social Ecology of Mental Functions" (2021).

[10] Neurodivergence as an identity -marker is a tool of inclusion, resonance, and camaraderie with anyone who is neuroatypical. Kassianne Asasumasu writes, "It is not another damn tool of exclusion. It is specifically a tool of inclusion […] Neurodivergent is for all of us" (para. 7).

In an interview, Aguilar opens up about her depression and suicidiation, and how her photography often becomes a visual testimony of her mental state for her therapists (Aguilar 118-20). Aguilar's bodymind and self-portraits are thus thoroughly neurodivergent, not just because of her auditory dyslexia, but also because she diverges from the "dominant ideal of life" by being depressed, Indigenous, Chicana, and lesbian (Manning 4). Moreover, states of depression and dissociation result from living in a world that is no longer habitable. They are the ceaseless feelings of heaviness that arrest mourning, grieving, and overcoming this sense of loss. If, as Alan Jurgens argues, "the structure of human experience and cognition always involves a relation to the world and to others, which constitutively shapes cognition," then states of depression cannot be uncoupled from the constant erosion of the ground on which we walk and build our lives (74). They are, in fact, the "predictable effect and nonexceptional experience of living with, in, and under biopower's structural disciplines and historical aggressions" (Berlant, *Inconvenience* 118). Depression and accompanying dissociation stem from the infrastructures of inequality that turn the impersonality of structural violence into a personal violation, resulting in an "ongoing difficulty felt in the body as a demeaning displacement" (*Inconvenience* 119). It is from this sense of displacement and non-belonging that suicidiation irrupts as a mode of salvaging the dissociated poetics of life. Suicidiation "marks the sense of the unendurable that is endured, and the work of holding things together while feeling that they might not hold and that life, as it is known, might not either" (Berlant, *Inconvenience* 122). In a way, suicidiation is the feeling of losing a grievable life on a soon-to-be lifeless planet, and a speculative death that operates on an intense engagement with wish fulfilment.

The undulating affective weight of these intense and unendurable structures of oppression appears as the optical spread of the *Nature Self-Portrait*. Aguilar places her body in relation to the sparse and parched grounds of the landscape while restricting the spectator's access to her face and eyes, seeming to maintain a sense of private contact with the landscape in which she blends. For Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, the face of the (human) staree facilitates an "intense eye-to-eye with the viewer", becoming a site to challenge and direct the starer's dehumanizing gaze (84). In *Nature Self-Portrait #5* and *Nature Self-Portrait #12* Aguilar effaces herself by turning her back on the camera lens, thereby foregoing the visual economy of staring. This denial of spectatorial engagement with her face destabilizes "the [visual, facial] norms that […] allocate who is and is not human" (Butler 77). She denies the spectators an engagement with her face and instead doubles her body into the rock-body and the tree-body. She thus disturbs the anthropocentrism of an ethical response driven by our "capacity to respond with outrage, opposition, and critique…depend[ing] in part on how the differential norm of the human is communicated through visual and discursive frames" (Butler 77). This is further exacerbated by the shadow of Aguilar's curled-up body obscuring her head (*Nature*

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Self-Portrait #12).[11] The visual, facial norms are stretched to their limits in ascertaining the recognizably human all the while Aguilar's seemingly headless body doubles up as the surrounding rocks. Drawing inspiration from the photographer Judy Dater's series, Aguilar's curled-up posture may also reflect the ongoing difficulty of movement and the heaviness of sadness felt in the body during depression, as well as, a mode of blending in with or doubling-up as the rocks and thereby destabilizing the anthropic from the technique of self-portraiture.[12]

By becoming a doubling-body with the rocks and trees in the landscape, the demarcation between the subject of action and the object acted upon is smudged. The shadows of the rocks, trees' limbs, and Aguilar's body appear to be indistinguishable from one another. The camera attends to the shadows of both human and nonhuman in the same way. The genre of self-portraiture already destabilizes the subject position of the photographer who at once appears as the subject and object of photography. While posing in front of the camera, Roland Barthes feels his subjecthood slipping into objecthood, calcified and entombed (13). As Gabriella Giannachi also notes in *Technologies of Self Portraiture*, this "doubling of the self as a subject and an object implies that the object [becomes] a *sine qua non* for the subject to recognize itself as such" (3). By posing in the nude, Aguilar becomes an object in the dual sense of the word—acted upon by the camera's calcifying shutter, while simultaneously possessed and scrutinized by the spectatorial gaze. However, this does not mean that she loses her subjecthood. Via self-portraiture, she doubles as both the subject of action and the object that is acted upon. She is both subject-becoming-object and object-becoming-subject, thus challenging the presumably neat distinction between the two. Aguilar embeds herself within the landscape by placing her body within the realm of those that have often been considered as objects in our anthropocene world—rocks, trees, sand, and grass. Moreover, she does so while in a state of depression, which, as Mel Y. Chen has demonstrated, is often associated with states of inertness, passivity, heaviness, and immobility, features that depression shares with other nonhuman, insensate elements in the animacy hierarchy (27). As Aguilar, in her depressed state, doubles with the rocks and trees, their (Aguilar's and the rocks' and trees') normatively lessened mobility-oriented agentic capacities enter the "calculus of animacy" (Chen 2). Within the schema of the photographs, the agentic irrupts with insistence via the transformation of object-becoming-subject; Aguilar, the trees, and the rocks pose in front of the camera through, if not the anthropocentric, neurotypically-inflected concept of agency (the capacity to act), then with what Manning calls agencement. The problem with agency, as she argues, is that "it makes the subject the subject of the action" (Manning 16). Drawing from Henri Bergson's and William James's theorizations on the act to develop the concept of agencement, Manning decenters the human subject from the activity of the act by foregrounding the nonvolitional in the act, rather than the event's decision to

[11] I would like to acknowledge the anonymous reviewers who brought this to my attention.
[12] Christopher Velasco referred me to Judy Dater's work from which Aguilar drew inspiration for her *Nature Self-Portrait #12*.

actualize (21). In this context, the mere existence of the rocks' rough texturing, shape, and form, the flailing limbs of the leafless trees, the way the sun hits them to form indiscriminate shadows upon the dry land, the wind that picks up at that particular moment to sway the trees' limbs or move the sand, all constitute the nonvolitional in the event's decision to act at that particular moment (the agencement), which is then followed by the camera's shutter—capturing the experience. Aguilar's photographic frames, thus, record the instants of becoming-subject and becoming-object, the indeterminate moments prior to the permanence of the subject-object divide in neurotypically-oriented perception's action of parsing via backgrounding the nonhuman agents of an event's making.

Textured Worlding: Neurodivergent Perception through Environmental Awareness

The blurring of the subject-object divide within the photographic space is as much haptic-tactile as it is visual.[13] The sensation of touch is precisely that through which, I, the neurodivergent spectator, enter the frame of Aguilar's self-portraits. An overwhelming 'aroundness'—here, my feeling of being inside the folds of various textures—via the sensation of touch is a particular mode of neurodivergent functioning that dwells within sensation rather than form. The action of deciphering and differentiating texture from form—the roughness of the rock's skin, the graininess of the sand, the smoothness of Aguilar's back, the scrappiness of the tree barks – occurs much later and slower. The textures of the two photographs I engage with, continuous with the New Mexico landscape, merge within the mental frame of my viewing-feeling bodymind. For me, their distinction as two separate photographs does not materialize at the beginning, and instead, they appear as instances from the same event of Aguilar's movement within the desert landscape. The separateness of the two photographs only emerges at a later stage when the overfull sensation of the textures is acclimatized to my bodymind. This differential experience of engaging with photographs is also neurodivergent. Its mode of registering is sensation and not form or content. Sensation, in this context, does not discriminate between the human and nonhuman. Such mode of indiscriminate perceptual action is often termed as a deficiency in differentiation. It is pathologized as mindblindness, which leads to the empathy-deficit model of indifference in autistics and other neurodivergents. However,

> [t]o experience the texture of the world "without discrimination" is not indifference. Texture is patterned, full of contrast and movement, gradients and transitions. It is complex and differentiated. To attend to everything "the same way" is not an inattention to life. It is to pay equal attention to the full range of life's texturing complexity, with an entranced and unhierarchized commitment to the way in which the organic and the inorganic, color, sound, smell, and rhythm, perception and

[13] Though hapticity and tactility both imply forms of touch-based sensations, the former also includes kinesthetic sensations of immersive bodily movement whereas the latter is more textural and felt on the skin's surface.

> emotion, intensely interweave into the "aroundness" of a textured world, alive with difference. (Manning and Masumi 04)

To attend to everything "in the same way," indiscriminately, is not mindblindness. The collapsing of the subject-object divide requires a work of slow perception wherein that which is normally at the periphery of neurotypical spectatorial gaze takes over and fills out the frame. In Aguilar's photoportraits, the rocks, trees, and landscape do not remain backgrounded, even for Aguilar. She compels the spectator, here, me, to engage with the texture of the rocks. The haptic-tactile component of life, via the grain of the photographs that is accentuated by the black-and-white monochrome, takes up a predominant space within the frame. In a way, the frame itself dissolves as the haptic-tactile vibrates throughout the photographic space. However, the photographs are not themselves grainy and pixelated. Rather, it is the heavily textured worlding of Aguilar's that constitutes the grain and brings in the haptic-tactile. To then focus on the texture of the rocks or the roughness of the tree barks in tandem with Aguilar's immobile body is to foreground the textural aspects that often remain peripheral.

Within Aguilar's photoportraits, I find a distinct companionship with the skin of the rocks. I feel them under my fingertips, or pressing against the back of my legs. I find a resonant memory of me sitting atop the rocks as I lose myself in the setting sun's orange glaze. This orange glaze reminds me of the cakes I would bake in my makeshift stovetop oven; the vessel lined with salt that would grainily clump up during the baking process. The sunset and the smell of orange-glazed cake being baked upon a layer of salt arrive together for me, indistinguishable. In that moment, I forget the human, me, sitting and thinking about these memories and associations.I transform into a becoming-cake, becoming-rock, becoming-sunset, becoming-orange-glaze. My humanity becomes interchangeable with the objects-subjects of my associations. This is not a matter of resemblance or identification through which emotions like empathy often work. Saidiya Hartman, who discusses the ethics of emotional spectatorial responses to the suffering Black body, argues that such emotions are slippery because "in making the other's suffering one's own, this suffering is occluded by the other's obliteration" (19). Thus, it is not a complete identification with the other or the insensate, which is stifling in its hostile takeover and/or possession of the other's bodymind. Instead, such emotional responses in spectatorial practices often presume a vertical, and therefore, hierarchical relationship: "the sufferer is over there" while the spectator who can empathize or have compassion for the sufferer is over here (emphasis in original, Berlant, *Compassion* 4*).* These responses presume a neurotypical subject at the center of this action, one who can parse effectively the direction toward whom these feelings are to be directed. As Anna Stenning argues, it is often difficult for some neurodivergent spectators to parse the human from the nonhuman, resulting in a further difficulty in orienting emotions such as compassion and empathy solely towards the human sufferer (108). As Stenning further argues, this difficulty is often perceived as an

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inability and such neurodivergent spectators are incorrectly labelled as being empathy-deficient (108). However, affect in its sensation-oriented functioning, does not differentiate between a human or nonhuman actor. Neither does it differentiate between subjects and objects. Therefore, to not feel the named emotions of empathy and compassion is neither a deficit nor unethical. When I say that my humanity becomes interchangeable with the elements within the photographic frames, I refer to the unsubtracted overfullness (and not a deficiency) of the affective sensations that the rocks, trees, shadows, ground, and Aguilar herself cause within me. This 'becoming-' is an attunement to the barest hum of sensation that connects me, unhierarchically, in a mode of horizontal instead of vertical companionate relationality with every element in Aguilar's *Nature Self-Portrait*. Therefore, 'becoming-' is a movement within the experience-in-formation of the rocks, trees, sunsets, and cake, via Aguilar's photographs, which attends to the potentiality of the events and enables co-inhabitation within the event-in-making. It is the movement of perception toward foregrounding the often-backgrounded milieu made up of those designated as objects and subjects that co-affect each other into their present realities. 'Becoming-' is attending to these textures in our ecologies. To tend to the texture of the world we live in is to orient ourselves to different kinds of worldings by activating differential perceptions. It is to foreground our emplaced and embodied self, which, in normative, ableist, neurotypical modes of perception-cognition, usually takes a backseat.

To attend to everything the same way, to come alive within the textures of the world, is an "*environmental mode of awareness*" based on the mutual action of reciprocity and relationality (emphasis in original, Manning and Massumi 6). It is not a human-centered attention to the environment but is rather an awareness of how the environment as an agentic milieu composes itself and is composed by others. Therefore, it is an awareness of the environment's co-compositional tendency. In Aguilar's photoportraits, it is the decision of the environmental components around her bodymind that leads to the event of photography. The environment and Aguilar co-compose the photographs through the presence of dynamism apparent in the way rocks are formed and obtain their rough texturing or how the trees have grown from saplings and eventually grow old and die. Any such biological movement of life or matter's formation cannot take place in isolation from the surrounding natural world. Additionally, Aguilar's photographs are not just co-compositional because of the engagement between Aguilar and the dynamism of the nonhuman elements, but my spectatorial encounter also co-composes these self-portraits as photographs of movement, texture, and affective overfullness mobilizing environmental awareness. This awareness occurs through what Manning and Massumi define in *Thought in the Act* (2014) via Alfred North Whitehead as entertainment, wherein the immediate field of experience is foregrounded, "prior to the distinction between active and passive, subject and object" (8). Aguilar's self-portraits capture this moment which is often too quickly parsed in neurotypically-oriented experiences of perception to be noticed or dwelled upon. By mobilizing a distinctive neurodivergent gaze that attends to

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everything the same way, Aguilar destabilizes the subject-object divide in neurotypically-inflected spectatorial practices, capturing within her photographic frame that particular moment of entertainment where the rocks, trees, soil, and her body are fielded indiscriminately without any of the elements being backgrounded for the centering of the human subject. She mobilizes a neurodivergent perception that

> dances attention, affirming the interconnectedness of modes of existence, foregrounding the relationality at the heart of perception, emphasizing how experience unfolds through the matrix of qualitative fields of overlap and emphasis already immediately moving toward expression in a dynamic field of becoming alive with co-composition. (Manning and Massumi 6-7)

Aguilar's photographs cannot materialize without the co-compositional forces of nature. The rocks, trees, and the New Mexico landscape compose the way Aguilar's body is placed in relation to them. Movement—as I read it in the slightly bent grass-blades and the somewhat leaning foliage of the trees in the backdrop of *Nature Self-Portrait #5* as well as in the grains of loose sand or dirt near the base of the rocks along with the skewedness of the finer (dry) tendrils of the dead tree in *Nature Self-Portrait #12*—is itself co-compositional in Aguilar's photographs. The stillness and the slight sway of the rocks and tree limbs, respectively, compose the mirroring movements of Aguilar's body. Moreover, the photographer's body, together with the camera, in turn compose the way the rocks and trees are perceived in relation to her body. This co-compositional force of an environmental mode of awareness makes immediate parsing of the photographic scene as a human versus nonhuman situation via subtraction of entertainment, as discussed above through Manning and Massumi, difficult in neurodivergent perception. I cannot get unstuck from the way the tree limbs must have swayed in the wind that day, or, how the wind would have picked up the loose sand of the parched land. This sand might have blown into Aguilar's eyes, mouth, and nostril. It might have covered the lens of the camera too. Non-subtraction of entertainment in experiencing the environment surrounding Aguilar demonstrates that the human and nonhuman "co-feature as tonal differences in a field modulating the whole of experience at all levels, composing an overall mode of existence that is in a different key than the neurotypical norm" (Manning and Massumi 8). Seeing the self-portraits in their dynamism compels me to ask to questions: where the rest of the mid-sneezing, crouching, dirt-smudged pictures went; and, can we ever be unaware of co-compositionality when engaging with such photographs that insist on our embeddedness within the world we live? This deep ecological relation between Aguilar's bodymind in the vicissitudes of depression and the elements of nature around her highlight what Cella calls the ecosomatic paradigm. It "assumes contiguity between the mind-body and its social and natural environments; thus […] the work of negotiating a "habitable body" and "habitable world" go hand in hand" (253). Although Aguilar's journey into the landscapes of New Mexico serve to be therapeutic ("Life of Laura"), the sparseness of the landscape, its parched aesthetic, and its monochromatic rendering resonate with Aguilar's interiority, which is marked

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heavily with depression, suicidiation, and a dissociating self. The photographs double as a depressed selfhood wherein nature and culture coexist "in various forms of commixture within a middle realm…in which the partners are in a relation of 'consanguinity'" (Edward Casey qtd. in Cella 242). This coexistence as partners and not as subjects or objects of photography marks the co-compositional nature of Aguilar's self-portraits. Each of these partners flesh the other out into affective existence. A field of relational affective milieu is created where the nonhuman elements such as the tree and rocks stand affected by Aguilar's presence and in turn also affect her into doubling up as the tree and rocks. My resonance with Aguilar as I myself dissolve within the folds of her landscape indicates a coming alive within the textures of the world. In neurodivergent perception, "without the surrounding environment, we cannot perceive or feel anything, meaning that the environment shapes us as we shape it. It is a dance of reciprocity" (Rosqvist, Nygren, and O'Donoghue 30). In my own engagement with the photographs, my neurodivergence compels a dwelling on the parts rather than the whole that enables me to enter a field of relationality with the elements within the frame. In this way, the frame expands to include different kinds of potentiality of the perceptible reality in front of me. Chen demonstrates that those who are physically and/or mentally disabled are often ranked lower in the animacy hierarchy of linguistic ordering, nearer to nonhuman animals and insensate objects, and are therefore not perceived as autonomous human subjects (27). To then engage with Aguilar's self-portraits in a manner that expands this field of perceptible reality so as to attend to everything within the photographic frame indiscriminately is to challenge the normative, ableist positions of anthropocentrism and, instead, foreground the enactivism of our being. Alan Jurgens argues that enactivism is crucial for understanding neurodiversity since our "embodiment and embeddedness [in nature] constitute the individual's cognition and experiences in the world" (74). Neurodiversity can never be divorced from the question of ecology. In fact, the term neurodiversity—borrowed from 'biodiversity'—takes its model of equality from the ecological world which is "itself an argument for respecting differing abilities and the uniqueness of all living beings" (Nocella II, 217). Therefore, such deep entanglement of the neurodiverse population—our divergent ways of perception, cognition, and structuration—with the ecological already situates any study of neurodivergence within the ecosomatic paradigm.

Fleshing Out Neurodivergent Gaze Co-compositionally: Moving toward the End

By "considering the impaired body in relation to its environmental situatedness" (Cella 277), we foreground the co-compositionality of Aguilar's self-portraits and our spectatorial response to these photographs. Phenomenologically, gaze does not function in a vacuum, neither is it solely the property of the human seer. In *The Visible and the Invisible* (1968/1964), Maurice Merleau-Ponty posits that vision is enfleshed and therefore haptic-tactile. It is coterminous with what he calls the "universal flesh" that is based on reciprocal action but which "belongs neither to the

body qua fact nor the world qua fact" (139). Emerging from the world in which the seer is embedded and emplaced and to which they are connected by the universal flesh that surrounds everything, the seer only later differentiates themself as the 'eye'/'I' that sees. This flesh is the mediation between the sensory and the visible, the screen upon which reciprocity occurs and upon which the world and the one belonging in the world co-affect each other into existence and form. According to Merleau-Ponty, gaze cannot exist without the tangible and sensory as basic pre-existing structures; what is seen, can be felt, touched, and experienced as texture, sensation, kinesthetic rearrangements, and so on (134). The "seer and the visible reciprocate one another [into tangible beings] and we no longer know which sees and which is seen" (Merleau-Ponty 139). Hence, co-compositionality emerges as the gaze's essential structure. It is based on reciprocal relationality with the ecological system that is coterminous and continuous with the bodymind.

If any gaze is reciprocal, multidirectional, and ecosomatic in its approach, then, given that neurodiversity signifies a "perceived variation in the cognitive, affective, and sensory functioning from the predominant neurotype" (Rosqvist, Stenning and Chown 1), a neurodivergent gaze also includes these latter facets in various degrees of manifestation. Resonating with Campt's theory of a Black gaze, a neurodivergent gaze "shifts the optics of 'looking at' to a politics of looking with, through, and alongside another" ("Prelude" par. 23). By shifting the optics of looking, Campt foregrounds the bonds of relationality between the spectators and Black sociality. A Black gaze therefore requires exertion to remain in close proximity to the photographed. In this article, a neurodivergent gaze likewise dwells in an overclose proximity within the bonds of relationality and companionship with forms of life and sociality that exceed the brackets of neurotypically-oriented, able-bodyminded anthropocentrism. Quite tellingly, when Amelia Jones establishes an alternate way of engaging with Aguilar's *Nature Self-Portrait*, she argues for embodied spectatorship "that involves deliciously relinquishing our power as viewing subjects and reveling in our own otherness" (952). Is this otherness not another name for the potentiality of neurodiversity, then? When Jones draws a relation between her nervous, anxious body and Aguilar's depression in her self-portraits, is she also not forming a neurodivergent, or at least, neurodivergently-allied sociality that exceeds the normativity that structures human subjectivity (Jones 968)?

In this essay, a neurodivergent gaze builds structures of close proximity with the human and nonhuman by residing inside the undifferentiated element of the universal flesh. Therefore, in reciprocity and co-compositionality, Aguilar and I are also the rocks as we are the bodies. We are also the shadows as we are the light. A neurodivergent gaze mobilizes a distinctly neurodivergent perception that is hyperrelational in its slowness, affective-textural in functioning, and exists in the moment of entertainment (that is, before a subject and object get differentiated as such). In its speculative mode of operation, a neurodivergent gaze co-creates the existence of multiple branches of an event-in-making. It visualizes not just the photograph's captured event, but also the "what-could-have-been" that led to the

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particular photographic event. Therefore, in its proliferation of "what-could-have-been," it is capacious in function.

In response to Aguilar's self-portraits, I took a photograph as well (Fig. 1). This photograph is intensely co-compositional and the self within it is dispersed as simultaneously everything and nothing.



Figure 1. Author produced. Untitled Self-Portrait, 2025

I took the photograph when I visited the Himalayan mountain ranges, driven out of Delhi by the pollution shrouding the city, which descended upon us in an almost solidified smog, unmoving and still. The pollution hung heavily in front of our eyes and visibility was almost zero. I could not breathe. The inhabitability of the city at that time led me to flee its borders and run to Uttarakhand, where I could sit with the Himalayas. I was also quite stressed. I had to start writing this paper, and Delhi would not allow me to. The air was not just stifling my lungs but also my brain and heart. Words could not flow. How could they when I could not even see the sun because of the smog? The trip to the Himalayas was a last attempt to write about Aguilar's *Nature Self-Portrait*, but I was unable to write there either. Apparently, my words could only be wrenched from me in Delhi when the smog would clear up and the pollution levels would drop. Nevertheless, my trip resulted in something else altogether. As I sat there on the banks of the river (I had never seen a river so blue before in my life), I felt a deep sense of relationality with Aguilar's photoportraits. I sat there for hours, lost in thought, and the only way I could express how I felt was by clicking photographs. I was weighed down with an ancient sadness, as if the world had already come to an end and I was sitting in the remaining few places where the air, river, and mountains still existed freely, the few remaining places where maybe I could still be free to draw a breath. And, as I sat there, I sensed how quickly these too would vanish. The river was already being used for kayaking. Adventure sports predominated the space. The parts of the river that could be tamed were done so in order to promote these sports

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for economic gains. The mountains were already capitalized to provide the so-called mountain experience to tired urban travelers like me. The rocks had warnings painted on them: do not cross; danger. Yet, even amongst these spaces of anthropocene interference, there were moments of pure relationality and becoming. I observed how my and my partner's disembodied shadows mixed with that of a cow's and the rocks on which we sat. We were an interplay of shadows, co-mingling and merging at the base, or getting differentiated after we emerged from the same base of shadowy rocks and textured sand. The shadows became the universal flesh that connected us to each other and to the nonhuman entities that embraced us.[14] Indistinguishable. I returned from the trip being co-composed into life anew by the ecology around me.

This entire article is an exercise in co-composition: Aguilar's co-composed self-portraits also co-compose the photograph I have taken in response. This is the operative function of a neurodivergent gaze at work. The power dynamic embedded within normative spectatorial practices is undone in neurodivergent gazing practices precisely because of the deep relationality that is formed between, herein, Aguilar's self-portraits and my viewing-feeling bodymind. I become undone and then put together by every element in Aguilar's photographs. In turn, I co-compose a photograph and this article, which are formed in consanguinity with Aguilar (across time and space). The operative force of this neurodivergent gaze is cripistemological. It functions to produce modes of knowledge—epistemes—that can only originate from cripped or disabled spaces. By mobilizing the disarticulation of the affective milieu, this neurodivergent gaze operates on the feltness of an experience-in-making. Both depression and dissociation register as a thickness and sluggishness of intense feelings coagulating in space, much like "walking in molasses," as linguistic capacities flounder upon a calcified field (Manning 179). In Aguilar's self-portraits, a disarticulated neurodivergent gaze emerges as a tool for framing this feeling of "walking in molasses." This gaze is precisely what makes known the agencement of the nonhuman rocks, trees, and the New Mexico landscape in co-composing the image of sensed depression. Of the order of the affective and not language,the neurodivergent gaze is a way of making visible that which often remains backgrounded in day-to-day experiences of the world's texturing pattern. Its temporality is that of a slow perception wherein the spectator's gaze cannot take in the totality of the image, and instead dwells within the image's fragments. In this article, a neurodivergent gaze emerges as a mode of imaginative, speculative, and creative engagement with the moment of photography where the event of taking the photograph is slowed down and the what-ifs emerge as the rabbit hole of relationality through which the spectator falls. Moreover, it is a way in which I, a neurodivergent spectator, engage and co-compose with Aguilar and the world in which I live. It is a gaze of anxiety, psychosis, depression, of rocks, trees, sand, and rivers. It is a gaze of

[14] I thank the editor of this special issue for giving me this phrase. This article is also co-composed in so many ways by the feedback and suggestions made by my friends, supervisor, the three anonymous reviewers, the editors, and Christopher Velasco.

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shadows that look back at me, opening and splitting me up. It is a distinctly pluriform, non-anthropomorphic gaze that displaces the neurotypical human from theories of spectatorship.

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Breathing through Catastrophe: Respiratory Disability in Sarah Crossan's Fiction

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Abstract

This essay argues that Sarah Crossan's young adult dystopian duology, *Breathe* (2012) and *Resist* (2013), represents a significant eco-crip intervention into the politics of atmospheric governance, one in which respiratory disability functions as the primary lens through which environmental catastrophe, political violence, and social stratification become legible. Set in a near-future world where the mass destruction of trees has rendered the atmosphere practically unbreathable, the novels imagine a sealed dome (known as the Pod) operated by a private corporation that manufactures and distributes artificial oxygen, thereby producing a deeply hierarchical society in which breathable air is privatised, unequally distributed, and weaponised as a tool of biocultural control. Drawing on disability studies and the environmental humanities, and engaging with the work of scholars like Jean-Thomas Tremblay, Stefanie Heine, Magdalena Górska, Alison Kafer, and Lennard Davis, among others, the article explores how Crossan's fiction stages the systematic conversion of ecological crisis into a logic of atmospheric infrastructure and bodily incapacitation. The first section examines how the Pod's regime produces and controls respiratory dependency as a structural effect rather than an anomaly, managing disability through surplus oxygen and the deliberate suppression of intuitive respiratory knowledge. The second section tracks the protagonists beyond the dome into a depleted and hostile landscape, where collective breathing emerges as a counter-practice grounded in shared vulnerability, precarity, and interspecies interdependence. The third section confronts the ethical price and limits of this communal vision through the duology's most consequential deaths and its two competing models of atmospheric community: the Grove's voluntary interspecies commons and Sequoia's eugenic regime of enforced bodily acclimatization. The essay concludes by arguing that Crossan's fiction refuses triumphalist resolution, offering instead a politics of recalcitrant persistence in which breathing remains a continuously mutating, precarious, and irreducibly collective practice of inhabiting damaged worlds.

Keywords: Eco-crip theory, respiratory disability, atmospheric governance, young adult dystopia, Sarah Crossan.

Resumen

Este ensayo sostiene que las novelas distópicas juveniles de Sarah Crossan, *Breathe* (2012) y *Resist* (2013), representan una intervención eco-crip significativa en la gobernanza atmosférica, donde la discapacidad respiratoria funciona como lente primaria a través de la cual la catástrofe ambiental, la violencia política y la estratificación social se hacen legibles. Ambientadas en un futuro cercano donde la destrucción masiva de los árboles ha hecho que la atmósfera sea prácticamente irrespirable, las novelas imaginan una cúpula hermética (conocida como el Pod) gestionada por una empresa privada que fabrica y distribuye oxígeno artificial, lo cual da lugar a una sociedad profundamente jerárquica en la que la respirabilidad es privatizada, desigualmente distribuida e instrumentalizada como control biocultural. Apoyándose en los estudios sobre discapacidad y las humanidades ambientales, y dialogando con académicos como Jean-Thomas Tremblay, Stephanie Heine, Magdalena Górska, Alison Kafer y Lennard Davis, entre otros, el artículo explora cómo la ficción de Crossan escenifica la conversión sistemática de la crisis ecológica en una lógica de infraestructura atmosférica e

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incapacitación corporal. La primera sección examina cómo el régimen del Pod genera y controla la dependencia respiratoria como un efecto estructural, gestionando la discapacidad mediante el exceso de oxígeno y la supresión deliberada del conocimiento respiratorio intuitivo. La segunda sección sigue a los protagonistas más allá de la cúpula hacia un paisaje empobrecido y hostil donde la respiración colectiva emerge como contrapráctica fundada en la vulnerabilidad compartida, la precariedad y la interdependencia interespecífica. La tercera sección confronta el precio ético y los límites de esta visión comunitaria a través de las muertes más significativas de la duología y dos modelos rivales de comunidad atmosférica: los bienes comunes interespecíficos voluntarios del Grove y el régimen eugenésico de aclimatación corporal forzada de Sequoia. El ensayo concluye argumentando que Crossan rechaza la resolución triunfalista, ofreciendo en su lugar una política de persistencia recalcitrante en la que respirar es una práctica en continua transformación, precaria e irreductiblemente colectiva de habitar mundos dañados.

Palabras clave: Teoría *eco-crip*, discapacidad respiratoria, gobernanza atmosférica, distopía juvenil, Sarah Crossan.

It Was Like Drinking Fire": Surplus, Scarcity, and the Eco-Crip Body

> *"So, you aren't overfeeding us oxygen?" Then another calls, "Yeah, what did he mean by that? We're paying for extra oxygen we don't even need?" [...] The Pod Minister rubs his mouth with the back of his hand and glares at the crowd. "If you want to leave the pod, you are all free to go. No one is stopping you. Leave!" [...] The camera closes in on Quinn and he seems to look right into the lens. [...] "We can't leave, and he knows it. They have us addicted to their air*." (Crossan, *Breathe* 337; my emphasis)

Irish author Sarah Crossan's novel *Breathe* (2012) and its sequel *Resist* (2013) are set in the near future, in the aftermath of an environmental catastrophe on planet Earth called the Switch, during which mass destruction of trees and vegetation caused atmospheric oxygen levels to plummet from twenty-one percent to an unsustainable level of four percent. The survivors now live inside the "Pod," a sealed glass dome governed by a private corporation called Breathe, which manufactures and distributes the artificial oxygen for the survivors. But this survival comes at a price, and through an inequitable process. The Pod's population is divided into two classes: Premiums, who can afford the supplemental oxygen that makes free movement and bodily exertion possible, and Auxiliaries, who cannot. The lives of the auxiliaries are therefore organized around preserving breath. They are forbidden to run, or even walk faster than a regulated pace, since any exertion beyond the rationed supply is unaffordable and, outside the airtanked comfort of the Premium class, effectively outlawed. Michelle Deininger has read the duology's stratified atmosphere through a material-ecofeminist lens, observing that there are "clear lines of demarcation between the spaces that the poor and rich can inhabit" and that "the inequalities created by multinationals are an underlying critique throughout the novel" (453). As I demonstrate in this article, this lens of class division is crucial, but so is reframing its effect as the deliberate production of respiratory disability rather than focusing solely on resource inequities. In the world of *Breathe*, breath is strictly transactional and heavily monitored. The ministry that administers this atmospheric economy

presents itself as a benevolent and protective entity: the custodian of a fragile population that would perish without its presence. Citizens are indoctrinated into believing that the outside world is lethally dangerous, that the Pod is their only refuge, and that their dependency on corporatized oxygen is only an obvious condition of their survival in this post-catastrophic world, a dependency they are taught to accept unquestioningly and whose engineering they never think to contest.

Here, it is useful to provide a summary of the novels. Though set within a single universe, the two novels chart distinct paths across it. *Breathe*, narrated in rotating first person by three teenagers, Bea, Alina, and Quinn, moves from inside the Pod outwards, following their flight into the Outlands and their eventual arrival at the Grove: the forested stronghold of the Resistance. There, a clandestine network of tree-planters and saboteurs work beyond the dome to restore a breathable atmosphere and break the Pod's monopoly on air. Disparagingly branded as RATS by the regime, the Resistance pursues its goals by covert raids on the biosphere and stealing plant cuttings to propagate and proliferate trees outside the Pod. The Grove becomes the setting of the closing chapters of *Breathe*, bringing in the Ministry's vicious assault and resulting in the dispersal of the survivors. *Resist* opens in the ruin of that defeat. It adds a fourth narrator in Ronan, a Premium conscripted into the regime's own ranks whose path intersects with those of the refugees. Their search for sanctuary leads them toward Sequoia, an ostensibly liberated settlement that later proves to be a creepy and eugenicist version of the Pod. It is governed by Vanya, sister of the Resistance leader Petra. Sequoia is organized around a ritual pairing that assigns reproductive partners by genetic fitness and the forced acclimatization of children to depleted air.

The passage from *Breathe* quoted above unfolds in this setting. Quinn Caffrey, a Premium teenager whom the regime's official story casts as a kidnapping victim, is now recovered by the ministry forces and brought before a televised public assembly. He is expected to denounce his captors and reaffirm the regime's legitimacy, but he subverts the propaganda spectacle, exposing on live broadcast that citizens are being overfed oxygen, that many could survive outside the dome if they were taught to breathe there, and that the regime is deliberately destroying the trees that might restore a breathable atmosphere. The crowd erupts in anger and, as the stewards move to disperse them, Bea's father breaks past the line and strikes the Pod Minister Cain Knavery to the ground.

What makes this moment significant is the affective and rhetorical aspect of the crowd's response. When voices start questioning the regime, the grievance emerges as a typical consumer suspicion: "We're paying for extra oxygen we don't even need?" (*Breathe* 337) Even at the threshold of political awakening, the language of market complaint is instinctively expressed and unavoidable. It refers to a transactional course correction without hurting the legitimacy of the capitalistic order. The Pod minister's retort, that anyone who objects is "free to go," daring the crowd to leave a Pod they cannot survive outside of, reflects a language of neo-liberal choice that has been systematically wielded against bodies that are disabled from

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exercising it (338). This taunt also reveals how respiratory incapacity can be turned into an infrastructural product. The so-called freedom to depart is presented because the regime has foreclosed its exercise, biologically and socially engineering a population whose bodies, habits, and beliefs have been calibrated to require what only the Pod provides. Disability here is reframed from being an individual pathology to a political design: the body is systematically made dependent so that dependency can be reframed as choice.

It is against this cynical rhetoric, the minister's sarcastic invitation to leave the Pod at will, that Quinn's formulation lands with such force. "They have us addicted to their air" refuses the framework of consumerism and signals something more insidious: a condition in which the body's most fundamental need has been captured, recalibrated, and bound to a supply that presents itself as transactional care but functions as pernicious bondage (338). Addiction, as contextualized by Quinn, is not a moral failure or even a political passivity. Rather, it specifically names a form of atmospheric governance that manufactures incapacity. For example, Auxiliary hearts cannot bear the strain of running; bodies cannot exercise without purchased oxygen; toddlers are tethered to their cribs lest they deplete a household's metered air; and even the regime's stewards cannot afford to dance. The regime does not merely deceive or mislead its citizens about the so-called scarcity of oxygen; it produces respiratory dependency as an essential condition for citizenship. This is the premise of the social model of disability, which locates the disability not in an impaired body but in the built and social environments that impair it, in contrast to the medical model's framing of disability as individual pathology (Shakespeare 214-22; Davis 1-14). It is this social constitution of disability that Rosemarie Garland-Thomson brings into focus as well. Disability, she argues, is not a property of bodies but rather a "set of practices that produce both the able-bodied and the disabled" ("Integrating Disability" 5). For Garland-Thomson, disability emerges relationally: as she explains, when "the norm becomes neutral in an environment created to accommodate it, disability becomes intense, extravagant, and problematic" ("Re-shaping" 2). The Pod demonstrates this logic operationally. By saturating its interior with oxygen calibrated to Premium bodies, it renders effortless breathing the neutral, invisible norm, and, in the same gesture, produces Auxiliaries who gasp for oxygen. In this construct, it is not the dependent body that requires justification; rather, the problem lies in how engineered atmospheres make dependency obvious and self-evident. This process connects to Garland-Thomson's conceptualization of normalcy as a process of quiet withdrawal and self-erasure rather than an explicit assertion. Within such an environment, unease can only surface as consumer grievance, until someone forces it into political rhetoric, as Quinn does. Quinn's affirmation about the fabricated dependency on air sees through this normalization by naming an atmospheric regime in which breath itself has become both the medium and the message of the state apparatus, and in which the body's (in)capacity to inhale sheds light on different forms of environmental and social violence that would otherwise remain imperceptible in an ableist order.

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Crossan's novels make respiratory disability the form in which such systemic failure becomes legible, from the bodily to the planetary level. This failure is not merely the ecological catastrophe of the Switch alone, but rather the political and economic order that converts that catastrophe into a society of privatized air, stratified citizenship, and manufactured dependency, in which disability is not anomaly but the designed yield. What Crossan's novels offer, then, is not simply a dramatization of environmental corruption or scarcity but a felt account of how certain bodies come to be marked as problems while the systems that produce them remain unaccountable. Pointing to nineteenth century British polymath and statistician Francis Galton's invention of the "normal distribution curve," disability studies scholar Lennard J. Davis reminds us that the norm "pushes the normal variation of the body through a stricter template guiding the way the body 'should be'" (5). Crossan transposes this insight within a respiratory register. The Auxiliary who gasps while climbing a staircase is not suffering from an individual deficit but from an atmospheric norm politically tailored to a privileged group's capacity. The reason Crossan's novels invite an eco-crip reading is that they refuse to separate environmental crisis from its embodied consequence, or to treat disability as a private trouble that exists independently of the infrastructures that shape it. The young protagonists of the novel discover their vulnerability relationally as an emergent process between their bodies and an engineered world. In Crossan's hands, breath becomes the site where environment and embodiment entangle most palpably: to notice one's breathing is to register an uneven distribution of survivability, and to see how ecological collapse is managed, domesticated, and made to appear inevitable.

Because this corporeal struggle is inherently bound up with the stories a population is told to secure their compliance, the characters' choice of language plays a crucial role in dismantling the Pod's protective mandate. In one of the most revealing moments concerning this biopolitical warfare, clandestine tree-planter and Resistance member Alina exposes the regime's manufactured scarcity when she claims:

> they give us enough for free to get us hooked. Before The Switch, the earth's air was twenty-one percent oxygen. In the pod they give us almost thirty percent. Why? So that when we come outside and have to suck in only six percent, we won't be able to cope. But we can cope. We would cope if they only taught us how. (*Breathe* 121)

This passage deconstructs the Pod's rhetoric by exposing oxygen as a managed and partitional norm rather than a neutral resource. By naming the air as manufactured and a "free" provision as a consciously expressive choice, Alina reframes care as a system that cultivates dependency, and then sells relief from it, as the same corporation that manufactures the craving also retails the satisfaction as supplemental oxygen for those who can pay, airtanks for sanctioned excursions, and an air tax levied even on the children. The numerical slide is also a crucial part of linguistic framing, for it recasts abundance as sabotage. The body, trained to treat supplementation as the baseline, becomes evidence of apparent uninhabitability. Thus, what is most striking about Alina's logic is its reversal of the expected grammar

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of deprivation. The regime's cruelty operates through what might be called a weaponization of excess rather than scarcity: they flood the body with oxygen at nearly thirty percent, ensuring that the outside world, where air hovers at six percent, registers as asphyxiation rather than possibility. The instrument of control here is not the withholding of breath but its overabundance, because this is a surplus so generous that the body readjusts its limits around it, consequently losing its tolerance for anything less, and ultimately experiences the unmediated atmosphere as a hazard rather than as an adaptable condition. The mechanism is consumer capitalism's own: dependency is secured by a surplus that accustoms the body to crave more, the same logic that applies to the market economy's manipulation of appetite or the attention economy's algorithmic control of the information flow that keeps consumers glued to the feed. And when Alina insists "we would cope if they only taught us how," she identifies a violence accompanying the atmospheric one: an epistemological withholding, the deliberate suppression of respiratory knowledge that ensures citizens never learn what their lungs might actually be capable of beyond the dome (121). The surplus Alina names is atmospheric: the Pod's air is oxygen rich for Premium and Auxiliary alike, and it is precisely this shared saturation that disables the bodies for the outside world. Categorically, class enters here not at the level or quality of air breathed but of the exertion permitted to consume more of it. Thus, abundance and rationing become two sides of the same coin.

Disability studies clarify what the Pod's forceful normativity actually accomplishes: going beyond responding to catastrophe, it produces (both geophysically and discursively) a breathable baseline that can be mistaken to be natural. If, as Robert McRuer argues, compulsory able-bodiedness is sustained by systems that present able-bodiedness as self-evident while continuously securing it through discipline and exclusion, then the Pod reads as an atmospheric technology of normativity, one that trains bodies to accept managed respiration as the condition of belonging (370–71). We can also return to Davis's critique of normativity here because it elucidates how the Pod's hierarchy does not merely sort bodies after the fact but actively produces so-called normal respiration as a social mandate that can then be treated as self-evident (3–6). Crossan makes this logic legible at the level of physiological act of breathing: Premium life is secured through atmospheres that make breathing feel effortless and therefore ordinary, while Auxiliary life is organized around the constant management of exertion, the careful rationing of inhalation, and the internalization of debility as common sense, so that engineered deprivation reads as personal limitation, even individual failure.

Tobin Siebers's notion of complex embodiment instructs us to view physiology and social order through a common lens and reminds us that biology is neither a brute biological fact nor a complete social construction. Rather, it is an ongoing interaction between bodies and built environments, in which impairment is real even if its meanings and scales are socially made (283–85). The respiratory limits that Crossan constructs express precisely such effects: they are neither natural nor figurative deficiencies but a physio-cultural materialization of power through air's unequal

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distribution. In *Breathe* then, the Pod is where ecological collapse is converted into an infrastructural commodity, and where disability becomes the unremarkable price of a world where violence is normalized and normativized. *Resist* widens this argument by relocating breath from managed interiority to conceptualizing exposure as collectivity, where air is not only scarce but contested as a collective condition and a political claim. Yet *Resist* declines to romanticize insurgency. Its narrative action is paced by lungs, climate, bodily exhaustion, and differentiated stamina, so that the call for resistance is repeatedly tested against changing bodily capacities, rather than measured by projections of revolutionary outcomes.

This persistence of the corporeal resonates with Achille Mbembe's invocation of a "universal right to breathe": a call that names breathability as a system of political distribution and a process of differential exposure acting as a governing logic, not an accidental or incidental crisis (58–62). In his eponymous April 2020 essay (published in the first stage of the pandemic, and weeks before the brutal murder by asphyxiation of George Floyd by the police in Minneapolis), Mbembe claims that Covid-19 exposed a prior condition rather than creating a new one. Modernity, he argued, has waged an interminable war on life, and all such wars begin by taking away breath. Long before the pandemic, capitalism had already condemned "entire races, to a difficult, panting breath and life of oppression" (S60-S61). What the pandemic foreclosed was the modern habit of delegating one's death to others, the ontological equivalent of exporting ecological damage elsewhere, and Mbembe warns that the crisis will deepen enclosure, as states fortify their borders, people stay glued to their screens, and life behind gated communities becomes the norm for those who can afford it. Thus, to claim breathing as a universal right, one that cannot be appropriated and "eludes all sovereignty," is to recognize it as a system of political distribution (S60-61). Feminist theorist Magdalena Górska grounds a similar claim in empirical particulars and intersectionality: her *Breathing Matters* reads breathing as both a corporeal and political process, across the coal miners' black lung disease, phone sex work, and anxiety or panic attacks. Arguing for a framework of "corpo-materiality" of breathing, she argues, "breath is a matter of structural power relations all over the world, and breath matters in power relations' differential operations of their local and global specificities" (95). Building on these formulations, it is my argument that Crossan's novels do not foreground breathability as a condition of environmental quality or a marker of bodily fitness alone, but as a way to name the socio-politically charged conditions that lead to unequal distribution of the ability to breathe: who is afforded breath? On what terms and at whose expense, and finally, to what degree of security?

Breathe and *Resist* are staged on this theoretical terrain. In Crossan's duology, breathability is never a natural given but rather a matter of political governance and allocation, and bodies most affected by this unequal allocation are also the ones most capable of reimagining its redistribution as commons. The sections that follow trace this drama across the duology: the contested ecology of collective breath beyond the dome, and its ethical reckoning through the novels' most consequential deaths and rival models of community building: the Grove's voluntary commons, and Sequoia's

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eugenic regime. Taken together, these movements make breathing less a mode of heroic refusal and more a shared practice of community building in dystopic times.

Contested Breath, Atmospheric Commons, and The Politics of Interdependence

"One breath for you, one breath for me." (Crossan, *Breathe* 210)

With this literal and strikingly liturgical phrase, teenage rebel Alina explains how she plans to survive along with her friends Bea, Maude, and Dorian in the toxic wasteland beyond the Pod. She has shared her oxygen with Bea to keep her alive on their approach to the Grove. The implication here is that two bodies would share a single airtank in alternating inhalations, gesturing at breathing as an act of trust between emotionally conjoined bodies. The expression denotes both intimacy and anxiety because such an improvised rhythm of mutual breathing among friends depends on both a dual arithmetic of scarce air, and also tenderness. What Crossan hints at here is something more than an emergency measure. The practice becomes a figuration of breath as something not individualized but irreducibly relational. The air that sustains one body is tied to the care for and care of another. At its most elemental level, survival becomes an exercise in shared vulnerability, rather than a test of individual endurance. This passage and the rest of the chapter ("Bea") anticipate a central conviction of the duology: that breathability is not a private possession, but a communal condition, and any politics that responds to the planetary climate crisis must begin with this recognition.

The authorial context is significant here in finding the correct balance between storytelling and polemic. Crossan has emphasized that writing for young readers does not mean simplifying the political stakes of our current moment. Rather, the moment demands that we put our faith in the body as an instrument to channel our political consciousness, allowing adolescent characters to starkly *feel* what it means to suffocate under a system of malevolent and calibrated dependency. The premise of plummeting oxygen, due to "human folly," as Crossan acknowledges, depicts "a scary place and a place, dare I say it, that's possible" (Vallesteros). The emphasis on plausibility is less about providing a scientifically accurate account of dystopia and more about making the reader feel a sense of discomfort: an uneasy sense of complicity about the devastated world the young will inherit. Referring to her experience as a teacher, Crossan described her soft spot for teenagers in an interview with *The Bookseller* magazine: "they're brave and curious and often see the world with a clarity that adults have lost. I love writing characters who are just starting to realise that the adults around them don't necessarily have all the answers, and who are learning to make choices for themselves" (Noble). This implies a pedagogical ethic that, within her fiction, translates into a narrative structure where received truths about the environment, social safety, and governance are systematically dismantled by the young who bear their consequences.

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In the volatile, oxygen-depleted world beyond the sealed interior, where breath must be contested, rationed, and collectively reimagined, Crossan's philosophy of survival is deliberately unsentimental. There is no green utopia awaiting the protagonists beyond the dome with the promise of a pastoral restoration. Instead, there is a precarious and depleted atmosphere with roughly six percent oxygen, with a landscape of "usual desolation: tumbledown buildings, smashed up cars, warped roads, and toppled lampposts. Bones are scattered among the debris; animal or human, it's hard to tell. In the distance are folds of hoary, barren fields" (*Resist* 47). It is in the midst of this desolation that Crossan locates an emergent form of respiratory community, emergent because its members refuse to separate the question of who can breathe from the question of how breathable air is materially and socially distributed. They are communities forged not from abundance but from precarity: from bodies whose exposure to a damaged atmosphere has become, paradoxically, the condition of their political intelligence. Feminist aesthetics scholar Jana Kukaine's formulation is apposite here: she argues that "the body should not be viewed as a passive surface of political imprints nor a mere victim of social injustice. Instead, the body exhibits its capacity to revive by using the state of vulnerability to fore-ground visceral resistance" (96). What Crossan's novels dramatise, across *Breathe* and *Resist*, is precisely this conversion of respiratory vulnerability into political resource, but they do so without abstracting or mystifying the process. Here, communal struggle is staged as an ecology of breath in its own right: a domain in which consensus and dissent about risk-taking become a moral arithmetic, where the most vulnerable bodies model forms of interdependence the able-bodied must learn or perish, and in which the fragile prospect of an atmospheric commons emerges not from heroic refusal but from the slow, patient, embodied labour of learning to breathe together in a damaged world.

Consider the figure of Maude Blue. Alina describes encountering her as a terrifying and ghostly figure: an elderly drifter surviving alone in a derelict house, tethered to a solar-powered respirator that "looks like a small refrigerator," her body ravaged by malnutrition and exposure (*Breathe* 105). Maude viciously attacks Alina, trying to steal her airtank, and is subdued only with the arrival of Quinn and Bea, who overpower her. Maude is presented here as a figure of abjection, and yet, we also learn that she is actually an expelled member of the Pod's own apparatus: "The drifters are all ex-Breathe," Alina explains bluntly (115). This disheveled appearance of Maude testifies to the regime's logic of disposability, ejecting its surplus objects and furnishing them with just enough resources to survive but not resist. But Maude also becomes a symbol of adaptation and endurance; by the time the group reaches the Resistance's stronghold at the Grove, and later, throughout the perilous journey to Sequoia in *Resist*, she has become indispensable. Her solar respirator, once a mark of expulsion, becomes an emblem of adaptive survival. Disability theorist Alison Kafer's concept of a "crip future" is relevant here. She argues for "a cripped environmentalism, one that looks to disabled bodies/minds as a resource in thinking about our future natures differently," insisting that the experience of disability

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"presents alternative ways of understanding ourselves in relation to the environment, understandings which can then generate new possibilities for intellectual connections and activist coalitions" (131). Maude embodies such a cripped environmentalism, her body a living archive of the Pod's atmospheric violence. Yet it is precisely this violence, both physical and psychological, that has generated in her a sense of altered and counterintuitive understanding of her environment. In fact, what the Pod designates as expendability turns out to be the seedbed of an alternative respiratory politics, one grounded not in the fiction of self-sufficient and individuated bodies but in the frank acknowledgement that every breath, outside the dome, is borrowed, shared, and owed.

This alternative politics receives its most concentrated expression in the breathing training sessions at the Grove, which Crossan stages with an almost reverential attention to the body's quiet labour. When Bea is first led into the training room, what she encounters is a scene of radical somatic discipline:

> Inside the room are about thirty people without facemasks [...] Half of them sitting crossed-legged and straight-backed on one side of the room, their eyes closed, their lips slightly parted. The other half have twisted their bodies into odd shapes: there's a girl standing on her head, her toes pointing into the air; there's a boy lying on his back with his legs straight and pulled up to his face. (*Breathe* 231)

There is, Bea notices, a strange sound in the room—"a crackling [...] like static electricity." Alina identifies it: "That's their breathing" (231). The room's oxygen level has been set to 6%, the same as the hostile atmosphere outside, and the trainees are learning to function within it: "Relaxation is the key to preserving oxygen... Everyone in this room is lowering their heart rates and maximizing lung potential" (231). What Crossan renders here is not simply an insurgent exercise regimen but an epistemological reversal of the Pod's atmospheric logic. Where the regime cultivates incapacity and dependency by flooding bodies with surplus oxygen, the Resistance cultivates capacity by training bodies to survive on less. Where the Pod suppresses respiratory knowledge, the Grove restores it, painstakingly, breath by breath. The training is collective, communal, and fully dependent on a principle of the commons. Song, the Grove's biochemist, has devised a system for "farming, storing, and transferring the oxygen from the trees and plants in the stadium to certain locations in the building," calibrated to eighteen percent in some areas, six percent in others (218). Consequently, the urgent stakes of this embodied knowledge become starkly visible in the differential fates of Crossan's protagonists. Quinn Caffrey, the Premium boy whose lungs have been calibrated to the Pod's thirty-percent atmosphere, finds himself paradoxically disabled by his own privilege the moment he steps outside. Habituated to surplus air, his body registers the depleted atmosphere as asphyxiation. Near the end of *Breathe*, when his father asks whether he can yet "breathe without supplemental air," Quinn replies as the first-person narrator: "I'm getting there" (361). Even deep into *Resist*, Quinn remains the slowest of the group, the one who cannot keep pace: "I wish I could run faster," he admits. "Silas and Alina keep stopping so I can catch up" (300). Significantly, his lack of adaptability and pace is not a symptom

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of essentializing stereotypes about disability, but rather a proof of a residual dependency on the control of the atmospheric regime. In this regard, literary and media scholar Jean-Thomas Tremblay's argument regarding the situational indistinction between "not being able to breathe and performing not being able to breathe" is relevant, especially when one is dealing with historical trauma (25). By contrast, those whom the Pod has marginalised or expelled, such as Auxiliaries, drifters, and the chronically breathless, possess embodied knowledge that becomes both a form of power and a performance. To elaborate, the Grove's relatively sophisticated training, Quinn's learning by trial and error, and Maude's learning by endurance all gesture at processes that, in Tremblay's words, "turn breathing into [an] art" (25). Jazz and Alina's reflections on their training are also a performance that questions the Pod's hierarchy of respiratory worth, and the performance matters because it narrativizes every act and existence of breathing into a process inscribed with milieu-specific power relations. With the dialectic of the inside and outside, which is also a dialectic of coercion and co-operation, Crossan dramatizes this power dynamic, for example, in the breathing exercises at the Grove. To go back to Alina's declaration about shared collectivity, in Crossan's fictional world, the literalism of the phrase compounds rather than diminishes its political force. The Resistance fighters practice breathing at six percent not merely to acclimatize but to reclaim a capacity that the state has deliberately extinguished: to render their lungs self-governable again. Their strained chests and moments of lightheadedness give this bodily labour an artistic and political force, locating resistance in the collective negotiation of bodily limits rather than in their heroic transcendence. Thus, the electric sound of their collective breath in the training room is at once the most ordinary and the most radical in the novel: the music of lungs that refuse and resist normative violence.

But the duology also does not let this vision of resourceful and mutually interdependent bodies stand uncontested. As I explore in the next section, there is a complex political reckoning behind this communal breathing: not just exertion and exposure, but also grief, psychological damage, and moral exhaustion that strain unrelentingly against a practice that is itself precarious. As Stephanie Heine reminds us in *Poetics of Breathing*, breath itself is never simply a sign of vitality but always "an ethics of breathing together apart, as being thrown into an atmosphere with others, others who are—to various degrees—always different from one another, and cannot be held together by a substance as frail and intangible as air" (35). It is this tension, between solidarity and singularity, or between redemption and ruin, that Crossan refuses to settle in the duology.

Shallow Breath: Interspecies Grief, Eugenic Air, and the Ethics of Expenditure

Going beyond the unstable collective established at the Grove, Crossan's narrative immediately tests the limits of shared respiration against the trauma of dispossession. To understand this context, we can turn to environmental humanities scholar Matthew J.C. Cella. In his effort to bridge ecocriticism and disability studies,

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Cella introduces the concept of "ecosomatic paradigm" to contend with "a key method with which to deconstruct norms of embodiment while simultaneously promoting ethical treatment of the natural world" (169). By emphasizing the fundamental porosity of human embodiment, Cella's framework clarifies how ecological degradation manifests directly as a bodily and psychological crisis. Crossan dramatises exactly such an ecosomatic rupture in the beginning of *Resist*. Fleeing the destruction of their sanctuary, the survivors face a reality where endurance itself crosses the threshold of tolerance. Holly, one of the Grove's gardeners, is unraveled by the catastrophe: she hyperventilates, refuses supplemental oxygen, and begs for fresh air, "as though there's such a thing" (4). When she is helped onto the deck, Holly still repeatedly attempts to throw herself over the prow. Holly "laughs mirthlessly," tells Alina, "I'm all out of hope" and let's go; she "hits the water and is devoured" (9). In this devastating scene, Crossan strips the emotions of any redemptive rhetoric. As the water devours Holly, she becomes a symbol of a terrible ecosomatic surrender to a damaged world. Holly's surrender illustrates how the atmospheric precarity manufactured by the regime ultimately extinguishes the imaginaries of liveable futures. Her death is a failure to envision and implement a true respiratory commons: a condition under which breathing actually feels worth the effort. Alina's despairing question "What are we fighting for, anyway?" (10) wraps up the first chapter in *Resist* and foreshadows every subsequent act of solidarity and defiance. The atmospheric commons the protagonists seek to build will therefore have to be adequate not only to the needs of lungs but to what Tremblay identifies as the irreducible morbidity of respiration itself. Holly's drowning clarifies this forcefully. As Tremblay writes at the close of his meditation on the last breath, "To breathe is [...] to be near death. Discourses of the last breath do not deny this reality so much as they frame it within a form of life. Those are the stories we tell ourselves in order to keep breathing" (157). Holly's drowning is also the loss of a narrative, however fragile, that might frame each act of breathing within a liveable horizon. Without it, respiration becomes indistinguishable from the slow violence it was meant to withstand, and the body's most elemental persistence ceases to feel like survival at all.

If Holly's death marks the psychological limit of respiratory precarity, Petra's death at the climax of *Breathe* marks its interspecies horizon. When the ministerial troops descend on the Grove, the forest that the Resistance has spent their collective lives nurturing "is shriveling up before [their] eyes" as "Black foam swells along the columns of trees and eats its way from branch to branch" (344). Petra refuses to abandon her trees. When the others scramble back down to find her, she is sitting on the low branch of an oak. Her demeanor is calm, and as Alina's narration puts it, she is "meditating her way to defeat" (344). To the pleas and curses of her comrades she responds with a question that scaffolds the novel's entire moral economy: "What have they ever done? [...] All I ever wanted was to protect them. I failed. I won't desert them" (344). Then, with those words, she begins to climb upward, moving closer to the toxic foam. Petra's upward and suicidal steps in these final moments are a refusal to separate her own breathability from the respiratory labour of the more-than-human

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organisms that make breathing possible in the first place. The trees of the Grove are co-participants in a shared ecology of breath that forms a matrix of kinship with humans. Their destruction constitutes a violence she recognizes as being inseparable from the violence done to human bodies. And crucially, nine-year-old Jazz follows her, scurrying up the trunk. What makes this moment so unsettling is not simply the risk but its root: the youngest and most respiratorily vulnerable body in the novel chooses the trees over the retreating collective, intuiting a kinship that the adults around her can only articulate as grief-induced insanity or impracticality. Jazz's ascent inverts the expected eco-crip logic of protection; it is the precarious body that extends care toward the dying nonhuman world, rather than receiving it. That Crossan suspends Jazz's fate from the reader across the novel's closing chapters deepens the ethical charge, refusing to let the reader emotionally metabolise her ascent as either certain martyrdom or simple rescue, and leaving it instead as an open scar in the narrative's cartography of conscience, until she is found in the Grove's rubble, alive but altered. In eco-crip terms, Jazz's initial stubborn immobility and the frantic ascent are a refusal of what Kafer refers to as a "curative futurity:" a time frame that casts disabled people (as) out of time, or as obstacles to the arc of progress (28). By orienting her precarious body not toward the normative arc of survival but toward the flaming and fuming canopy, Jazz enacts the kind of crip futurity that insists vulnerable bodies are not obstacles to be overcome but the ethical ground from which any alternative futurity must be imagined.

Against Petra's arboreal solidarity, Crossan sets a darker example in *Resist*: the settlement of Sequoia, which is governed by Petra's sister Vanya. If the Grove represents a future that is collective, shared, voluntary, and attentive to the more than human, Sequoia represents a far more sinister atmospheric regime, capable of transforming the language of adaptation. When Abel, a former resistance member who has been living at Sequoia, leads Alina to the compound's hospital ward at night and shows her what Vanya's program truly entails, she sees through the narrow windows a room of metal beds, bodies strapped down with tubes threaded through their mouths and noses, and machines hissing and beeping. The second room is even more disturbing, full of cribs and playpens: "The children are crying, wheezing, or asleep. None of them are connected to tubes, but most are covered in Band-Aids and bruises" (247). "They're pumping the air in at fifteen percent," Abel whispers, "and they keep lowering it until a child looks like he might suffocate. Then they hook him up to an oxybox. They're training them" (247). The scene tells us that the pairing ceremony that governs Sequoia's political economy, in which genetic compatibility determines who is worthy of breeding, and with whom, reinforces the picture of a community that has responded to the crisis of breathability not by reimagining its terms but by reproducing the Pod's logic of austerity governance at a smaller scale.

Where the Pod manufactures dependency through surplus oxygen, Sequoia manufactures supposed strength through enforced deprivation. But in both cases, breath remains an instrument of biocultural control rather than a commons. And the bodies that struggle to adjust are treated as extractive resources for a governance

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model beyond their choosing. Alina's revulsion at the hospital ward underscores that settlements like Sequoia are the result of a biopolitics that dispenses with solidarity and substitutes it with eugenic management, foreclosing a crip future through the language of authoritarian design. This distinction between these two models of atmospheric community, i.e. the Grove's collaborative interspecies commons and Sequoia's biocultural and technoscientific apparatus, gives the climactic sequence of *Resist* its ethical grounding. The question that these two approaches highlight is grounded in lived experience: how does such politically charged accessibility and capacity of breathing count, and who controls it? As Górska puts it: "It does matter whose lives (do not) matter; it does matter whose lives are (un)breathable; and it does matter whose lives and what practices of resistance and transformation are (not) considered political" (252). Specifically, Crossan builds this differential logic in the narrative architecture of the novel. We encounter Sequoia only after putting our faith in the Grove, and the sequencing nudges us to confront what Górska's formulation lays bare: that equitable breathability is not in itself a political good unless we grapple with the questions of agency and instrumentality. The real horror of Sequoia is its shared premise with the Grove's vision that bodies must be remade for a damaged atmosphere, ultimately obscuring the possibility of imperfect commons. Crossan's deepest provocation, then, is that atmospheric liberation carries no insurance against its own inversion, and that the distinction between care and control must be a part of the broader vision of any respiratory politics.

It is in light of this recognition that breathing can be engineered toward liberation or toward domination, and that the difference is legible only in collective organizing and entanglement of vulnerable bodies, that the novels' two most significant deaths acquire their full eco-crip weight. They register not as isolated tragedies but as connected indices of how atmospheric governance distributes conditions of survival, how malleable bodies and environments convert broader ecological crisis into intuited and embodied cognizance, and how these precarious bodies become, in their very expansiveness, sites where any genuinely collective future must be envisioned. The first death is that of General Jude Caffrey. Throughout the narrative arc, Caffrey embodies the ambivalence of complicity: a man who enforces the goals of the regime and commands the destruction of the Grove, yet who, at a decisive point in *Breathe*, cannot sacrifice his own son to the system he serves. He leads Quinn to an exit and pushes him into the Outlands with a quietly profound speculation: "In another world I think we would have been friends, son" (362). In *Resist*, this ambivalence deepens, as Caffrey recruits Auxiliary soldiers to defend the Pod against Vanya's attack, effectively militarizing a disabled population. When he is shot in the neck in the final battle, Quinn kneels beside him as the General rips off his oxygen mask and flings it beyond reach. "His breath is short and soft," Quinn notes (349). This detail is crucial to the scene's meaning, as it underscores the transformation and vulnerability of the enforcer of the atmospheric order. This final and unmediated inhalation, along with his self-unmasking, helps complete the cyclical arc of the novel where no breath is solitary; even the enforcer's lungs are implicated

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in the atmosphere he helped to make toxic, and as that complicity unravels, it does not necessarily redeem the past so much as acknowledge a shared condition. The second death is Alina's, and it tracks the entire trajectory of breath from private commodity to collective offering. When she discovers Vanya's bomb and carries it into the open field, running on atmospheric oxygen alone, she reassures herself, "The oxygen in the atmosphere is thin, but it's enough after my training" (*Resist* 345). It is also "enough" because this air supports everything the Grove has built so far. As Alina carries herself across the terrain, she becomes a vital part of a social whole. And what she does with that collectively forged capacity is give it away: not through the reciprocal rhythm of shared inhalation, but in a terminal expenditure that ensures others will continue to breathe. As Black studies scholars Jessie Cox and Isaac Jean-Francois argue, breathing liquifies "any fantasy of individuated contours" between self and other (110). Alina's sacrifice takes this dissolution to its limit, converting the ecosomatic malleability, from Holly's despair through Petra's arboreal fidelity, into an act whose political meaning is inseparable from its physiological cost. That Bea must lift her own face mask to whisper to Alina's body turns even this final communication into a form of respiratory caring. This gesture refuses to let speech exist outside the economy of shared air. Yet Crossan does not end with this image of sacrifice or even triumph, as the epilogue represents a quiet and radical resolution: a crip present. Bea's closing reflection on her "own shallow breath" refuses the triumphalist mode that a conventional dystopian ending might demand (*Resist* 356). Bea's respiration is damaged and insufficient by any normative standard of respiratory health. Yet it is not hers alone. Her struggle for breathing now stands for a respiration that the survivors share. What Crossan offers is a continuance of inhabitation in a damaged world and finding, through physical and emotional labour, not redemption but rather a sense of adequacy and healing.

Conclusion

Sarah Crossan's *Breathe* and *Resist* constitute a significant eco-crip intervention into atmospheric governance, one in which respiratory disability is not just a figurative framework, but indeed the primary register through which ecological catastrophe, political violence, and social stratification become legible. The Pod converts environmental collapse into a bio-techno-cultural regime of normativity, engineering a respiratory baseline that produces disability as its key structural effect, rather than as an anomaly. In situating her characters beyond the dome, Crossan stages collective breathing as a counter-practice grounded in vulnerability. Yet, the duology also resists letting this communal vision stand unchallenged. It traces interspecies kinship, its perversely eugenic inversion, and the question of breath being converted from private commodity into terminal expenditure, culminating in Bea's imperfectly tenacious continuance. These three movements—the Pod's manufactured logic of normalcy, the Grove's contested commons, and competing models of community in this narrative universe—are critical because a single

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underlying logic connects them: the conversion of crisis into infrastructure. In Crossan's fictional world, ecological catastrophe gets rationalized, domesticated, and, ultimately, administered to function as the governing structure of everyday life. The Switch creates conditions under which breathability becomes a managed resource, distributed hierarchically. Within this administered environment, disability becomes the ongoing yield of a system requiring differential incapacitation to sustain itself. Tremblay's formulation delineates this dynamic within the contemporary crisis of breath, as he argues:

> The intensified pollution, weaponization, and monetization of air and breath since the 1970s amount to a crisis in the reproduction of life. Within this crisis, breath, a life force to be marshaled individually or collectively, reveals its contingency on environments, broadly conceived, that exhaust their occupants at different rates. Accordingly, articulations of survival become predicated on the management and dispersal of respiratory hazards. (2)

Crossan's fiction depicts this dispersal of hazards, staging it across bodies, milieus, and institutions to expose how atmospheric governance embeds a gradual spectrum of respiratory precarity whose distribution reinforces existing hierarchies of expendability. Yet the novels also show how breathing emerges as a site of ethical possibility even after its instrumentalization. As Heine argues in her study of respiratory figurations in Modernist literature, "breath is the recalcitrant persistence of material always on the move" (172). Crossan realizes this as breath in her fiction is never settled, never safe, never fully redeemed, but neither is it obliterated. It is an ongoing negotiation and a practice of inhabiting the world that always remains hostile and conflicting. Bea's closing reflection enacts this recognition that survival in a damaged world requires something beyond restoration: a politics of recalcitrant persistence and defiance, attuned to a collective, rather than individual, understanding of freedom. Crossan's Young Adult dystopia thus offers more than fictional anticipation of the contemporary planetary climate crisis, by providing an eco-crip account of how bodies, ecologies, and political orders are mutually constituted through the most elemental of acts: the continuous and precarious work of breathing. Young adult fiction, in Crossan's hands, becomes the form and also a tool for political education about our shared and collective atmosphere. This is not a simplified iteration of adult crisis, but rather a sharp reorientation of the logic of this crisis to imagine a liveable world through a commitment to the common good.

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Cripping the Eco-Disaster: Imagining Disability Ecologies in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* and Veena Nagpal's *Radius 200*

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Abstract

This essay situates eco-crip theory in a postcolonial context and argues that the Indian English novels *Animal's People* (2007) and *Radius 200* (2014) envision the eco-disaster in the so-called Global South as a site of emerging disability ecologies that inextricably entangle the human and the more-than-human in a web of mutual material-discursive enmeshments. I suggest that the novels imagine disability experiences in the Global South in the aftermath of disaster in manifold entangled relations with the more-than-human, thus destabilizing universalizing notions of disability. While Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* is a fictionalisation of the aftermath of the 1984 Bhopal Disaster in India, where a chemical gas leak in a pesticide factory killed thousands of people and animals as well as leaving thousands more chronically ill, Veena Nagpal's *Radius 200* is set in an India of a not-so-distant future, in which a rivalry over water resources between India and China results in a Chinese nuclear attack on the city of Allahabad, creating a 200 mile-radius Exclusion Zone in which a group of survivors is left to fend for itself. Reading these two Indian English novels together can shed light on eco-crip relations in India by centering the eco-crip within specific cultural, social, political and material contexts that make visible "the actual lived experience of disabled people in the Global South" (Krentz 5), and the manifold more-than-human enmeshments that shape experiences of disability. By thematically and aesthetically envisioning new forms of disability subjectivities that emerge as material-discursive entanglements between the human and the more-than-human in disaster-ridden environments, the novels can contribute to the production of knowledge about specific disability experiences in the Global South.

Keywords: Transcorporeality, disability ecology, Indian English fiction, eco-disaster, slow violence.

Resumen

Este ensayo sitúa la teoría *eco-crip* en un contexto poscolonial, y sostiene que las novelas en inglés de la India *Animal's People* (2007) y *Radius 200* (2014) conciben el desastre ecológico en el denominado Sur Global como un escenario de ecologías de la discapacidad emergentes que entrelazan inextricablemente lo humano y lo más-que-humano en una red de interdependencias materiales y discursivas mutuas. Sugiero que las novelas imaginan las experiencias de discapacidad en el Sur Global tras el desastre en múltiples relaciones entrelazadas con lo más-que-humano, desestabilizando así las nociones universalizadoras de la discapacidad. Mientras que *Animal's People*, de Indra Sinha, es una novelización de las secuelas del desastre de Bhopal de 1984 en la India—donde una fuga de gas químico en una fábrica de pesticidas mató a miles de personas y animales, además de dejar a otros miles con enfermedades crónicas—, *Radius 200*, de Veena Nagpal, se ambienta en una India de un futuro no muy lejano, en la que una rivalidad por los recursos hídricos entre la India y China da lugar a un ataque nuclear chino contra la ciudad de Allahabad, creando una zona de exclusión de 200 millas de radio en la que un grupo de supervivientes se ve obligado a valerse por sí mismo. La lectura conjunta de estas dos novelas indias escritas en inglés puede arrojar luz sobre las relaciones entre lo ecológico y lo discapacitado en la India, al situar lo ecológico y lo discapacitado en contextos culturales, sociales, políticos y materiales específicos que hacen visible "la experiencia real vivida por las personas con discapacidad en el Sur Global" (Krentz 5), así como los múltiples entrelazamientos más allá de lo humano que dan forma a las experiencias de la discapacidad. Al imaginar, desde un punto de vista temático y estético, nuevas formas de subjetividades de la discapacidad que surgen como

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entrelazamientos materiales y discursivos entre lo humano y lo más que humano en entornos azotados por desastres, estas novelas pueden contribuir a la generación de conocimiento sobre experiencias específicas de discapacidad en el Sur Global.

Palabras clave: Transcorporalidad, ecología de la discapacidad, ficción en inglés de la India, eco-desastre, violencia lenta.

Introduction

India can be regarded as one of the countries that is most affected by the consequences of anthropogenic climate change. It is not surprising, therefore, that in recent years a growing body of fiction from the subcontinent has emerged that deals with environmental degradation, loss of biodiversity, climate migration and speculative climate futures. Given the high rate of pollution and toxicity in India that are the results of neoliberal, neocolonial and capitalist practices, authors such as Indra Sinha and Veena Nagpal have paid attention to the calamitous consequences of eco-disasters in an Indian context as well as to their effects on human and more-than-human environments. Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* (2007) is a fictionalization of the aftermath of the 1984 Bhopal Disaster in India, where a chemical gas leak in a pesticide factory killed thousands of people and animals as well as leaving thousands more chronically ill and disabled. Veena Nagpal's *Radius 200* (2014) is set in an India of a not-so-distant future, in which a rivalry over water resources between India and China results in a Chinese nuclear attack on the North Indian city of Allahabad (nowadays known as Prayagraj), creating a 200 mile-radius Exclusion Zone in which a group of survivors is left to fend for itself.

Both novels negotiate the emergence of disabled bodies and environments as a result of extractive neocolonial practices (*Animal's People*) and increasing geopolitical crises due to climate change (*Radius 200*).[1] This essay situates eco-crip theory in a postcolonial context and argues that the novels envision the eco-disaster in the so-called Global South as a site of emerging disability ecologies that inextricably entangle the human and the more-than-human in a web of material-discursive enmeshments. I suggest that the novels imagine disability experiences in the Global South in the aftermath of disaster in manifold entangled relations with the more-than-human, thus destabilizing universalizing notions of disability. While *Animal's People* has already garnered much scholarly attention in the environmental humanities, postcolonial studies and—increasingly—in disability studies, due to its championing of the disabled protagonist Animal and his unique narrative voice, *Radius 200* has not been the focus of much literary or cultural studies scholarship as of yet. The few articles that were published on this novel have dealt with the ramifications of the water crisis in India but have not addressed questions of disability (Rajbanshi and

[1] Snyder and Mitchell define disability as a "continuum of human embodiment" (5) and a "site of phenomenological value that is not purely synonymous with the processes of social disablement" (6).

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Kumar; Degener). By juxtaposing the well-known *Animal's People* with the lesser-known *Radius 200*, this article moreover tries to broaden the discussion of literary negotiations of disability experiences in India and their different approaches to narration and aesthetics. While both novels are set in India, *Radius 200* takes place in a post-apocalyptic speculative future, and *Animal's People* is a fictionalisation of a real historical event that still has repercussions to this day. Yet in an eco-crip context, the two novels provide interesting parallels: Both novels take place in the aftermath of eco-disaster and negotiate questions of uncertain climate futures and living with disability in cities wrecked by eco-disasters that are propelled by neoliberal, neocolonial and geopolitical power structures, as well as address questions of mass disablement as consequence of such disasters.[2] Reading these two Indian English novels together can shed light on eco-crip relations in India by centering the eco-crip within specific cultural, social, political and material contexts that make visible "the actual lived experience of disabled people in the Global South" (Krentz 5), and the manifold more-than-human enmeshments that shape experiences of disability.[3]

The significance of zooming in on the eco-crip in a Global South context becomes evident through a postcolonial lens: In their influential article on the relationship between disability and postcolonialism, Clare Barker and Stuart Murray argue for a decolonization of disability studies that question the unreflected application of social models of disability in postcolonial contexts without regarding matters of colonial history and neocolonial practices.[4] The need for analyses that take into account the "cultural locatedness" and particularity of disability experiences becomes more important than ever, such as attending to specific cultural beliefs about health and disability, as well as to colonial and neocolonial practices that engendered mass disablement in specific regions of the world (228–230). As Esme Cleall shows, about 80% out of the more than 1 billion disabled people around the world reside in the Global South (1), thereby highlighting the need for a reframing of disability experiences in different geographical and cultural contexts, in which disability is no longer the deviation from the norm. Moreover, Helen Meekosha pleads for a decolonization of disability studies, arguing that "critical disability studies itself needs to be re-formulated, to theorize relationships that have arisen from colonialism and postcolonial power," and criticizing a universalizing tendency in disability studies that holds critical concepts from the Global North as standard (669). The importance of attending to disability when examining colonial and neocolonial relations also becomes evident when looking at colonial practices of othering the colonized body that informed notions of bodily normativity and ableism, such as in the

[2] Jina Kim has investigated the role of mass disablement and postcolonialism in *Animal's People* in her article "People of the Apokalis: Spatial Disability and the Bhopal Disaster" (2014).

[3] I use the term more-than-human rather than non-human to point towards the various material enmeshments that the human is an inextricable part of and that relates both the human and the non-human in multiple creative ways.

[4] I will use the terms Global North and Global South in the sense of unevenly distributed forms of inequality of regions around the world due to specific historical and geopolitical forces and developments.

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hierarchization of bodily impairments during the slave trade and the projection of anxieties by colonizers on the bodies of colonized peoples (Grech 10–11). Combining a postcolonial lens with an eco-crip framework can thus be a fruitful merger of disciplinary perspectives with regard to examining literary articulations of disablement in the Global South in the wake of eco-disaster and the various material-discursive relationalities that emerge therewith.

Crip theory and the verb *cripping*, as McRuer argues, try to exceed the well-known and often criticized medical and social models of disability by highlighting the "materiality of embodiment" as well as how able-bodiedness and disability are binarized and brought into an oppositional and hierarchical relationship in specific public discourses (*Crip Times* 24).[5] McRuer explains the necessity of *cripping* in destabilizing and "radically revisioning" ableist structures in all their forms (*Crip Times* 22). Moreover, in recent years, the environmental humanities and disability studies have mutually benefitted from each other, with scholars highlighting the interconnections between built environments and the privileging of certain bodies, as well as the influence of toxic environments on the physical and mental health of local populations (Ray and Sibara 2–3). Eco-crip theory has proposed new ways of thinking about the disabled body as contingent upon environmental accessibilities and inaccessibilities: New Materialist scholar Stacy Alaimo calls for a "cripping [of] environmental studies" and the addition of "multispecies perspectives" to disability studies ("Foreword" xi). By focusing on entangled, relational and embodied epistemologies, eco-crip theory can draw from Posthumanism(s), New Materialism(s) and other forms of relational Materialism(s), as well as on Indigenous epistemologies (Alaimo, "Foreword" xi–xii). Merging these interdisciplinary interests of the eco-crip can therefore highlight the limitations of social constructionist and medical models by foregrounding the interplay between particular material dimensions of bodies, their relationship with more-than-human environments, and political, cultural and social forces.

A renewed focus on the inextricability of material and social relations in eco-crip theory is highlighted by Kupetz who coined the term "disability ecology" (2019). He defines it as a conceptual framework that is "part of the broader rediscovery of the body as site, critical lens, and sensuous experience already occurring throughout the social sciences and humanities" (48), thereby trying to circumvent the limitations of social constructionist models. Drawing on new materialist thought, he argues that such an approach to disability makes visible the manifold enmeshments that structure the lives of disabled people, while also emphasizing the approach's usefulness in propelling a reimagination of disability as a "material semiotic effect of the social relationships between embodied individual and a range of nonhuman

[5] While medical models foreground disability as an individual bodily problem that needs to be cured and overcome, social approaches to disability disavow a pathologization of individuals while viewing disability as produced by systemic power structures and exclusionary practices (Marks 86-89), thereby disregarding the very materiality of physical or mental impairments, the possible pain that comes with that, as well as the wish for medical intervention by some individuals (Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* 7–8).

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actors, including cultural practices, institutions, and technologies" (50).[6] This intricate relationality between human and more-than-human agents and forces thus makes disability a "dynamic state of perpetual becoming, not a fixed condition with a stable meaning" (55). Accordingly, disability ecologies encompass both human and more-than-human forces that are in constant flux with each other, thereby destabilizing the notion of the boundedness of material human bodies and foregrounding the role of the more-than-human, such as toxins or other more-than-human substances and environments, in shaping disability experiences (48-49). Viewing disability through the lens of disability ecology can thus contribute to a destabilization of ableist, neoliberal and other forms of oppression against disabled people as well as to a reframing of looking at the disabled body in a continual process of emerging with the more-than-human.

In this vein, disability ecologies shall provide the conceptual framework for my analysis of the eco-disasters in *Animal's People* and *Radius 200.* Anthony Carrigan has highlighted the relationship between eco-disasters, the emergence of disabilities in such disaster zones and the postcolonial state, claiming that representations of disability in postcolonial literature might help us to reframe conceptualisations of disability in a global context. He argues that "regional militarization and neocolonial power consolidation have combined to produce what can be viewed as a disabling environment, in which disability and disaster operate in processual terms", which is why disability is a part of everyday life for many people in formerly colonized regions (255-256). The ethical dimension of living in post-disaster environments is foregrounded by Pramod K. Nayar, who coined the term *ecoprecarity* to delineate the interdependent forms of precarity the human and the more-than-human experience in the wake of disaster (7). Such interdependencies can create an "erosion of species boundaries and new forms of species alignment, about the nature of Nature and the nature of life in a world of potentially combinatory life forms" (11). A disability ecology lens on eco-disasters can thus foreground the various human and more-than-human enmeshments that exceed bounded and fixed notions of the disabled body and disabled environments. Accordingly, my analysis of *Animal's People* and *Radius 200* suggests that by cripping the eco-disaster in the Global South, normative frames of viewing disability are laid open and alternative disability subjectivities emerge as a relational process of material, social, political and cultural enmeshments that renegotiates the production and experience of disability in the Global South.

Crip(ping) Time in the (Post-)Apocalypse

As both novels are set in the aftermath of the 'apocalyptic' events of the disasters, the manifold temporal relations in the disaster-ridden environments and specific disabled subjectivities that emerge out of these settings shall provide the starting point of my analysis. Lawrence Buell describes the "[a]pocalypse is the single

[6] New Materialists focus on the co-emergence of manifold and swarming materialities, situating the human within complex material flows with the more-than-human (Coole and Frost 7).

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most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal" (285), highlighting the ubiquity of this trope in cultural and literary discourses associated with suddenness and spectacularity. Yet the (post-)apocalypse in *Animal's People* and *Radius 200* reveals specific negotiations of crip(ped) time in disaster-ridden environments—on both narrative and thematic levels. Such temporal disability ecologies thus destabilize ableist and neoliberal notions of time associated with linearity and progress.

Sinha's work *Animal's People* is based on the 1984 biochemical disaster in Bhopal, India. On the night of December 2nd, 1984, methyl isocyanate began to leak from the factory into Bhopal, leaving more than three thousand people dead immediately, mostly people from the slums around the factory, as well as killing thousands of animals (Broughton 1–2). Thousands more died over the following years from cancer and other illnesses caused by gas leak (Kim n.p.). Sinha's *Animal's People* is set in the city of Khaufpur, a fictional stand-in for Bhopal, nineteen years after the disaster. The novel tells the story of Animal, a teenage boy whose spine was distorted during the night of the disaster, leaving him walking on both hands and feet and resulting in his name Animal.

Animal's People fruitfully subverts the spectacularity and suddenness of apocalyptic scenarios by a formulation of an apocalypse that is outside of the boundaries of linear human time. For the people of Khaufpur, the "Apokalis" is on their doorstep and has "started on that night in Khaufpur" (Sinha 63). As the French nun Ma Franci proclaims, "We are the people of the Apokalis" (63). She prophesies that "[t]error will return to this city. It began here, here it will end" (63–64). Yet to that, Animal sarcastically replies: "Fucking world didn't end. It's still suffering" (64). As a consequence of "that night" (1), the city is permeated by toxic matter, which calls to mind Rob Nixon's term of *slow violence*, namely "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (2). The novel is filled with characters who suffer from physical or mental impairments due to the gas leak, such as lung diseases and walking impairments, highlighting the massive scale of disablement that occurred during that night. The chemicals of the factory have created an active network of toxicity throughout the city that transcends corporeal boundaries and showcases the deep entanglement of the body with its environment: "[W]ells are full of poison. It's in the soil, water, in our blood, it's in our milk. Everything here is poisoned. If you stay here long enough, you will be too" (107–8). By materially intra-acting with the bodies of Khaufpuris, the chemicals and poisonous gases cause illness and death in the city over a prolonged period of time.[7] Animal describes the people as "hav[ing] that look common among Khaufpuris, tiredness, sickness, futility, their faces drift and dissolve like pools of cloud" (235). The faces of

[7] Barad defines intra-actions as "specific causal material enactments that may or may not involve 'humans'" (171). As such, these enactments are non-deterministic and in a constant processual becoming involving "relata [that] do not preexist relations" (140). Agents in material-discursive phenomena thus always come into existence in a relational emergence with other agents.

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the Khaufpuris are here metaphorically equated with the poisonous gases that have brought the apocalypse upon them, recalling Alaimo's concept of "trans-corporeality", which she defines as a "new materialist and posthumanist sense of the human as substantially and perpetually interconnected with the flows of substances and the agencies of environments" ("States of Suspension" 476). Spectacular apocalyptic tropes are here subverted by renegotiating the apocalypse as a slow phenomenon that affects the Khaufpuris since the night of the disaster nineteen years ago and continues to create a stagnant existence for them. The more-than-human time scale of toxic chemicals that take effect over many years is here then enmeshed with a human scale temporality, as the poisoning of Khaufpur outlasts the lifespans of most of the people in the city. The slow violence of toxicity is cripped by the ongoing process of material-discursive intra-relations that affect the citizens of Khaufpur even after the initial event of disaster.

Such material-discursive and trans-corporeal relations between the human and the more-than-human are moreover emphasised when Animal imaginatively takes the reader on a tour around the abandoned factory. He addresses the reader with "Eyes, I wish you could come with me into the factory. Step through one of these holes, you're into another world. […]. Listen, how quiet it's. No bird song. No hoppers in the grass. […]. Insects can't survive here. […]." (29). Animal introduces the factory as a spectral world in which the effects of the toxins kill the local fauna and the ghosts of the deceased "shriek […] up and down the empty pipes" (32). The slow violence of the chemicals that have changed Animal's body now allows him to access the poisoned environment as a "four-foot creature climbing in the trees and pipes" (32) and "[p]erched like a monkey on top of this poison-khana" (32). Yet while the factory is a spectral place, Animal points out an ensuing green life that sprouts through the abandoned interior: "Look inside, you see something strange, a forest is growing, tall grasses, bushes, trees, creepers that shoot sprays of flowers like fireworks" (29). The abandoned factory shows clear signs of life that are trying to make their way through the industrial waste. He moreover notices that within the factory compound

> a silent war is being waged. Mother Nature's trying to take back the land. […]. Under the poison house trees are growing up through the pipework. Creepers…as my wrist, have climbed all the way to the top, tightly they've wrapped wooden knuckles round pipes and ladders, like they want to rip down everything the Kampani made. (31)

The sprouting green life within the factory stands in stark contrast to the eerie silence in and around the factory. The creepers try to tear down the factory and its cruel legacy, thereby highlighting the vitality and agentic materiality of the natural environment in and around the area. The factory is thus at once breeding ground for death and life and nature here arguably takes back its claim, yet it is still deeply interwoven with the industrial human-made grounds of the factory and its discursive ramifications.

Dipesh Chakrabarty's plea for a recognition of the inextricability of human historical time and the vast geological temporalities of more-than-human "deep time and deep history" (8) illuminate the enmeshment of the human within vaster human

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historical and more-than-human timescales in Animal's factory tour. This view disavows notions of anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism by embedding humans within a timescale that far exceeds human evolution. In a similar manner, Paul Huebener calls for an "untangling [of] the complexities of time in its many cultural and ecological forms" (11). This is why the image of the clock is ill-suited to vouch for the various social, individual, and ecological temporal interlacements and thus for the various temporal levels at work on earth (20). The "nother world" (Sinha 2) of the factory becomes a disabled space in which the spectacularity of apocalypse is here again cripped by locating the eco-disaster within various intra-relating human and more-than-human temporalities that exceed and undermine ableist notions of time.

Not only does the nonlinear trajectory of apocalypse foreground the emergence of disabled bodies and environments as always already trans-corporeally and temporally enmeshed with each other and other discursive forces, it also suggests specific notions of crip time experienced by the protagonist Animal. While Alison Kafer argues that crip time must exceed formulations of time tied to ableist and capitalist notions of productivity and profitable outcomes ("After Crip, Crip Afters" 420–21), Brad Bierdz is more radical in his conceptualisation of crip time: "Crip time must remain within notions of nonsense and indeterminability—outside the determinations of time as an organizing apparatus that is maintained in order to understand inter-subjective experience" (565). For Animal, time ceases to be progressive, as for him it is "Now o'clock, always now o'clock. In the Kingdom of the Poor, time doesn't exist" (Sinha 185). His description of "now o'clock" is contradictory in ableist terms, negating progressive notions of time, while describing time with temporal indicators such as 'o'clock' or 'always'. Time in Khaufpur is non-existent and does not order experience but encompasses it. It is, as Bierdz suggests, an "immanence" that evades binary notions of temporality and atemporality (560). The slowness of disaster renders time neither ongoing nor stagnant, but rather as a continual negotiation of something that moves outside of and between temporal parameters. Animal's embodied experience of time suggests a living with and outside of ableist and progressive notions of time itself. While he as a narrator and focalizer directly speaks to the reader and tries to put his experience into words, the specific experience of ''now o'clock" evades the reader. Like the chemical gas leak that disabled the city, Animal's immanent experience of crip time leaks out of the pages and can never be fully captured in normative terms.

This notion of nonnormative crip time experienced by Animal is further corroborated at the end of the novel, when he flees into a nearby forest to commit suicide by an overdose of datura pills and has a near-death experience:

> There are animals of every kind, leopards and deer and horses and elephants, there's a tiger and a rhino, among them are small figures on two legs, except some have horns some have tails they are neither men nor animals, or else they are both, then I know that I have found my kind, plus this place will be my everlasting home, I have found it at last, this is the deep time when there was no difference between anything when separation did not exist when all things were together, one and whole before humans set themselves apart and became clever and made cities and kampanis and factories.

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> Time in paradise is like in the Nutcracker, it ceases to have meaning, suns and moons migrate into the sky and tumble into the west. Days pass, or maybe it's just one, or years, or thousands of years, I am immortal. (352)

Animal imagines an Edenic paradise in which earth's more-than-human deep time is here collapsed with his experience of crip time in the disaster-ridden city. It is a relational and simultaneously non-relational notion of time that materially enmeshes human with the more-than-human disabled bodies and that dissolves notions of progressivity and linearity associated with capitalist and neoliberal temporal logic. This paradise, in which time does not follow linear patterns, becomes a place in which so-called animals like him can thrive. In this imagination, disabled people are no longer framed by exclusionary ableist, neoliberal and neocolonial structures that render people like him invisible and disposable. Thus, disability is reframed as processual becoming that is not stable and clearly definable and always already entangled with more-than-human agents in complex and nonnormative temporal relations.

Animal narrates the story in episodic cassette tapes, which he records for an Australian journalist who intends to write a book about life in post-disaster Khaufpur. As some critics have argued, the novel follows the conventions of the picaresque novel, which had its beginnings in 16th-century Spain as a "countergenre" that reacted against the Spanish aristocracy and aristocratic language as well as "classical literary forms" (Nixon 56). With regard to the structure of *Animal's People*, Stacey Balkan moreover argues, "[t]he novel parodies representational strategies that augment the project of global capitalism—specifically, the liberal narrative of development—through its episodic form, and with a narrator whose mutilated body illustrates the toxic underside of industrial progress" (116–17). The novel's episodic structure moreover reinforces the complex notion of crip(ped) time as a time that works outside of normative frameworks. Animal'stapes are fairly disconnected from each other, telling different episodes of his life in Khaufpur, such as his quest of winning the love of the local girl Nisha, or spying on the American doctor Elli Barber. This also ties in with his establishment of an absolute narrative authority over the story by emphasizing that "If you want my story, you'll have to put up with how I tell it" (Sinha 2). Animal's narrative authority thereby sets up a challenge to experiencing time in normative manners. The episodic structure of the novel borrowed from the picaresque, thus defies linear neoliberal narratives that view perpetual societal and economic 'progress' as the ultimate goal of humanity.

Similar to *Animal's People*, Veena Nagpal's *Radius 200* imagines the slow violence of the (post-)apocalypse in a nonlinear and speculative manner. The novel takes place in India in the year 2040, in which India and China are at war with each other due to severe droughts and a lack of water resources. Both nations fight for access to the river Brahmaputra, which runs through both Southwestern China and a good part of India, and constitutes an integral part of India's water distribution system. When China erects an immense hydroelectrical dam on the Chinese part of the river that diverts much of the water's flow to China and leaves India's agricultural

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sector with severe water deficiencies, the Indian government decides to respond with an attack on the dam, propelling both nations into a geopolitical war. China thus responds with a nuclear attack on Northern India, turning the city of Allahabad "120 kilometres from the epicentre" (Nagpal 262) and the surrounding area into an Exclusion Zone that is prohibited to enter from the outside. The novel traces the stories of the journalist Kyra who searches for her lover Om Prakash, whom she believes to be lost in the Exclusion Zone, as well as of a group of survivors within the radiated region navigating survival after the nuclear attack. The escalations of geopolitical power struggles for natural resources leave human and more-than-human bodies and the more-than-human cityscape severely vulnerable and in precarious conditions.

While *Animal's People* draws on real events, *Radius 200* can be regarded as speculative climate fiction that negotiates possible Indian futures in the wake of climate crisis and geopolitical wars. The apocalypse in the novel exceeds the initial events of the nuclear attack by unfolding in the ongoing radiation and environmental degradation in the Exclusion Zone. Like *Animal's People*, *Radius 200* in its very narrative structure already does not follow a linear logic: dispersed with multiple point of views, both from within and from outside the Exclusion Zone, the temporal organization of the story manifests itself in a slow unravelling of the events that led to the nuclear attack, with a nonlinear back and forth between the diegetic present in the aftermath of disaster and multiple interspersed flashbacks, experienced through the eyes of the survivors and through the eyes of Kyra and the scientist Arjun who embark on a search mission for the survivors. In a flashback, Jiji, one of the survivors, recounts her memories of that fateful night: "*Just a mangled mass. Burning. Tentage cloth, poles. Melting plastic chairs. Humans on fire. Running. Flame chased, succumbing. […]. A woman holding a baby at her breast—his head a mangled mass of blood and bones, his insides leaking out of his stomach*" (22, emphasis in original). By the use of gerunds and ellipses, the text evokes gruesome yet dynamic images of a nuclear disaster that initially does conjure the spectacularity of apocalypse and disaster. The environmental destruction and disablement here emerge due to an entanglement of the material agency of the nuclear bomb and the geopolitical conflict between India and China.

Yet the spectacularity of the initial attack and ensuing destruction gives way to an ongoing sense of apocalyptic disaster that is slowly unfolding and does not follow a sense of linearity and teleology. The group of survivors takes refuge in the underground ruins of the Allahabad Fort that has served as a military base. In the nuclear aftermath, Allahabad has the appearance of a "ghost town of broken walls, collapsed roofs, twisted metal rods sticking out at impossible angles" (43). The almost gothic aesthetics foreground the disabled, spectral and almost uncanny architectural environment that emphasises the longevity of radiation and the ubiquity of death and decay in the Exclusion Zone. The very material consequences of the nuclear attack initiated by the discursive forces of geopolitical crisis create a nonlinear sense of time in the Exclusion Zone that oscillates between the atemporality and finality of death

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and linear processes of ageing in life. Crip(ped) time in the novel, I further suggest, is negotiated through the hydrological scarcity produced by the acceleration of the climate crisis and the consequences of the nuclear attack. In the Exclusion Zone, potable water is extremely scarce, as there is only a small well in which the water is still uncontaminated. Yet even the well is slowly running out of water, forcing the survivors to ration their water portions by two glasses per day (35). Regular search groups, led by Jiji's son Chief are moreover sent out to search for uncontaminated water sources, yet the missions prove to be unsuccessful. The living reality of the survivors does not follow the normative temporalities of neoliberal, capitalist or ableist systems, but is rather defined by a relentless waiting: "The heat was oppressive. […] Everyone had been driven under cover, lying around listlessly, waiting for the sun to go down, waiting for the next dose of water to wet their lips" (137). Time in the Exclusion Zone does not manifest itself through a linear line but rather through an endless cycle of waiting out the scorching heat and waiting for the next drops of water to consume, evoking a pattern of seemingly never-ending repetition.

Next to the devastated cityscape and the ensuing dangers that come from outside the Fort, the radiated environment has moreover rendered multiple human bodies wounded, impaired or chronically ill. Jiji develops a penetrant cough in the course of the twenty years in the Exclusion Zone and at one point loses her left hand, leaving her with only a stump (32). Most children in the Exclusion Zone are affected by the consequences of the nuclear attack: Jiji becomes a mother of two sons, one named Club Foot and the other named Chief. As his name already indicates, Club Foot walks around with a wooden pole and has a "useless right leg" with which he is born (33). Moreover, Shanno, one of the group elders, laments the pain of his two children, with the older one "lying limp on the floor. His huge head perched on tiny shoulders—it… it's so full of festering sores. The younger one… his fragile legs and arms turned into impossible contortions, it's just… I know he's in terrible pain. Little kids born to pain, dying such horrible deaths!" (19–20). Additionally, the city's desolated and ruined buildings are metaphorically equated with disabled bodies: "Past buildings pockmarked the way erupting heat boils had once marked everyone's bodies, oozing yellow pus, then drying out into dark scabs" (285–286). This equation of the human and the more-than-human renegotiates them as materially but also discursively enmeshed within a larger network of geopolitical power struggles that render human bodies and more-than-human environments as collateral damage in the wake of climate crisis management. Like in *Animal's People*, slow violence is cripped through the various trans-corporeal relationalities that engender the disabled body in the aftermath of disaster within vaster more-than-human temporalities, as seen in the following passages: "Shadowy ruins leapt up, as the light of the rising sun seeped through the eerie haze picking out desolate, devastated streets, a charred amusement park, a forever immobilised Ferris wheel…" (Nagpal 312). Like the factory in *Animal's People*, the Exclusion Zone is a spectral place that simultaneously evokes the suddenness of disaster but also highlights the slow violence of radiation and decay that slowly but surely erodes the city buildings and renders its surroundings as no

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more than "barren, white, sandy landscape broken by patchy vegetation" (286). The toxins and the radiation released in the suddenness of the nuclear attack will remain in the buildings and the soil of the region much longer than an individual human lifespan and will continue to produce disabled bodies in the Exclusion Zone, thereby enmeshing both human and more-than-human in distinct material and temporal relationalities. Pain and the ubiquity of death thus become the new normal for the survivors as a result of what Mbembe has named *necropolitics*, a form of governance, in which "weapons are deployed in the interest of maximum destruction of persons and the creation of death-worlds, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead" (40). Normative frames of time are undermined, as the haunting presence of death co-exists with the lives of the disabled characters in the wake of eco-disaster.

On a narrative level, notions of crip time are negotiated by the focalization of General Om Prakash, Kyra's lover who has been stranded in the Exclusion Zone during the disaster due to a plane accident. He is tended to by Jiji as his walking impairment progressively worsens by the year and his strength weakens, eventually leaving him in a comatose state. Om Prakash's consciousness is narratively filtered through intermittent streams of consciousness, such as in the following example: "Can't…Goddamit I can't move! I'm trapped inside an immobile body and my mind…*The images begin to blur*… no! Please don't disappear! I need to remember. Help! Someone please help! Unscreamed screams resounding against my ribs. Who am I? Why am I here, trapped in this immobile body? Why?" (Nagpal 40, emphasis in original). His narration and focalization, which is the only first-person narration in the novel evokes the notion that "[c]rip time is time travel. Disability and illness have the power to extract us from linear, progressive time with its normative life stages and cast us into a wormhole of backward and forward acceleration, jerky stops and starts, tedious intervals and abrupt endings" (Samuels, n.p.). Between shambled streams of consciousness and free indirect discourse in which he remembers the events leading to the nuclear attack, the constant narrative oscillation between elliptic and frantic sentences in his impaired condition and the clear and concise flashback narrations of his time as an able-bodied officer complicate linear and clearly progressive notions of ableist time.

Crip time in the disaster zones is thus presented as jumbled and in a process of constant negotiation with different human and more-than-human temporalities. By cripping time in the (post-)apocalypse, both *Animal's People* and *Radius 200* negotiate differential frames of temporality that destabilize neoliberal and ableist notions of time associated with linearity and progressivity. Through the various material-semiotic and narrative intra-relations, the novels suggest temporal disability ecologies and thus distinctive experiences of crip time in disaster-ridden environments in India.

Negotiating the Disabled Body and Generative More-Than-Human Agency in the Post-Disaster Cityscape

Next to crip(ped) time, *Animal's People* and *Radius 200* negotiate discursive forms of violence that lay open naturalizing assumptions about normate bodies and environments in a post-disaster context in the Global South, while suggesting disability ecologies that promote alternative forms of embodied knowledge and generative more-than-human agency which emerge through various creative enmeshments. Animal opens his narrative with the provocative words "I used to be human once. So I'm told. I don't remember it myself, but people who knew me when I was small say I walked on two feet just like a human being" (Sinha 1). Animal's narrative begins with the poignant statement that he used to be human a long time ago, thereby questioning seemingly stable definitions of the human. He insinuates here that being human is something that one can lay down and that it is a category that is subject to change. Due to his own bodily posture, Animal cannot tell the story from the perspective of an upright 'human': For him it is a "[w]hole nother world […], below the waist" (2). For Animal, the world of humans is not attainable due to his posture, which is why the furthest he can see is into someone's lower abdomen. His 'nother world' is accessible only to him and his understanding of the human thus becomes completely decoupled from bodily posture. Animal's bodily 'deviance' ties to historical notions of viewing the disabled body as spectacle and abject, such as in freak shows).[8] His body painfully changes when he is six years old due to his exposure to the gas leak, making him feel like "a devil rode [his] back and chafed [him] with red hot tongs" and generating a "smelting in [his] spine" (15). Justin Omar Johnston argues that Animal's body is not situated inside the hot and steamy interior of the factory, but the factory's industrial tools can now be found inside the body, changing it genetically (119). In fact, Animal's language about the tools inscribes his trans-corporeality: Materially, the gases have changed his body, while discursively the very industrial language he uses to describe the pain already hints at a global network of capitalism and neoliberal notions of progress that renders bodies and the environments in the Global South as disposable. Animal's body can thereby be literally seen as the abject residual of the industrial forces that re-formed his body during the night of the disaster. Yet while his body is inflicted by pain, he uses it to his advantage and develops a strong chest and strong arms due to being forced to walk on his hands and feet (Sinha 15). Animal's bodily form and unique spatial mobility enables him to gain news about the happenings in the city, and especially about news of the American Kampani (27). In this sense, Animal's trans-corporeality negotiates what it means to be human in a complex world where more-than-human and human materialities constantly converge and come into contact with each other. His provocative narrative voice and highly idiosyncratic bodily experience of the world thus undermines notions of bodily normalcy.

His ability to move around on both hands and feet, and thus his animal-like perspective also give him other views of the city that not even the people of Khaufpur

[8] For example, see Garland-Thomson's work *Extraordinary Bodies* (1997) and her discussion of disability and the social forces that historically contributed to a marking of certain bodies as deviant from a perceived understanding of bodily normalcy.

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can access: "How well I know this city's zameen, its ground, from an altitude of two feet, this is my home earth, discarded things are my city's treasures, [...]" (272). Animal's bent body thus gives him the ability to see the city from an "altitude of two feet," which is a view denied to adult humans, making him appreciate the dirt under his hands and feet as well as "discarded things." In a normative world, such things are considered waste, thereby creating a parallel between the abject materiality of waste and his material body, and once more enunciating the ecological destruction and social marginalisation by multinational corporations under the guise of supposed development and progress. So, Animal's very subjectivity as a narrator and focalizer and his experience of the city through his bodily materiality and walking pace thereby allows for a specific and intimate view of the disaster-ridden city that cannot be encompassed by an able-bodied perspective. This is further foregrounded when he adopts a bird-perspective of the city:

> Bird that I am sees all, white palace of gone rulers on hill, lake looks pale green from up here, eye slides along a road lined with dirty buildings, snarling away in dust and truck smoke, till it reaches a place where the city's turned to jungle, railway tracks come running up and vanish, beyond is terrain harder to interpret, mottling of brown, a pimpliness which on looking closer resolves to the innumerable roofs of the very poor. (133)

Animal adopts a double perspective as he sees the world from above while viewing himself in it. He observes the cityscape, laid out like a map and overhung by an almost imperceptible fog that continues to poison the city. From this vantage point, Animal-as-bird sees the parts of the city are already taken back by more-than-human forms, such as the abandoned railway tracks, emphasising that in Khaufpur there are no clear distinctions anymore between human and more-than-human spaces. Having Animal adopt a more-than-human perspective from above thus foregrounds the inextricable trans-corporeal relationship between the individual human or more-than-human body and larger material-discursive forces that have shaped the city. His bodily impairment allows him to experience the disaster-ridden city in ways that normate bodies cannot and thus proposes alternative ways of knowing the city.

Animal's bodily and non-normative knowledge of the city is moreover emphasised when he takes the reader on a tour around the factory. He guides the reader to the abandoned factory grounds from where the poisons leaked, which for most Khaufpuris is a "shunned place, where better for an animal to make its lair?" (29). For Animal, the poisoned factory is his "kingdom, in here [he] [is] the boss" (30). Subverting his self-perceived victimhood, the factory becomes an Other world where the socially outcast Animal feels right at home and the place that painfully changed his body becomes the place where he is now the most comfortable. As Jina Kim argues in the context of the novel, "[a]bility emerges as a socio-spatial experience, and because he can easily access and navigate Khaufpur's terrain, his body is no longer legible as disabled" (n.p.). Animal's multiple spatial perspectives of the city, from the earthy city ground to the sky above, thus highlights his trans-corporeal relationship with the more-than-human environment that structure his disabled subjectivity.

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Animal in the end rejects being cured, as he would then lose his unique way of mobility and his status as 'animal,' claiming that "I might have a wheelchair, but how far will that get me in the gullis of Khaufpur? Right now I can run and hop and carry kids on my back, I can climb hard trees, I've gone up mountains, roamed in jungles. Is life so bad?" (366). As Eli Clare argues, the notion of cure is always bound up with "eradication and the many kinds of violence that accompany it" (26). While medical and technological developments and interventions can help with the alleviation of chronic illnesses or painful impairments and thus should not solely be viewed as negative, such notions of eradication can become harmful if they are directed toward specific groups of people that in turn reinforces an objectification of such groups and a reinscription of a normative status quo (26-28). Animal refuses to be defined as human, as he would lose his unique way of mobility in and around the city, which helps his fellow people in Khaufpur and with which he can do more good than being upright. As Kim argues, Animal's decision "disallows narrative closure—we cannot contain his story within the narrative arc of recovery. His story is in excess of the teleology of healing, spilling outward from the narrative framework of containment" (n.p.). In this way, Animal's story does not conform to narrative boundaries that promote a stable cure for the disabled individual at the end of the story and his reincorporation into an able-bodied society. Animal's supposed animality thus negotiates what it means to be human in a complex world where more-than-human and human materialities constantly converge and come into contact. His idiosyncratic narrative voice thus highlights his own unique subjectivity, while managing to encompass the experiences of other disabled voices in the post-disaster cityscape.

Insofar as *Animal's People* considers disability through an individual narrative voice *Radius 200* lays open the normative institutional frames through which the disabled body is viewed. The Indian government has not issued any search and rescue attempts for possible survivors in the Exclusion Zone in the twenty years since the attack, which makes the survivors wonder "[w]hy did no one ever come to look for us? In all these years—not even once!" (Nagpal 72). The search for possible survivors is only initiated by Kyra, who hopes to find her love, Om Prakash. Jiji reflections lead her to assume the following: "'But this was India!' she whispered hoarsely. 'We believe those who die will be reborn. Inevitably. So years before Fukushima, we left Bhopal victims to fend for themselves. Our beliefs—you understand how it becomes so easy to abandon the dying?'" (72–73). Jiji refers to the Hindu beliefs of reincarnation and karma to justify the Indian government's decision to leave the survivors to their fate with a dominant religious discourse in the country. This discourse vocalizes a double entendre of how disability in the wake of eco-disaster is framed. It simultaneously points to the ongoing disablement of people in disaster-ridden regions and the ensuing binarization of able-bodied and disabled bodies by normative discourses, while foregrounding a specific postcolonial perspective: While victims of Fukushima in Japan, usually considered part of the Global North, victims of disasters such as Bhopal or Allahabad in India, usually considered part of the Global South, are left to fend for themselves. Questions of reconstruction are thus tied to a discursive form of

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violence that dictates which lives are deemed grievable and which are not, as disabled bodies in the novel here do not fall into the dominant frames of recognition set up by hegemonic state and institutional powers in India itself and beyond.

Similar to *Animal's People*, the novel *Radius 200* emphasizes the notion of mass disablement in countries such as India via the double role of nuclear disaster and the acceleration of the water crisis. Because of the rapidly changing climate conditions, rain becomes a rare phenomenon in the weather patterns within and outside of the Exclusion Zone: "freaky […] these days, a shower is just a blink-and-you-miss-it-affair" (14). Moreover, even before the Chinese nuclear attack, water and rain was scarce: In a flashback, Jiji reflects on the Kumbh mela celebrations on the day of the attack, remarking that "[w]hat fair could you hold to celebrate the holy Ganga, when it had dwindled almost into non-existence?" (73). With the rivers Ganga and Brahmaputra almost gone and the temperatures rising at a rapid level, the country faces a severe water crisis that is already at a critical level. As McRuer argues, "it's clear that we're inescapably haunted by the disability to come" (*Crip Theory* 207), which highlights a haunting aspect of disability that is ever-present with able-bodied people, thus highlighting disability as a continuum that is dependent on material-discursive human and more-than-human relations. The precarious state of India's water resources and its discursive ramifications in climate change and the geopolitical conflict with China not only affects the people in the Exclusion Zone but also the people outside of it, making visible a mutual, yet differently distributed precarity that "emerges over time as well, as the consequence of processes and practices" (Nayar 9). The novel's speculative form thus hints here at such "disabilit[ies] to come" (McRuer 207) that are not just limited to the effects of eco-disaster but at the worsening climate conditions that are already present for many people in countries such as India.

While *Radius 200* arguably does not promote alternative forms of embodied knowledge and living with disability on the site of the individual human body in the way that *Animal's People* does, I suggest that it hints at a generative more-than-human reconstruction in the wake of eco-disaster with the storyline surrounding the search for the mythical river Saraswati. Arjun Sharma, "Vice Chief of the Saraswati Research Centre" (Nagpal 2), and trained geologist, has worked for over twenty-five years in the Saraswati Project, searching for the river. According to Tiwari et al., "[i]n the realm of Hindu mythology and ancient Indian texts, [the] Vedic River Saraswati's (VRS) holds a revered position as one of the most sacred rivers" (n.p.). The Saraswati River is mentioned several times in the oldest texts of Hindu mythology, such as the *Mahabharata* and the *Rigveda*, being described as 'Best of Mothers, Best of Rivers, Best of Goddesses' (Rigveda, 2.41.16 qtd. in Tiwari et al. n.p.). Next to its mythological and cultural significance in India, scientific and archeological research into the origins of the river has generated a wide consensus that the river did indeed exist (Tiwari et al. n.p.). In the novel, Arjun suspects that the Saraswati runs underneath the Allahabad Fort in the desolated cityscape of Allahabad. At the novel's climax, the group is saved by the sound of "[f]lowing water! Rushing out of the heart of the earth! Endless. It's never going to stop!" (Nagpal 307) and Kyra's and Arjun's rescue mission find the

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survivors just in time. It is revealed that the communal well is the gateway to the mythical river that runs underneath it and Arjun plans to design a new water distribution system with the Saraswati as source. Possible reconstruction in the wake of disaster is here negotiated through the material agency of the mythical river that can potentially bring an end to the water crisis in India and to the suffering of the population. Yet it is noticeable that this source of potential recovery originates in the disabled environment of the Exclusion Zone, thus complicating stable notions of health and sickness within disaster-ridden environments. Violent notions of cure and eradication are here countered by a co-constitution of more-than-human and human agencies.

Human and more-than-human enmeshments in the novels not only lay open normative and discursive frameworks of viewing the disabled body in the Global South, they also imagine nonnormative ways of living with disability and disabled more-than-human environments as generative sites of reconstruction. In this vein, disability ecologies that posit material-semiotic entanglements between the human and the more-than-human can help reframe discourses of healthy and sick bodies and environments in post-disaster contexts.

Conclusion

To conclude, both *Radius 200* and *Animal's People* situate the eco-disaster in India as the site of various disability ecologies that foreground the material-discursive enmeshments between the human and the more-than-human. Disabled bodies and environments emerge as part of political, social, economic and material more-than-human enmeshments that shape specific disability experiences and subjectivities in the Global South and thereby articulate alternative embodied forms of understanding disability outside of dominant and universalizing frameworks from the Global North. The spectacularity of disaster in the novels is subverted through the crip(ped) intersection of manifold human and more-than-human temporalities and nonlinear narrative strategies that defy normative notions of linear and progressive time. Moreover, the novels suggest nonnormative ways of living with disability in the aftermath of disaster while imagining more-than-human forms of generative reconstruction. By engaging with historical fictionalizations of eco-disaster (*Animal's People*) and speculative future disasters in the wake of climate change (*Radius 200*) the novels negotiate eco-crip relations in a Global South where "the effects of the climate crisis are felt not in the distant future but are visible in the numerous forms of vulnerability and precarity that millions of people encounter on a daily basis" (Rajbanshi and Kumar 136). The imagination of disability ecologies in fiction from India can thus foreground how disability is differentially and unevenly produced through specific cultural, political and material emergences in countries of the Global South while challenging universalizing notions of disability through attention to material-discursive enmeshments. Cripping the eco-disaster in Indian English fiction can thereby not only contribute to a decolonization of disability experiences and

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subjectivities that are still very much tied to the Global North but also to ethical reformulations of human and more-than-human relations in times of increasing geopolitical and socio-ecological crises. Fiction from India can play an important part in the future in negotiating and producing new and alternative forms of disability knowledge(s), as fiction is not only a site of knowledge production but also a site of witnessing.

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Debilitating Ecologies: Eco-Crip Resistance in Saro-Wiwa's *A Month and a Day* and Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*

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Abstract

This paper examines the intersections of disability and environmental degradation in Nigeria's Niger Delta through an eco-crip lens, focusing on Ken Saro-Wiwa's *A Month and a Day: A Detention Diary* (1995) and Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* (2006). Drawing on Jasbir Puar's concept of debility and Rob Nixon's "slow violence," it argues that these texts represent the debilitating effects of oil pollution—poisoned air and water, threatened food supplies, reproductive harm, and communal dysfunction—as environmentally induced disabilities. This approach addresses the absence of conventional Western disability representations in Nigerian literature while critiquing ableist and extractive norms perpetuated by oil companies and state complicity. Saro-Wiwa's memoir foregrounds Ogoni health crises and activist resistance via the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People, while Agary's novel illuminates gendered debility, such as the reproductive harms to which poverty, displacement, and environmental ruin expose women, infusing the eco-crip perspective with feminist agency. Employing a cultural studies approach, this article responds to the non-hierarchical appraisals of diverse embodiments, emphasising tensions and toxicities in Delta spaces and bodies. By juxtaposing Saro-Wiwa's activism with Agary's feminist narrative, it reimagines well-being through plural contributions, situating the Delta's struggle within broader African environmental justice discourses.

Keywords: Eco-crip theory, debility, Niger Delta, environmental justice, slow violence.

Resumen

Este artículo analiza las intersecciones entre la discapacidad y la degradación medioambiental en el delta del Níger, en Nigeria, desde una perspectiva *eco-crip*, centrándose en las obras *A Month and a Day: A Detention Diary* (1995), de Ken Saro-Wiwa, y *Yellow-Yellow* (2006), de Kaine Agary. Basándose en el concepto de debilidad de Jasbir Puar y en la *violencia lenta* de Rob Nixon, sostiene que estos textos representan los efectos debilitantes de la contaminación por petróleo—aire y agua envenenados, suministro alimentario amenazado, daños reproductivos y disfunción comunitaria—como discapacidades inducidas por el medio ambiente. Este enfoque aborda la ausencia de representaciones occidentales convencionales de la discapacidad en la literatura nigeriana, al tiempo que critica las normas capacitistas y extractivas perpetuadas por las empresas petroleras y la complicidad del Estado. Las memorias de Saro-Wiwa ponen de relieve las crisis sanitarias de los ogoni y la resistencia activista a través del Movimiento por la Supervivencia del Pueblo Ogoni, mientras que la novela de Agary arroja luz sobre la debilidad de género, como los daños reproductivos a los que la pobreza, el desplazamiento y la ruina medioambiental exponen a las mujeres, infundiendo la perspectiva *eco-crip* con agencia feminista. Empleando un enfoque de estudios culturales, este artículo responde a las valoraciones no jerárquicas de diversas formas de encarnación, haciendo hincapié en las tensiones y toxicidades presentes en los espacios y los cuerpos del Delta. Al yuxtaponer el activismo de Saro-Wiwa con la narrativa feminista de Agary, se reimagina el bienestar a través de contribuciones plurales, situando la lucha del Delta dentro de los discursos más amplios sobre la justicia medioambiental en África.

Palabras clave: Teoría eco-crip, debilidad, delta del Níger, justicia medioambiental, violencia lenta.

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Introduction

The Niger Delta, a lush region of rivers, mangroves, and wetlands rich in biodiversity, embodies a stark paradox: immense oil wealth that powers global economies while inflicting profound poverty, environmental devastation, and human suffering on its inhabitants. Since oil discovery in 1956, multinational corporations—often in partnership with Nigerian governments—have extracted billions of barrels, yielding vast profits but causing widespread ecological ruin and what Rob Nixon (2) has termed "slow violence"—the gradual, attritional harm that unfolds over generations.

Ken Saro-Wiwa (1941–1995), writer, activist, and founder of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), led nonviolent resistance against oil-related degradation by companies like Shell, including spills and gas flaring that poisoned air, water, and soil. His 1995 execution, along with eight other Ogoni leaders (the "Ogoni Nine"), by Nigeria's military regime ignited international outrage and exposed state-corporate repression. Kaine Agary's novel *Yellow-Yellow* (2006) fictionalises these realities through Zilayefa, a biracial young woman confronting identity, poverty, and environmental ruin in the Delta. The narrative links personal struggles to ecological critique, showing oil spills devastating fisheries, farmlands, and livelihoods, with gendered vulnerabilities amplifying harms such as reproductive loss and economic precarity. As an eco-feminist Bildungsroman, it traces Zilayefa's growth from oppression toward agency, calling for shifts in patriarchal, political, and ecological systems (Ogene and Okolo 156-57, 169-70; Ashaolu 41-42).

This paper argues that Saro-Wiwa's activism and Agary's fiction illuminate eco-crip debility as postcolonial violence in the Niger Delta, where environmental harm produces widespread bodily impairments, disrupts Western ability/disability binaries, and enables African-centred resistance. I draw on Jasbir K. Puar's concept of debility—the ongoing, attritional weakening of populations under late capitalism—which, in her words, addresses injury that is "endemic rather than epidemic or exceptional" (Puar xvii), and which I distinguish from what I call event-based disability (disability understood as a discrete, identifiable condition or injury that triggers medical and social intervention), as well as on Rob Nixon's notion of slow violence—incremental, dispersed destruction that occurs gradually and out of sight, often unrecognised as violence at all—in order to frame oil exploitation as creating "debilitating ecologies," interlinked systems of harm binding human bodies and nonhuman environments in vulnerability and potential solidarity. Oil exploitation enacts slow violence that produces debilitating ecologies, systemic, attritional harms that align with Puar's framework while attending to Nixon's emphasis on temporal dispersal (Nixon 2). By making visible the attritional, non-spectacular harms of oil extraction, Saro-Wiwa and Agary address what Nixon describes as the "representational, narrative, and strategic challenges" of slow violence (2),

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functioning as writer-activists who challenge conventional definitions of violence itself (Nixon 2, 11).

African environmental literature scholarship has emphasised land dispossession and resource conflicts but often overlooks corporeal dimensions via an eco-crip perspective. Postcolonial ecocriticism addresses colonialism-environment intersections in works like Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood* (1977), yet underexplores debility in Global South contexts, where individualistic, medicalised Western disability models miss collective, attritional extractive impacts. This study advances an African-centred eco-crip framework, stressing the interdependence of impaired bodies and degraded ecologies, as well as resistance, by moving beyond the binaries of human and nonhuman, ability and disability. Such collective debility is not merely theoretical: empirical data from the Niger Delta reveal population-level harms that affect entire communities rather than isolated individuals. For example, oil spills contaminate water with hydrocarbons, which one review of the research projects could reduce household food security by up to 60%[1] and increase childhood malnutrition by 24%[2]; benzene, a known carcinogen, has been found in Ogoniland drinking water at more than 900 times the World Health Organization's guideline level.[3] These figures demonstrate how extractive violence produces shared, attritional disablement—not as individual medical conditions but as communal, intergenerational crises. In response to this collective debility, collective resistance has emerged: MOSOP's 1993 protests, which mobilised about 300,000 Ogoni (Saro-Wiwa 12), exemplify how affected communities organise not as discrete disabled bodies but as an interdependent populace fighting what Saro-Wiwa called an "ecological war" (147).

Amid climate and debility crises, recognising shared vulnerabilities is essential for sustainable futures, and this study directly engages such recognition by centring the gendered, racialised, and class-based burdens of oil extraction in the Niger Delta. Environmental justice intersects with gender, class, and race: as the primary farmers and fishers, women suffer disproportionate reproductive and economic burdens from polluted resources (Adewumi 75-76). Feminist and postcolonial lenses trace these to patriarchal structures and colonial extraction legacies. This paper will further engage with an "eco-crip" theoretical frame, which refers to the critical intersection of disability studies and environmental humanities (Ray and Sibara 17), to challenge ableist environmentalism. Environmental justice is understood here as the principle that environmental harms and benefits should be distributed equitably across all communities, with particular attention to race, class, gender, and colonial

[1] Kelechukwu Iruoma and Ruth Olurounbi, "Silent Killer: Oil Pollution Continues to Kill Nigerians in Delta Region," ICIR Nigeria, 26 Mar. 2020, www.icirnigeria.org/silent-killer-oil-pollution-continues-to-kill-nigerians-in-delta-region/. The article presents these figures as projections drawn from the Centre for Environment, Human Rights and Development (CEHRD).
[2] Iruoma and Olurounbi, "Silent Killer."
[3] "UNEP Ogoniland Oil Assessment Reveals Extent of Environmental Contamination and Threats to Human Health." *UNEP*, 4 Aug. 2011, www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/unep-ogoniland-oil-assessment-reveals-extent-environmental-contamination-and.

history. Finally, the essay will specifically incorporate ecofeminism, the analytical and activist tradition that links the exploitation of nature with the subordination of women, both rooted in patriarchal and colonial logics of domination. In this paper, these three frameworks converge to show how oil exploitation in the Niger Delta produces compounded, attritional violence against women's bodies, livelihoods, and ecologies—violence that demands collective, decolonial resistance.

Historical and Theoretical Contexts: Oil Exploitation in the Niger Delta

Colonial legacies laid the foundation for contemporary extractive violence, environmental injustice, and population-level debilitation in the Niger Delta. British monopolies like the Royal Niger Company extracted resources while suppressing local populations. In 1914, the Mineral Oils Ordinance vested all mineral rights in the British Crown, legally dispossessing Indigenous communities. In the 1930s, Shell secured licenses, with the first well at Oloibiri drilled in 1956. Post-1960 independence saw oil booms displacing agriculture and marginalising minorities. Joint ventures between multinationals (Shell, Chevron, ExxonMobil) and the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation sustained an industry that has brought Nigeria more than $350 billion in oil revenues since 1970,[4] yet caused ongoing devastation. Recurrent spills contaminate mangroves, farmlands, and aquifers; gas flaring emits toxins into the air, and life expectancy in the Delta was reported in 2008 as 40 years, against a national figure of 46.7 years.[5] In response to these compounding harms, the Ogoni people issued their 1990 Bill of Rights, demanding political control of Ogoni affairs, the control and use of a fair proportion of Ogoni economic resources, and the right to protect the Ogoni environment and ecology (Saro-Wiwa 68, 176). This document marks a collective assertion against what would later be theorised as slow violence and debility. These extractive histories exemplify the concept of "debilitating ecologies," which this paper develops to name the intertwined human-environmental systems in which slow violence produces population-level debilitation.

Eco-crip theory links disability studies and environmental humanities, critiquing ableism in environmentalism and revealing the co-debilitation of bodies and ecologies. Within this framework, Puar's concept of debility provides a crucial analytic. Puar positions debility as an ongoing, attritional weakening of populations under late capitalism and extractive regimes, one that is "endemic rather than epidemic or exceptional" (xvii) and that supplements, rather than opposes, disability (xvii); I distinguish it here from conventional, event-based disability. As Puar writes: "I argue […] for a critical deployment of the concepts of debility and capacity to rethink disability through, against, and across the disabled/non-disabled binary. I

[4] Nnimmo Bassey, "The Oil Industry and Human Rights in the Niger Delta," testimony before the Subcommittee on Human Rights and the Law, U.S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary, 24 Sept. 2008, www.judiciary.senate.gov/download/testimony-of-nnimmo-basey pdf. Bassey states that "Nigeria has received more than $350 billion in oil revenues since 1970."
[5] Bassey, "The Oil Industry and Human Rights in the Niger Delta."

situate disability in relation to concepts such as neoliberal and affective capacitation, debilitation, and slow death" (2). Debility is thus a biopolitical process rather than a fixed state: populations are worn down through normalised, cumulative exposures (to toxins, precarity, debt, and extractive violence) from which capital profits (Puar xx, 13). In postcolonial extractive zones like the Niger Delta, debility manifests as the gradual, unspectacular erosion of bodily capacity from oil pollution, food insecurity, and chronic ill health.

Nixon's concept of slow violence complements this framework by illuminating the temporal and representational dimensions of erosive harm. Nixon defines slow violence as "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight […] an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (2). Unlike immediate, spectacular violence, it is "incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales" (2). Nixon carefully distinguishes slow violence from Johan Galtung's structural violence: structural violence describes enduring inequalities, whereas slow violence foregrounds "questions of time, movement, and change, however gradual" and the representational challenge of making invisible damage visible (Nixon 10-11). This paper argues that debility is the outcome (systemic wearing out), while slow violence is the mechanism (attritional process) that produces that outcome. The two concepts are not identical: slow violence emphasises representation and temporality; debility emphasises biopolitical population-level weakening. Together they capture how oil extraction in the Delta inflicts non-spectacular, delayed, yet systematic harm.

Bridging these theories is disability scholar Alison Kafer's attention to "bodies of nature," which foregrounds human-environment interdependence (144). Kafer critiques mainstream environmentalism's ableist ideal of the hyper-fit, autonomous body and calls for a cripped environmentalism that reads disability into formations of nature, looking to disabled bodies as "a resource in thinking about our future natures differently" (131). This perspective is vital for the Niger Delta, where the same extractive forces that debilitate human populations also degrade the nonhuman natural environment that communities inhabit relationally. An African-centred eco-crip approach thus contrasts with dominant Western disability studies that prioritise individualistic, medicalised models. For example, early social model formulations focused on individual access and rights, often overlooking collective, attritional debilitation tied to environmental racism and extractivism. By centring interdependent "bodies of nature" and population-level debility, Saro-Wiwa and Agary advance a relational, decolonial eco-crip critique.

In the Niger Delta, slow violence blends spectacular events (major spills) with attritional processes (persistent flaring), rooted in colonial racial/class/gender hierarchies. Women face amplified reproductive and economic risks, and class and minority status deepen poverty and disempowerment. Debilitating ecologies, this paper's own synthesising concept, frames these as systemic entanglements where human and environmental erosion mirror each other, demanding holistic resistance. Ecofeminism connects despoliation to sexist oppression, with women's bodies and

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land exploited in parallel (Ufuoma 258-59; Simon 157; Ashaolu 41-42). This theoretical grounding, therefore, reframes oil exploitation not merely as environmental degradation but as a biopolitical process of debilitation, one in which colonial legacies, neoliberal extraction, and racialised hierarchies converge to produce populations marked for slow death while extracting value from their ongoing wearing out.

Debility and Activist Resistance in Saro-Wiwa's *A Month and a Day*

Ken Saro-Wiwa's *A Month and a Day: A Detention Diary* (1995) centres on his imprisonment under Nigeria's military regime in 1993, but the memoir directs equal attention to the environmental degradation, communal health crises, and nonviolent activism of the Niger Delta. As the leader of MOSOP, Saro-Wiwa documents his detention not as a personal ordeal alone but as an extension of systemic harms inflicted by multinational oil companies (Shell, Chevron) in collusion with the Nigerian state. The narrative weaves diary entries, speeches, poems, letters, and the full Ogoni Bill of Rights (1990). This paper reads the memoir through an eco-crip lens, which links disability studies and environmental humanities to reveal the co-debilitation of bodies and ecologies (Kafer 2013; Taylor 2024). Nixon's and Puar's frameworks help to illuminate how the writer and eco-activist's practice makes visible the non-spectacular, embodied harms of extraction while showing how debilitated communities can reclaim political agency without overcoming their impairments.

Unlike what I call event-based disability (a discrete injury that triggers medical intervention), Puar's debility captures the normalised wearing out of populations through ongoing exposure to toxins, precarity, and neglect (Puar xvii, xx). In the Niger Delta, this attritional process produces both bodily and psychic debility, the slow erosion of mental and emotional capacities through a prolonged state of terror, isolation, and humiliation. Psychic debility differs from a clinically diagnosable psychological disability (often event-triggered) in that it is collective, gradual, and embedded in structural violence rather than individual pathology. This important distinction is illustrated in Saro-Wiwa's memoir, which shows how oil extraction and state repression converge to create a biopolitical economy of slow death, while MOSOP's nonviolent resistance transforms shared debility into collective agency, an insight that resonates with disability rights activist Sunaura Taylor's argument that ecologies are "disabled by the debilitating economic and political systems that continue to demand perpetual growth and production" (114).

Pollution and Communal Health

Saro-Wiwa repeatedly documents specific bodily and communal harms. The Ogoni Bill of Rights states that "neglectful environmental pollution laws […] have led to the complete degradation of the Ogoni environment," leaving communities without

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"health and other social facilities" (Saro-Wiwa 67). The writer-activist identifies gas flaring as a root cause of his community's suffering through his poetic indictment: "The flares of Shell are flames of hell / We bake beneath their light / Nought for us save the blight" (78). Saro-Wiwa's use of "bake" to evoke heat stress renders the harm in everyday language, the kind of imaginative work that Nixon attributes to writer-activists (5, 15). The memoir spells out what the poem's "blight" implies: the atmosphere, Saro-Wiwa writes, is poisoned by "hydrocarbon vapours, methane, carbon monoxide, carbon dioxide and soot emitted by gas which has been flared" (95). Critically, Saro-Wiwa later specifies that "the air and water are poisoned" (147), calling the situation an "ecological war" in which "no bones are broken, no blood is spilled and no one is maimed. Yet, men, women and children die; flora and fauna perish" (147). The memoir's attention to bodily harm is also personal: his brother Owens, a doctor, set up a clinic at Bori, where "the misery all around was virtually unbearable" (12). The memoir likewise links the oil industry to threats to the Ogoni's food supply, noting that "the farmlands have been rendered infertile by acid rain" and that "marine life is gone" (95). Saro-Wiwa goes on to lament the disparity between the oil-rich Delta and northern expressways funded by petrodollars (18), and the Bill of Rights specifies "land and food shortages" (67). The Bill of Rights also warns that the Ogoni "cannot sit idly by while we are, as a people, dehumanized and slowly exterminated and driven to extinction even as our rich resources are siphoned off" (89). Extermination here proceeds not through a single act of killing but through dehumanisation, dispossession, and the siphoning of resources. Through his writer-activism, Saro-Wiwa converts the Niger Delta's long emergencies into "stories dramatic enough to rouse public sentiment" (Nixon 3), performing, as Nixon has theorised, the critical task of meeting the "representational, narrative, and strategic challenges" posed by the slow violence enacted on his people (2).

Detention Reflections and Bodily Vulnerability

Saro-Wiwa's prison diary examines how state repression intensifies the same attritional logic as oil extraction. His plea against road travel—"another road journey […] will virtually kill me. I haven't travelled that much by road in a long time. Besides, I'm not in the best of health" (32)—reveals a body that has been chronically debilitated. He lists specific ailments: "a running stomach, seven boils on my left posterior, and my swollen feet" (46). Because the medicines he receives are "not efficacious" (46), these ailments amount to ongoing functional limitation rather than temporary sickness, yet they lack the spectacular quality of a broken bone. Puar's concept of debility helps to illuminate such ailments: debility is the normalised, everyday wearing out that often falls outside medical or legal recognition (xvi, 12).

The prison's filthy conditions—"the stench from the window next to me" (40), "Bedbugs, fleas and insects" (40), an infirmary "leaking like a sieve […] only a bucket latrine" (225)—mirror the Delta's contaminated ecology. Saro-Wiwa calls attention to the overrepresentation of Ogoni inmates (one-third of 1,200 prisoners) "dumped

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there on minor charges, forgotten", thereby framing their incarceration as collective, attritional catastrophe (227). Within this collective, psychic debility emerges, as the inmates' mental health slowly erodes as a result of their isolation, humiliation, and uncertainty. Saro-Wiwa writes of "the turmoil in my soul" (40). He describes his captor's casual humiliation: "Having thus humiliated me, he now casually informed me that he still had no further orders" (195). Unlike a psychological disability diagnosed following a discrete trauma, psychic debility is a population-level, gradual condition produced by the duration of state violence. Saro-Wiwa's psychic debility is a predictable outcome of state repression that sought to silence a movement against extraction. Yet he resists passive victimhood. His diary, written while he was "always busy either writing or reading" (40), is itself an act of resistance, and visits from Ogoni supporters—"offering us solidarity, comfort and, wait for it, money!" (197)—provide communal care. This collective dimension is crucial: Saro-Wiwa does not overcome his impairments but endures within them, supported by networks that embody the interdependence Kafer describes (144) and that, in her words, "recognize and refuse the intertwined exploitation of bodies and environments" (158) in a collective resistance.

Nonviolent Activism as Resistance

MOSOP's nonviolent activism shows how communities subjected to slow violence can mobilise politically. Saro-Wiwa writes that the Ogoni "had been sleepwalking their way towards extinction" and that "it had fallen to me to wake them up" (17). The 1993 protest march, during which participants went "to symbolically take over the oilfield with its flaming gas flare" at Bomu (124), transforms the flare—a weapon of slow violence—into a stage for political visibility. Saro-Wiwa captures the shift: "The empowerment which had enabled them to stand up to their oppressors at long last was the issue of the day" (124). This is not an overcoming of physical debility; marchers remained sick. Rather, it is a political reclamation of agency from *within* debility.

The Ogoni Bill of Rights abjures violence (90) and demands political control of Ogoni affairs, the control and use of a fair proportion of Ogoni economic resources, and the right to protect the Ogoni environment and ecology (68, 176). Nonviolence is not merely tactical but epistemological: it operates on the same temporal scale as slow violence—"for as long as is necessary" (90)—refusing the spectacular terms that would render debilitated bodies invisible. Saro-Wiwa's text articulates this philosophy: "Our opponents are given to violence and we cannot meet them on their turf, even if we wanted to. Non-violent struggle offers weak people the strength which they otherwise would not have" (193). He refuses the ableist binary that strength must mirror the opponent's capacity, instead building a politics of endurance, patience, and moral witness. MOSOP's response—providing medicine for the wounded after the Biara shootings (156), deploying Owens's clinic ambulance during the march (12), and relying on the "Ogoni bush radio" (140)—distributes agency

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across bodies, vehicles, and airwaves. Deploying an eco-crip insight, organisers reveal that capacity is not individual physical prowess but communal, networked endurance. Saro-Wiwa's defiance in the face of imprisonment—"neither prison nor the threat of death nor death itself could ever deter me" (170)—detaches the movement's success from his own bodily survival. The words reported as his last, "Lord, take my soul, but the struggle continues" (Agary 34), complete the transference: the struggle was never located in his body alone but in the distributed network of Ogoni resistance.

Saro-Wiwa's memoir shows that slow violence produces debility as a profit-driven, biopolitical process, while simultaneously demonstrating how debilitated communities can reclaim agency through nonviolent, communal, eco-crip strategies that refuse ableist norms of capacity. By converting poisoned air, chronic illness, and carceral neglect into visible testimony, Saro-Wiwa performs the writer-activists' essential task: making attritional harm legible as violence and modelling resistance that begins not from overcoming but from enduring together.

Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*: Gendered Debility, Feminist Agency, and Communal Care

Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* (2006) extends the eco-crip critique of debilitating ecologies by centring gendered debility, the specific, attritional weakening of women's bodies through the entangled forces of environmental pollution and patriarchal exploitation. Unlike Saro-Wiwa's focus on collective political resistance, Agary's protagonist Zilayefa navigates a landscape where slow violence manifests as reproductive harm, chronic pain, and economic precarity, yet the novel simultaneously models forms of feminist agency that reclaim capacity from debilitated bodies. Building on Puar's debility as population-level wearing out (xvii), Nixon's slow violence as incrementally dispersed harm (2), and Kafer's emphasis on human interdependence with nonhuman nature (144), this section examines how Agary portrays women's bodies as sites of both exploitation and resilience. The novel also reveals the limits of survival strategies that remain detached from sustained political engagement, a tension that speaks directly to environmental justice. Following Stacy Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality (2) and Taylor's argument that ecologies are disabled by economic and political systems that demand perpetual growth (114), I demonstrate how Agary's novel makes visible the embodied, gendered, and reproductive dimensions of slow violence that purely economic or political frameworks often miss.

The novel functions as an eco-feminist Bildungsroman, tracing Zilayefa's trajectory from rural vulnerability to urban migration. Read through an ecofeminist lens that links the exploitation of nature and the subordination of women, Agary's text explores how oil extraction and gender oppression converge on female bodies. The recurring motif of "yellow-yellow" skin, which refers to Zilayefa's light complexion, inherited from an absent Greek sailor, symbolises the debilitated, interstitial

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subjectivities produced by extractive capitalism. The protagonist's hybrid body is neither fully Nigerian nor European, neither wholly healthy nor completely disabled, but exists in a zone of ongoing, attritional vulnerability that Puar identifies with the biopolitical condition of debilitated populations (xvii). In Port Harcourt, as Zilayefa observes, "being yellow defined my interactions" (73-74), and she is one of an entire "crop of yellows" born of the oil sector's foreign workforce (74). The stigma attached to her skin is therefore social rather than medical, and it testifies to the long entanglement of oil with the bodies and families it brings into the Delta.

The Contaminated River and Gendered Debility

The contaminated river provides the novel's most powerful image of how slow violence becomes embodied as gendered debility. Zilayefa reflects:

> How many more times could I bear the pain like a hundred razor blades slashing my private part because the river water that washed it was the same water that received the waste rejected by my body in its attempt to cleanse itself? The water that flowed with streaks of blue, purple, and red, as drops of oil escaped from the pipelines that moved the wealth from beneath my land and into the pockets of the select few who ruled Nigeria was the same water I drank. (39)

This passage is significant for three interconnected reasons. First, it demonstrates how slow violence operates not as a spectacular event but as a durational, embodied condition. The repetition of "the same water" links excretory waste, oil pollution, and drinking water into a single toxic circuit, illustrating Nixon's claim that slow violence is "incremental and accretive" (Nixon 2). Second, the passage genders this harm explicitly: the "razor blades slashing my private part" locates environmental injury in the most intimate female body, revealing how extractive capitalism exploits reproductive capacities as sites of profit and pain. Third, this gendered debility is structural: Puar argues that "debility is profitable for capitalism" (13), and Agary's river, which carries oil wealth "into the pockets of the select few," materialises that economic logic. Zilayefa's body echoes Kafer's "expanded view of health that looks beyond the boundaries of the body" (146): the river's pollution becomes her internal condition, collapsing any distinction between environmental health and bodily integrity. Understood through Alaimo's trans-corporeality, the "movement across bodies" that reveals "the interchanges and interconnections between various bodily natures" (2), the river and the body are co-constitutive: the water that carries the oil's streaks of blue, purple, and red is also the water that enters and leaves Zilayefa's body. Agary extends this ecological-reproductive metaphor:

> Farming and fishing, the occupations that had sustained my mother, her mother, and her mother's mother no longer provided gain. I had witnessed lands claimed by massive floods during the rainy season, the earth slowly melting into the rivers. Women rowed their canoes farther and farther away to find land for farming. In addition, every year it was harder to catch fish, as though the water spirits had tied the fishes' wombs, until people barely bothered to cast their nets. (39)

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Through the metaphor of the water spirits who "had tied the fishes' wombs," Agary voices the river's declining fertility in the idiom of the spirit world, treating the loss of the fish as the work of agents with intentions. This animist framing refuses the Western distinction between natural processes and political violence, presenting ecological decline as a moral and metaphysical matter rather than a merely technical one. The water spirits add a spiritual register to the economic and political forces that damage the river, suggesting that slow violence has become part of the Delta's metaphysical order. The passage also emphasises intergenerational continuity and debility whereby "the past of slow violence is never past" (Nixon 8): the occupations of "mother, her mother, and her mother's mother" are foreclosed; Zilayefa's generation inherits not only polluted land but also the impossibility of traditional female livelihoods.

The same attention to the body structures the novel's opening, in which an oil spill destroys Zilayefa's mother's farm: "one of the crude oil pipes that ran through my village broke and spilled oil over several hectares of land, my mother's farm included" (3). Rather than narrating the rupture, Agary focalises the event through Zilayefa's sensory experience: the mother returns with legs "stained black" (3), and Zilayefa experiences nausea, "Then there was the smell. I can't describe it but it was strong—so strong it made my head hurt and turned my stomach. I bent over, and retched so hard I became dizzy" (3). Nixon argues that slow violence evades representation because it lacks "instant sensational visibility" (2). Agary's response is not to make the spill spectacular but to focus on its embodied aftermath: stained skin, nausea, dizziness—symptoms that are undeniable yet non-spectacular. By centring the body's involuntary responses, Agary makes slow violence legible through somatic testimony. The oil company denies compensation, claiming "sabotage by the youths" (4), and denies liability while continuing extraction. In so doing, the denial acts as a biopolitical mechanism that naturalises debility as the cost of doing business.

The spill's aftermath also reveals the gendered economics of slow violence. The community's failed attempt to secure compensation exposes the structural impunity that enables debility to be profitable, in particular by debilitating women, for whom this economic precarity cascades into intensified vulnerability. Zilayefa's mother, deprived of her farm, must find alternative livelihoods. The novel suggests that women's migration to Port Harcourt is driven not by choice but by the attritional erosion of rural subsistence economies. These are not spectacular forms of violence, but they are no less debilitating, and they illustrate the "representational challenges… posed not just by imperceptible violence but by imperceptible change" (Nixon 11). The displacement of women from land and livelihood is thus the first, quiet stage of gendered debility in *Yellow-Yellow*: it leaves them dependent on the very economy that has dispossessed them, a dependence that the novel's later scenes of transactional intimacy make plain.

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Polluted Bodies and Reproductive Harm

Agary's most searing contribution lies in her depiction of reproductive harm as the embodied endpoint of extractive violence. Whereas Saro-Wiwa documents how slow violence wears down activist bodies, Agary reveals a more intimate form of debility, the self-induced miscarriage that follows when a young woman's reproductive capacities become entangled with the economic dependence and patriarchal privilege that oil money sustains. The novel frames reproductive harm not as an exceptional tragedy but as a normalised outcome of gendered debility. Zilayefa's relationship with Admiral, a retired senior naval officer and friend of Lolo's father, culminates in a pregnancy that he treats as a problem to be removed, an episode that illustrates Puar's claim that debility is profitable and operates through the medical-industrial complex (13, 16). The termination "pays" in several senses: it spares Admiral the costs and obligations of paternity and preserves his comfortable life, while the risk, secrecy, and cost fall on Zilayefa alone. Admiral's directive—"Go to Island Clinic and ask for Dr. George. Tell him you need a pregnancy test, and if you are pregnant, he will help you get rid of it" (161)—is clinically brutal. He does not ask "whether I wanted to keep the child or not" (161); instead, he treats her body as a problem requiring a technical solution. Healthcare becomes a mechanism for managing inconvenient bodies. In this system, a child would create friction, but the termination restores Admiral's capacity to continue extracting without entanglement. Zilayefa refuses this route—"Dr. George was out of the question" (161)—and ends the pregnancy herself, but she does so within the narrow terms set by Admiral's indifference and by her fear of being sent packing by Sisi (161).

The self-induced miscarriage is harrowing:

> I lay curled up in the foetal position on the cold tile floor until my sweat and the blood that gushed from between my legs drenched my clothes, and I began to shiver from the cold and the pain. I begged God for forgiveness and called on all my mother spirits for comfort. Even so, I had to bite down on a towel to keep from screaming as my body pushed out blood and clumps of tissue that had been forming a little person inside me for almost three months. (177-78)

This passage is significant for four reasons. First, Agary transforms abstract "reproductive debility" into visceral, embodied testimony, meeting the representational challenges that Nixon associates with slow violence. Second, the passage reveals the isolation of gendered debility: Zilayefa keeps the pregnancy from Lolo (174) and bears the pain alone—"I could take care of my problem myself" (175). This isolation matters to my argument because it shows that debility is lived by individual women in privacy and silence, outside the collective networks and public protest that sustain Saro-Wiwa's resistance; an eco-crip reading that attends to diverse embodiments must therefore attend also to bodies whose suffering is hidden and gendered. Third, her appeal to "God" and her "mother spirits" registers a spiritual dimension that echoes the water spirits of the river passage: Zilayefa seeks forgiveness and comfort from ancestral and divine powers rather than from the state or the clinic, which suggests that the Delta's ecological and reproductive losses are

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experienced as moral and spiritual ruptures as well as physical ones. Fourth, the passage shows reproductive harm exceeding conventional disability categories: Zilayefa emerges without a stable, identifiable disability, yet she is marked by the same attritional pressures—economic precarity and patriarchal exploitation, set within a damaged ecology. Taken together, these four points show why *Yellow-Yellow* matters to African environmental justice discourse. By following oil's damage into a young woman's most private experience, Agary shows that environmental injustice in the Niger Delta is distributed unequally by gender and class, endured in silence, and largely invisible in the public record of spills and settlements. The novel thereby widens the scope of African environmental justice beyond collective protest, such as Saro-Wiwa's, to include the intimate, feminised costs of living in a poisoned landscape, and it asks that eco-crip attention to diverse embodiments be extended to the bodies that bear those costs.

Feminist Narratives of Survival

Amid gendered debility, Agary reveals feminist resistance through migration, communal care, and embodied reclamation. Zilayefa's mother exemplifies adaptive resilience: after an oil spill destroys her farm, she rows daily to new farmland "with unwavering determination" (10). This is ordinary persistence, the slow, attritional labour of surviving within a debilitating ecology. Zilayefa's migration to Port Harcourt reframes mobility as agency available to debilitated subjects. Her "master escape plan" (17-18) and her pleasure in clothing reveal the agency of a crip feminist: "I liked how the bodice caressed my breasts and the way the skirt brushed my hips when I walked" (17). The protagonist reclaims her body as a site of sensation and choice. Such sensory reclamation can be read as a political act: it refuses the assumption that debilitated bodies are entitled only to pain. Compare Kafer's insistence on "the possibility of pleasure" for disabled bodies (65).

Communal networks sustain this agency. Mama Ebiye, the village neighbour and closest friend of Zilayefa's mother, exemplifies interdependence without idealisation: their quarrels "never lasted for more than a few hours," and the home remains open (16). In Port Harcourt, Sisi, the boutique owner who takes Zilayefa in, offers mentorship that reframes debility as opportunity, not by denying harm but by insisting that Zilayefa build capacity within constraints: "We are all workaday girls here, so you, too, have to pull your weight" (67-68). Other examples include sisterly care, provided by Lolo, Sisi's daughter, who treats Zilayefa as her "little sister" (50), and rituals like libation, which blend ancestral bonds with everyday resistance (43-44). These networks preview the interdependence that eco-crip politics requires, yet they also reveal its fragility: care is personal, contingent, and vulnerable to the same extractive logics that produce debility.

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Risks of Entrenchment and Sustained Political Engagement

Despite these affirmations, Agary's novel reveals the limits of survival strategies that remain detached from sustained collective political engagement: the comfort of Lolo's circle numbs awareness (99); state repression silences dissent ("No one wanted to be the next Ken Saro-Wiwa," 137); and ethnic conflicts fanned by the head of state displace accountability (108). Zilayefa's own position illustrates these limits. She is "sheltered by the comforts that living with Sisi provided" (99), and she registers the gap between private contentment and public crisis: "Inside me was my personal turmoil over Plato and outside was the turmoil of a nation; somewhere in between was the contentment of life provided for me by Sisi and Lolo" (108). The same distance from the sources of power appears in the scholarships that the oil companies announce over the radio, which were "useless to us because no one in my village knew how to get them" (11): a gesture of corporate benevolence that remains, for those it claims to serve, tokenistic, and that echoes Saro-Wiwa's rebuttal of Shell's claim that its community assistance is "not cosmetic or token" (164-65). In this context, Zilayefa's guilt about her own opulence marks the limit of care-based survival: "I felt guilty […] I was part of the crowd that was greedily wolfing down pieces of the national cake" (121-22). The gendered economics of entrenchment appear in Zilayefa's consideration of sex work (42) and the structural impossibility of reproductive futurity with transient figures like Sergio, a white timber-business man with a family in Spain, whom Zilayefa meets in the village and who reappears in Port Harcourt (167-72). His importance to this argument lies in the fact that he may have fathered her pregnancy (172), and that she rejects the idea of bearing his child: "I could not bring Sergio's child into my world […] he was a transient white man with whom I had no future because as I had learnt, his type left when they had to—and without looking back" (172). Sergio's transience symbolises entrenched debility at the level of kinship. Like Admiral, Sergio is an extractive subject: he appears, consumes intimacy, and disappears. Zilayefa's decision not to bear his child is simultaneously an act of agency (refusing to bring a child into a debilitating ecology) and a symptom of debility (the impossibility of reproductive futurity within extractive capitalism). Other critics have read the absent father figure (Plato Papadopoulos) as a displaced subject mapped onto the men Zilayefa meets in Port Harcourt, such as Admiral and Sergio, who embody a patriarchal impunity that mirrors the oil companies' exploitation (Chukwumah 49-50; Ogene and Okolo 162-63). Zilayefa's dependence on these men for comfort and security keeps her agency partial. The novel sets this dependence against the memory of Saro-Wiwa, whose reported last words, "Lord, take my soul, but the struggle continues," and the slogan "Aluta continua" (Agary 34) point to an organised struggle as a different model of agency. Agary thereby diagnoses the trap: survival strategies that fail to evolve into political engagement risk reproducing the very debilitating ecologies they seek to endure.

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Communal Care, Interdependence, and Critiques of Resistance

Both Ken Saro-Wiwa's *A Month and a Day* and Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* position care networks as essential responses to debilitating ecologies, yet they also expose how care can become a form of accommodation when it operates without structural transformation. Gendered debility can be defined as the specific, attritional weakening of women's bodies through the convergence of environmental toxicity, patriarchal control, and economic precarity; it differs from a feminist-crip framework, which focuses on how disabled women resist ableist norms. Debility emphasises the *production* of weakness as a biopolitical strategy (Puar xvii, 13), while eco-crip emphasises resistance from within that weakness. The two are not opposed but operate dialectically: debility is the condition that extractive capitalism produces, and eco-crip is the collective response that refuses to let that condition be the final word. Where debility is profitable for capitalism (Puar 13), the care practices in these texts work to make debility *not* pay—or at least to ensure that its costs are shared rather than privatised. In *Yellow-Yellow*, Agary portrays interdependence as a feminist strategy that sustains life within contaminated environments. Zilayefa's bonds with her mother, Mama Ebiye, Sisi, and Lolo form a web of support that compensates for the state's absence and the oil industry's predation. Her mother's post-spill resilience—farming inherited land and rowing daily to new sites—embodies another example of ordinary persistence within compromised environments. Kafer's cripped environmentalism looks to disabled bodies not as obstacles to ecological thinking but as "a resource in thinking about our future natures differently" (131). In the Niger Delta, where oil contamination produces chronic illness, Agary and Saro-Wiwa's texts reframe care, not as charity but as a political practice that challenges ableist assumptions that only "healthy" bodies can build movements: Zilayefa's mother rows despite debility; Saro-Wiwa organises from a cell despite physical deterioration.

This care is neither romantic nor seamless: the relationships among Zilayefa's mother, Mama Ebiye, Sisi, and Lolo are marked by quarrels, obligations, and class differences, and Sisi's "workaday girls" ethic offers mutual obligation rather than rescue. This is an ethics of debility: the recognition that all bodies in this economy are worn down, and survival requires distributed labour rather than heroic capacity. Yet the same networks can also enable complacency. Agary records that "Lolo and her friends were making enough money to be comfortable, and their comfort numbed them and inured them to the realities of the poverty and oppression around them" (99). Lolo, who uses her family name to win contracts from the oil companies (58), is comfortable precisely because of the economy that impoverishes the Delta, and her comfort cushions her and her friends from seeing it. Zilayefa herself admits that she was "also removed from it all, sheltered by the comforts that living with Sisi provided" (99). This paradox is the novel's most searching critique: care without political engagement becomes a buffer that protects the comfortable from seeing what their comfort costs.

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Saro-Wiwa's memoir positions communal care as explicitly political. Owens's clinic, operating amid "the misery all around" (12), links individual health to collective organising: on the day of the march, its ambulance was "the only vehicle available to take care of any emergency cases" (12). This is not charity but infrastructure for resistance: a debilitated activist cannot march, but a clinic returns him to the struggle. Owens's clinic can be read as standing against the logic of the medical-industrial complex that Puar describes (16), since it places care at the service of a collective struggle. In detention, Ogoni visitors bring "solidarity, comfort and, wait for it, money!" (197), and Saro-Wiwa takes note of the many Ogoni inmates "forgotten by the police and the judicial system" (227). Evoking what Eli Clare has termed "brilliant imperfection," a way of living with disability that is "rooted in the nonnegotiable value of body-mind difference" and that "has emerged from collective understandings and stubborn survivals" (xvii), the communal care networks in both texts make the invisible harm of slow violence visible through mutual aid. Saro-Wiwa does not wait for a just world to arrive; he builds care within the unjust one. The Ogoni Bill of Rights, which complains of communities left without "health and other social facilities" (67), refuses to "sit idly by while we are, as a people, dehumanized and slowly exterminated" (89). Here, care becomes demand: communal well-being is not a gift from the state or Shell but a right that extraction has violated. Shell's own insistence that its community assistance is "not cosmetic or token" (164), which Saro-Wiwa dismisses as "negligible and […] most insulting when quantified and placed side by side with what the company has taken out of the area or the harm it has caused the environment" (165), confirms that without structural change, corporate care remains a mask over ongoing harm.

Paradoxes of Resistance

Both texts expose a central tension: the same strategies that enable survival can also entrench the conditions that make survival necessary. In *Yellow-Yellow*, Zilayefa's defiance (42) and embodied empowerment (17) challenge pathologising norms, yet urban complacency, ethnic conflicts fanned by the head of state (108), and pressure to end her pregnancy (161) perpetuate cycles of debility. Zilayefa's guilt, discussed above, is not resistance, but its presence signals that the protagonist has not fully surrendered to accommodation. Agary leaves her at this impasse: aware but not yet organised.

Saro-Wiwa offers a different resolution. Nonviolence transforms debility into collective eco-crip agency through MOSOP marches (123-24) and the election boycott (155). Personal ailments become fuel for mobilisation rather than reasons for withdrawal. When Saro-Wiwa, from detention, affirms that "we have chosen the path of non-violent struggle" (193), he practises care at a distance—leadership that depends on distributed trust rather than physical presence. The paradox here is that state repression intensifies even as resistance grows: soldiers wound eleven protesters at Biara (155), and the state later executes Saro-Wiwa despite (or because

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of) his nonviolence. Yet the words reported as his last—"Lord, take my soul, but the struggle continues" (Agary 34)—affirm that care networks survived his body's destruction. These tensions reflect slow violence's attritional nature, as it fosters bonds of necessity while also reinforcing the hierarchies that require those bonds. Without structural change—resource control, cleanup, accountability—care becomes a palliative rather than a cure. Agary and Saro-Wiwa do not celebrate resistance uncritically. They show that care can numb, that survival can accommodate, and that even the most committed struggle cannot prevent all harm. What remains is the insistence on continuing—"Aluta continua" (34)—not because victory is certain but because the alternative is extinction.

Juxtaposing Saro-Wiwa's activist resistance with Agary's feminist narrative reveals complementary strategies for confronting debilitating ecologies. Together, the two texts model a plural vision of well-being: one that moves beyond individual recovery to demand structural transformation while insisting that care, interdependence, and political organising are mutually necessary. Saro-Wiwa's memoir positions MOSOP's struggle against what he calls "ecological war" (147), a conflict where the weapons are pipelines, gas flares, and denied compensation rather than bombs. The journalist and activist reframes environmental degradation as deliberate violence, not unfortunate accident. His demand for Ogoni autonomy is not separatism but a prerequisite for survival: without control over resources and environmental governance, debility will continue to be produced as a profitable outcome of extraction. For his part, Agary genders his critique by centring reproductive harms (177-178) and hybrid "yellow-yellow" identities (7, 74) as sites not only of injury but also of reclamation. Where Saro-Wiwa shows how communities organise *against* debility, Agary shows how debility is *lived* in female bodies that must continue to labour, bear children, and care for families even as the conditions for that labour are systematically eroded.

Saro-Wiwa prioritises nonviolence and collective solidarity as the engine of political change (193), while Agary highlights migration and communal networks as feminist survival tactics. Read together, these are not opposing choices but sequential or simultaneous necessities: one cannot organise politically if one cannot survive materially, and survival without political engagement risks entrenching the conditions that require survival in the first place. The shared vulnerabilities across both texts—contaminated rivers (Agary 39; Saro-Wiwa 73) and corporate impunity (Saro-Wiwa 165; Agary 4)—ground this complementarity in the material reality of the Niger Delta, where no strategy, however well-conceived, can fully escape the attritional logics of extraction. Reimagining well-being beyond debility requires a politics of repair: not the restoration of an original, undamaged state, which Clare treats with suspicion (14-15, 187), but a practice, in the spirit of what Clare calls "brilliant imperfection" (xvii), that builds liveable futures from compromised presents. In the Niger Delta, this means decolonial ecologies: resource control, environmental cleanup, and governance systems that prioritise communal health over corporate profit. Ongoing spills and litigation, such as the Bodo and Ogale cases,

where communities have secured settlements from Shell but face incomplete remediation, underscore the need for participatory governance rather than top-down compensation models ("Shell–Bodo;" "Shell Faces"). An eco-crip lens reveals that governance without attention to bodily impairment and ecological interdependence remains incomplete. Participatory governance must include accessible healthcare for chronically ill populations, remediation that restores both land and bodies, and recognition that debility is not a deviation from normal functioning but a predictable outcome of extractive capitalism.

Future interdisciplinary work on this corpus could integrate Indigenous knowledges, such as the water spirits that populate Agary's spiritual landscape, with eco-crip models. A cripped environmentalism requires attending to bodies of nature, not as resources to be managed but as entangled, vulnerable, and mutually constituting. The water spirits that "tied the fishes' wombs" (Agary 39) are not superstition but epistemology: they name the reproductive debility that science measures but cannot, on its own, make intelligible as injustice. An eco-crip politics adequate to the Niger Delta would therefore hold together Saro-Wiwa's collective organising, Agary's gendered care networks, and Indigenous cosmologies, refusing to choose between them because debility itself refuses to operate along a single axis.

Conclusion

Saro-Wiwa's memoir and Agary's novel together expose oil exploitation in the Niger Delta as a form of slow violence that produces debilitating ecologies, where environmental degradation systematically weakens bodies, communities, and landscapes in ways that exceed conventional disability frameworks. Read through an eco-crip lens, these texts reveal attritional harms—poisoned air and water, threatened food supplies, reproductive loss, economic dispossession, and communal erosion—as biopolitical mechanisms of control rooted in extractive capitalism, colonial legacies, and state-corporate collusion. At the same time, they foreground resistance: Saro-Wiwa's nonviolent activism through MOSOP transforms shared vulnerability into collective agency and demands for autonomy, while Agary's feminist narrative traces individual and communal strategies of survival, migration, and care amid gendered burdens.

Communal networks in both works affirm human-nature interdependence while highlighting paradoxes, which include risks of entrenchment, complacency, and incomplete structural change without sustained political engagement. The texts' insistence on mutual care, whether through MOSOP's solidarity networks or Agary's female kinship webs, models a form of resistance that refuses the ableist demand for individual overcoming and instead distributes agency across debilitated bodies, shared resources, and damaged lands. These literary representations challenge ableist and profit-driven norms, making visible the casualties of incremental violence and meeting the representational challenges of slow violence. They advocate plural, decolonial visions of well-being that integrate diverse embodiments and ecologies,

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holding together collective organising, gendered care, and Indigenous cosmologies. By centring African experiences within global environmental justice discourses, Saro-Wiwa and Agary urge holistic resistance that bridges impaired bodies, degraded environments, and collective futures beyond extractivism, a resistance that begins not from overcoming debility, but from enduring and repairing together.

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Environmental Parataxis. Writing Hyperabject Patterns of Death in the Web of Life in Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*

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Abstract

Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* is often credited with starting the modern environmental movement. This article turns to a specific stylistic element employed throughout this book: parataxis. This figure can usefully foreground the hyperabject—contemporary infrastructures of waste—as it weaves together the sprawl of nature and the spread of toxic chemicals. The article presents parataxis as a useful tool for environmental communicators and how Carson used it in the struggle against pesticides. The article also cautions authors employing environmental parataxis against overlooking the inequalities of toxic contamination in paratactical compositions where words and phrases are ordered non-hierarchically.

Keywords: Environmental parataxis, Rachel Carson, the hyperabject, toxic waste.

Resumen

El inicio del movimiento ecologista moderno es a menudo atribuido a *Primavera Silenciosa* de Rachel Carson. Este artículo se centra en un elemento estilístico específico empleado a lo largo de ese libro: la parataxis. Esta figura puede servir para poner en primer plano el hiperabjeto—las infraestructuras contemporáneas de residuos—, ya que entrelaza la extensión de la naturaleza y la propagación de sustancias químicas tóxicas. El artículo presenta la parataxis como una herramienta útil para los comunicadores medioambientales, y explica cómo Carson la utilizó en la lucha contra los pesticidas. El artículo también advierte a los autores que emplean la parataxis medioambiental sobre el peligro de pasar por alto las desigualdades de la contaminación tóxica en composiciones paratácticas en las que las palabras y frases se ordenan de forma no jerárquica.

Palabras clave: Parataxis medioambiental, Rachel Carson, el hiperabjeto, residuos tóxicos.

Consider the following passage about "the sagebrush lands of the West, where a vast campaign is on to destroy the sage and to substitute grasslands":

> The land of the sage is the land of the high western plains and the lower slopes of the mountains that rise above them, a land born of the great uplift of the Rocky Mountain system many millions of years ago. It is a place of harsh extremes of climate: of long winters when blizzards drive down from the mountains and snow lies deep on the plains, of summers whose heat is relieved by only scanty rains, with drought biting deep into the soil, and drying winds stealing moisture from leaf and stem. (Carson 53)

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An attentive reader well versed in literature, rhetoric, and composition studies might localize many figures here such as repetition ("of" appearing seven times in the short phrase, often as anaphor at the start of a *cola*) and anthropomorphization ("drying winds stealing moisture"). However, what I wish to highlight is the superb use of *parataxis*: a figure in which words, sentences, or phrases are placed side by side so that each element is conveyed with equal weight and emphasis.

The above use of parataxis is relatively subtle. Now, consider how such superbly narrated naturescapes are tarnished: "Azaleas, mountain laurel, blueberries, huckleberries, viburnums, dogwood, bayberry, sweet fern, low shadbush, winterberry, chokeberry, and wild plum are dying before the chemical barrage. So are the daisies, black-eyed Susans, Queen Anne's lace, goldenrods, and fall asters which lend grace and beauty to the landscape" (58).

Toxins enter the textual scenery and start to circulate and accumulate: "Chlorides, chlorades, salts of phosphonic acid, fluorides, and arsenic" (36-37) flow from mountains and into waterways, causing birds to exhibit "typical symptoms of insecticide poisoning – tremoring, loss of ability to fly, paralysis, convulsions," (74) causing "sickness and death among horses, cows, goats, pigs, deer, fishes, and bees," (15) and, eventually, exposing humans to "nausea, vomiting, chills, fever, extreme fatigue, and coughing" (75). The consequences of the careless use of pesticides and other poisons motivated by short-term profits are devastating; written with parataxis as the guiding figure, a "pattern of death" is woven: "Always, the pattern of death assumed a characteristic shape: the smell of DDT over the forest, an oil film on the water surface, dead trout along the shoreline" (112).

These quotes are all to be found in environmentalist and scientist Rachel Carson's classic piece of environmental writing *Silent Spring* from 1962, a bestselling book that "both confirmed American anxieties about the impact of chemical war in agriculture and triggered the rise of modern environmentalism" (Hamilton 5). In *Recurring Silent Spring*, Carson scholar H. Patricia Hynes cements the significance of the book: "*Silent Spring* altered the balance in the world. No one since would be able to sell pollution as the necessary underside of progress so easily and uncritically" (3). There are many reasons for the book's astonishing effectiveness in raising environmental awareness ultimately leading to vital regulation of the use of pesticides (although, as is evident from the ecological crisis that we face today, one could have wished for so much more responsible political action to protect the environment, in Carson's time and place and beyond). In this article, I zoom in on a specific stylistic characteristic of *Silent Spring* that I believe to be one reason among many for this effectiveness: Carson's pervasive and expert employment of parataxis, a nonhierarchical way of arranging elements in a text. I argue that Carson's use of parataxis effectively and productively foregrounds the hyperabject—"a planetary infrastructure of waste" characterized not by its agentic qualities but by its intertness (Frantzen and Bjering 89)—of pesticides to a public audience by stringing together toxins, species, places, and people. Fully acknowledging that parataxis is but one stylistic strategy that will have to work in concert with many others in diverging ways

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in diverging situations, I suggest that communicators aiming to cultivate awareness of environmental crises can learn from Carson's paratactical writing. The environmental parataxis, I propose, is a rhetorical figure geared toward drawing the audience's attention to the overwhelming yet usually invisible dispersion of toxic material in both specific ecosystems and in the biosphere as a whole. The effect is thus amplificatory: it makes toxic relations noticeable and overwhelming, eventually contributing to preparing the ground for political action to face and deal more substantially with the problem of the hyperabject.

I first discuss a range of conceptualizations of waste relations in the Anthropocene. It is important to discuss these theories and concepts of waste because it helps us see the need for strategies communicating the urgent issues of toxic waste in order for communicators and critics to address the crisis effectively and with care for Earthly life (Entres; Pezzullo, "Environment;" "On Environmental Communication"). That is, writing forth waste is important precisely because the deepening, non-benign relations of toxic chemicals and life in the Earth's biosphere causes exceptionally global, although unequally distributed, harm and thus imply the urgency of environmental political action. For this purpose, I find Mikkel Krause Frantzen and Jens Bjering's concept of the hyperabject useful. Second, I turn to Carson's use of the environmental parataxis in *Silent Spring*. Although some scholars have engaged with parataxis in an ecological framework (Dowd; Morton, *Ecology*), these tend to focus on ontological significations within literary texts. I take a different approach, looking at Carson's critical essayism as a rhetorical text first and foremost, persuading the audience about the problem of environmental devastation in order to act before it is too late. I show how Carson achieved this by paratactically writing the lively sprawl of nature alongside the deadly spraying of toxic chemicals and suggest that the environmental parataxis is an effective figure in Carson's strategy that today's environmental communicators can learn from and use in their practice. Thus, this article follows studies on how various stakeholders might improve their environmental and climate communicative/rhetorical practices by employing specific strategies (Anderson and Maffey; Besley and Dudo; Bloomfield; Bloomfield and Manktelow; Cox and Hansen; Hoewe and Ahern; Mehlenbacher). Lastly, I caution that the environmental parataxis not be used as a device to show how everything is connected and affected in the hyperabject thus leaving out important environmental injustices and inequalities. Although synthetic chemicals can be found in almost all humans and animals today, some are earlier and more serious victims of the hyperabject than others. Writers employing the environmental parataxis in their rhetorical compositions should therefore always be weary of the danger of losing sight of this unjust politics of waste in the paratactic chains of words and phrases.

The contribution of this article is thus somewhat modest in that it zooms in on one particular figure that should obviously be used in concert with many others for a piece of environmental writing to gain any sort of impact. Nevertheless, I argue that such practice-oriented investigation of rhetorical figures is one way that environmental communicators can engage in the struggle for environmental justice.

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To emphasize the contemporary relevance of this perspective, throughout the article I use current research on the spread of per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances, or PFAS, chemicals as example of an environmental issue that communicators working in textual media can engage by employing the environmental parataxis inspired by Carson's work.

Foregrounding the Toxic Hyperabject in the Anthropocene

In February 2023, an Oxford University-led team of researchers published a study documenting "alarming levels" of PFAS in the Arctic ice on the Norwegian island group Svalbard (Hartz et al.). 26 variants of PFAS out of the 45 tested for were detected, and the scientists warn that the synthetical chemicals are damaging to wildlife in the region (Perkins). As the ice melts faster due to rising temperatures, the chemicals will spread to other parts of the ecosystem affecting life on a large scale. Most likely stemming from precipitation, the PFAS chemicals' origin is industry and agriculture in Europe and Asia. Carried within clouds to remote areas like Svalbard where they have then been stored in the ice for decades, the PFAS chemicals have made their toxic mark many thousands of kilometers from their production and emission. This global distribution of toxic chemicals—from factory production on one continent, then to the clouds, then to the Arctic circle, then into wider circulation in the biosphere—is not only deeply concerning; it makes evident the fact that a central characteristic and problematic of the Anthropocene, the geological epoch defined by human influence on climate and ecological earth systems (Angus; Merchant; Moore), is *waste*. As toxic matter spreads so far and wide beyond the centers of industrial production, it becomes staggeringly clear that toxic waste does not simply disappear after production; it keeps on circulating, and dangerously so, since it does not partake in the ecological circuit of decay and regeneration that the Earth system has refined since the dawn of life, but simply piles up in all kinds of bodies. Hence PFAS' ominous nickname: forever chemicals. Human societies and their production of all kinds of goods in the supply chains of global capitalism systematically fail to take sufficient political action to deal with the production, disposal, and circulation of toxic materials, to the well-documented detriment for humans and non-humans alike (Guagliardi; Konrad; Kryder-Reid and May; Müller and Nielsen; Pezzullo, *Toxic Tourism*; Rodricks). We now find ourselves in a situation where toxic byproducts and waste is such an ingrained part of our lives, and even our bodies, that ethically 'pure' ways of living in, with, and *as* nature has become wholly untenable (Barnett; Shotwell).

Other studies of the spread of these chemicals focus on the inequality of the spread of PFAS. Rosie Mueller, Derrick Salvatore, Phil Brown, and Alissa Cordner looked at the concentrations in New Jersey's drinking water. They show that while 84% of the population getting their water from public sources were drinking water containing PFAS, they also found "that a larger proportion of people of color lived in CWS service areas with PFAS detections compared to the non-Hispanic white

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population" (1). Writing about the pervasiveness and injustice of PFAS chemicals must find a way to incorporate both perspectives. This shows an increasing awareness of the spread of chemicals as well as their unequal effects (Lerner).

The circulation and piling up of toxic chemicals are increasingly coming to the attention of humanities scholars working with the Anthropocene. For instance, philosopher Michael Marder's essay "This Dump that is the Anthropocene" from 2019 characterizes our planetary moment as one defined by the waste resulting from our very existence in industrialized civilization: "Our planet is at an advanced stage of being converted into a dump for industrial output and its by-products, not to mention for consumerism and its excesses" (164). This dumping comes *from* us but also happens *to* us, as "The dump penetrates the very fibres of our being," making the Anthropocene "a global dump" (165). Marder plays on the double meaning of the word "dump" as both a location for the disposal of waste and in the even less charming sense of having or taking a dump (to defecate, that is). Here, Marder is writing in the tradition of Marxist ecology's concept of the metabolic rift: the decisive mismatch between consumption and regeneration of natural resources, akin to a skewed metabolism in a human body and accelerating with industrial capitalism in the nineteenth century (Foster and Clark). Marder's essay brings this allegory back to the body from which it came: the metaphysics of Anthropocene destruction stems from our collective desire for suppressing excrement, getting rid of our waste as fast as possible, flushing it down deep underground. Another philosopher of ecologies, Timothy Morton ("Hyperobjects"), describes a similar reaction in the meeting between human consciousness and the viscous "hyperobject" of global warming: "Knowledge of the hyperobject Earth, and of the hyperobject biosphere, presents us with viscous surfaces from which nothing can be forcibly peeled. There is no Away on this surface, no here and no there" (31). Marder's and Morton's descriptions of existential waste relations in the Anthropocene joins a range of contemporary theorizations of the Anthropocene as defined first and foremost by human waste. According to Marco Armiero, who coins a waste-focused "-cene," "The Wasteocene assumes that waste can be considered the planetary mark of our new epoch" (2). Importantly, Armiero rejects accounts of the Anthropocene that do not consider the social and political dimensions putting some humans and non-humans in a more precarious situation. The Wasteocene, then, "is not about the material stuff but the socio-ecological relationships making someone/something disposable," (11) in its foundational "othering project which simultaneously produces the global dump for the most and the paradise for the few" (14).

Thus, we can identify existential as well as political implications in humanities accounts of a world of waste. Tying several of these theoretizations together, Mikkel Krause Frantzen and Jens Bjering move from Morton's notion of the hyperobject to what they call the hyper*abject*, a word borrowed from Danish poet Theis Ørntoft. Ørntoft's term is informed by Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject—the unsettling border-dissolving experience of something being 'me and not me,' human and not human, the emblematic example being a corpse—making the hyperabject "a

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planetary infrastructure of waste. What defines the hyperabject is not only extension but *inertness* and the clogging of economic and ecological circulations produced by this inertness" (89). Thus, in 'business as usual' climate politics, we not only deemphasize politics (Berglez and Olausson); in post-political technocrat attitudes valorizing progression from within the status quo, we gloss over the ubiquitousness of waste so central to the slow violence of the Anthropocene directing more or less visible streams of toxic material from the few to the many (De La Torre; Nixon; Zimring). Rather than subscribing to Morton's idea of global warming and the deteriorating biosphere as hyperobject—a totalizing theoretical gesture risking the analytically unhelpful evisceration of history and politics in the name of total and fundamentally inscrutable connectedness—Frantzen and Bjering suggest that the hyperabject draws acute attention to the consequences and injustices of piling waste upon the many under capitalist production: "[T]he hyperabject has a desublimating effect on the hyperobject, literally bringing it down to earth and reinserting it in history and into a proper political realm" (90).

Whereas cultural studies scholars and ecological philosophers have grappled with the establishment of analytical frameworks for understanding waste in relation to the climate and ecological crisis, rhetoricians and communication scholars have also dealt with toxicity and waste extensively (Endres; Kelly; Peeples, "Toxic Sublime;" "Imaging Toxics;" Riddick). For instance, Casey R. Kelly's work on the "toxic screen" in the TV drama *True Detective* shows how "the use of toxic visual and narrative tropes in contemporary dramatic television can expand our capacity to critique the effects of industrial pollution" (41), which is a challenge in visual media since "Contaminated places can appear relatively clean, leaving spectators unaffected by their visual encounter" (42, see also Pezzullo, *Toxic Tourism*). Another rhetorician engaging with toxicity onscreen is Joshua Trey Barnett who puts forward the notion of "atmospheric rhetoric" as exemplified in the toxic thriller *Safe* from 1995. These studies in visual rhetoric share this article's project of examining how toxic pervasiveness can be conveyed to audiences as part of a rhetorical process of dealing with contamination, impureness, and toxic waste in late-capitalist society. As Phaedra Pezzullo (*Toxic Tourism*) notes, "the *toxification* of our culture, or the processes through which people are persuaded (and sometimes compelled) to accept the ongoing pollution of our bodies with toxic chemicals," (11) is a rhetorical struggle not just over waste production but crucially also over *onto whom* toxic waste should be dumped. In this sense, detecting and employing communicative strategies to position waste—socially and ecologically—as a central problem in the time of ecological crisis is a vital component of anti-toxification rhetoric.

As a rhetorical modality, writing shares television's challenge of making urgent issues of toxicity tangible to audiences but from a different representational perspective. How to convey the 'everywhereness' of, for instance, 'forever chemicals' through words alone? This article seeks to contribute to the above research with an account of the rhetorical potential of writing forth the hyperabject using a particular stylistic move, parataxis. Texts about environmental justice are as relevant and

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pervasive as ever; environmental writing "may affect one's caring for the physical world: make it feel more or less precious or endangered or disposable" (Buell 2) even as it today competes with many other modes of representation and persuasive influence. In its most effective instantiations, environmental writing takes "a form of readily recognizable spatialized experience, so recognizable as to be taken for granted, and to achieve a certain bringing to awareness by exposure of chronic unawareness" (Buell 26). Thus, as televised or cinematic toxicity is important to grasp from a rhetorical and ecocritical perspective, scholars ought not to neglect treatments of toxic waste in written modalities—especially as the ways in which it exudes its influence will be different in its representation on the toxic page than on the toxic screen. Carson's book, as Alexa Weik von Mossner points out, joins other canonized works of environmental non-fiction that "belong to a repertoire of rhetorical and narrative techniques that aim to engage readers sensually and emotionally and thereby move them to action" (8).

Although this article's scope is limited to investigating a specific rhetorical figure and its potential to foreground waste streams in the Anthropocene, I argue that Carson's use of environmental parataxis encourages its audience to think critically about, and ultimately to inspire political action toward, toxic waste from human activity and its catastrophic entanglements with human and non-human life and ecologies broadly. In the following section, I aim to show how using parataxis can be an effective strategy in environmental communication because it brings attention to waste relations that would otherwise be less present to audiences.

Introducing the Environmental Parataxis

Parataxis is, generally speaking, the practice in formulation of language where several syntactically equal parts or phrases are placed alongside one another. That is, "In *paratactic* prose, clauses are loosely connected, creating a looping discourse of *here's another thing and another thing and another thing*" (Fahnestock 382), or, in Angus Fletcher's definition, "a structuring of sentences such that they do not convey any distinctions of higher or lower order. 'Order' here means intensity of interest, since what is more important usually gets the greater share of attention" (162). The opposite twin of parataxis is *hypotaxis*, an ordering of clauses in a syntactical hierarchy. To use a simple example, the difference between these basic modes of passage construction is the difference between saying 'the bee and the flower and the nectar' (parataxis) or 'the bee flew to the flower because it wanted nectar' (hypotaxis). All prose texts, at least of any considerable length, contain both structures to varying degrees and in combination ('the bee flew to the sunflowers, tulips, roses, and poppies to get the nectar'). Parataxis can be polysyndetic (where many conjunctions connect the elements of the text, as in Fahnestock's example of "*here's another thing and another thing and another thing*" above) or asyndetic (as in, say, "*Here's a thing. Here's another thing. Here is yet another thing.*"). That is, parataxis may occur with or without conjunctions. While in its most striking instantiations

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parataxis tends to provide a staccato feel with many elements closely strung together within a single period, it can also be taken to encompass entire passages where different sentences are hierarchically leveled, such as in my opening example in this article. I employ a broad definition of parataxis here encompassing staccato as well as more subtle and 'spread out' paratactic writing, although with an inclination toward the former. As will become evident below, Carson excels in parataxis in *Silent Spring,* so much so that this text might be used for emulation for writing toxicity more than half a century later.

Other scholars have commented on parataxis in relation to environmental and ecological themes. However, these contributions tend to focus on literary texts. In Morton's rethinking of the environmental aesthetics of nature writing in *Ecology without Nature*, paratactic lists in Romantic poetry is an important device in "Ecorhapsody," where it adds "tempo or *phase*" evoking "a force from 'elsewhere' within the text itself" (61). Writing on the use of parataxis, analepsis, and geophysiology in Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road*, Ciorán Dowd argues that McCarthy's use of "parataxis […] undermines the conceptual categories of causality and hierarchical importance, thus allegorically inscribing in the novel's syntax a profoundly non-anthropocentric ontological framework" (23). Dowd notes further that the paratactic "elimination of distinctions between sentences or clauses with regard to their importance is naturally suited to the inscription of an ecocentric, or at the very least non-anthropocentric, ontology" (24). I agree with Dowd in observing that paratactic style is especially suited to environmental writing. However, in turning not to literary texts but to the politically engaged essayism of *Silent Spring*, I focus on the way in which environmental parataxis is used to persuade the reader to notice and oppose environmental wrongs by amplifying toxic relations. Again, I am not so much concerned with the ontological implications of environmental parataxis in the sense that human and non-human matter and agents are placed on a par but rather in its rhetorical effect to shape political ideas about toxicity and natural environments. In this historically specific planetary infrastructure of waste that is the hyperabject, it is not so much the agential properties of toxic chemical that should be our focus, but its inertness: the way they pile up and circulate as a result of careless industrial production.

However, while Frantzen and Bjering criticize object-oriented ontologists like Morton or new materialists like Jane Bennett for their many "lists" and accuse them of thinking "that there is no ontological difference between human and non-humans, that everything has agency, and that everything is hopelessly entangled with everything else," (95) my rhetorical orientation in this article points me toward a different perspective on the language of 'and another and another and another.' When considered not in relation to the domains of ontology and aesthetics, but as a way of appealing to an audience to inspire political consciousness or collective action in publics, the many objects placed beside one another in a text potentially take up another function, making the acute political dimensions of toxic waste in the Anthropocene overwhelmingly present. Carson's parataxis not only shows how life

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forms are enmeshed but is also a strategy of amplification of both waste and life that seeks to move the reader toward political action on environmental issues. According to Laurent Pernot "amplification does not mean 'development,' even less 'padding out.' It involves not lengthening a speech but increasing the size of its subject, by emphasizing its beauty, its nobleness, etc." (87). Debra Hawhee has elaborated on this effect in a climate and ecological crisis context. She notes that amplification "presents images before the eyes of the listeners, the public, and it magnifies their importance, thereby shaping attention's quality and turning into magnitude" (27). For instance, Hawhee notes, when glaciers melt, it is necessary to amplify the very process of this disappearance, exactly because of the large scales of climate change that can be difficult to grasp. Likewise, the sheer ubiquity of toxic waste is difficult to comprehend and forces us to grapple with the task of dealing with this radically de-localized environmental phenomenon (Heise) generating a range of unequally distributed local effects. Paratactic writing, then, provides one stylistic tool to amplify the hyperabject of toxic waste to make it present in the reader's consciousness.

The Pattern of Death in the Web of Life: *Silent Spring's* Paratactic Style

Scientist and writer Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* from 1962 is often lauded as one of the single most important pieces of environmental writing in the twentieth century. If one is not familiar with the book and its history and influence, this may sound like hyperbole. However, some very specific and important effects followed this book's publication, namely the nationwide ban on the agricultural use of the pesticide DDT in the United States in the early 1970s. Also published as a series of essays in *The New Yorker*, the book's seventeen chapters make up a masterly composed warning about the dangerous effects of using pesticides in agricultural practices primarily, but also of the use of toxic chemistry in other areas of production and everyday life in the 1950s and early 1960s as chemistry manufacturers sought to accommodate and keep up their production in a post-war economy. Carson communicates the science behind the poisonous influence of various pesticides as well as accuses chemical corporations of disregarding the general health of nature systems for profit. Many regard Carson's work as a main precursor to the environmental movement in the United States and beyond in the decades following *Silent Spring's* publication (Burby; Dunlap; Hynes; Kroll; Lytle; Musil; Van Noy).

There are of course many brilliant scholarly accounts of Carson's writing and of what made it so effective (Beudel; P.C. Murphy). For instance, scholars of ecocritical literature have written about Carson's use of irony and sarcasm (Corbett; Secreast), her writing's temporal orientations (Kaza), and more (see also Savory; Wadell; Walsh and Walker). This article joins these scholarly treatments of *Silent Spring* but emphasizes a hereto forth unexamined but pervasive figure in the book, parataxis. In this way, it consciously deviates from recent Carson scholarship concerned with the communicative strategies in *Silent Spring* more broadly (Corbett; M. K. Murphy; Savory) to hone in on a specific rhetorical figure instructive for ecocriticism today.

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As shown in this article's introduction, Carson excels in paratactic style. She does so on a rich variety of themes, ranging from lists of poison chemicals or animals to the various plants and crops affected by agricultural pesticides. This can take the form of explicit list-making: "To the list of about a dozen agricultural insects showing resistance to the inorganic chemicals of an earlier era there is now added a host of others resistant to DDT, BHC, lindane, toxaphene, dieldrin, aldrin, and even to the phosphates from which so much was hoped" (222). Often, these lists contain chemicals, as in the latter example, but more often species of plants and animals: "Brown thrashers, starlings, meadow larks, grackles, and pheasants were virtually wiped out" (77); "The fresh and dried fish; the fat, oil, or meat from beaver, beluga caribou, moose, oogruk, polar bear, and walrus; cranberries, salmonberries and wild rhubarb all had so far escaped contamination" (148). On a basic level, these paratactical phrases often serve as examples, which is of course a mainstay of popular scientific texts. However, when Carson writes that "The dormant sprays applied to the elms in the autumn, sending the poison into every little crevice in the bark, are probably responsible for the severe reduction observed in the number of chickadees, nuthatches, titmice, woodpeckers, and brown creepers" (92), she could have replaced the chickadees, nuthatches, titmice, woodpeckers, and brown creepers with a non-paratactic phrasing such as 'severe reductions in several species,' or named just one of such species as example. It is undeniably a strategic component of the book to present nature paratactically: "There were channel cats, the chief game fish of the river. There were blue and flathead catfish, bullheads, four species of sunfish, shiners, dace, stone rollers, largemouth bass, carp, mullet, suckers. There were eels, gar, carp, river carpsuckers, gizzard shad, and buffalo" (120). Thus, Carson's environmental parataxis goes beyond using examples as clarifying devices. Sometimes the environmental parataxis functions as an insertion, proving Carson's urge to write forth nature's sprawl and diversity even as it is not strictly needed for the information conveyed in the passage: "[I]t concerns the many different kinds of fishes—bass, sunfish, crappies, suckers, and others—that inhabit many kinds of waters, still or flowing, in many parts of the country" (114); "The inshore waters—the bays, the sounds, the river estuaries, the tidal marshes—form an ecological unit of the utmost importance" (123).

Carson uses parataxis to pile on the many species of life comprising the US-American naturescape. And then, when the audience is presented with the sprawl of life in nature, comes the poison:

> These sprays, dusts, and aerosols are now applied almost universally to farms, gardens, forests, and homes – nonselective chemicals that have the power to kill every insect, the "good" and the "bad," to still the song of birds and the leaping of fish in the streams, to coat the leaves with a deadly film, and to linger on in soil – all this though the intended target may be only a few weeds or insects. (7)

Carson's core argument centers on the self-imposed deceit of humanity's control over nature, the idea that we should stand above it, leading to our spreading toxic chemicals for profit:

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> We have seen that they now contaminate soil, water, and food, that they have the power to make our streams fishless and our gardens and woodlands silent and birdless. Man, however much he may like to pretend the contrary, is part of nature. Can he escape a pollution that is now so thoroughly distributed throughout our world? (153-4)

Indeed, there is no escape. The hyperabject is an infrastructure travelling in and through our bodies, just like it travels through other life. We are only unique in the sense that we have orchestrated this infrastructure of inert waste piling up everywhere, whether pesticides or forever chemicals. In weaving a pattern of death across the web of life, Carson's environmental parataxis effectually juxtaposes the wondrous sprawl of biological life and the dreadful ubiquity of toxic waste such that we are overwhelmed by the experience of the hyperabject:

> They [residues of chemicals] have entered and lodged in the bodies of fish, birds, reptiles, and domestic and wild animals so universally that scientists carrying on animal experiments find it almost impossible to locate subjects free from such contamination. They have been found in fish in remote mountain lakes, in earthworms burrowing in soil, in the eggs of birds – and in man himself. (13)

The environmental parataxis as Carson uses it throws toxic waste back at the audience: As Marder and Morton (*The Ecological Thought*) reminds us, there is no land of Away, and Carson strings together toxins and species and human societies to remind the audience of what we are, in fact, doing: clogging the biosphere with chemical byproducts. Just like the biologist's deep understanding of the interconnections of ecosystems necessarily challenges the two-dimensional anthropocentric logic of humans as front and center and "nature" as exploitable and dead background (Merchant), drawing attention to the hyperabject shows how "underground movements circulate as secret and secreting bowel movements of that which cannot be digested by the surface" (Frantzen and Bjering 103). Using the environmental parataxis to write the toxic hyperabject, communicators can reintroduce responsibility in a world that pretends that synthetic chemicals are no longer "our" problem as soon as they are produced and discarded. In chapter four of *Silent Spring*, "Surface Waters and Underground Seas," Carson—whose work prior to this book focused on the sea (*The Sea Around Us*)—paratactically reminds us of the depth of waters, and, by extension, of biological life:

> Water must also be thought of in terms of the chains of life it supports – from the small-as-dust green cells of the drifting plant plankton, through the minute water fleas to the fishes that strain plankton from the water and are in turn eaten by other fishes or by birds, mink, raccoons – in an endless cyclic transfer of materials from life to life. (*Silent Spring* 39)

Endless as this cyclic transfer is, it will also be subject to the hyperabject: "Rains then carry pan of the arsenic into streams, rivers, and reservoirs, as well as into the vast subterranean seas of groundwater. […] Here again we are reminded that in nature nothing exists alone" (43).

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Concluding Perspective: Political Pitfalls of the Environmental Parataxis

In his article "Pesticide, Politics and a Paradise Lost: Toxicity, Slow Violence and Survival Environmentalism in Ambikasutan Mangad's *Swarga*," Sk Tarik Ali shows how Ambikasutan Mangad's novel "ends up bringing the pesticide disaster into the popular imagination and engaging readers with the seriousness of the issue" (159). Although I argue that *Silent Spring* had similar effects on a similar issue, there are important nuances to consider in terms of environmental justice issues that Ali points out as central in Magad's prose. Although Carson's work was highly influential on many parameters in its immediate context, and although *Silent Spring* takes swings at authorities and corporations disregarding ecosystems for profit, social and political issues of inequity and discrimination in terms of toxic waste is not part of Carson's argument against pesticide use. However, as Amiero, Frantzen and Bjering, and others point out, while we may all live in the hyperabject dumping ground of the Wasteocene, we live here very differently across economic, social, ethnic, class, and species status. Communication scholarship dealing with toxicity has often taken this unequal distribution of toxic waste as its vantage point (Pezzullo, *Toxic Tourism*). Environmental writers and activists using the environmental parataxis as I have described it thus need to be conscious about avoiding implications of equality in toxic waste relations in the non-hierarchical paratactic prose.

Although Frantzen and Bjering criticize the 'list writing' of some new materialist and posthumanist scholars for being oblivious to political difference, parataxis can, like any rhetorical figure, be used in the service of hegemony as well as struggles for justice. The challenge in strategically employing the environmental parataxis is how to balance the fact that toxic chemicals are literally everywhere and, in this sense, affect every living being on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the fact that these chemicals are also wildly unequally distributed in dispersal and effects. How to be mindful about this balance between toxic pervasiveness and toxic inequality and how to concretely meet this challenge in writing and other communication practices will always depend on the specific circumstances to which one responds. The political message of *Silent Spring*—that the dumping of pesticides in rivers and soils and oceans, in gardens and forests, in the eggs of birds and insects is perpetuated by greedy and short-sighted corporate actors and that this must be put to an end—is silent about, for instance, racial injustices in toxic waste practices in the United States. As these injustices have only deepened as time has passed and generational health issues due to toxic dumping in neighborhoods with large proportions of colored and poor inhabitants become evident (Bullard; Swyngedouw and Heynen), the task of a more "contemporary *Silent Spring*" would be to include these abhorrent politics of waste in its ecocritical advocacy. In terms of the environmental parataxis, this task includes making present to the audience the overwhelming number of toxic chemicals affecting disadvantaged peoples in a range of ways.

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In *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Rob Nixon spells out the need for the kind of awareness of the slow violence of ecocide to which the environmental parataxis can contribute:

> To confront slow violence requires, then, that we plot and give figurative shape to formless threats whose vital repercussions are dispersed across space and time. The representational challenges are acute, requiring creative ways of drawing public attention to catastrophic acts that are low in instant spectacle but high in long-term effects. To intervene representationally entails devising iconic symbols that embody amorphous calamities as well as narrative forms that infuse those symbols with dramatic urgency. (10)

Carson's paratactic style—combined with the many other compositional aspects of *Silent Spring*—draws public attention to catastrophic acts of pesticide dumping in nature and bodies; to the hyperabject. To represent and confront the slow violence of the hyperabject in the twenty-first century demands that the environmental parataxis is employed alongside narratives highlighting the political struggles inherent to toxic waste streams in the Anthropocene where everyone is affected by waste, but staggeringly unequally so. That is, Carson uses paratactic style to note how the web of death encroaches on flocks of birds as well as American families but did not, as for instance environmental activist Victor Lewis points out in an otherwise laudatory essay on Carson's legacy from 1991, have an eye for the inequality and injustice of this distribution of toxic waste in *Silent Spring* (see also Buell 44-45). However, writing—technical, literary, and everything in between—engaging the hyperabject must reject linear narratives of waste and disaster (Enríquez-Loya and Léon).

Returning to the example of PFAS pollution, it is a fitting case for highlighting the political dilemmas of the environmental parataxis today. On the one hand, PFAS is everywhere and in everyone as the team from Oxford University (Hartz et al.) has documented. On the other hand, it often affects the poor and racialized to a much greater extent as the study of New Jersey drinking water shows (Mueller et al.). The task of the writer employing the environmental parataxis to write about the PFAS crisis, then, is to compose and amplify a pattern of death in the web of life to overwhelm the reader and inspire action, while avoiding representing this web as encompassing everyone equally.

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Hydropolitics, Colonization, and Frontiers: Reading Dystopian Landscapes in Hawai'i and India

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Abstract

This article presents a close reading of Haunani Kay Trask's book of poetry (*Light in the Crevice Never Seen*) and Komal Swaminathan's play *Thaneer! Thaneer!* (Eng. trans. *Water! Water!*). Both texts reveal water-scarce landscapes in Hawai'i and India that tell stories of colonization of local populations. In so doing, these foreground a certain hydropolitics: that water pollution and scarcity is the result of its commercialisation by global capital, which has despoiled ecological systems and the habitat of all species on the planet. Finally, this article foregrounds how writers like Trask and Swaminathan can actively draw their readers' attention to the environmental frontiers reached by such politics and help them reimagine alternative futures.

Keywords: Hydropolitics, Trask, Swaminathan, ecocriticism.

Resumen

Este artículo presenta una lectura detallada del libro de poemas de Haunani Kay Trask (*Light in the Crevice Never Seen*) y de la obra de teatro de Komal Swaminathan *Thaneer! Thaneer!* (*Water! Water!* en su traducción al inglés). Ambos textos revelan paisajes de Hawái y la India en los que escasea y que cuentan historias de la colonización de las poblaciones locales. Al hacerlo, ponen en evidencia una cierta hidropolítica que revela cómo la contaminación y la escasez del agua son el resultado de su comercialización por parte del capital global que ha saqueado los sistemas ecológicos y el hábitat de todas las especies del planeta. Finalmente, este artículo resalta cómo escritores como Trask y Swaminathan pueden captar activamente la atención de sus lectores sobre las fronteras ambientales alcanzadas por dichas políticas y ayudarlos a reimaginar alternativas para el futuro.

Palabras claves: Hidropolítica, Trask , Swaminathan, ecocrítica.

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As the gathering environmental crises deepen in the twenty-first century, critiques of our global economic and political system and its concomitant impact on the environment have intensified, fuelling much activism and debate. Scholars define this system as a form of latter-day imperialism involving the quest for land and extraction of natural resources, with major ecological consequences: acid rain, holes in the ozone layer, diminishing biodiversity, air pollution, global warming, fossil fuel exhaustion, and water crises (see Roos and Hunt 2; Harvey 145-152; Smith 84-85 and 89; Crist ch. 1; McBrien ch. 4; Foster 12; Purdy, 5-6). Such processes lead to mass-scale poverty, degradation of the environment, and ultimately climate change (see

Harvey 181-182; Smith 71; Foster 10-11; Roos and Hunt 3-4). Nowhere is the impact of climate change as evident as in the global hydropolitics of water: shifting precipitation patterns, increased melting of glaciers, disrupting upstream and downstream rivers, rising sea levels, flooding and drought, and decreased freshwater availability. All of these factors produce conflicts that fuel violent instability within and between states at the local, national, and international levels (see Michel and Pandya xii-xiii; Al-Muqdadi 18). It is therefore necessary to examine unstable water systems—that are impacted by human activities—as areas to understand the geopolitics of the Anthropocene (see Clarke-Sather et al. 2; Al-Muqdadi 9). As a global resource, water is unique in that it is essential for both human life and ecosystem function, but is limited as a resource (See Clarke-Sather et al. 3; Mahkahleng 38). Consequently, water wars have emerged wherever fragile human institutions fail to address water scarcity (Mahkahleng 40).

Clearly, the environment represents the next frontier in humans' understanding of their living possibilities on this planet in the twenty-first century. A frontier can be a boundary that functions as a transition between the known and familiar and the unknown and uncharted. It can signify the limits of knowledge in a particular subject, or a new field of study requiring exploration. All of these connotations are fruitful in describing our environmental crises in the twenty-first century which pose challenges of unimaginable proportions and require new ways of understanding relationships between human and nonhuman environments. So, what should writers and artists do in facilitating such understanding? Well, ecocritical scholars have specific opinions about what these responsibilities should be. Some opine that climate change threatens our current literary imagination (See Ghosh 6-7, 9). And so, writers must radically reimagine a politics of common responsibility that will merge ecological and social justice concerns (see Buell 6-7; Heise 252-253; Spivak 339, 342-6; Ghosh 32; DeLoughrey and Handley 29). Others assert that writers need to critique the destructive one-dimensional nature of the processes of globalization and the neoliberal state (see DeLoughrey and Handley 8; Heise 254). In so doing, they must facilitate a dialog of accountability amongst humans about their relations with a more-than-human world (see Buell 2; Spivak 348-350; Ghosh 79-80, 160; Glotfelty xix-xx; DeLoughrey and Handley 25-26). To do so, their imaginaries must be non-hierarchical, non-patriarchal, non-Eurocentric, non-linear, while also being diverse and spontaneous; writers must then be prepared to reinvent literary forms, experiment with genre, and force readers to change their act of reading (see Buell 8-9; Heise 258; Spivak 507; Ghosh 84-85,161; Lynch, Glotfelty, and Armbuster 12-13). In fact, a multiplicity of voices are required to address the problems that our world faces today (see Spivak 340; DeLoughrey and Handley 28). Such voices will create literature that is rooted to a place while also being interconnected to global and bioregional environments (see Buell 60; Heise 253; Barnhill 212-213; Lynch, Glotfelty, and Armbuster 8-9; DeLoughrey and Handley 10).

This article presents two such writers through a close reading of their place-based texts: Haunani Kay Trask's book of poetry (*Light in the Crevice Never Seen*) and

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Komal Swaminathan's play (*Thaneer! Thaneer!* Eng. trans. *Water! Water!*). Both texts reveal water-scarce landscapes that tell stories of colonization of local populations. Trask's poetry links the water depredations in Hawai'i to the U.S. imperial history of exploitation. Swaminathan's play exposes the systemic failure of postcolonial India through water-starved Athipatti, a fictional village. Trask and Swaminathan function like activists in drawing their readers' attention to the environmental frontiers reached by such hydropolitics: that water, fundamental to all species' survival and integral to all cultural practices, is polluted and made scarce; that ecological systems are despoiled; and that habitats as widely disparate as those in Hawai'i and India are similarly threatened through the activities of global capital. Studying their work is important because Trask and Swaminathan, juxtaposed together, expose the extent to which capitalism ravages the environment in different spaces on the earth. They also help their readers reimagine alternative futures. Trask presents vivid images of a tranquil bioregional landscape in harmony with itself that is an alternative to water pollution and commercial overuse. Swaminathan provides alternative possibilities to water starvation when underprivileged characters proactively create local solutions with whatever resources they have. In both cases, readers are encouraged to rethink other possibilities to the specific hydropolitical realities presented in these texts. These possibilities are indeed less hierarchical and patriarchal, while being more diverse and spontaneous. Therein lies the relevance of these writers and their work in the world today and the reason to study them.

Dystopic Landscapes of Hawai'i

Haunani-Kay Trask, a Hawaiian scholar, activist, and poet, writes poetry that ties Hawai'i's hydropolitics to its disempowered status as a U.S. colony. Her poetry collection, *Light in the Crevice Never Seen,* was published in 1994, almost one hundred years after the U.S. annexation of Hawai'i in 1898: "During the course of little more than a century, the *haole* [foreigner] onslaught had taken from us 95 percent of our Hawaiian people, 99 percent of our lands and waters, and the entirety of our political sovereignty" ("Feminism and Hawaiian Nationalism" 907). Trask's poetry from the first two sections of her collection make visible to her readers the disastrous consequences of such colonization on the environment, especially in the toxic relationship's humans establish with nature through the trope of tourism as development. Her poems focus on how tourists misuse Hawai'i's water resources while trashing its beaches because they think of these as disposable commodities. Trask then ties such activities to the policies of land and coastal development pursued by politicians and capitalist developers from the time of Hawai'i's annexation. She conveys her message by using the Hawaiian kanikau, a type of dirge or chant of lament that evokes memories of death, loss, and grief and that may also evoke the elegy

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within the Anglo-American poetic tradition.[1] It is important to list the common features in her poetry while undertaking a close reading of a few for purposes of unpacking Hawaiian hydropolitics. For instance, in her poetry Trask mixes American English with Hawaiian words and sometimes Hawaiian Creole English. Following the tradition of Hawaiian poetry, Trask interlaces her poems with italicized notes with historical information on specific political and cultural events and figures; these notes contrast visually and auditorily with the un-italicized poetry. Also, specific to the Hawaiian tradition, Trask traces the genealogies of people and places. Her poems are of varying lengths—short and imagistic as well as longer with subsections. The stanzas are composed in free verse, only sometimes regular, and there is no formal rhyme scheme. The sentences are often condensed and staccato, but they can also be long, flowing, and lyrical. The speaker is unnamed and often angry, grief stricken, and sorrowful, in line with the lament or the elegiac tradition. However, the perspective is often in the first person, which helps draw in readers by having them identify with the speaker's perspective.

In "Makua Kane"—a poem written in five sections with four stanzas in each section (barring the fifth which has five stanzas). and with each stanza having dominantly three lines but otherwise two, four, and at times five lines—the speaker in the third section accuses politicians of commercializing the coastline to ostensibly develop Hawai'i; they:

> carve up land:
> shoreline for hotels, valleys
> for houses, underground for bunkers, sewers
> miles of wire. (section III, ll. 10-13, p.5)

The land is metaphorically carved up and consumed just as one does meat. Meat as protein is the cornerstone of a non-vegetarian diet, and is of high value. Similarly, the land continues to yield high market value when its beaches, sandy shoreline, and green valleys are replaced with hotels and housing projects which involve miles of electrical wires and sewers. Military bunkers are strewn all over as reminders of Hawai'i's role as a military outpost for the U.S. during World War II. Further, the inhabitants of these hotels and housing complexes "… throw cans/cigarette butts/plastic" on beaches. (section III, ll. 6-8, p. 5) Their "screeching cars" "startled" the "little doves" darting in and out of "banyan" trees (section III, ll. 1-5, p. 5). These are dystopic images that speak to our senses of sight and sound to convey an impression of congestion, pollution, littering, and waste. This section contrasts with the peaceful, ecologically harmonious activities of the previous section in which we see an average day in the lives of Hawaiians as they dance, fish, tell stories while the sunset cloaks the hill in golden color. The first and fifth sections are tied together in a

[1] Trask's poetry draws upon Anglo-American literary traditions. After all, Hawai'i is a U.S. colony and Anglo-American knowledge dominates the educational system. However, Trask is also informed by a nearly two millennia-old Hawaiian literary tradition that is experientially bound to its specific bioregional landscape. For details on the complex and specialized Hawaiian aesthetic system see Brandy Nālani McDougal 1-47, and ku'ualoha ho'omanawanui 30-52.

prophetic dream of doom; what is revealed "in the stomach of/my sleep" in section I (ll. 3-4, p. 4) becomes "in the tomb/ of sleep" in section V (ll. 7-8, p. 6). In both sections there are references to rituals involving sea salt and taro.

The note attached to the poem explains that these are rituals conducted at the time of death. The reference to the canoe in the fifth section—"taking our canoe to sea" (l. 13, p. 6)—is also explained in the note as portentous of death. Such intimations of mortality have to be taken seriously. Section V offers stark images of an ecological dystopia:

> turtles disappear
> at noon, a parching sun
> scours the land
> [...]
> with the dying
> moon. (ll. 4-6, 14-15, p. 6)

Sea turtles naturally bask on Hawaiian shores everyday as a way of regulating their body temperature, digesting food, resting, and improving their immune systems. Their noontime disappearance is unnatural and symbolic. The sun's heat creates extreme dryness on the land that it scours abrasively, for the rivers and streams have dried up. These are consequences of unsustainable activities of tourists and developers, activities that the speaker fails to prevent as a lawyer and activist in section IV:

> ... I fight
> for the land but
> we feel there is
> no hope. (ll. 8-11, p.5)

The tone is despairing. The note attached to the poem traces Trask's activism to a genealogy of such advocacy covering three generations of her ancestors who "lived in a white world that controlled our Native land" and who were "long-time fighters for our people" (7). The title of the poem itself is a reference to her father who died in 1977. Parents tie children to the land and to a continuity of culture, which is also simultaneously disrupted.

"Waikīkī" continues this theme of water pollution and over consumption by tourists and land developers. The poem is written over twelve stanzas, with seven stanzas of four lines, two stanzas of three lines, and one stanza each of two lines and one line. The short length of each line within each stanza has a staccato effect that provides speed to the movement of images and ideas. The speaker speaks in the impersonal third person providing a bird's eye view of the hydropolitics on the Waikīkī beach. The tone is satirical, sarcastic, and angry as revealed through the deliberate choice of words. The first stanza hits the reader with information on how ocean waters are polluted—by pumping human waste into it:

> all those 5 gallon
> toilets flushing
> away tourist waste
> into our waters. (ll. 1-4, p. 60)

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The overwhelming image is of 5 gallons of water wasted, as conjured by the phrase "5 gallon/ toilets," when this water is bifurcated to service hotels and beach-front properties. Tourism developed in Hawai'i as a consequence of such commercialization, assert scholars like Ohnuma (365-394), Desmond (459-501), Poddar (51-64), and Hogue (144-152) who all share the following observations. That Hawai'i was marketed through the 1900s as quasi-primitive, erotic, utopic, and remote from the workaday world of the U.S. mainland. These images were orientalist projections of early European explorers who described Hawaiians as ideal natives or noble savages representing a pre-industrial, pastoral vision of harmony with nature. That mainland entrepreneurs, whose wealth was built on the toil of urban working classes, could escape the latter's demands by vacationing on Hawaiian beaches. The ostensibly simple, welcoming natives and unspoiled terrain offered to restore tourists with its balm of pleasures while maintaining the latter's 'civilized distance' from Hawaiian culture. However, Trask's poem offers graphic images of how these policies have transformed beaches like those in Waikīkī. It is now "home/of the ali'i [chief]/ sewer center/ of Hawai'i" (ll. 5-8, p. 60).

The contrast is stark, even shocking. The poem provides a list of such images that sustain this shock value throughout the poem. Stanzas three and four assert that the "8 billion dollar/beach" (ll. 9-10, p.60) at Waikīkī is actually a "secret/ rendezvous for/ pimps" (ll. 10-12, p. 60), "Hong Kong hoodlums/Japanese capitalists/*haole* punkers" (ll. 13-15, p. 60). Stanzas five and six expose how the condo units built on these beaches are vortices for

> disease
> drug traffic
> child porn
>
> AIDS herpes
> old fashioned
> syphilis
> gangland murder. (ll. 19-23, p. 60)

These, Trask satirically asserts in stanzas seven to eleven, are the "gifts of industrial/ culture for" (ll. 24-25, p. 60) Hawaiians who are condescendingly perceived, by *haole* mainstream Americans, as a "primitive/ island people" (ll. 25-26, p. 60) with an inferior culture: their system of taro cultivation does not develop them economically; their political system of chieftains does not equip them with a sense of a larger world; their religious system with lowly gods is inferior to Christianity; and they are savages with sex lives who lack discipline and upliftment. The transformation of Waikīkī as per the *haole* narrative is then justified as a testament to the superiority of Western culture. The spaces placed deliberately between words in these stanzas force readers to reconsider this narrative. Trask ends the poem with the line "the onslaught of barbarians" (l. 41, p. 61). But who is barbaric here? Trask indicts American culture by revealing the imperialistic politics underlying its popular narrative on Hawai'i that drives the business of tourism and in turn impacts its hydropolitics.

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In the "Chant of Lamentation" taro terraces, now derelict, become a metaphor for Hawai'i's colonized condition. Taro is significant within the Hawaiian creation story; it grew out of the burial of a stillborn child by the sky father and earth mother. Historically, water from streams and rivers was used by Hawaiians to irrigate terraces for taro cultivation. However scholars point out, since the 1800s with the advent of U.S. entrepreneurs, water resources were bifurcated from taro cultivation to a flourishing plantation culture.[2] Extensive canal and tunnel systems were built to redirect water from mountain valleys to inland sugar and pineapple plantations:[3] "Hawai'i's favorable climate and year-round growing season were perfect for cane; all the sugar barons needed was water to irrigate their fields" (Sproat 141). In many cases, entire streams were diverted, disconnecting ocean fish and shrimp species from their river nurseries. By the twentieth century, these streams were often polluted or running dry (Sproat 143). Water for multipurpose use by indigenous communities was less available and ground water supplies feeding nearshore marine ecosystems declined in both quantity and quality (Sproat 145). Such hydropolitics has been connected by scholars like Wilson and Soja to Hawai'i's location in the Pacific Ocean that served late-nineteenth-century U.S. expansionist policies requiring raw materials and consumer markets overseas. Wilson outlines the ways in which Hawaii served as an important location in the Pacific for the U.S. (521-524). Its ports allowed for an abundant flow of migrant labor from Asia and global trade in commodities. It connected shipping routes between the East and West Coasts. It served as a military outpost enabling the U.S. to dominate the American Pacific. Soja describes this time as disruptive (190), with uneven distributions of power, wealth, and resources across regions, when transnational capital started dominating local cultures; in the process Hawai'i became a periphery serving U.S. interests. These changes started its ongoing commercialization. The "Chant of Lamentation" addresses this current state of Hawai'i through an elegiac lament in free verse where the regularity of the stanzaic structure is broken several times through the poem; such breakage forces the reader to pay attention to the lines without taking their meaning for granted. There are two alternating sets of stanzas that act as parallel refrains: one set (containing six stanzas of mostly four and some three lines) starts with the phrase "I lament" while the other set (containing five stanzas of mostly three and some four lines) starts with the interrogative pronoun "who" but is followed by action verbs such as "comes," "journeys," "chants," "tells," and "parts." The set of stanzas, marked by the phrase "I lament," is filled with vivid imagery of a landscape that has turned against itself. The sky is "wounded," "unnourished," and "desolate" (ll. 8-9, p. 23). It falls drunk over "the iron sea" (ll. 10-11, p. 23). The past is "black and naked" with "a million ghosts laid

[2] For details about the history of sugar plantations in Hawai'i, see Dorrance and Morgan, *Sugar Islands*. For details on Hawaiian land dispossession, see Kame'eleihiwa, *Native Land and Foreign Desires*. See the Blount Report of 1893 for an analysis of the overthrow of Hawaiian sovereignty.

[3] Sproat traces this history in connection to a legal petition in 2004 won by Hawaiian activist groups forcing the Hawaii Water Commission to restore water rights to indigenous communities by restoring continuous water flow to four streams bifurcated 150 years earlier.

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out across the ocean floor" (ll. 15-17, p. 23). The streams are "blood-filled," (l. 33, p. 24) the graves are scattered far, the earth is "stained and dying" (ll. 23-24, p. 23).

Trask uses metaphors and personification to make her point. For instance, the landscape is personified to represent the living entity that it is and that reacts to the impact of commercialized human activities. These reactions are in sync with the unnamed speaker's overwhelming sense of horror and grief at the condition of Hawai'i. This strategy is not only a part of the Hawaiian poetic tradition but also resonates with the Anglo American tradition of the pathetic fallacy in which the grief-stricken, unnamed speaker projects these emotions onto the landscape, which shares in and amplifies them and so the entire ecological system participates in mourning this death of biodiversity:

> I lament the abandoned
> terraces, their shattered
> waters, silent ear
> of stone and blight. (ll. 1-4, p. 23)

These are sharp, catastrophic images. Traditional livelihoods are blighted by shattered streams that no longer irrigate now abandoned taro farms. These taro terraces are personified with ears that hear only silence for what remains is a stony landscape where nothing grows. In accordance with traditional Hawaiian poetry, Trask attaches a note to the poem. The note comments upon the second set of five stanzas, starting with the interrogative "who," that also acts as a refrain. The first stanza within this set queries whether someone comes trailing after the winds that sweep through the now empty taro fields. The second stanza queries whether someone chants with the hollowed-out gourd that accompanies Hawaiian song and dance rituals. The third stanza asks if anyone journeys through the time of tradition, of the ancient chants. The implicit answer to these queries is negative for Hawaiian culture is being assaulted by American culture. The fourth stanza is a reference to the creation chant, the Kumulipo, in which life is born through a fusion of the human and divine. The implication is that now there is not much scope for such creativity. The fifth stanza is a lament for her ancestors whose bones are disinterred by land developers and archaeologists "to clear areas for hotels" (25). It is also a lament for the land which is "scarred by American greed" (25). She refers to Hawaiian genealogy, childless, emptied of its bloodline—"the flowers,/ a'ole pua" (ll. 21-22, p.23). This is potentially the condition of Hawaiian communities and other life forms within such an ecosystem.

Using the Hawaiian genre of the kanikau, that shares similarities with the genre of the Anglo-American genre of the elegy or the dirge, these poems from the first two sections of Trask's poetry collection combine multiple histories: Hawai'i's pre-colonial past, colonization by the U.S., the disempowerment of Hawaiian communities, and the misuse and abuse of the environment. The story of water and its politics is interwoven with these other stories and depicts the "mo'olelo" (a multi-layered term simultaneously meaning a story, history, literature, or any kind of narrative) of Hawai'i. In containing such themes, Trask's poetry displays the "hulihia"

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(rebellious) spirit, much like a volcanic eruption associated with the goddess Pele. Readers confront a frontier in the sense of a boundary or a limit reached within the environment when its resources are crassly commercialized and the ecological balance is disturbed. In telling this story, Trask is recording and preserving a living history as well as displaying a "kuleana" consciousness, which is an activist consciousness of the need to continue the fight for and revitalize Hawaiian culture, nation, and identity.[4]

Dystopic Landscapes of India

This section, in keeping with the previous section, analyzes the hydropolitics of Athipatti, a fictitious village in Komal Swaminathan's Tamil play—*Thaneer! Thaneer!* (or, *Water! Water!*) — to highlight the inequities of internal colonization in India. In so doing, like Trask, Swaminathan combines his creativity with advocacy: as playwright, filmmaker, and activist. *Thaneer! Thaneer!* was originally published in 1979 but later translated into English and other Indian languages. It was staged across the country through the decade of the 1980s and 1990s. The play is set in the context of the late 1970s and opens with Vellaisamy, a fugitive, arriving at Athipatti hungry and thirsty. He learns of their chronic water scarcity and offers initially to fetch water in a bullock cart from the nearest spring but later attempts to build a dam. His efforts are derailed by the government engineer and local politician. Eventually he dies of thirst in the forest on the run. Writing and publishing from the 1960s, Swaminathan combines biting social commentary with an absurdist laughter that can be attributed to multiple theater traditions. His use of absurdism may be linked with the theater-of-the-absurd,[5] a mid-twentieth-century tradition which presents humans trapped in a world where actions are senseless, the cause-and-effect relationships between incidents are eliminated, language ceases to communicate, characters are archetypes, places are nonspecific, and the world is incomprehensible. Swaminathan's play presents such a world when it contemplates the absurdity of the postcolonial State. His use of absurdist laughter creates moments of self-reflexivity and awareness amidst the audience—effects that can be linked to other mid-twentieth century theater traditions. For instance, Bertolt Brecht's epic theater[6] alienates audiences by making them conscious of the theatricality of the performance through use of a bare stage, exposed lighting and scenic equipment, and short scenes. Swaminathan uses similar staging techniques. In addition, Tamil theater is influenced by Dravidian lower-caste politics which insisted that stage characters represent

[4] Trask is in sync with a number of Pacific Islander scholars like Linda Tuhiwai Smith (*Decolonizing Methodologies*), Daniel Heath Justice (*Why Indigenous Literatures Matter),* Robert Warrior (*American Indian Literary Nationalism),* and ku'ualoha ho'omanawanui (*Voices of Fire* xxix-xxx), who insist that indigenous storytelling must combat poisonous colonial stereotypes and craft an indigenous Hawaiian literary nationalism that links the people, the land, and the cosmos together in a dynamic system of relationships.

[5] For more details on absurd theater, see Esslin, *The Theater of the Absurd.*

[6] For more details on epic theater, see Brecht, *Brecht on Theater*.

ordinary people, that dialogues be de-Sanskritized, that the dominant themes concern self-respect for lower castes.[7] We certainly see these characteristics in *Thaneer! Thaneer!.* Swaminathan was also influenced by left-centric, socially-realistic, experimental modern Indian theater.[8] Notably, the IPTA (Indian Political Theatre Association), Vijay Tendulkar's plays of the 1960s and 1970s, and Badal Sircar's idea of a Third Theater [9] focused on the struggles of the rural and urban working classes and used theater as a tool for social change by attacking the status quo. Their vision also provided the groundwork for Swaminathan's play. For purposes of the larger argument on hydropolitics, colonization, and frontiers, this section will closely read three instances of dialogic exchanges in the play which combine absurdist laughter with social realism to expose the systemic failures of the state and its consequent water crises.

The first instance of absurdism mixed with social realism occurs in Act 1, between scenes 1-4. These scenes, which are short and enable the plot to move quickly, create a detailed context for the play through the villagers' ironic comments in their interaction with Vellaisamy, the outsider who visits their village. In fact, the dialog evolves with villagers responding to Vellaisamy's questions and assertions with answers and counter assertions. This back and forth sets the tone for what is to unravel. Speedily, readers get a sense, enabled by the villagers' grim, socially realistic descriptions, of a setting which has been water-deprived for five years:

> Vellaisamy: What are you saying? Is there no water in the village?
> Adaikappan: We've been suffering for five years without any water. Once upon a time we too were farmers. But in the last five years there's been no rain and the land has turned into a desert. (5)

In the ensuing conversation between Vellaisamy and other villagers, the readers learn many facts about the village. The fields lie fallow and parched. The wells have run dry. Villagers have to walk fourteen miles daily on a round trip to fetch water from the nearest spring. Life has become unsustainable, fueling migrations to cities; many work for daily wages as porters in markets nearby because farming is impossible, while others have sold their cattle and agricultural implements. The only well with water reserves is polluted with fluoride and poisons those who drink from it. This well, used by lower caste communities, is the first to be polluted and so their inferior status exacerbates their water crisis. This is the first indication that caste politics creates unequal privileges in the play.

[7] Of relevance to the play is the Dravida or Self Respect movement, which attacked caste hierarchies. Founded in 1921, it influenced the formation of political parties, such as Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) in 1944 and All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) in 1972, in Tamil Nadu. The play espousing the underdog was well received precisely because of the consciousness-raising activities of the Dravida movement.

[8] For political theater in India, see Nandi Bhatia, *Acts of Authority/Acts of Resistance*; for social realism, see David Forrest, *Social Realism*.

[9] Third theater focused performance on the actor's body; sets, lights, costumes and background music were minimal; ticket prices were low or free. The purpose was to engage audiences about their responsibilities and rights as citizens. Thus, the play could be performed in any space. For information on the Third Theater, see Kundu, *So Near, Yet So Far*.

Within such a context, when Vellaisamy starts hiccupping and gasping for water in scene 2, no one is prepared to give him any until Sevanthy, the only female character in the play, gives him some water from her pot. The probability that he might have choked to death is very real. However, the villagers berate him for his carelessness in almost dying on their premises.

> Vellaisamy: I don't understand. Take pity on me—some water, please.
> Adaikappan: You scoundrel! You come here, eat and start this bloody hiccupping … Now you'll hiccup and hiccup and die of your hiccupping! (4)

When Vellaisamy asks for compassion, Kovalu, another villager, reminds him: "You question our compassion! Yet the millions who live outside this village have no compassion for us" (4). Living in extreme deprivation makes people inhumane where having water—a very basic need—is more precious than possessing gold:

> Vellaisamy: Is washing your face a luxury?
> Adaikappan: Yes. In this village, bathing or washing your face is a luxury. (14)

These exchanges bring home the point that not only has the state failed to provide the infrastructure where water can be brought to meet basic needs, but it also refuses to accept its responsibility in creating feasible conditions for life in remote areas. The conditions in which these villagers live are horrifying and thus absurd. When the villagers present their needs in a memorandum to the minister, they face crippling red tape and nothing happens. No newspaper reports on their plight because their needs are not deemed newsworthy by news editors next to celebrity culture: "Actress Sukanya wears only red saris when she goes out on shooting on Fridays" (6). This is the society of the spectacle when the reading and viewing public live vicariously through images of lifestyles far beyond their reach.[10] Such image consumption when juxtaposed with the spectacularly grim images of a water-starved village forces the audience to confront the differential access citizens have to natural resources based on their caste, class, and location.

The second instance of absurdity mixed with social realism is revealed, in scenes 10 and 14, through darkly comic dialogues between Naicker, the politician, and his Athipatti electorate regarding elections. In scene 10, readers are introduced to Velusamy Naicker, "one of the most powerful men in this region" who has "in his pocket" the local collector, MLA, and ministers (27). Velusamy Naicker comes to Athipatti to ask all members of the Naicker caste to vote for a fellow member of their caste—Sithaiyya Naicker—who is the electoral candidate of the region and owner of a matchbox factory. If elected, Velusamy expects that Sithaiyya Naicker will distribute government jobs and land among other Naickers. However, there are class divisions within caste groups. Adaikappan reminds Velusamy "All that's for the rich Naicker. Not for Naickers like us who work ourselves to death for a pittance" (29). He further accuses Velusamy of bringing caste differences into a village where different castes

[10] In *The Society of the Spectacle* (pub. 1967) Guy Debord reveals how in modern society social life between humans and their environment is replaced with its representation in media images. So instead of living their own lives, humans are obsessed with a passive identification with the spectacle that they consume.

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co-exist in peace. Kovalu, another villager, accuses Velusamy of false promises before every election: "What did you do to bring water to this village? During every election, they say 'Just let the elections be over, and water will pour into this village like a waterfall in the hills.' The only thing pouring in this village are our tears" (29). The image of the waterfall is one of natural abundance, which contrasts with an abundance of tears signifying deprivation and sorrow. So, these exchanges set the stage for a manipulative, self-serving, casteist politics that benefit members of the upper class, a politics incapable of representing the interests of other classes. Velusamy Naicker is tone deaf in his responses to these questions: "That's why we've put together the Sixth Five Year Plan" (30) […] "The current plan has a budget of 90 thousand crores" (31). Naicker is referring to the system of planned economic development over 5-years adopted since independence by the Indian government. However, the common grievance with such a system of planning is that it has failed more than it has succeeded; the state has done little to alleviate poverty or guarantee the fundamental rights of vulnerable citizens.

> Adaikappan: Listen to you! You're talking of 90 thousand crores to people who haven't seen a ten-rupee note […] you use all the money to improve the lives of people living in places like Bombay, Madras and Delhi. What's going to change in this remote village? (31)

Indeed, for those who live a hand-to-mouth existence with little cash flow, what is the buying power of large sums of money? How should Athipatti dwellers demand accountability of local government officials for implementation of government schemes? After all, in the context of prolonged deprivation, five-year plans with welfare schemes do not make sense. Velusamy Naicker represents the interests of city dwellers who are recipients of most of the funds set aside for development. He cannot really see his electorate as equal to himself nor is he sensitized to their needs. In scene 14, he gets angry when his candidate loses the elections and his henchmen beat up Vellaisamy and destroy his water-carrying cart and ox. His anger exposes his indifference to the plight of the people who constitute his vote bank, "What does not having water have to do with voting? Who told them to remain in that wasteland, outcasts that they are! Why don't they go to Madurai or Madras and beg in the streets?" (37-38). Madras (now Chennai) and Madurai are cities where displaced villagers do indeed often end up begging on the streets, destitute and starving. Naicker is unwilling to connect the villagers' survival to their access to natural resources like water, to infrastructural support from the government, and to his failure to support and sponsor responsible politicians. His outburst is absurd and is darkly humorous because it exposes how the villagers' lives are rendered abject and meaningless to the postcolonial state when these systems of support are fragmented by casteism, and exploitation.[11]

[11] In a growing body of scholarship centered on social marginalization, the concept of precarity names extreme conditions in life when the act of living itself is precarious. For instance, Judith Butler asserts that precarity points to "the politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from

The third instance of absurdity occurs in scene 27, when the state intervenes to disrupt Athipatti dwellers' efforts to build a micro dam that will supply water to their village. This intervention is especially significant against a context of pro-urban biases in developmental projects that ignore villages like Athipatti. Throughout the play, readers see Vellaisamy as a fugitive and a bond slave who finds shelter in Athipatti and who offers micro-level solutions to their water crises. He raises money to invest in a bullock cart to transport water from the river. He convinces villagers to join him in digging a canal that will connect their village to the river: "Man has leveled mountains. He has cleared forests and made the land cultivable. With his two hands he has wrestled with nature and turned it into his convenience" (10). As a discourse, this appears to belong to the post-independence official narratives of nation-building through the taming of nature. However, Vellaisamy is not arguing for big dams. Nor do government officials sympathize with his vision. In fact, the civil engineer destroys the canal because the villagers have not acquired a license for it:

> Engineer: I am a PWD engineer. I've come to throw all of you in jail.
> Vaithilingam: To throw us in jail? Why would you want to do that?
> Engineer: Whose permission did you take before digging the canal?
> Vaithilingam: Do we need to ask someone? This land belongs to the public.
> Engineer : You did say it belongs to the public, didn't you? Now, is that land your ancestral property? That is government land.
> Adaikappan: We don't have a government here. We are the government.
> Engineer: You are the government?! Look at your arrogance! It was wrong of you to cut a canal on government land without government permission. It was wrong of you to dig up the hill without government permission. All of this is illegal.
> Vaithilingam: Yes, it is a crime. When a canal is needed we are supposed to tell the government. They are supposed to call for a tender. The contractor gobbles up half the money. You engineers, clerks, and revenue inspectors each gobble up a little. With taxpayers' money, you buy gold necklaces for your wives. Of course it's illegal for us to dig a canal, leaving you with no opportunities for all this. (61)

His exchange with the villagers is not only satirical but also absurd. The canal is built on land not owned privately and so historically it is the commons and belongs to all people and anyone can claim access to it. However, the government as the representative of the state claims ownership of all property not privately owned and thereby eliminates the rights of villagers to it. In demanding that villagers request permission to use the commons for their self-help schemes, it acts like a landlord and treats villagers like tenants who can be evicted because of defaulted rents. Such a demand is absurd because the government is absent when people are water deprived and starving. Its tangled bureaucracy is mixed with red tape, corruption, favoritism, and underhand deals where public funds are siphoned out for private consumption. It is thus unable to gauge or respond to people's needs. It will rather destroy self-help efforts of the people using legal loopholes than laud and strengthen such initiatives at nation-building. The petty, thoughtless nature of these actions point to a failing

failing social and economic networks [...] becoming differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death" (*Frames of War* 25).

system which is certainly not pro-people. In fact, in 1996, journalist P. Sainath published *Everybody Loves a Good Drought*, a reputable collection of stories of micro struggles over water resources in rural India based upon his research (from a *Times of India* fellowship) between 1993 and 1995. He details the effects of the government's development policies: destruction of traditional irrigation systems, deforestation, villagers' loss of control over common water resources, private contractors' misuse of drought-relief funds, and contradictory conditions within districts of abundant rainfall and acute drought. He concludes that drought relief is rural India's biggest growth industry where the poor are never consulted and conflicts arising from man-made drought have increased. Sainath's book was a seminal publication on the hydropolitics of rural India. The conditions he describes in the villages he visits in the 1990s are very similar to Swaminathan's late 1970s fictional Athipatti.

The play, in one act with 29 scenes, generates a deconstructive laughter that exposes the absurdity of failed systems. Absurdism, or a philosophy of life as absurd, influenced many genres of literature. The play critiques the absurd top-down practices of the postcolonial State that occlude participation of those who are most affected by these. Critics of the postcolonial State often accuse its ruling elite of exploiting the underclass in the same manner as did the foreign colonizers after the transfer of power with independence. These are conditions of internal colonialism, a phenomenon leading to complex, structural inter-regional inequalities that have persisted through the 1980s and 1990s.[12] These conditions of internal colonization serve as the backdrop to the unevenly developed landscapes of the play where pockets of abundance (usually urban) are surrounded by vast areas of scarcity (usually rural).[13] Using the language of theater as a tool, *Water! Water!* exposes the failure of the postcolonial State by presenting landscapes of extreme man-made water scarcity. It reveals the differential access to natural resources that citizens have based upon their caste, class, gender, and locational affiliations. This hydropolitics mirrors a frontier reached in the world today with the threat of water scarcity and climate change.

The Environmental Crises, Frontiers, and Writing as Activism

This paper juxtaposes Trask's poetry with Swaminathan's play to draw attention to capitalism's repeated ability to create similar dystopian landscapes in

[12] For further explication on the concept of internal colonialism, see Fanon's chapter "The Trials and Tribulations of National Consciousness," *The Wretched of the Earth* (97-144).

[13] Scholars trace such landscapes of uneven development to lopsided colonial policies favoring the landed elite, many of whom retained their privileges post-independence. Consequently, land redistribution reforms were inconsistent. Attempts to provide universal education, healthcare, and employment were ineffective. Heavy industrialization trumped agriculture. The green revolution was partially impactful. The bureaucracy was corrupt. Certainly, Swaminathan evokes these debates while portraying the hydropolitics of Athipatti. For details, see Chakravarty, *Development Planning* and Kohli, *State-Directed Development.*

disparate parts of the world. Both texts provide images of places of plenitude and scarcity that are unevenly developed, illustrating the complex ebb and flow of capital between varied landscapes. Therefore, U.S. businesses control all resources in Hawai'i, disinvest in Hawaiian communities, and invest in the mainland. In India, resources are siphoned to cities like Chennai or Madurai while villages like Athipatti become unsustainable. Hawaiian and Indian activists attribute this to the imperialistic process of capital accumulation, which creates resource-rich centers with poverty-stricken peripheries. Both texts show certain aspects of capitalism. First, resources are unequally divided between classes, castes, races, and genders within such centers and peripheries. Second, fundamental to creating profit is the devaluation of the labor of the marginalized and dispossessed. Third, nature becomes a commodity when natural resources are placed on the market: as the landscape of a holiday resort; as seawater polluted by resort toilets; or as a water-scarce, drought-ridden village. Fourth, these landscapes are environmentally degraded as products of violent histories of internal/external colonization. Fifth, each space is physically produced because of specific histories associated with the nation-building activities of late-nineteenth/early-twentieth century U.S. and mid-to-late twentieth-century India. Sixth, these nations are part of a capitalist, globalized system and function as its agents, after all the State controls the physical terrain upon which capital operates. Finally, the State legitimizes exploitation and appropriation in the name of nation-building, modernization, and development. It is possible to conclude that these past two centuries have ushered in the age of capital, which is characterized by human-centric thought, scientific discoveries, technological innovation, industrialism, global conquest, commoditization of nature, economic growth, and consumerism. In such an age, human actions have the same impact on the planet as geological forces. In other words, we have reached a frontier in our understanding of how we should live on this planet and of how we should relate to both humans and nonhumans.

This article turns to debates among environmental activists and scholars who attempt to address some of these concerns by examining the interrelations between the local and the global on the one hand, and the local and the bioregional on the other. Some critics note that the global ecological crises have problematized the concept of place (Heise 253; Buell 59-60). Others note that a localized sense of place is incomplete unless augmented by a sense of its integration into the wider global network of cultures and economies; likewise, the idea of the global becomes oppressive and homogenizing unless linked to local cultures (DeLoughrey and Handley 25, 27; Diaz and Kauanui 318-321). Further, Spivak introduces the concept of planetarity to describe how all local cultures exist in alterity with each other, without hierarchy and without any normative center, and that this concept of planetarity replaces the idea of the global (338-339). Ethically responsible relationships are only possible within such a conceptual framework. Some others put forward the idea of bioregionalism, which is a body of thought connecting human cultures in a socially just, sustainable manner to those region-scale ecosystems in which they are embedded (El Dessouky 256-257; Barnhill 212-213; Lynch, Glotfelty,

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and Armbuster 9-11). Unlike other political movements, bioregionalism accords the non-human a decisive place in conceptions of human polity. In all of these debates scholars emphasize the need for ethical activism.

Can playwrights or poets act ethically by raising awareness of this ecological crisis amongst their readers? Scholars such as Dobrin and Weiser, Nixon, and Schneiderman believe that writers can be activists. After all, assert Dobrin and Weiser (576), writers, as members of discourse communities, operate as fundamental units within these systems. They are not only forged by these systemic ideologies, but can also potentially alter them. Yes, indeed writers may be activists, reiterates Rob Nixon (14-37), but it is not easy for them to represent ecological challenges. After all, climate change, he explains, is oblique and slow-acting over centuries, posing formidable imaginative difficulties for writers and activists alike in an age of the instant and spectacular. Nixon elaborates that environmental storytellers must overcome such obstacles by creatively drawing public attention to catastrophic acts that are low in instant spectacle but high in long-term effects. Jill Schneiderman (83-97) offers a creative example of such activism by combining Buddhist thought with geological expertise and insights. Armed with the knowledge of the Noble Eightfold Path, geoscientists can offer scientific knowledge that will render visible global environmental degradation over time; armed with such geological insights, Buddhist practitioners can provide examples of ethical conduct, compassion, and wisdom in action and thought that will counter the slow violence of climate change. Drawing upon these debates, this article presents Trask and Swaminathan as writers who actively engage their environments by adopting creative measures to draw their audiences' attention to the imperialistic hydropolitics at work in Hawai'i and the South Indian village of Athipatti—a hydropolitics that exacerbates the slow violence of climate change.

Trask adopts several creative measures by which she fixes her readers' attention to the complexity of her subject matter. The third and final section of her poetry volume—"Light in the Crevice Never Seen"—Trask presents sharp images of a luminous natural landscape evoking beauty and pleasure while powerfully triggering historical connections in her Hawaiian readers. She also invites her non-Hawaiian readers to perceive this landscape through the five senses. This is a landscape awash with color. The moonlight glitters over the water turning it "gold on black" ("Moon Over Manana" l. 2, p. 71). However, this beauty is not merely visual but an olfactory, tactile as well as an auditory experience. The fog through Hina's estuary is "moist, reedy" and the *hunehune* [delicate, misty] winds are "shade cool" ("To Write by Moonlight" ll. 7, 10, p. 89). The "freshest seas" "sting" ("Open Your Weariness" ll. 8-9, p. 92). The shadows exude a musky "hot perfume," "tight-winged" birds cry out, their cries are akin to the feel of "flickering tongues" on "damplit skin" and "the seep/of summer thirst" ("Where the Fern Clings" ll. 5-6, 8-13, p. 93). The carnality and fertility of the sea is underscored by "the water/milky sperm dissolving/in spurts/of gelatine" ("So Tight is My Love" ll. 10-13, p. 76) with "the sexual/squid squirting his ink// to the stars" ("So Tight is My Love" ll. 20-22, p.76). The association

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with sperm and amniotic fluid suggests a hydrological cycle that is fertile, life-enhancing, and creative. Is this place and vision worth fighting for? Yes it is, Trask opines. In "Writing in Captivity," she declares that resistance to and freedom from North American white settler colonial control of Hawai'i entails: "[…] a celebration of […] the lavish beauty of our delicate islands […] and, of course, the mana (spiritual power) that is generated by human beings in love with, and dependent on, the natural world" (19). Trask's critique is bioregional in that her poetry holistically integrates humans with all life in the bioregional Pacific world of Hawai'i; it provides a deep-rooted sense of place, reclaims cultural stewardship, and puts indigenous discourse at the center. She embraces the past of Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander cultures, for these histories contain the seeds of their future ("Feminism and Indigenous Hawaiian Nationalism" 913). In all of these practices, Trask can be aligned with other Pacific Islander writers who also contextualize Hawai'i in the midst of a larger Pacific World or Oceania, in which each island retains its own cultural specificity amidst a larger overlapping culture (Diaz and Kaunui 318-321).

Similar to Trask's poetry, Swaminathan's play also attracts his readers' attention by creating alternate possibilities despite its tragic ending. The central character, Vellaisamy, is born into slavery because his father and grandfather, poor farmers, had mortgaged their land and labor for high interest loans from the rich, local landlord. In return, they became bonded laborers working through their lifetimes to pay off the interest.[14] What are his options within such a script? Not a lot, obviously. However, there is much in the play outside the typical script of postcolonial underdevelopment. Vellaisamy is educated with a little of the precious resources of his father, an unusual situation in the case of bonded laborers. In a society where bonded laborers lack agency, Vellaisamy does not wait for someone to empower him. He uses his education to successfully create his own water business. He negotiates a safe harbor in the village in return for his services as a water gatherer. He is so successful that his efforts get publicized beyond the village. Vellaisamy becomes an unlikely role model for all villagers in teaching them to become creative, self-reliant, and entrepreneurial: "There's nothing that human beings cannot achieve" (scene 3, p. 10). The villagers do get water for their basic needs. In return, the villagers overcome caste and class barriers to protect him from the brutality of the police and of the government. The result is an unprecedented change in people's circumstances. The play won accolades when screened as a film at the Kolkata International Film Festival in 1982. Shankar, the translator, notes in his introduction that after viewing the film, residents of Dhideernagar, Pondicherry, collected a rupee from each of the 500 households in the area to lay a pipeline of their own connecting to the main water

[14] Bonded labor was historically associated with rural economies where peasants from economically disadvantaged communities were bound to work for the landlords. Although the system of debt bondage can be traced back to ancient India, it was exacerbated under colonial rule. Additionally, the social inequalities perpetuated by the Indian caste system in contemporary India ensures that this practice persists despite efforts to enforce labor laws by activists, NGOs and government offices.

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supply, while in Bangalore, slum dwellers started agitating for water (xix). Swaminathan's work cannot be described as bioregional. His play does not discuss humans' relationships with the nonhuman world. By default, the absence of biodiversity is implicated in the absence of greenery. This is a dystopian world without water, the product of the ongoing colonizing practices of the nation-state. However, any discussion of the nation illuminates its relationship to the global circuits of capital, and so the links between the local, national, and global spheres are also illuminated.

Climate change is an ongoing process through these past two hundred years of industrialization. By the twenty-first century, it has changed and continues to change the habitat of all species, and so has caused all species to reach a frontier. For humans, this is a frontier where they confront unknown/unimaginable changes in their living conditions on this planet. They have to rethink their relationships with other species and with the ecosystem. That implies a rethinking of their economic systems of production and resource extraction, political ideologies ratifying the accompanying relationships of exploitation, and customs that are born and normalized out of these relationships. For writers, the responsibility is to find appropriate language that can force their readers to confront and rethink such relationships. Trask and Swaminathan function as activists. Trask uses the genre of the chant of lament with its elegiac overtones and Swaminathan uses the genre of socially realistic and absurd theater to educate their readers about the links between a colonial/neocolonial nation-state, corporate globalization, loss of biodiversity, the pollution of water resources, and the assault on indigenous cultures and their resources. Such rethinking may help readers to act responsibly by protesting policies promoting ecological despoliation and social injustice.

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Metamorphosis Towards Human-Vegetal Hybrids, From Utopia to Dystopia and Back: A Mirrored Reading of Franci Conforti's *Carnivori* and Clelia Farris's *I vegumani*

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Abstract

This article proposes a compared reading of two contemporary Italian novels: *Carnivori*, by Franci Conforti, and *I vegumani*, by Clelia Farris. Both stories revolve around the common premise of hybridizing humans with plants, aiming to address contemporary urgencies such as climate change and food security. Despite significant common points, the two novels diverge in their narrative trajectories: the former starts from a partially utopian situation and ends on a dystopian and even apocalyptic note, whereas the latter follows an exactly opposite path. This article explores the factors that may explain this difference, including the science fiction subgenres the novels are related to, the relevance of plants in the stories, and the ways hybridization is represented (as a loss of humanity and involution towards monstrosity versus as a vital enrichment of the characters' identities and way of life). As I will argue, the different approaches of the two authors may be traced back to the opposite ideological stances they take regarding a traditional, humanist view of human identity: adhering to it (*Carnivori*) or overcoming it in favour of a post-anthropocentric perspective (*I vegumani*).

Keywords: Climate fiction, dystopia/utopia, hybridization, Italian literature, plants.

Resumen

Este artículo propone una lectura comparada de dos novelas italianas contemporáneas: *Carnivori*, de Franci Conforti, e *I vegumani*, de Clelia Farris. Ambas historias giran en torno a la premisa común de un plan para hibridar a los seres humanos con plantas, con el fin de afrontar urgencias contemporáneas como el cambio climático y la seguridad alimentaria. A pesar de presentar puntos de contacto significativos, las dos novelas divergen en sus trayectorias narrativas: la primera parte de una situación parcialmente utópica y culmina en una nota distópica e incluso apocalíptica, mientras que la segunda sigue un camino exactamente opuesto. Este artículo explora los factores que pueden explicar esta diferencia, incluyendo los subgéneros de ciencia ficción con los que las novelas se relacionan, la relevancia de las plantas en las tramas, y las formas en que se representa la hibridación (ya sea como una pérdida de humanidad y una involución hacia la monstruosidad, o bien como un enriquecimiento vital de la identidad y el modo de vida de los personajes). En última instancia, sostengo que los distintos enfoques de los dos autores pueden remontarse a las posturas ideológicas opuestas que adoptan respecto a una visión tradicional y humanista de la identidad humana: su adhesión (*Carnivori*) o su superación en favor de una perspectiva postantropocéntrica (*I vegumani*).

Palabras clave: Ficción climática, distopía/utopía, hibridación, literatura italiana, plantas.

Contemporary dystopian climate fiction works frequently revolve around the idea of a world devastated by endless drought (Arpaia, Conti, Pincio, Zanotti). Few works, however, try to imagine an alternative future, in which the sun's light and warmth may become increasingly vital sources of energy, if not the exclusive sources of food, for humanity. This paper aims to explore, through a comparative reading, two Italian novels that take this unusual approach: *Carnivori* by Franci Conforti (2017), and *I vegumani* by Clelia Farris (2022). Both works engage with the notion of scientific manipulations that transform human beings into hybrid creatures, able to derive new benefits from the sun, either by feeding on its rays or "simply" receiving vital energy from them.

In *Carnivori*, set in the late twenty-second century, the planet initially appears stable thanks to a synthetic superfood called "mulk," that has replaced every natural source of food and thus eradicated famine. Beneath this apparent balance, however, a secret faction of "ethical" scientists plans to release lab-created spores designed to transform humans into "sunmen" who survive on sunlight alone but gradually lose reason, social bonds, and even life itself—forcing the last survivors to consider exile on another planet.

I vegumani is set on a drought-stricken island where the local cooperative community faces the prospect of mass migration to the "North." When a locally produced sun lotion unexpectedly turns its users into human-plant hybrids resilient to heat and scarcity, the transformation offers a path to staying and thriving.

Despite sharing a premise of human-vegetal hybridization aimed to address an ecological crisis, the novels follow opposite narrative trajectories: *Carnivori* moves from a fragile utopia to apocalypse, whereas *I vegumani* charts a shift from dystopian hardship to a renewed harmony. Thus, this paper aims to analyse both the similarities and the divergences between the two novels, suggesting possible explanations for the variations in their treatment of shared themes. The analysis is grounded in the hypothesis that these differences may stem from distinct narrative intentions, divergent science fiction subgenres, and differing ideological premises. Ultimately, I will show that the same motif can serve very different purposes: in *I vegumani*, it opens the way to a post-anthropocentric reflection on human identity and evolution, as deeply connected to nonhuman others; in *Carnivori*, on the contrary, it reinforces a traditional humanist perspective, where transformation and otherness are seen as threats to human identity.

Issues of Plot and Genre: Common Motifs, Divergent Trajectories

This section aims to outline some structural and thematic characteristics of the novels under analysis, offering the reader elements that will facilitate engagement with the more conceptual developments in the subsequent sections.

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Plots, Conflicts, and Protagonists

The two novels' main characters share some striking similarities, being both women characterized by an advanced scientific knowledge and a profound love for the natural world. *Carnivori*'s protagonist, named John Smith, is American. *I vegumani*'s main character, on the other hand, calls herself Gazania, after the name of a plant, and has a strong attachment to the unidentified island (probably Sardinia) where she has spent her whole life. The reader is never provided with any precise geographical coordinates, other than "il Nord," a faraway, vague place where most of the Southern populations have emigrated to find more liveable climatic conditions.

Both characters, because of their biological and chemical knowledge, find themselves involved in other people's plans to trigger an "evolution" of human beings towards human-plant hybrids. The main difference in this respect lies in their respective reactions when these plans are revealed—reactions that are hardly dissociable from the long-term objectives of the plans in question.

Carnivori's story is divided into three main parts. The first one (7-64) shows John Smith being recruited to participate in a military investigation on the possible existence of extraterrestrial interferences across the globe. In the second part (65-148), she and her colleagues infiltrate a scientific site, identified as being at the core of the extraterrestrial "traces," discover the secret plan, and fail to prevent its implementation. Conforti attributes the origin of the conspiracy to a group of scientists closely linked to the so-called "ethical" ("etici"), a worldwide faction which holds all life (even vegetal) as sacred and aims at stopping any consumption of animal *or* vegetal food by humanity. These so-called "ethical" do not hesitate to impose their radical 'solution' upon the whole humanity, as well as on all other species living on Earth, at the cost of a tragically high rate of death among the beings affected. Whether they die or transform into hybrids, the creatures exposed to the spores endure a painful agony: "The face swells up and becomes a monster of pain. […] It's not a pretty sight. Mrs. Pivot dies shortly after, scratching her eyes out with her well-manicured nails; the others run back and forth […] like crazy wasps" (185).[1]

As a result, it is not surprising that, in the last part of the book (149-204), John Smith decides to be on the side of those resisting this forced 'evolution,' looking for a place where to hide with hundreds of survivors. They organize a new collective life underground, waiting for a possible moment when it will become possible to inhabit the earth *as human beings* again, or, in alternative, to exile themselves on another planet. The latter option becomes reality at the end of the novel, with the non-disinterested help of an extraterrestrial, intelligent species.

[1] "La facia si gonfia e diventa un mostro di dolore. […] Non è una bella scena. La signora Pivot muore poco dopo scorticandosi gli occhi con le unghie ben curate; gli altri corrono avanti e indietro […] come vespe impazzite." All translations are mine.

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The theme of exile is also central to the construction of *I vegumani*'s story, although its connections with human evolution are opposite to those observed in *Carnivori*. Farris's novel can, like Conforti's, be divided into three main sections. The first one (5-47) is dedicated to presenting the setting and the issues related to climate change; the reader also gradually discover the surprising side effects of the sun cream produced by Gazania. The second section (48-100) narrates the failed attempts of a group of geoengineers from the North to induce rain, and the subsequent discussions among the members of the cooperative about the necessity to leave the island. In the final section (101-148) Gazania, discovers that the hybridization of humans with plants has been provoked by one of her fellow citizens archetypically called "the Grandma" ("la Nonna"), who had surreptitiously interfered with the fabrication of the sun cream. Her intent was to help the island's inhabitants better resist the climatic hardships—and, consequently, *prevent* exile. Once she finally knows the secret ingredient (derived from a genetically modified *Chrysomallon* snail), Gazania decides to accept her own responsibility in orienting humanity towards radical changes and starts producing the cream (renamed *AmicaSole*— "*FriendSun*") at an industrial scale.

As we will see now, the dialectic of common points and differences in the novels' plots is closely connected to their complex relationships with different literary genres and subgenres.

Apocalyptic versus Utopian Futures

Both novels belong to the "cultural field" of speculative fiction, understood here as a broad category including all literary and artistic "non-mimetic genres"—that is, genres that "are informed by the […] departure from verisimilitude to consensus reality" (Oziewicz). This notion, "an indispensable term for contemporary works within the fantastic field, most of which blend genres to such a degree that they can no longer be adequately described with old tools and categorizations," may best frame a comparison of *I vegumani* and *Carnivori*. Indeed, both novels attempt to imagine a more or less plausible future through an original blending of different genres.

They share some characteristics with science fiction, particularly if the genre is considered more for its cognitive functioning than its thematic components. For example, Vint defines it as follows:

> Sf forces us to confront ideas and conventions that have been *made to appear* natural and inevitable, by giving us a world founded on other premises. The dialectical interaction between what is familiar and what is alien thus opens up a more critical understanding of the structures underlying and shaping the familiar world of daily experience. This […] is the source of the genre's ability to be a reflection *on* reality as well as *of* it. (39; emphasis in original)

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However, they differ in their adherence to some of the genre's conventions, which usually involve a strong presence of scientific and technological advances—often constituting most of the *novum*, or new feature specific to an invented universe.[2]

Carnivori may be defined as a blend of elements from different genres, primarily thriller, science fiction, and apocalyptic fiction. Set in a future yet purely earthly world, it eventually reveals the existence of two extraterrestrial, intelligent species. One major modification in the global order constitutes the novel's *novum*: the worldwide diffusion of the aforementioned synthetic superfood called *mulk*. This has replaced most other food sources, especially meat, now viewed as a cruel, "involuted" practice. Another *novum* is represented by a technological—and paradigmatically science fictional—novelty, called "liar," a personal and portable virtual interface which is completely integrated into the everyday lives of almost every human individual on the planet.

The planetary scale of the story, as well as its apocalyptic character, is announced from the first page, through a prolepsis presenting the outcome of the facts the reader is about to discover: "The United States no longer exist. […] We will no longer eat this planet. I participated in the extinction. I know a fragment of the story, I was part of it" (7).[3] The genre expectations are explicitly set through this *incipit*; therefore, the suspense, for the reader, is not about knowing whether human civilization will survive or not, but about the path that is going to lead to its destruction.

Conversely, Farris confines her story to a local scale. The contrast between the two texts is particularly striking if one compares the itineraries of the two main characters. Indeed, while John Smith first travels from the United States to Italy, and then to a research centre located somewhere near the Himalayas, Gazania never goes more than a few miles away from the place where she grew up. Furthermore, very little information is provided about the global situation: that climate change has rendered a large part of the planet almost unliveable, causing mass emigration to the "North," but no country names or geopolitical details are ever mentioned. This might suggest that the novel's focus is not on the globalized world, but on the local scale and, more precisely, on the fate of characters living in a new form of social and economic organization—namely, an agricultural cooperative that Gazania helped found.[4]

At the same time, the lack of precise geographical or temporal coordinates—although some features of the island have led critics to identify it as a transfigured Sardinia—also suggests the story is set in a *non-place* (Augé), as are many fictional environments built to display utopia. Indeed, utopia is one of the literary genres to

[2] This notion is fundamental to Darko Suvin's seminal theory of science fiction as mainly characterized by the centrality of "cognitive estrangement" ("On the Poetics").

[3] "Gli Stati Uniti non esistono più. […] Non ci mangeremo più questo pianeta. Ho partecipato all'estinzione. Conosco un frammento della storia, ne ho fatto parte."

[4] In this sense, *I vegumani* is quite far from the science fiction canon, which puts at the centre of the stories the progressive discovery (for the reader and/or the protagonist) of the "xeno-encyclopaedia," a term coined by Richard Saint-Gelais to indicate the complex of elements that constitute an invented universe.

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which *I vegumani* can most adequately be associated. Interestingly, the novel appears to combine elements of the two contrasting meanings of utopia as theorized by Jameson: utopia as a "programme" or a literary genre, characterized by its structured and cohesive nature, and utopia as a "drive," intended as an impulse towards a desirable future, which is not connected to a concrete and/or systematic realization. Utopian elements are present since the beginning of the novel, with the cooperative appearing to be a healthy and democratic social structure, and its material innovations being highly adapted to the aridity of the climate. These aspects of the novel are close to what characterizes utopia as a literary genre, whereas the sun cream and the new human-plant relationship it enables are more closely related to the utopian "drive."

This social organization is however threatened by the further deterioration of the climate, and by the increasingly widespread desire among citizens to join the ongoing exodus towards the North. The story will ultimately be about the new ways they will find to adapt and finally fully realize the utopia of a human population living in harmony with their environment, despite climate change. Thus, the novel blends elements of utopia with others belonging to climate fiction, a term coined in 2007 that indicates "a new genre of fiction and film, reflecting but also to a degree informing views and shaping conversations on climate change" (Goodbody and Johns-Putra 1).

This positive approach to climate change, rather rare within the field of anticipation literature, is linked to the subgenre to which the novel belongs, as is explicitly claimed on its back cover: solarpunk. The term refers to a recent artistic and political movement, as well as a related science fiction subgenre, whose first expressions date back to 2008.[5] The 2019 "Solarpunk Manifesto" summarizes the movement's objectives, after acknowledging that "The genre is not yet clearly defined": "Solarpunk is a movement in speculative fiction, art, fashion and activism that seeks to answer and embody the question 'what does a sustainable civilization look like, and how can we get there?'"[6]

As Cesaretti points out, "solarpunk has still to fully flourish […] within the fields of ecofiction and/or ecological science fiction both in English and, even more, in Italian" (Cesaretti 215). That said, *I Vegumani* is part of what could be considered a boom period for Italian literary solarpunk, which began in 2020 with the publication of the first Italian solarpunk anthology, *Assalto al sole*.

The utopian drive that we identified at the core of the novel is inherent to the very definition of solarpunk. The novel presents an optimistic vision of the path

[5] The term "solarpunk" was coined in a blog article written by an anonymous author, entitled "From Steampunk to Solarpunk." While a strong affinity with the steampunk subgenre is made explicit by the second part of the term, the first part, "solar," refers both to the sun as a renewable source of energy and to an optimistic, proactive vision of the future.

[6] The Solarpunk Manifesto, whose collective author is claimed to be "the Solarpunk community," can be read at this link: https://www.re-des.org/es/a-solarpunk-manifesto/. The quoted sentence was first written in an introduction to the extensive Internet page titled "Solarpunk: A Reference Guide," accessible at the following link: https://medium.com/solarpunks/solarpunk-a-reference-guide-8bcf18871965.

humanity might follow in the future, when the consequences of climate change have reached extreme levels and adaptation to a new, harsher reality becomes the only option. Farris's version of solarpunk can be seen as an original blend of a nostalgic idealization of a "golden age," in which human beings would have lived in harmony with nature, and scientific and technological components inspired by her familiarity with science fictional approaches to the future. Ultimately, it is possible to speak of a 'utopia in progress': not a closed, perfected social system, but one that is rapidly evolving towards perfection.

In short, both novels address urgent issues related to ecology, understood as humankind's relationship with its environment and the other, nonhuman inhabitants of the Earth, including plants. However, while the first adopts a classic science fiction structure and scope, displaying dramatic stakes that directly affect all of humanity and end in a collective tragedy, the second prefers a 'local' approach and the optimistic vision of solarpunk.

Hybrid Futures: From Nonhuman Encounters to Human Metamorphosis

The two novels under analysis articulate contrasting approaches to the question of human relationships with nonhuman others, a theme widely debated in contemporary philosophy and literary fiction. As the following paragraphs will show, the way humans relate to their "exterior" natural alterities—animals, plants, the planet—may have profound implications for their own identity and aspiration to, or fear of, transformation. This section therefore examines both the representation of nonhuman life in the two novels and the motif of hybridization, understood as the passage from an external relation with other beings to an internal metamorphosis of the human itself.

Human Relationships with Nonhuman Others

At first glance, the two protagonists begin their stories with a well-developed personal and professional relationship to the natural, nonhuman environment. One—the military John Smith—is originally a "bioambientalist" who specializes in "bioevolution and advanced genetic bioengineering" (Conforti 30), while the other, who chose her own name out of a flower, lives and works in an agricultural cooperative.

Remarkably, and even though nonhuman animals are not entirely absent from either novel, they remain largely secondary. In *Carnivori*, the question of meat-eating is nevertheless central to the narrative, as it is framed within the fanatical logic of the "Ethical": the project's radical approach seeks not only to solve ethical or ecological

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issues related to animal consumption, but also to extend the principle of non-harm to the point of eventually encompassing all living beings.[7]

The most important category for a comprehensive reading of these novels is the vegetal kingdom. The main characters of both novels share a personal knowledge of and love for their natural environment, particularly plants. In *Carnivori*, this knowledge is evident in an early passage where the description of a landscape is punctuated with the scientific names of the trees present, demonstrating John's familiarity with the plant kingdom: "*Pinus pinea* and *Pinus pianster* dominating over a sea of *Quercus ilex*, with a few scattered *Pinus sylvestris*" (32).[8] The same rhetorical device is used in *I vegumani*: throughout the novel, we follow Gazania's point of view (although, unlike Conforti, Farris opted for a third-person narration), which entails the recognition of a large number of plants, named either by their common or scientific names, or sometimes both.

However, the two novels differ greatly in terms of the narrative presence of plants, both in quantity and quality. While the quoted passage in Conforti does not prefigure the rest of the novel, which is almost devoid of concrete allusions to plants, the opposite is true in Farris's novel, to the point that this text has been described as "a whole love novel for the plant kingdom" ("un intero romanzo d'amore per il regno vegetale," De Paolo). Gazania does not only know plants as scientific or aesthetic objects; she actually *lives with them*, as fellow members of the cooperative, and sees them as alterities that deserve love and care. The other characters—especially the children—also have strong feelings towards what they consider their fellow plants, which are referred to with many terms associated with the idea of kinship: "amici" ("friends"), "sorelle del deserto" ("sisters of the desert" 85), "fratelli e sorelle vegetali" ("vegetal brothers and sisters" 147), and so on.

Moreover, plants are seen as individuals with unique personalities, as is the case with a huge hybrid plant with which Gazania has formed a bond of friendship, and to which she has given a name, Aster. This "Rose of the Desert" plays a recurring role in the story, through the evolutions of Gazania's relationship to it: it offers her a refuge from the external hardships, but also rejects her when she harbours negative feelings. Above all, Aster helps her understand how plants live, and how the hybridization of human beings with plants induced by the sun cream could lead them to live a more harmonious and peaceful existence. In other words, the main character shares a deep, multifaceted bond with this vegetal entity, rooted in a sense of kinship, which is acknowledged since its first appearance in the narrative: "The girl felt as though she were Aster's daughter and sister, as if she had grown from one of their shoots" (23).[9]

[7] A detailed analysis of the question of meat-eating in *Carnivori* would merit a separate study, in dialogue with the growing field of "meat critique;" see, for instance, McCorry and Miller (esp. the introduction).

[8] "*Pinus pinea* e *Pinus pianster* che dominano su una marea di *Quercus ilex*, e poi qualche sparuto *Pinus sylvestris.*"

[9] "La ragazza si sentiva figlia e sorella di Aster, come se fosse scaturita da un suo pollone."

This is what makes *I vegumani*'s narrative construction original: plants are not just landscape features—they are actual characters, who play a central role in the lives and concerns of the human protagonists. This narrative choice may have been influenced by the publication, in recent years, of scientific and philosophical books that have revealed to the public the unsuspected complexity of plants' lives, their adaptative strategies, and their communication.[10] The novel is indeed informed by biological data on the plant kingdom, but this scientific dimension is merely a backdrop against which the author's poetic imagination can offer a fictional glimpse into how plants might perceive and comprehend the world. In this sense, Farris's novel aligns with the critical trend that Iovino refers to as "Literature of Liberation," whereby many literary works actively contribute to "liberating" nonhuman beings—not only animals, but also plants and inorganic objects—from their "silence", attempting to "overcome the boundaries of subjectivity" and "emancipate storytelling from the standpoint of the individual ego" (Iovino 2018, 233). Whether intentionally or not, Farris thus follows an Italian literary tradition that, going from Leopardi to Calvino and Primo Levi (in many of his short stories), challenges the anthropocentric view of the world that has long been dominant in Western culture and literature.

However, Farris does not directly depict the point of view of any plant; instead, she centres her story on human beings whose already existing special proximity with the vegetal kingdom is further accentuated and explored through the means of a partial and involuntary 'becoming-plant,' which plays an important role at both individual and collective levels.

The acceptance of hybridization as a solution, not only to climatic hardships, but also to the broader issue of what a healthy and harmonious existence should be, is at the core of the novel's post-anthropocentric scope. This is particularly evident if we examine the vision of plants conveyed by the speeches and thoughts of the human characters: what emerges is, overall, such a profound admiration for them that plants end up being seen as a model to follow. This vision can be connected to a recent, flourishing theoretical trend which invites us to 'learn' from the plants, in order for human beings to live better lives (Hall; Marder; Mancuso; Tassin; Wohlleben).

This representation of plants reveals an unexpected common characteristic of the two novels: despite their contrasting ideological stances on human/nonhuman relationships, both novels engage in a similar ontological flattening of the differences between living kingdoms, particularly between animal and plant life. In one case, this makes vegetarianism seem irrelevant, while in the other, it gives plants increased ontological value, as they are shown to be capable of suffering like animals.

In several passages, we can speak of a genuine idealization, the formulation of which—following the tendency for the human mind to only think of the nonhuman

[10] See especially Mancuso 2019. This hypothesis is not supported by any interviews with the author: rather, it lies upon the thematic and semantic proximity of Farris's novel with this trend in scientific literature.

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through the prism of anthropomorphism[11]—involves the rhetorical device of personification: "Tomatoes hold hands like little sisters, thought Gazania. [...] Ah, if human beings were like tomatoes!" (28).[12] The superiority of tomatoes over humans—one of the many manifestations of an axiological reversal at work in the novel, where plants are generally considered to be wiser and more resilient than human beings—is expressed through their humanization and the desire for human beings to follow them as a life model. This passage subtly anticipates the transformation of human characters into half-plant beings, and the new wisdom this experience will allow them to access.

All of this brings us to examine the descriptions of the hybridizing processes and their outcomes in the two novels, which share some common points but diverge in the positive or negative view that is taken of them.

Hybridization and Identity, between Loss and Enhancement

It is worth clarifying what I mean by the term "hybridization", which is central to my interpretation of *Carnivori* and *I vegumani.* Let us start with the literal definition: "the process of producing a plant or animal from two different types of plant or animal" (Cambridge Dictionary). In our case, however, I believe it is important to consider hybridization in a broader sense, specific to science fiction imagination, wherein the phenomenon is not limited to species belonging to the same living kingdom. After all, many authors have imagined 'hybridization' between human and machine.

Another objection to using the term in our case could be that, in *Carnivori*, human beings are profoundly modified, but there is no explicit mention of any real crossing with another species or kingdom. Nevertheless, the biological basis of the notion is relevant in both cases, insofar as the process occurs through a modification of human DNA. I will therefore continue to use the term, as it best approximates the original transformations extrapolated by the two authors and raises interesting questions relating to the important issue of identity.

In my reading, the notion of hybridization carries markedly different implications in the two novels. In *Carnivori*, it is portrayed as a threat to human identity, a process whose costs—loss of reason, social bonds, and ultimately life itself—far outweigh its intended benefits; I therefore interpret it as largely a negative and dangerous transformation. This is illustrated by a dialogue between the narrator and her friend, whose wife and daughter are said to "have lost humanity" ("hanno perso l'umanità," 196). In contrast, in *I vegumani*, it is depicted positively, enriching human capacities and fostering a harmonious relationship with the nonhuman world,

[11] For interesting considerations on the possible anti-anthropocentric uses of anthropomorphism in literature, see Clark. For a critical stance on the aforementioned theoretical trend, and its tendency to flatten the differences between different species and living kingdoms, as well as the inappropriateness of uncritically applying 'zoomorphism' to plants, see Burgat.

[12] "I pomodori si tengono per mano come tante sorelline, pensava Gazania. […] Ah, se anche gli esseri umani fossero stati come pomodori!"

without undermining the positive attributes of human life. At the end of the novel, the main character observes with a sense of relief: "humanity still behaved according to its old habits" (135).[13]

Let us now examine how the process and consequences of hybridization are concretely represented in the novels. One obvious common point is the fact that hybridized human beings are able to draw their energy and nutrients from the sun's rays, either partially (*I vegumani*) or completely (*Carnivori*). Such a vision might appear as utopian at first, as it seems to solve some of the major issues facing humanity, both in our own time and in the futures imagined by the authors. These issues are only partly shared by the two novels: while Conforti focuses on the issue of how to feed all humans *without* harming other living beings, Farris treats the food issue just one of the many difficulties arising from climate change. Therefore, it is logical that her version of the same transformation should have other positive effects. For instance, her 'vegumani' need much less water to survive and can withstand the unbearable heat of the sun's rays, especially at certain times of the day, which has become impossible for 'normal' human beings.

This representation echoes Micali's theorization of the "nonhuman," according to which the hybrids, zombies, cyborgs, and monsters of all kinds "can be regarded as means of inquiry into the nature, position and destiny of humankind in the world" (Micali 20). From this standpoint, hybridization is neither positive nor negative in itself, and the two novels under analysis illustrate how a text's perspective can determine the value accorded to this phenomenon. *I vegumani* falls into a particular subcategory of science fiction, exemplified by Octavia Butler's *Lilith's Brood* trilogy, in which hybridizing humankind with another species is presented as its best chance to mitigate the unhealthy and destructive tendencies of human nature and thus survive the world's transformations (Micali 110–113 and 212–214).

Another interesting and shared element is the addictive potential of the experience of feeding on sunlight. This dangerous side effect, which might compromise the entire experiment, is visible from the first pages of *I vegumani*, when Gazania's friend, Asfodelo, is said to be "sun-drunk as a reptile" (18)[14]. In *Carnivori*, the narrator and protagonist discovers it only after receiving her own injection of the hybridizing substance, around the middle of the story (100–105).

Still, at some point, both Gazania and John Smith experience a similar pleasure of unprecedented depth (Farris 41; Conforti 102). Both scenes show the discovery of an intimate new relationship with the sun, whose light provides pleasure, renewed vitality and positive emotions. The phenomenon appears as profound but moderated in Farris: "As she walked, Gazania felt that exposure to the sun invigorated her [...]; the warm air instilled a calmness that started in her chest and spread in every direction" (41).[15]

[13] "L'umanità si comportava ancora secondo le vecchie abitudini."
[14] "[U]briaco di sole come un rettile."
[15] "Mentre si incamminava, Gazania aveva l'impressione che l'esposizione al Sole la rinvigorisse [...]; l'aria calda le infondeva una calma che partiva dal petto e si espandeva in ogni direzione."

On the contrary, Conforti uses the hyperbolic term "ecstasis", and makes it clear immediately afterwards that this experience entails the risk of a loss of control, along with disturbing side-effects: "It is a strong, burning, violent desire that I must repress, not a passive repulsion like that of the mulk. [...] Something is wrong. [...] I am mentally unstable and I have to keep that in mind before I act" (104–105).[16]

From this point onwards, the vision of hybridization conveyed by the story becomes increasingly disturbing, as the benefits of the process appear to be far outweighed by the costs. Even the supposedly good intentions of those responsible for the plan are being called into question, when John discovers a whole host of human subjects who have been used as involuntary guinea pigs. After their bodies have had adverse reactions to the injection, these human beings, now reduced to the status of "rejections" ("rigetti"), are locked up and deprived of all rights (138–146). Stana Hannson's stated desire to work for the good of humanity appears to mask a fanatical spirit that is willing to disregard all respect for human dignity to achieve her ends.

Conversely, Gazania and most of her compatriots remain committed to pursuing the common good. Even the "Grandma," who generally comes across as unfriendly and cynical, is eventually revealed to be at the origin of the sun cream's hybridizing power, and thus to have saved her whole community from exile. Relatedly, the individual and collective perception of hybridization follows the opposite trajectory to that observed in *Carnivori*: while Gazania is initially concerned about its mysterious functioning and consequences, she ultimately sees it as an unexpected solution to all the problems threatening the community's survival[17]. Finally, one might argue that Farris depicts a 'successful' hybridization because it does not rob people of their human characteristics, but rather combines them harmoniously with features taken from plants. Consequently, it creates beings who can draw on the strengths of both categories, as a character sums up: "See the plants? Two drops of water and they're green. They're more capable of living than we are. But we have ingenuity. You have it and use it well. That's how we will make it" (Farris 46).[18] Moreover, this transformation is not forced upon the population; it is made available to anyone who wishes to experience it and is the result of a personal choice. Conforti's version of hybridization, on the other hand, is perceived as an imposed and inescapable metamorphosis towards monstrosity. It entails the loss of everything that traditionally defines a human being—namely, self-consciousness, language, and the capacity to reason. In this sense, another subgenre of science fiction to which *Carnivori* can be related is the zombie story: the hosts of transformed creatures that inhabit the planet at the end look like undead people, in that they retain something of

[16] "È un desiderio forte e bruciante, violento, quello che devo reprimere, non una repulsione passiva come quella del mulk. [...] Qualcosa non va. [...] Sono mentalmente instabile e devo tenerlo presente prima di agire."

[17] This providential nature was anticipated when, early in the novel, Gazania hyperbolically wondered if the cream might be "the solution to all their problems" ("la soluzione a tutti i loro problem," 50).

[18] "'Vedi le piante? Due gocce d'acqua e sono verdi. Sono più capaci di noi a vivere. Però noi abbiamo l'ingegno. Tu ce l'hai et lo usi bene. È così che ce la faremo'."

their previous appearance but have lost all memory of their human existence and now act on pure instinct.

The final difference between the two representations of hybridity is that only Farris's *vegumani* grow roots (provided they keep their feet bare), which are among the most remarkable physiological particularities of plants and the medium through which they relate to the earth. In the next section, I will discuss some of the implications of this detail in terms of the ideological and existential connotations attributed to the transformation.

Overcoming vs Reaffirming Anthropocentrism

In this final section, I will demonstrate how the contrasting representations of nonhuman life and hybridity in the two novels reflect divergent assumptions about the status of human beings in relation to the rest of the living world.

As was shown above, the human characters' partial plant transformation in *I vegumani* is viewed as an enhancement of their physical abilities and their understanding of the nonhuman world (versus a loss of humanity). This allows them not only to better withstand the sun and scarcity of food, but also to develop a deeper relationship with the world they live in and its other inhabitants. This is what Gazania recognizes when she acknowledges, late in the novel, that her sun cream "ha[s] led her to develop a profound sensitivity to vegetal life" (131–132).[19]

In this sense, *I vegumani* can be read as a literary realization of the post-anthropocentric ethical and political rethinking of the notion of community that many ecofeminist and posthumanist thinkers are calling for. The notion of posthumanism I refer to is a "post-anthropocentric and post-dualistic approach" (Ferrando 27), primarily represented by English-speaking thinkers (Braidotti; Wolfe), but has also gained ground in Italy (Ferrando; Marchesini) and is now often used as a theoretical reference framework within Italian Ecocriticism. The main common ground between these thinkers is their deconstruction of the anthropocentric worldview inherited from Western humanism. This deconstruction leads to various redefinitions of human identity, particularly in light of the concept of hybridity—the idea that human beings are intrinsically and profoundly hybridized with their natural and technological others. Alongside this ontological re-foundation, posthumanism also advocates the development of a new ethics that takes into account human kinship and interdependency with other living beings and with their natural environment, including plants. [20]

The human/nonhuman boundary on which the whole humanist tradition has been built is called into question in Farris's novel, all the more radically since the beings that are now included as fellow citizens in the community are not only animals,

[19] "L'AmicaSole le [ha] fatto sviluppare una sensibilità profonda alla vita vegetale."

[20] See for instance the notion of "zoo-egalitarianism" coined by Rosi Braidotti in *The Posthuman*, or the call for a post-capitalist, more inclusive sense of community in the last pages of Val Plumwood's foundational ecofeminist essay *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature.*

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but also plants—living beings that have long been considered the most alien to human subjectivity and mode of being in the world.

Gazania and her friends also overcome anthropocentrism in another sense: they learn many things from the plants, acknowledging their above-mentioned 'superiority' in certain aspects of their being in the world. Firstly, the (removable) roots that the AmicaSole grows under people's feet when they walk barefoot allow them to experience what it means to be truly rooted in the earth—an overwhelming sense of belonging and interdependence. This idea is summed up on the last page by the expression "communion with Creation" ("comunione col creato," 148).

The last aspect of *I vegumani*'s post-anthropocentric perspective that I would like to discuss is the question of human evolution. The humanist tradition views *homo sapiens* as the perfect culmination of an evolutionary journey that sets it apart from and above all other living species (see, for instance, Braidotti and Marchesini). Different contemporary trends of thought, however, consider that human evolution has not necessarily reached its final point, or even that it is infinite by essence. Posthumanist thinking, in particular, calls into question the adequacy of the unbridgeable ontological boundary erected by humanism between humanity and all other beings. This boundary is explicitly at stake in Farris's novel, through the hesitation between, on one hand, fearing a transformative process whose consequences are not yet fully understood, and on the other, accepting the fact that human nature is inherently changeable and never definitively fixed.[21] The entire text draws on this philosophical thesis, the fictitious realization of which is permitted by its inscription in science fiction conventions and scientific extrapolation about the possibility of genetic hybridization with nonhuman species. Towards the end, the "Grandma" delivers a speech that highlights the incompatibility between traditional humanistic assumptions about the fixed and inviolable nature of human identity and the necessity for literal and conceptual evolution, both in response to the ecological crisis: "We had to adapt, there was no other solution. But they were afraid. Touching the DNA, violating the sacred boundary! Imbeciles. As if DNA doesn't modify itself with every mitosis" (Farris 115).[22]

On the other hand, the global vision that emerges from *Carnivori* is much closer to reaffirming humanist positions. Although post-anthropocentric echoes are not absent, they remain mostly confined to the discourses of people who, despite their apparently 'ethical' ideology, are eventually characterized as fanatics. Indeed, their desire to improve the world causes the painful annihilation of countless individual beings and species. Interestingly, the metaphorical expression 'salto evolutivo' appears in both novels (Farris 110 and Conforti 195). In one case, it is integrated into the narrative to express the main character's thoughts; in the other, it is used by an

[21] This aspect of the novel aligns with posthumanist views of human identity as inherently hybrid (Marchesini; Wolfe), as well as with Coccia's conception of metamorphosis and hybridization as the essence of life itself—so much so that, according to him, "Every Living Being Is a Chimera" (Coccia 55).
[22] "Dovevamo adattarci, non c'era altra soluzione. Ma loro avevano paura. Toccare il DNA, violare il sacro confine! Imbecilli. Come se il DNA non si modificasse da solo a ogni mitosi."

'ethical' spokesperson who is perceived as fanatical. This detail alone is indicative of the two novels' divergent perspectives on the same central theme, which is pivotal to the extrapolation in the science fiction genre.

At the same time, some aspects of Conforti's book suggest a vision of humanity as part of a vast ecosystem, whose destruction is terrible *in itself*. As mentioned previously, the main character, John Smith, has a deep love for her world, expressed, for instance, in the following words: "This world is so beautiful" (115).[23] The choice of the adjective "beautiful" reveals a kind of affection I would define as more aesthetic than organic. This interpretation is confirmed by another line attributed to the same character: "I just love the landscape more than the people"[24]. Using the term "landscape"—instead of 'world,' 'environment' or 'ecosystem'—is a revealing semantic choice, which alludes to a relationship with the world based on visual enjoyment rather than on affective connections, mutual exchanges, or interdependence. This detail, along with the whole story, conveys the impression of a less intimate relationship between human beings and their habitat than that imagined by Farris.

Ultimately, *Carnivori* is not a novel that can be interpreted univocally. Its ideological stance involves complex questioning, evident in John's hesitation between two worldviews and her partial adherence to the 'ethical' perspective until a late stage in the story. Yet, it unfolds a human-centred narrative and conveys a conception of hybridization as a threat for human identity, rather than as a healthy adaptation to new living conditions. The idea of a positive but extremely remote future evolution is only briefly evoked in a dialogue between John and her friend Marcus: "According to Enebra, sunmen will make at least six generations in a hundred years, sixty in a thousand. They may express significant functional changes" (200).[25] This passage suggests that human evolution may not be definitively achieved, but that it is necessary to allow it to run its natural course, rather than forcing humanity to take a brutal evolutionary leap.

Evolution is thus a central theme in both novels, but it is intended in a more conservative sense in *Carnivori*, whereas Farris embraces a posthuman, revolutionary interpretation of the concept. Similarly, both books feature characters who love the natural world deeply, but only in *I vegumani* does this love take the form of concrete, mutual relationships with nonhuman others.

Conclusion

This reading has demonstrated how *I vegumani*'s and *Carnivori*'s stories, starting from a common narrative premise—the hybridization of humans and

[23] "Questo mondo è bellissimo."
[24] "È che io amo più il paesaggio della gente."
[25] "Secondo Enebra i *sunmen* faranno almeno sei generazioni in cent'anni, sessanta in mille. Potrebbero esprimere delle modificazioni funzionali significative."

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plants—lead to divergent, even opposite, ideological outcomes. While *I vegumani* envisions a post-anthropocentric humanity, integrated within a network of interdependence and open to evolutionary transformation, *Carnivori* reaffirms a more traditional, humanist conception of human identity, seen as something that must be preserved from contamination with natural others.

These contrasting perspectives suggest that the figure of the human-plant hybrid in speculative fiction is not inherently subversive: it can either dismantle or reinforce the boundaries of human exceptionalism. Yet, when employed to question those boundaries, it becomes a powerful tool for reconsidering humanity's place within the living world—a reflection that may prove vital for our collective future.

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The Art of Change: Decolonization and Gendered Indigenous Environmental Artivism in Works by Elle-Máijá Tailfeathers and Ann-Helén Laestadius

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Abstract

Elle-Máijá Tailfeathers and Ann-Helén Laestadius define themselves neither as environmentalists nor activists, although their artworks critically reflect on and actively engage with the complex issues of Indigenous environmental justice and the gendered struggle against multiple forms of colonial and extractive violence. Using confrontational aesthetic strategies and building on human-place relations, they create transition discourses and counter the neoliberalism of Euro-Western politico-economic elites in post-democratic societies. They employ Indigenous worldviews and relational ontologies as creative forms of "imagining otherwise" for living well with Earth. This article proposes to apply the cross-genre category of artivist works to Tailfeathers's experimental adult short film *Bloodland* and Laestadius's young adult novels *Tio över ett* [Ten past one] and *Inte längre min* [No longer mine], and argues for understanding these works as artivism.

Keywords: Indigenous environmental justice, artivism, decolonization, Elle-Máijá Tailfeathers, Ann-Helén Laestadius.

Resumen

Elle-Máijá Tailfeathers y Ann-Helén Laestadius no se definen a sí mismas como ecologistas ni activistas pese a que sus obras de arte manifiestan una reflexión crítica y un activo compromiso con las complejas cuestiones de la justicia medioambiental indígena y la lucha de género contra múltiples formas de violencia colonial y extractiva. Utilizando estrategias estéticas de confrontación y partiendo de las relaciones entre humanos y lugares, crean discursos de transición y se posicionan contra el neoliberalismo de las élites político-económicas eurooccidentales en las sociedades posdemocráticas. Emplean cosmovisiones indígenas y ontologías relacionales como formas creativas de "imaginar de otro modo" para vivir bien con la Tierra. Este artículo propone aplicar la categoría intergenérica de obras artivistas al cortometraje experimental para adultos *Bloodland*, de Tailfeathers, y a las novelas para jóvenes adultos *Tio över ett* [La una y diez] e *Inte längre min* [Ya no es mío], de Laestadius, y aboga por entender estas obras como artivismo.

Palabras clave: Justicia medioambiental indígena, artivismo, descolonización, Elle-Máijá Tailfeathers, Ann-Helén Laestadius.

Empowering Energies: Resource Conflicts and Indigenous Sovereignty

Indigenous environmental justice is an intersectional issue, shaped by multifaceted colonial, gendered, social, and political challenges. Examples from North America and Northern Europe illustrate how both extractive industries and their mitigation technologies—such as Carbon Capture and Storage (CCS)—as well as renewable energies such as wind turbines and hydroelectric facilities, continue to have devastating impacts on Indigenous cultures and livelihoods. These developments often prioritize extractive projects over Indigenous rights, marginalize Indigenous knowledges, and reveal the shortcomings of current practices to meaningfully include Indigenous communities in equal decision-making processes. Such systemic exclusions undermine Indigenous sovereignty, hinder just transformations, and ultimately underscore the need for decolonial approaches that address power imbalances and center Indigenous-led futures (see Westman; Alexander and Stanley; Raitio and Larsen; Skogvang).

The highly prominent Alta Dam Conflict, lasting in Norway from approximately 1970 to 1982 (Berg-Nordlie and Tvedt), illustrates—from Jensen's and Valaker's non-Indigenous, Euro-Western perspective—how social movement communication, as practiced by Indigenous Sámi and environmental activists, can function as a disruptive democratic innovation by enabling marginalized groups to mobilize resources and rhetoric that facilitate constitutional transformation and reshape power imbalances in democratic processes (Jensen and Valaker 87, 89, 92–93, 107–109). However, as, for instance, the case of the Fosen wind park shows (Skogvang), although democratic systems and disruptive interventions of democratic systems exist, cases like Alta repeat themselves, not only in Sápmi but all over the globe. Some Indigenous scholars regard Euro-Western liberal democracy as a colonial imposition that is incompatible with Indigenous governance systems and values (Alfred 45, 62–63). They even critique the assimilative dangers of certain deliberative democratic models, which uphold settler colonialism whose politics of recognition and accommodation undermine the "grounded normativity" of Indigenous sovereignty (Coulthard 13–14, 79–83, 102; Simpson 22–25). Regarding environmental justice, Dina Gilio-Whitaker (Colville confederated Tribes) criticizes "a form of democracy where justice is framed by principles embedded in a capitalist system" which means that "justice is presumed to follow a distributive model" (22).

The dynamics at play in the above-mentioned environmental justice issues and the critique of democracy through an Indigenous lens align to a certain degree with British political scientist and sociologist Colin Crouch's concept of post-democracy, particularly the idea that, while formal democratic structures remain intact, they are weakening as their effectiveness is increasingly undermined by economic globalization. This development diminishes public engagement and leads to policy decisions heavily influenced by elite interests rather than broad democratic participation (1–3, 6–7). While Crouch leaves out the role of art when implicitly supporting agonistic democracy's calls for revitalizing democratic conflict, pluralism, and contestation, Belgian political philosopher Chantal Mouffe explicitly focuses on "aesthetic resistance" (53) and "counter-hegemonic practices" (55), art's political and agonist democratic engagement, arguing that art can function as a form of activism

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while political activism can incorporate artistic methods. She highlights art's capacity to challenge prevailing narratives and promote democratic participation, advocating for a reciprocal interaction where art and politics mutually influence and strengthen each other (55–57). However, neither Crouch nor Mouffe engage with Indigenous artists, arts, and scholars and their roles in contesting the limitations of Euro-Western democracies.[1]

Indigenous feminism confronts colonial systems that obstruct Indigenous self-determination, exposing intersecting forms of oppression. It foregrounds Indigenous women's participation and leadership in decision-making. By advancing justice across gender, race, class, and sexuality, Indigenous feminism fosters more inclusive and equitable political practices (McGregor, "Indigenous Feminism" 113–16). Therefore, this analysis focuses on female Indigenous artists in articulating gendered critiques of Euro-Western political systems in the context of environmental justice, explored through the close examination of selected artistic works.

With this article, the author, a European, German, female scholar of Literary and Cultural Studies—with Scandinavian Studies being her discipline of origin—continues an ongoing series of contributions to global Trans-Indigenous Studies (Egerer "Afro-Swedish;" "Exploring;" "Facing;" "Reframing;" "Teasing"): Applying trans-Indigenous methodologies as introduced and practiced by Chickasaw scholar Chadwick Allen ("Decolonizing;" "Trans-Indigenous Lens;" "Trans-Indigenous Methodologies") encourages the juxtaposition and reciprocal illumination of diverse Indigenous works of art, including literary texts of various genres, oral narratives, sculptures, films, and paintings, as well as heterogeneous cultural expressions such as Indigenous philosophies and worldviews. Combined with Indigenous as well as non-Indigenous theoretical frameworks, these methodologies open up new perspectives on diverse works of art and enable the articulation and engagement of interdisciplinary Indigenous knowledges beyond the constraints of dominant Euro-Western academic frameworks, such as boundaries of disciplines and established genre classifications. Focusing on selected Indigenous works of art that engage complex discourses of gendered Indigenous environmental justice, this analysis turns toward concepts rooted in Indigenous cultures.

The creative works studied position themselves toward two extractive industries: fracking on Indigenous lands in Alberta, Canada, and iron ore as well as rare earth mining in the Swedish part of Sápmi. The analysis proceeds by first introducing the Indigenous artists, followed by a discussion of relevant conceptual and sociopolitical contexts before visiting the respective creative works and turning to their closer reading.[2] In alignment with an Indigenous mode of relational and circular understanding, the conclusion reflects on the teachings gifted by these

[1] With Mouffe's exception of stating her admiration for Indigenous peoples' environmental and climate change knowledges in a 2023 interview published by Universitetet i Agder, Norway. Mouffe is obviously not inspired through interaction and collaboration with Indigenous peoples but by reading French anthropologist's Philippe Descola's works (Machin).

[2] On the ethically engaged method of visiting Indigenous stories and the notion that "[v]isiting as a mode of reading is an antidote to the all-too-common practice of extractive criticism" see Métis scholar Warren Cariou (10).

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Indigenous works and, to engage in anticolonial environmental justice, respectfully outlines their implications for non-Indigenous contexts.

Artists' Responses to Extractive Industries: Fracking and Mining

"Write letters. Contact every level of government and exercise your democratic rights" (Chiu) Blackfoot and Sámi filmmaker Elle-Máijá Tailfeathers recommended when asked about how to deal with extractive industries. With *Bloodland* (2011), an experimental short film, Tailfeathers intended "to get people thinking of the impact of gas and oil extraction overall" (Chiu). *Bloodland* was accepted into several film festivals in North America and Northern Europe (Bonar) and featured at Berlinale Talents in 2013 (KBB). In a 2014 public lecture, Tailfeathers defined her position toward extractive industries in a self-identifying statement: "I am not an environmentalist, and that's because I'm a proud Blackfoot and Sámi woman who is fighting an Indigenous struggle which is inherently tied to struggles for the land. And that struggle for the land is gendered, too" ("Frack Off" 00:43–01:05). Rejecting any simplifying cliché, Tailfeathers refuses to analogize Indigenous women's relationality to the land with environmentalists' commitment. Indigenous relationality to the land is deeply connected to the respective Indigenous cultures, epistemologies, ontologies, and cosmologies of being in a place or even being a place: Unangax̂ (Aleut) scholar Eve Tuck and co-author K. Wayne Yang argue, that genuine decolonization requires the repatriation of Indigenous land. They critique settler colonialism's "moves to innocence," such as reconciliation, which render decolonization as a metaphor for social justice or human and civil rights-based approaches, which, however, are structurally incompatible and incommensurable with Indigenous sovereignty and worldviews. Rather, they favour recognizing the material, transformative, and unsettling demands of decolonization, rooted in Indigenous futures and land rights. They also point out that decolonization insists on a radical reordering of the world that exceeds rights-based frameworks like democracy and their elision with justice (3, 9–19, 25, 28, 35–36). Tailfeathers's statement evokes these entangled complexities of decolonization, Indigenous feminism, and environmental justice.

Swedish Sámi author and journalist Ann-Helén Laestadius, who also is of minority Tornedalian[3] descent, likewise touches on these complexities in her two award-winning young adult novels *Ten past one*[4] and its sequel *No longer mine*[5] about experiencing relocation to make way for extractive industries (*Augustpriset*, *Norrlands Litteraturpris*).[6] To Laestadius, writing books for young adults means creating spaces of empowerment and imagining different futures as well as coming to terms with her own history and life experience (Rydell). In an interview addressing environmental and social justice struggles in Sápmi, the traditional territory of the

[3] Tornedalians are a Meänkieli-speaking ethnic and linguistic minority group of Finns in northern Sweden, particularly in the Torne River region, officially recognized as a minority by the Swedish Government in 2000 (Lipott).
[4] *Tio över ett*, 2016.
[5] *Inte längre min*, 2018.
[6] Hitherto, neither *Tio över ett* nor *Inte längre min* have been translated into English. All translations from Swedish to English are provided by the author of this article.

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Sámi people that today includes northern parts of Norway, Sweden, Finland, and the Russian Kola Peninsula, Laestadius self-identifies as follows: "I am not an activist, I am a writer hoping to arouse emotions in others." She explains:

> I have a strong sense of what is right and wrong, and I am driven towards injustice and getting justice done. And often that doesn't work out and writing literature is then a good outlet for me. That is where I can let my frustrations loose and put a finger on what is unacceptable. (UNRIC and Laestadius)

By employing analogous and comparable aesthetic strategies—such as confronting audiences with the colonial, physical, psychic, gendered, and social harms of exploitative extraction and evoking transformative responses by engaging audiences on an affective level and holding them accountable as witnesses—Tailfeathers's and Laestadius's artistic works critically engage with the issues surrounding extractive industries on Indigenous lands. From a Trans-Indigenous perspective, this raises the question of whether a conceptual category beyond the ex-negative designations of "not an environmentalist" and "not an activist" might more adequately account for the positions, creative practices, and artistic works of both female Indigenous artists.

Indigenous and Minority Environmental Justice

Tailfeathers and Laestadius situate their artistic works in their respective fields of filmmaking and literature in an extended, relational community of humans and more-than-humans,[7] the land, and familiar places. They unveil the complicated context of Indigenous and minority environmental justice. Environmental justice can be seen as an important aspect of Environmental Studies, particularly within its social science and policy dimensions. While Environmental Studies addresses human-environment interactions, sustainability, and resource management, environmental justice analyzes the unequal distribution of environmental burdens—such as

[7] All terms denoting the 'nonhuman,' 'non-human,' 'more-than-human,' and 'other-than-human' are inherently anthropocentric, referencing humans as the central point of comparison or relation. Yet, their meanings might vary slightly with conceptual context: Tim Ingold, for instance, consistently employs 'non-human' to denote other species, specifically animals and plants (xii, 6–12 et passim). In contrast, David Abram's concept of 'more-than-human' encompasses an animate dimension that dissolves the boundary between material and immaterial realms, emphasizing the spirituality of matter and the materiality of spirit. This concept primarily concerns reciprocal ecological balances but also extends to human-made artifacts and structures arising from this fluid and dynamic, emerging and decaying matter-spirituality. At the same time, when referring to animals, plants, weather patterns, local geographies and landforms as ecological environments, Abram uses also 'nonhuman', though without a hyphen (11–26 et passim). The term 'other-than-human,' also sometimes written with spaces instead of hyphens, was coined by A. Irving Hallowell and refers to a category of persons in the context of an Ojibwe worldview (51–52 et passim). David Schlosberg uses 'nonhuman' (6) when referring to nonhuman participants in deliberation. Anishinaabe scholar Deborah McGregor et al. use 'non-human entities' and 'non-human beings,' both hyphenated ("Indigenous Environmental Justice" 35–37). Blackfoot scholar Betty Bastien employs "non-human relatives" ("Blackfoot Ways" 172). Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar and activist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (10) appears to use "nonhumans" in a sense similar to that employed by Abram. This list is illustrative rather than exhaustive. I do not have any preferences but rather use the variety of these terms, mostly following the respective scholars and scholarly works I engage with. When employed in this study and referring to an Indigenous context, any of these terms is meant to express kinship and relationality with beings beyond humans, including plants, animals, minerals, elements, landscapes, weather phenomena, skies and celestial bodies, built environment, spirit beings, ancestors, and other entities.

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pollution, extraction, and urban development—and interrogates issues of procedural justice, participation, and equitable access to resources. It is also central to the field of Environmental Humanities, which explore cultural, historical, philosophical, and ethical dimensions of human-nature relations. Here, environmental justice offers critical perspectives on power, representation, and marginalization, highlighting the intersections of colonialism, race, gender, and voice in environmental harm. Robert D. Bullard is considered the founder of environmental justice research ("Dumping," "Unequal Protection"). Academics such as Julian Agyeman, who has also been co-authoring with Robert D. Bullard and Bob Evans, as well as Rob Nixon and David Schlosberg followed, to name just a few.

Standing Rock Sioux Vine Deloria Jr. ("God is Red;" "Red Earth"), Anishinaabekwe and enrolled member of the Mississippi Band of Ashinaabeg Winona LaDuke, and Sámi multimedia artist and activist Nils-Aslak Valkeapää have been pivotal in highlighting the unique environmental challenges faced by Indigenous peoples, emphasizing the deep connection between Indigenous rights and environmental stewardship. It is therefore necessary to take a closer look at the implications of environmental justice and Indigenous environmental justice.

David Schlosberg's broad and pluralistic concept of environmental justice emphasizes "that a solely distributive notion of environmental justice fails Indigenous peoples" as Gilio-Whitaker notes (23). Schlosberg follows Rachel Carson and combines environmental *and* ecological justice, i.e., "concerns […] for the natural world […] and the concern for human health and industrial impacts on individuals and communities" (Schlosberg 7). In this comprehensive understanding, the umbrella term *environmental justice* comprises several components focusing on both human and nonhuman relationships: the ensuring of equitable *distribution* of goods and benefits to individuals and communities; individuals' and communities' *capability* of well-functioning and flourishing by transforming these goods and ecological benefits; the presence of individual and social respect and *recognition*; the meaningful engagement and equal *participation* in democratic procedures and decision-making processes; as well as *ecological justice* by including the natural world and ensuring justice in distribution, capability, recognition, and participation also to individuals and groups belonging to the nonhuman, i.e., animal, vegetal, mineral, and elemental world (3–41, 158–59). Applying the safeguarding of environmental justice, defined in this pluralistic way for individuals and groups in human and nonhuman realms, holds considerable potential for conflicts that need to be addressed (165–86). Tailfeathers and Laestadius face these conflicts by linking their cultural creations to real-world events:

Tailfeathers's homeland is the Kainai Blood Reserve in Alberta, Canada. On behalf of the Blood Tribe-owned Kainaiwa Resources Incorporated (KRI) natural resource development company, Blood-Tribe Chief and Council signed a 50-million-dollar land-leasing deal with United States-based Murphy Oil Corporation and Calgary-based Bowood Energy in 2010, lasting for five years, without consulting tribe members and without holding the required referendum. The deal granted a five-year permit for oil and gas exploration and extraction by hydraulic fracturing (fracking) on Blood Reserve land (Provencher). This resulted in small earthquakes and toxic fumes that led to the evacuation of an on-reserve school (Chiu). *Protect Blood Land*

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was created as a space on the Internet to oppose this development (Provencher). According to Schlosberg's criteria for environmental justice, the Blood Reserve case reveals serious threats or absences in its key components, as evidenced by *Protect Blood Land's* main arguments: "concern with environmental and health damages," threatening Aboriginal Land Title by resource exploitation, "lack of consultation and referendum by KRI in signing the lease and creating Kainai Energy," questioning the band council system and "the legitimacy of the Blood Tribe Chief and Council in negotiating on behalf of the Blood Tribe members" (Provencher). Fracking poses potential long-term risks to health, well-being, and land access for future generations, raising questions about whether such activities on reserve land might infringe on Aboriginal title. Canadian legislation—such as the Indian Oil and Gas Act and the First Nations Oil and Gas and Moneys Management Act—permits oil and gas extraction on reserve lands. Kainai Chief and Council, however, violated the First Nations Oil and Gas and Moneys Management Act, which requires a referendum within the Blood Tribe as the final step to transfer authority for oil and gas resource management to the tribe-owned company KRI (Provencher). In addition to the absence of Schlosberg's environmental justice criteria, in this case, democracy and the rule of law in Canada fail Indigenous peoples, causing Indigenous leaders to engage in lateral colonial violence, and deny full Indigenous sovereignty and relations to the land.

Laestadius calls Kiruna, in Sámi Giron,[8] her home, a town located in a part of Sápmi that today is a multi-ethnic Sámi-Tornedalian-Swedish region (Rabén och Sjögren), belonging to the province of *Norrbottens län* in Northern Sweden. Kiruna was built to the needs of the Swedish state-owned mining company Loussavaara Kiirunavaara Aktiebolag (LKAB) that in 1890 started operating what is today the world's largest underground iron ore mine (Ojala and Nordin 12). In 1867, Sweden established a law of cultivation limit, the *odlingsgräns*, to separate settler agriculture in the south from Sámi reindeer herding areas in the north, aiming to reduce conflict. In practice, the boundary failed to safeguard Sámi interests, as key herding areas lay south of it and were overtaken by settlers. Defining the North as an economic landscape by industrial expansion, prioritizing the profits of the land over Sámi reindeer herding, establishing mining, and building the town of Kiruna in 1890 were violences against this law of cultivation limit, and rendered the boundary largely ineffective. Sámi rights in Sweden remained informal until the 1886 Reindeer Herding Act, which legally recognized herding but restricted rights to active herders, sidelining non-herding Sámi and privileging settler land use (Forsell 199–200). The mining company LKAB also appropriated the two iron ore-containing mountains near Kiruna linguistically and iconographically by distorting their North Sámi as well as Meänkieli names Gíronvárri/Kierunavaara and Luossavárri/Luossavaara, meaning "mountain of the snow grouse" and "salmon mountain," and by creating a logotype showing two snow-covered peaks above black magnetite iron ore, encircled by the iron symbol (LKAB, "The World of Minerals"). The mine expansion is accompanied by ground subsidence and associated risks that result in a significant part of the town having to be moved three kilometers to the northeast in a process called "urban transformation" (LKAB, "This Is the Urban Transformation;" "We Are Moving a

[8] Giron is North Sámi and means 'ptarmigan', 'snow grouse.'

Town"). This "involves both demolition of existing buildings as well as the careful dismantling and rebuilding of a few selected buildings in new neighbourhoods on new ground" (Overud 107). A "memorial park will serve as a barrier against the mine as the ground cracks" but "even the parkland is a temporary space" "as the open pit approaches the city" (107–108). According to LKAB, the mine and the town have worked in close relation to one another and will continue to do so in the future (LKAB, "We Are Moving a Town"). Mine expansion and urban transformation affect areas relevant to Sámi reindeer herding and migration routes: Indigenous Sámi communities in the region experience exploitation of their reindeer grazing lands and forced adaption to industrial expansion (Overud 107). In the case of Kiruna, Schlosberg's criteria of environmental justice are again highly unbalanced or completely absent.

It is important to recognize significant differences between environmental justice and Indigenous environmental justice. Dina Gilio-Whitaker (Colville Confederated Tribes) clarifies:

> E[nvironmental] J[ustice] for Indigenous peoples [...] must be capable of a political scale beyond the homogenizing, assimilationist, capitalist State. It must conform to a model that can frame issues in terms of their colonial condition and can affirm decolonization as a potential framework within which environmental justice can be made available to them. [...] Indigenizing E[nvironmental] J[ustice] by centering Native issues means it should conform to principles outlined in decolonizing theories and Indigenous research methodologies [...]. [...] Indigenous modes of justice typically reflect a restorative orientation. [...] In essence, justice for Indigenous peoples is about restoring balance in relationships that are out of balance. (Gilio-Whitaker, 25–26)

Anishinaabe scholar Deborah McGregor, along with co-authors Steven Whitaker and Mahisha Sritharan, advocate for a "distinct formulation of Indigenous environmental justice" based on Indigenous "intellectual and legal traditions […] to generate a self-determined future that involves living well with the Earth" (35, 36). Such a "distinct framework and set of logics that recognizes the agency of non-human beings as well as the Earth itself" is especially important as colonialism and its dominant "global, national, and regional economic and political frameworks" are still in progress and "undermine Indigenous peoples, in particular Indigenous women, in systemic, ongoing, and violent ways" (36). "Indigenous understandings" counter the "dominant Western society's tendency to view the natural world as a commodity, property or a 'resource'" by "regarding the Earth as alive and imbued with spirit" (35), and go beyond Schlosberg's definition by recognizing different epistemologies and ontologies, animism, and various non-human and spirit beings.

> Indigenous peoples assert that a just path to a sustainable future must consider *all relations*, an approach best expressed through Indigenous knowledge systems, legal orders, governance and conceptions of justice. These systems offer a diagnosis and path forward that answers the call for the 'transformative change' needed to alter global society's current trajectory. Indigenous knowledge can play a key role in such transformation and has been recognized as such for decades. (36; emphasis in original)

McGregor et al. draw on the vision of *buen vivir* proposed by Indigenous peoples as a path to a more just, sustainable, and inclusive future (37). Considering the worldviews and the "epistemological disobedience" (Stephen 165) in Tailfeathers's and Laestadius's artistic works will provide insight into how they confront ongoing

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exploitation and environmental injustice. Since Laestadius is concerned with both Sámi and Tornedalians, it is more accurate to speak of Indigenous *and* minority environmental justice.

Gendered Struggle Against Multiple Forms of Violence

An additional intersectional criterion emerges in the works of both artists: Female protagonists struggle for environmental justice or are exposed to environmental injustice, partly reflecting the artists' real-world experiences. Being involved in the gendered struggle for Indigenous and minority environmental justice as a woman means facing and resisting multiple forms of violence emanating from dominant cultures and capitalist societies (Stephen). The fraudulent consent between the Kainai Chief and Council and the companies managing the extraction directed against Blood Tribe members can be seen as a result of colonial violence: alluding to lateral violence and colonial domination, Tailfeathers states that the "root of this violence stems from deeply internalized oppression" which causes Indigenous people to turn against their own communities (Tailfeathers, "Fractured Land"). This lateral violence can easily combine with gendered violence: When peacefully protesting against the fracking in 2011, Tailfeathers and two other Indigenous women, Jill Crop Eared Wolf and Lois Frank, who were members of a group of people who called themselves the Kainai Earth Watch, were arrested by tribal police and charged with intimidation. Later, the charges were dismissed (Barlow 43–44; Blackburn and Wong; Tailfeathers, "Frack Off").

For the Swedish context in Kiruna, Bo Nilsson analyzes how official narratives construct an "ideological fantasy" that portrays Kiruna's relocation as necessary, positive, and inevitable ("Ideology" 434–35, 440–41). He shows how municipal and the mine's corporate discourse emphasize progress, sustainability, and democratic participation, while marginalizing social, cultural, and emotional impacts (436, 438, 439). LKAB presents the town's relocation in euphemistic rhetoric and with symbols of colonial pioneerism, advertising it as an exciting event of global significance (LKAB, "We Are Moving a Town"). While Kiruna municipality gives the impression that the relocation of the town is participatory and the most democratic urban transformation in the world (Overud 111), Nilsson exposes "this emphasis on the democratic process" as "an approach to imbue the process with legitimacy" and discloses the notion of a commonly shared consensus on Kiruna's relocation as "largely a rhetorical product" (Overud 111, with reference to Nilsson, "Kiruna: Staden" 25). Based on 20 interviews—two of them with self-identified Sámi—Nilsson found that, while no one questioned the mine's expansion and the relocation itself as necessary and without a long-term alternative, residents expressed indifference, fatalism, mistrust, and disempowerment in light of their dependence on LKAB (Nilsson, "Ideology" 434, 437–38, 441). Nilsson further identifies two key dynamics in Kiruna: a "small town mentality" that accepts subordination and the company's patriarchal role, and "accumulated masculinity" in a dominant working-class masculine miner culture (437, 441). From this perspective "it is a Catch 22 situation. You cannot criticize the hand that feeds you" (441). This, however, seems to be the dominant or perceptible mainstream opinion among residents because "marginalised communities, made

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invisible by urban development, struggle to regain access to and influence over public space" and "open resistance to the ongoing transformation process is seldom found" in Kiruna (Overud 115). Lack of representation in media silences alternative voices. This is also reflected in a historically embedded process of shaping colonial socio-cultural memory in Kiruna: For this process, also historical and contemporary photography has been used in the service of settler-colonial knowledge production to create a narrative dominated by resource-exploiting socio-economic powers. Photographs served "to emphasize the message that modern Kiruna has evolved from extreme simplicity and poverty to prosperity" and—while "reminiscent of the early settlers' hard-working durability and abrasive resistance"—"to honour the memory of the navvies and pioneers," i.e., Swedish miners (Overud 113). Pictures effectively set the stage for the "imperialist message" that "colonial industrialisation is the progressive way" and "the only way" (115). Photographs depicted Sámi people as a lower social group and "representatives of a less progressive race" (114). Overud also analyzes a photograph from 1900 showing the first settler child born in the mining shantytown established by LKAB, a girl who was named "Kiruna" at the suggestion of the then LKAB's managing director, Hjalmar Lundbohm. A family tradition of giving this middle name to the first-born daughter was established and led to the sixth generation "Kiruna" being born at the beginning of the twenty-first century (105–6). Emphasizing a settler child as Kiruna's firstborn denies the presence of people not devoted to the mine and nullifies the fact that there are other firstborns on the territory. The colonization of Sámi Giron and its transformation into Swedish settler-miner Kiruna can be understood in analogy to the historical shift from perceiving Earth as a living organism to conceiving it in a mechanistic sense as an assemblage of resources that can be used for humans' purposes—a shift that, as Carolyn Merchant argues, facilitated and legitimized the domination of both nature and women ("The Death of Nature;" "The Scientific Revolution" 514–15). The appropriation of female bodies is a hitherto insufficiently reflected abusive practice that parallels the exploitative abuse of Earth for economic interests and serves to manifest male colonial dominance.

Feminist and gender-sensitive approaches can counter the colonial, hegemonic, patriarchal and male-dominated practices present in the Blood Reserve and Kiruna cases. Ojibway from Batchewana First Nation scholar Cheryl Suzack defines "Indigenous feminism" as

> a critical paradigm that analyses how gender injustice against Indigenous women emerges from colonial policies and patriarchal practices that inscribe gendered power dynamics to the detriment of Indigenous women. It focuses on the intersections between colonialism and patriarchy to examine how race and gender systems overlap to create conditions in which Indigenous women are subjected to forms of social disempowerment that arise out of historical and contemporary practices of colonialism, racism, sexism, and patriarchy. (Suzack 261)

The central points of this analytical paradigm call for consideration of the gendered struggle for Indigenous and minority environmental justice as represented in Tailfeathers's and Laestadius's works of art.

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Artworks as Critical Reflections

Condensed to utmost audio-visual compactness and less than 5 minutes long, the experimental short film *Bloodland* is multi-layered. On the visual level, it begins and ends with a black screen and text in white letters. On the audio level, there is an indifferent background noise similar to the traffic of a busy motorway in the distance that blends with the sound of an iambic rhythm played on a hand drum, reminiscent of a heartbeat. The indifferent noise stops when a female voice starts crooning soothingly to the drum rhythm, visually accompanied by an Indigenous woman (played by Tailfeathers) dressed in traditional clothes emerging from Earth. Two male figures (played by Cowboy Smithx and Byron Chief-Moon), dressed in settler colonial suits, are shown in sharp cuts that follow the drum rhythm. They seize the woman violently and strap her to a cot. A second female voice starts speaking calmly and confidently in the Blackfoot language. Using drilling machines, the two men, now dressed in workwear, drill into the Indigenous woman's body. She is writhing in agony, her face contorted with pain, her mouth wide open, as if she were screaming. But apart from the rhythm of the drum, the crooning, and the words spoken, nothing can be heard. Rapidly alternating images, moving with sharp cuts in the heartbeat rhythm, show the men's gloved hands digging both into the woman's body and into Earth's soil. After extracting what they wanted, the male figures turn away and leave her to die. A black-red liquid, reminiscent of blood and petroleum, runs on a white background into a black depth to which the camera swings to blackout. During the closing credits, the Women Warrior Song resounds, sung by female voices and accompanied by the steady rhythm of a hand drum.

The multiple forms of violence that Tailfeathers interweaves in *Bloodland* shed light on human-Earth relations, reinforce Suzack's points, and demonstrate that Indigenous feminism is inextricably intertwined with a gendered struggle for the land. The disturbing imagery reveals analogies between the disempowerment of Indigenous women and the disempowerment of Earth. *Bloodland* calls attention to the crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls in Canada, in short MMIWG.[9] Tailfeathers depicts extraction as a patriarchal practice toward Earth and the female body, sanctioned by colonial policies and imposed by male-dominated power. Red River Métis Jennifer Hettinga and co-author Amber Dean highlight that colonialism and the establishment of resource extraction projects in Canada intensifies Indigenous women's vulnerability to violence through the emergence of so-called "man camps" that are characterized by sexism, social and geographical disconnection, homophobia, and "hypermasculinity similar to military organizations" (4). Also, shifts in local economic structures, and altered family dynamics contribute to Indigenous women's exposure to violence (5–6). When coupled with the systemic failures of the criminal justice system, the violence experienced by Indigenous women suggests three intersecting categories: "domestic violence, workplace violence, and sexual violence" (1, 5–8). Although the Blood Reserve region is not included in the economic map presented in Hettinga's and Dean's study (10), Tailfeathers's

[9] Meanwhile, the attention has been expanded on MMIWG 2SLGBTQQIA+ (Narratives Inc. 1).

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Bloodland powerfully reflects this multifaceted "man camp" violence through the medium of cinematographic art.

Laestadius's young adult novels *Ten past one* and *No longer mine* feature an internally focalized first-person narrator, the teenage protagonist Maja. She recounts her experiences in an intermittent but simultaneous, chronological mode with occasional analepses that reflect on the past. Living in contemporary Kiruna and coming from a Tornedalian mine worker family, her most challenging task is to deal with a stressful and complex socio-environmental dilemma (Ittner 1834; Six 426–27): While LKAB and the mine are the lifeblood of today's Kiruna, they are at the same time destroying the town (Laestadius, *Tio över ett* 7). Maja realizes that Kiruna and its inhabitants are at the mercy of LKAB's exploitative economic interests, patriarchal control, and colonial practices. Literally shaken by the regular nightly mine blasts, the fear of possible subsidence, and the relocation of her hometown, Maja faces her panic attacks and loneliness (52–59) in confrontation with LKAB executives, local politicians—in particular her grandmother, a municipal politician strongly advocating for the mine expansion and the relocation— peers, friends, and family who are either indifferent to or in favor of further resource extraction, or who simply do not see an alternative way of life. Laestadius's novels contrast Maja's critical and investigative attitude with the conformist stance of mainstream society. Kiruna is depicted as a masculine, culturally poor town, characterized by ice hockey, outdoor sports, snowmobiles, and the mine as the primary source of wealth and economic prosperity (9, 30, 32–33). To male youths from Maja's school, LKAB is a well-paying employer, the exploitation of resources a welcome path to consumerism and individual wealth, and Kiruna's transformation a means of attracting global attention (Laestatius, *Tio över ett* 78–85; *Inte längre min* 37–38). Maja dislikes LKAB's relocating the town and disapproves of the anti-Sámi racism and chauvinism many of her peers display (Laestadius, *Inte längre min* 31, 38, 50, 56–57, 79–83). She critically documents the destruction of cultural memory, social ties, and relationships to places, capturing her feelings and the town's transformation through mobile phone videos and text notes. Maja gradually understands that she is different and belongs to a minority not only in terms of her Tornedalian descent but also in terms of her attachment to places and her critical position, as she is convinced that LKAB "buys our silence. This is what happens when almost everyone works at LKAB. Everyone wants money and we sell out our soul. The soul of Kiruna" (Laestadius, *Tio över* ett 83).[10] She also observes that female stakeholders support LKAB by perpetuating objectification and asserting dominance in various aspects of their lives (Laestadius, *Inte längre min* 150–52, 272–76). Longing for reliable social and identity-constructing spatio-temporal relationships, Maja struggles to acquire self-confidence. A sincere and mutually supportive friendship and allyship is foreshadowed when Maja cautiously observes her classmate Alva, a teenage Sámi girl, winning a literary competition organized by the local Kiruna newspaper, in which both girls are recognized for expressing their feelings about Kiruna's relocation through skilled written and filmic artworks respectively (Laestadius, *Tio över ett* 242–46). This

[10] "köper vår tystnad. Så blir det när nästan alla jobbar i LKAB. Alla vill ha pengar och då säljer vi ut vår själ. Kirunas själ" (Laestadius, *Tio över ett* 83).

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narrative strand unfolds in the sequel where Maja and Alva, encouraged by their former teacher Stina, a Swede, become close friends and allies as they both feel isolated and face similar forms of violence (Laestadius, *Inte längre min* 175, 270–72). Both teenage girls' resistance is grounded in shared experiences of marginalization based on gender, ethnic or Indigenous identity, and worldview. Here, Suzack's paradigm is extended from Indigenous feminism to minority feminism, encompassing the involvement and support of an allied non-Indigenous teenage feminist. The narrative expansion on Maja and Alva's friendship and allyship serves as an example of young Indigenous and non-Indigenous—specifically Tornedalian—women uniting against silencing in a male-dominated social environment. The narrative nexus to the Swedish teacher Stina parallels the alliance between Sámi and Nordic feminisms advocated for by Sámi sociologist Astri Dankertsen (137–44).

While Ann-Helén Laestadius narratively depicts an alliance that transcends the boundaries of Indigeneity, Tailfeathers actively demands such a coalition by evoking an experience to which, unfortunately, women—regardless of race, ethnicity, and Indigeneity—may be subjected: the degrading and abhorrent sexual discrimination enacted through male violence. Both Laestadius's and Tailfeathers's depictions strongly resonate with Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's "kwe," a term in the Nishnaabe language meaning "woman," yet also inclusive to "a spectrum of gender expressions" (29): "Kwe is not a commodity. Kwe is not capital. […] Kwe cannot be exploited" (29). "At its core, kwe as a method is about refusal. […] [i]t is about refusing colonial domination, refusing heteropatriarchy, and refusing to be tamed by whiteness or the academy" (33). In the novels *Ten Past One* and *No Longer Mine*, the teenage girls refuse mainstream Kiruna masculine views on resources, commodities, and capital. Similarly, in *Bloodland*, the calm voice speaking Blackfoot and the concluding Women Warrior Song collectively refuse the male extractive violence depicted visually throughout the short film.

Imagining Otherwise and Indigenous World-Making Practices

By depicting the threat of anthropogenic realities, Tailfeathers's audio-visual and Laestadius's textual stories inspire transformative change. According to Cherokee scholar Daniel Heath Justice, Indigenous stories "make space for meaningful engagements" (154) and for imagining other possible futures by contrasting "lives of accountability and honour with the world" with "a great resource-consuming mass of humanity" (39). By exposing the inadequacy of Euro-Western concepts of the "real" based on binary oppositions and dualities to the "imaginary," Justice draws attention to alternative, mature, experiential Indigenous realities that, for instance, also include spirit beings and various non-human beings (141–42). Instead of escapism, Indigenous stories offer a distinct form of escape that "presumes an ongoing engagement with the world, not a repudiation of or removal from it" (151). Justice defines Indigenous stories as "wonderworks" (153) because "wonder" "places unsolvable mystery, not fixed insistence, at the heart of engagement" (153). "Wonder" comprises "meaningful uncertainty, curiosity, humility", "astonishment, admiration, and [...] mindful fear" (153), and "wondrous things are *other* and *otherwise*, [...] outside the bounds of the everyday and mundane" (153). This "[i]magining

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otherwise" (142) unleashes transformative energies: It is not only an "act of […] resistance" but also a "moral imperative" as it counters problematic dominant Euro-Western standards (142).

Although Laestadius's texts can be defined as realistic within Euro-Western literary terms—they provide detailed representation of everyday life and individual experience in Kiruna, marked by social critique and a rejection of idealization—protagonist Maja experiences the above-mentioned elusive socio-environmental dilemma in both novels as a mysterious wonder. Through internal focalization, readers participate closely in the process of experiencing transformational power. The mysterious wonder takes the shape of the teenage girl Aurora, daughter of a female LKAB business economist. Aurora has lived in many different places, everywhere creating new identities. Her flamboyance quickly wins the attention of her peers. Maja, too, is fascinated by Aurora and seems to get on well with her. Set against the wondrous Sámi lore of the Northern Lights, the *Aurora borealis*, however, Maja's Sámi teenage friend Alva issues a warning:

> Speaking of Aurora, I was just thinking about the Northern Lights. When my grandmother was growing up, they said the Northern Lights could be dangerous and you should absolutely not call after them, hardly look at them, because there was a risk that they would take you [...] I do not believe in that, of course, but nevertheless, maybe one should be cautious of things that are a bit too blinding. (Laestadius, *Inte längre min* 205)[11]

Alva translates the lesson of a Sámi worldview into a topically relevant, figurative understanding: Aurora embodies and personifies a mysterious danger comparable to that which, according to Sámi traditional lore, could emanate from the Northern Lights. Thus, Aurora represents the mysterious wonder that Maja faces with admiration, meaningful uncertainty, and mindful fear. In Aurora, Maja encounters the wondrous that lies beyond the bounds of the everyday and mundane and is prepared to embrace its conflictual transformative powers. Aurora functions as a representative of the resource-consuming mass of humanity: she takes Maja's boyfriend, Albin; moves into the house Maja was forced to leave due to LKAB's relocation—subsequently relocated as well and granted to Aurora's family (Laestadius, *Inte längre min* 115, 153, 183, 207–37); and ultimately reveals that she chose to use her middle name upon moving to Kiruna, stating: "My name is Linnea Aurora. And now, when I was about to move here, I thought it was fitting to choose Aurora. Thinking of the Northern Lights. It is a bit like a social experiment to change one's name" (Laestadius, *Inte längre min* 191).[12] Aurora is utterly euphoric in response to her name: "But to bear the name of the Northern Lights when I moved to Kiruna was simply brilliant" (Laestadius, *Inte längre min* 274).[13] The name Linnea

[11] "[...] jag kom bara att tänka på norrsken apropå Aurora. När min mormor växte upp sa man att norrskenet kunde vara farligt och man fick absolut inte ropa på det, knappt titta på det, för det fanns en risk att det skulle ta en. [...] Jag tror inte på det där förstås, men ändå, man kanske ska akta sig för sånt som bländar lite för mycket." (Laestadius, *Inte längre min* 205)

[12] "Jag heter Linnea Aurora. Och nu när jag skulle flytta hit så tyckte jag att det passade att välja Aurora. Med tanke på norrskenet. Det är lite som ett socialt experiment att byta namn." (Laestadius, *Intet längre min* 191)

[13] "Men att heta som norrskenet när jag flyttade till Kiruna var ju genialiskt." (Laestadius, *Intet längre min* 274)

carries colonial resonance, as it derives from *Linnaea borealis*, the twinflower, which Swedish botanist Carl von Linné (1707–1778) named after himself and which appears in a well-known portrait of him by Swedish painter Alexander Roslin (1718–1793), where Linné is depicted wearing twinflowers on his lapel. Carl von Linné played a significant role in classifying Sámi nomads as subaltern subjects. Following his 1732 journey to what he called Lappland, he published *Systema Naturæ* in 1758, introducing not only the still well-known botanical and zoological nomenclature but also a hierarchical categorization of the human species (Volquardsen and Körber 228–29).

In contrast, Maja represents a struggle for relational sovereignty and a life of responsibility and honour with the world. Alva's vision of the deceptive *Aurora borealis*, the Northern Lights, and her encouragement inspire Maja to refuse and fiercely counter Aurora's and the dominant mainstream's way of life (Laestadius, *Inte längre min* 258–60, 262–65, 271–72). It helps Maja to imagine herself and Kiruna otherwise, not as victims of extractive violence but as beings of deepest insight who can look behind the façade of the resource-consuming mass of humanity. From this, Maja draws the energy to enact a different future: "Alva is right. Her family, the reindeer herders, have experienced what is now awaiting us all. Being forced to leave our place" (Laestadius, *Tio över ett* 245).[14]

While confronting the key mysterious wonder of the iron ore mine nourishing and destroying Kiruna, Maja gains insights that guide her further actions: She recognizes journalistic reporting as a mission, resistance (Laestadius, *Inte längre min* 10), and a moral imperative (Justice 142) she is ready to pursue. Targeting Sweden's defective democracy, Maja powerfully articulates:

> The mine is eating us both from without and from within. […] One day, I will write an article that will cause the whole of Sweden to wake up. [...] I […] do not want to be seen as a victim. I have to discuss this more with Alva. Sámi people are all too often portrayed as victims in the media when the perpetrators should be pointed out. Focus on who has done wrong instead. […] Everything leads back to the state. […] Beautiful Sweden, which prides itself on being an equal democratic country, but the state has done the Sámi great harm. And now those in power are blinded by money as the mine has to expand. […] It is Alva who makes me wiser. When she tells me about reindeer husbandry and everything they had to go through, she forces me to see the perpetrators. (Laestadius, *Inte längre min* 270)[15]

Maja begins to imagine otherwise and an otherwise world. Sámi scholars Sanna Valkonen, Saara Alakorva, Áile Aikio, and Sigga-Marja Magga describe the Sámi concept of "máilbmi," meaning "world." The word can take on different meanings depending on the speaker and "conveys the […] understanding that there are

[14] "Alva har rätt. Hennes släkt, rensköterna, har upplevd det där som nu väntar oss alla. Att trängas undan från sin plats" (Laestadius, *Tio över ett* 245).

[15] "Gruvan äter upp oss både utifrån och inifrån. [...] Någon gång ska jag skriva artikeln som får hela Sverige att vakna. [...] Jag [vill] inte [...] ses som ett offer. Jag måste prata mer med Alva om det. Samer beskrivs alltför ofta som offer i media när man borde peka ut förövarna. Lägg fokus på vilka som gjort fel istället. [...] Det är staten allt leder tillbaka till. Gång på gång. Fina Sverige som slår sig för bröstet som det jämställda demomratiska landet, men staten har gjort samerna mycket illa. Och nu är makthavarna förblindade av pengarna när gruvan måste expandera. [...] Det är Alva som gör mig klokare. När hon berättar om renskötseln och allt de fätt gå igenom tvinger hon mig att see förövarna" (Laestadius, *Inte längre min* 270).

multitudes of realities and possibilities to traverse […] by moving from one reality to another, in one or many directions." Máilbmi "encompasses everything between the earth and the sky" and "refers to [both] the global world" and "different micro realities with their own ecosystem principles […]." Máilbmi is "a *pluriverse*—the idea of the coexistence of multiple worlds […] becoming real and being enacted in and through practices: different practices create various realities, not interpretations of the same reality" (2–3). Sámi world-making practices inherently hold the possibility of imagining otherwise and enacting another world. Teenage Sámi Alva inspires the power of pluriverse worlds in Maja and thus empowers her. At the same time, Laestadius's novels arouse emotions in readers and call for meaningful engagement with the world.

In contrast to Laestadius's more grounded narrative realist representation of everyday life and individual experiences, Tailfeathers's *Bloodland* portrays extractive violence with extreme realism, employing a heightened realist aesthetic that produces immersive, overwhelming emotional and sensory experiences. In the first scene, however, the Indigenous woman slowly appears as a fade-in body emerging from Earth. This reveals a miraculous reality that evokes astonishment and humility: Tailfeathers portrays Woman and Earth as wondrously connected. By evoking this connection, Tailfeathers builds on the immanent transcendence characteristic in Blackfoot worldview as explained by Blackfoot scholar Betty Bastien:

> [P]articipatory visions are represented in stories of how humans can carry out their obligations within an intricate network of relationships. In these stories, what Eurocentric thinking considers 'transcendent' is as present and real as what Eurocentric thinking refers to as 'immanent.' ("The Cultural Practice" 41–42)

Bastien also points out that "spiritual energies" emanating from "Ihtsipaitapiiyo'pa", the "Source of Life", "permeate the cosmic universe" and "manifest in physical form" ("Blackfoot Ways" 3). This "world of balance and harmony" (1)—a "multi-level reality from which meaning and connection to all others emerges"—is of "transformational nature" without any "separation" (177). Blackfoot reality consists of complex reciprocal relationships between humans and non-humans (9). If there is no separation but reciprocal relationships, the colonial exploiters in the short film not only do harm to Woman and Earth but ultimately to themselves: By exploiting and killing Woman, they exploit and kill Earth, and, in the end, will commit extended suicide because they aim at destroying Ihtsipaitapiiyo'pa, the Source of Life. In *Bloodland*, the moral imperative of imagining otherwise calls for an ongoing and meaningful engagement with the world by protecting and caring for Woman and Earth. Quotes framing the short film address the importance of maintaining cosmic balance and harmony beyond space and time: in the opening, Tailfeathers quotes Murphy Oil Corporation as alluding to relational responsibilities: "Some say we do not inherit our world from past generations as much as we borrow it from future ones." (*Bloodland* 00:17 min). With the introductory phrase "some say", Murphy Oil Corporation dismisses the statement an unproven minority opinion. In the closing credits, Tailfeathers quotes Blackfoot Chief Isapo-Muxika, in English known as Crowfoot. As a member of a minority, he has his say, too:

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> Our land is more valuable than your money. As long as the sun shines and the waters flow, this land will be here to give life to men and animals. We cannot sell the lives of men and animals. It was put here by the Great Spirit and we cannot sell it because it does not belong to us. (*Bloodland* 03:43 min.)

This statement is not just what 'some say,' but a powerful reminder of the wondrous reciprocal interconnectedness between humans, various non-human relatives, and the land as a life-giving relation. Fulfilling the moral imperative to imagine otherwise even further, Tailfeathers discloses in an ironic act that "this film [was] made generously possible by Murphy Oil[,] Bowood Energy[,] Kainai Resources Inc.[, and] Blood Tribe Chief and Council" (*Bloodland* 3:48 min.). While crediting the perpetrators might seem ominous and cause some uncertainty and mindful fear in readers, Tailfeathers explained in a public lecture that she used the fracking distribution cheque handed out by the Chief and Council to every member of the Kainai Blood Tribe to fund the film production (Tailfeathers, "Frack off" 6:10–6:50 min.; 8:15–8:55 min.). In this way, she powerfully re-imagines the destructive forces as generous, transformational, inseparable from everything else, and refuses to capitulate to them.

Therefore, Tailfeathers's and Laestadius's works neither are entirely realistic nor escapist fiction but Indigenous wonderworks (Justice 151–53): They encourage and empower their audience to imagine and enact different worlds and to continue the fight for the land and for decolonization.

Human-Place Relations and Transition Discourses

Both artistic works show that the relationship to the land and to particular places is indispensable for human identity and well-being. Non-Native cultural geographer Soren C. Larsen and Delaware and Cherokee scholar and geographer Jay T. Johnson focus on a profound understanding of the relationality of humans and more-than-humans in and with places. Place, they argue, is an agent—"actively initiating and sustaining coexistence struggle" and "forcing […] coexistents to acknowledge one another" ("Being Together" 1, 2). Place inspires life-supportive relationships, mutual recognition, reciprocity, and respect with the aim of coexisting in balance, in an interconnected and decolonized way, and without asymmetrical and unequal powers and hierarchies (184–202). The agency of place is a call with which place as a more-than-human engagement invites and convenes human encounters and dialogues in various ways, for example, conflict, protest, tragedy, grief, and activism (2). Often, state and corporate actors do not recognize but try to suppress the hospitality and invitation of place (189). Place, however, calls to decolonization, teaches acknowledgment, and guides humans and more-than-humans on the pathways of responsibility, in that resistance and resurgence arise from the agency of place. "[P]lace […] has the agency to *compel* or *oblige* transition discourse among more-than-human communities engaged in struggles for more respectful ways of coexisting" (191; emphasis in original).

With their artistic creations, Tailfeathers and Laestadius enact placework, a methodology that emphasizes place as an active agent in shaping a more-than-human geographical self, highlighting how place constitutes human identity through

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entangled, more-than-human relations and its inherent ontological and cosmological agency (Larsen and Johnson, "The Agency of Place" 153).

> Place creates—it personalizes the power consciousness of Creation into ways of being whose manifestations are enmeshed within more-than-human relationships. Place speaks—its creative aegis is expressed in the diverse personalities, moods, and intentions of the many place worlds of being and relationship. Place teaches—its manifestations guide us in our responsibilities in the pluriverse by reminding us when we forget, as we so often do, how to be Natural People. (Larsen and Johnson, "The Agency of Place" 152)

According to Seneca historian and writer John Mohawk (10), to whom Larsen and Johnson refer, "Natural People" are those who "see beauty in the things and processes that support and produce life" and are considered "spiritual proprietors of the Universe, not because they possess the things of Creation, but because they celebrate them" (Larsen and Johnson, "The Agency of Place" 152).

> Places live—they are born, change, and age. Places have moods. They get angry and invoke fear; they nourish, soothe, and protect. The personality of a place is an expression of what it has to teach, and also of how it teaches. To understand a place's personality is to understand its story and the lessons it has to teach. (Larsen and Johnson, "The Agency of Place" 158)

In this sense, Blood Reserve land and Kiruna are places that teach the artists and call for action and for sparking the transition discourse in complex environmental justice cases. This raises the question of whether and how Tailfeathers and Laestadius hear and respond to the calls of their respective places, and to what extent their creative works transcend Tailfeathers's self-identification as 'not an environmentalist' and Laestadius's as 'not an activist' in the sense of becoming a more-than-human geographical self—given that both produce powerful and influential artistic contributions deeply engaged in gendered Indigenous environmental justice.

Evoking the respect and humility of relational ontology and epistemology, Tailfeathers describes Blood Reserve land as "the kind of place that brings you inward. The sky is endless. It's the kind of place that makes you think, it's the kind of place that makes you feel, and it's the kind of place that makes you grateful to be alive" (Tailfeathers, "Frack Off" 3:40–3:54 min.). This also resonates with perspectives advanced by non-Indigenous scholars: By circumventing a body/spirit and science/animism dichotomy, rejecting the "individual" and rather drawing on the "dividual", "a person constitutive of relationships" and "a person constitutive of transferable particles that form his or her personal substance" (Bird-David 68, 72; with reference to Strathern 1988 and Mariott 1976), Israeli cultural anthropologist Nurit Bird-David conceptualized animism as relational ontology and epistemology that "is about knowing the world by focusing primarily on relatedness, from a related point of view, within the shifting horizons of the related viewer" (69). Interactive, reciprocal human-place relationship thus allows related Indigenous selves to be aware of all-relatedness as the unifying modality of human and more-than-human life: "I know as I relate" and "I relate, therefore I am" (78) or, even more concisely, "We relate, and therefore we are" (Morrison 39). This contrasts the Cartesian "cogito, ergo sum", "I think, therefore I am" which German American Studies scholar Hartmut Lutz exposes as

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> a statement that is entirely isolationist and shockingly solipsistic. It constructs the thinking subject as removed from any relations with the surrounding world, from time or place, from social relations and the ecosystem, and even from his or her own physical being. (72–73)

Rather, the statement "I live on this place on earth, therefore I am" would be "less egocentric and certainly more life sustaining" (73).

To display the dualism and separation of Cartesian thought, Tailfeathers uses filmic techniques and visual narrative strategies of materialist atomization and dichotomization. While heading toward its dramatic climax, *Bloodland* is a succession of two alternating, antithetical, divided, unrelated images, moving forward in rapid cuts: The image of reddish-black liquid running down a white surface flashes rhythmically, disrupting the portrayal of spiritual connection, intimate tranquillity, and profound relatedness. This connection is initially presented through the gentle dissolve of the Indigenous woman slowly rising from Earth, marvelously materializing on the land, and finally standing upright in the natural place that she is and is of (*Bloodland* 0:25–0:43 min.; for being of a place see Deloria and Wildcat 31). After that, images of drilling machines penetrating Woman's and Earth's bodies as well as images of the gloved hands of the Euro-Western male resource extractors rummaging in Woman's intestines and Earth's soil alternate rhythmically (*Bloodland* 1:06–1:40 min.). Fast-moving, visualized fragmentation and disconnectedness increasingly provoke a perceptual, cognitive, and emotional overload intended to shock the viewers into realizing the analogies between the two forms of violence: The first one, against human beings, abhorred, the second one, against the land and a particular place, accepted as resource extraction. Woman is the animated land and place, recognizable in relational epistemology and ontology. Through this analogization, land and place in *Bloodland* are agents like Woman and any other person, not resources or commodities made up of geological formations and chemical elements that are utilized as exploitable raw materials to fulfill complex abstract, inanimate functions in dichotomized, individualized, neoliberal, and capitalist systems.

Through *Bloodland's* entire audio-visual design, Tailfeathers prompts viewers to engage in critical self-reflection, exposing how consumerist and exploitative lifestyles ultimately result in death and devastation. She calls for allyship with Indigenous peoples, particularly women, while the persistent Blackfoot female voice and the triumphant Women Warrior Song affirm that resistance is not only possible but effective.

In Laestadius's *Tio över ett* and *Inte längre min*, Kiruna is depicted not merely as a backdrop but as an active, dynamic agent shaping the characters' identities and experiences by interaction. However, in Kiruna, anthropogenic exploitation attacks Earth's soil that should safely carry humans and more-than-humans. Ground subsidence is reaching close to the town. Laestadius has Maja describe the process of ore extraction using partly medical terms, drawing an analogy between the human body and Earth, similar to the analogy implied by Tailfeathers:

> Every night preparations are made for the underground blasts. [...] Liquid explosives are injected into several boreholes in the [...] mine tunnels. [...] Dangerous gases are

> generated in the tunnels. Then there is a roar and the iron ore loosens. The iron ore that makes Kiruna live. (Laestadius, *Tio över ett* 30)[16]

The passage is highly ambivalent. On the one hand, it employs medicalized language—terms such as "preparations," "injected," and "mine tunnels"—evoking the imagery of surgical intervention and the intravenous injection of an anesthetic via a venous cannula, thereby framing Earth as a living body subjected to invasive procedures. Yet this figurative surgery does not heal but instead inflicts harm. Within this ambiguous metaphor, iron ore operates dually: as the life-sustaining core of Kiruna and as a pathological object—the core of systemic extraction and environmental injustice. This tension also lies at the heart of the stressful and complex socio-environmental dilemma that Maja faces, constituting her greatest challenge.

On the level of story, the central theme of Laestadius's young adult novels is the protagonist's motivation to survive as a dividuum, as defined above. Maja struggles to protect and maintain her relational identity by being and knowing her place-relations while Kiruna is relocated. On the one hand, the internally focalized narrative voice provides insights into fragmentations that threaten Maja's identity: the experience of being misunderstood and isolated. Maja expresses her loneliness within an environment shaped by the Euro-Western dichotomy that sanctions neoliberal resource exploitation and has no understanding of relational ontology and epistemology in strong words: "Damn LKAB. Damn municipality. Damn all those who do not understand what will happen when the town changes. People will choose to move. And not just three kilometers but three hundred and fifty kilometers or farther away" (Laestadius, *Tio över ett* 75).[17] Ignoring the agency of place causes humans to disappear. When Maja voices her relationality with the town's places and buildings and her concerns about their disrespectful treatment, even her own family evades her, downplaying her perspective, refusing to move back into their old house, which has been saved from demolition and relocated. Surrounded by an environment that subscribes to Cartesian separation and dichotomy, she experiences existential threat: "It is as if I don't exist" (Laestadius, *Inte längre min* 24, 102).[18] On the other hand, the internal focalization employed throughout the novels allows the readers to feel and comprehend Maja's relations and the shifting horizons and points of observation, which are additionally dynamized by the alterations that the place agent Kiruna undergoes. Maja is profoundly attached to Kiruna's places who speak to her in their unique manner and help her to find ways of relating to the alterations of the outside world through interactions guided from within. Places and many buildings—the library, the community hall, the church—that are closed, demolished, or rebuilt elsewhere, relate to Maja with their details. Their architecture, building materials, and shapes evoke memories of social gatherings and emphasize their central role in

[16] "Varje natt förbereder man för sprängningarna under jord. [...] Flytande sprängmedel injiceras i flera borrhål i [...] gruvgångerna. [...] Det bildas farliga gaser i orterna. Sedan dånar det och järnmalmen lossnar. Järnmalmen som gör att Kiruna lever." (Laestadius, *Tio över ett* 30)

[17] "Jävla LKAB. Jävla kommunen. Jävla alla som inte förstår vad som kommer att hända när stan förändras. Folk kommer att välja att flytta. Och inte bara tre kilometer utan trettiofem mil eller längre bort." (Laestadius, *Tio över ett* 75)

[18] "Det är som om jag inte finns." (Laestadius, *Inte längre min* 24,102)

bringing a community of humans and more-than-humans together (Laestadius, *Tio över ett* 20, 34, 47; *Inte längre min* 58, 96).

> I […] pass by the old library, its rusty red brickwork and green peeling metal roof. A stately, old building with wide spiral stone staircases between the floors. [...] I ran up and down those stairs between the departments so many times. It is almost impossible to look at the building without feeling a cramp in my stomach. It was the first thing I lost. The library closed and moved to Union Street [...]. I was there at the opening. My mom was too. [...] She is always so nostalgic. That is why she should understand me. But she doesn't. She only gets angry. (Laestadius, *Tio över ett* 34)[19]

To Maja, Kiruna is an entity. Her practised relation to Kiruna is reminiscent of Sámi "*meahcci*," "a *creative collection of practical places and relations*—a set of *activity spaces*" or "*taskscapes*" (Joks et al. 307; emphasis in original). In the plural, "meahcit" are "locations where people undertake different tasks at different times," "a part of home and a place of safety," and "a set of potentially *productive relations*" (307; emphasis in original). As multiple, unfolding, specific, and concrete "*places–times–tasks*" and encounters with "*morally sensible*," "*lively and powerful beings*," meahcit "bypass not only the nature/culture binaries […] but also the abstractions that go both with clock time and two- or three-dimensional cartographic conceptions of the spatial" (308; emphasis in original). Although Maja is Tornedalian rather than Indigenous, her attitudes and practices advocate for a shift toward understanding built and natural environments as relations. Her emotional engagement with Kiruna's places evoke Sámi ways of knowing and relating to environments, emphasizing the material and processual dimensions of lived environmental relationships, as embodied in concepts such as *meahcci*. Maja rebuilds Kiruna from within herself and finds ways to express these internalized place relations: on the one hand in her mobile phone videos, on the other hand in her decision to pursue a career as a journalist. Supported by her Sámi friend Alva, Maja eventually plucks up the courage to confront Aurora who appropriates non-human beings by drawing and painting them, using places and the social relations they encourage with colonial intent to increase her power and gain status and prestige (Laestadius, *Inte längre min* 258–59). Addressing Aurora directly, Maja explicitly voices the fundamental difference between her relational worldview and Aurora's separated dichotomist one:

> I am not like you at all. I dare to be myself [. ...] I think you are just sad that you do not belong anywhere [...] And that simply proves that you have no roots. You don't know what home is. My home and Kiruna are everything to me, that is who I am. (Laestadius, *Inte längre min* 274–76)[20]

Laestadius expands the horizon for alliances between Indigenous peoples, ethnic minorities, and even non-Indigenous individuals, such as the above-mentioned Swede Stina, Maja's teacher. Laestadius stages a confrontation between Maja,

[19] "Jag […] passerar det gamla biblioteket, rostrött tegel och grönt flagnat plåttak. Ett ståtligt, gammalt hus med breda spiraltrappor i sten mellan våningarna. [...] Jag har sprungit upp och ner i de där trapporna mellan avdelningarna så många gånger. Det går nästan inte att titta på huset utan att det krampar i magen. Det var det första som försvann för mig. Biblioteket stängde och flyttade till Föreningsgatan [...]. Jag var med på invigningen. Mamma också. [...] Hon är alltid så nostalgisk. Därför borde hon förstå mig. Men det gör hon inte. Hon blir bara arg" (Laestadius, *Tio över ett* 34).

[20] "Jag är inte alls som du. Jag vågar vara mig själv [. ...] Jag tror att du egentligen är ledsen över att du inte hör hemma någonstans [. ...] Och det visar bara att du inte har några rötter. Du vet inte vad hemma betyder. Mitt hem och Kiruna är allt för mig, det är jag" (Laestadius, *Inte längre min* 274–76).

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granddaughter of a local politician who strongly endorses the mining industry and Kiruna's relocation and daughter of a mine worker family, and Aurora, daughter of an LKAB business economist. Through this encounter, Laestadius presents Maja as an empowered young woman who transforms her vulnerability into defiant strength. Simultaneously, she portrays Aurora as both a colonized subject and a victim of a paradoxical "maternal patriarchy" enacted by her mother—LKAB's business economist—who engages in the mine's extractive self-sabotage. Moreover, the juxtaposition and confrontation of the two girls gestures toward the possibility that Aurora might embark on a process of transformative self-reflection: Both her names, Linnea Aurora, inscribe a polyvalence in their bearer, opening both for colonial acts (Linnea) as well as the chance to be multifaceted (Aurora) which carries the risk of being a deceptive threat but also opens the chance to unseen transformation in a pluriverse. Thus, with the character Aurora, Laestadius challenges readers to confront their own complex identities, attitudes, positionalities, and colonial complicities.

As the examples above show, from a trans-Indigenous methodological lens, the place-based relational ontologies and epistemologies Laestadius and Tailfeathers put forward in their artistic works correspond with each other.

Artivism: Facing Politico-economic Elites in Post-democratic Societies and Turning to Kin Approaches

Hitherto nothing has been done to successfully alter the overall global course of ongoing colonial exploitation and resource extraction. Both fossil energy extraction on Blood Reserve land and iron ore extraction in Kiruna are harmful to Indigenous and minority communities and environmental living conditions by design. LKAB even announced the exploitation of Europe's largest deposit of rare earths near Kiruna**,** arguing that access to rare elements is important for Europe's becoming independent from Chinese and Russian markets as these elements are essential for the manufacture of electric vehicles, wind turbines, and a successful climate transition. Claiming that "this is good news, not only for LKAB, the region and the Swedish people, but also for Europe and the climate" (LKAB, "Europe's largest deposit"), LKAB overlooks the fact that such an unbalanced transition will inevitably lead to environmental injustice that will eventually affect the entire Earth.

Swedish scholar Moa Sandström relates art produced by Sámi artists to the aim of implementing decolonization and coined the term decolonizing art:[21] artivism, i.e., art intended to function as a means of bringing about social change, can include any type of art, artwork, or artistic practice (3–11, 243–49). Laestadius and Tailfeathers use their respective textual and audio-visual forms of art deliberately to encourage and bring about socio-political, liberating, and collective change. Accordingly, their works *Bloodland* as well as *Tio över ett* and *Inte längre min* can be defined as artivism, or—since the social changes they aim at are multiple and entangled—even more precisely as decolonizing gendered Indigenous and minority

[21] Sandström's Swedish term and title of their work is "dekoloniseringskonst", which literally translates as "decolonizing art."

environmental artivism. Returning to the question posed at the outset—whether a conceptual category beyond Tailfeathers's and Laestadius's self-designations as "not an environmentalist" and "not an activist" might more adequately encompass their positions, creative practices, and artistic output—this study proposes that they may more aptly be understood as artivists.

Regarding the initial question of equitable democratic participation in decision-making processes concerning Indigenous environmental justice—as an intersectional issue encompassing colonial, gendered, social, and political dimensions—the functions and limitations of democracy must be critically examined. Colin Crouch situates his analysis within advanced Western democracies, illustrating how liberal democratic systems have been increasingly hollowed out by elite influence. As in the examples from Northern Europe and North America outlined in the introduction, democratic frameworks—such as the Canadian federal parliamentary democracy and the Swedish parliamentary monarchy—formally exist. However, meaningful participation in decision-making processes concerning one's living environment has failed in the case of the Kainai Blood Reserve and is entirely absent in the case of Kiruna. As these cases show, both Sweden and Canada bear marks of a post-democracy, defined by Crouch as a society in which democratic "institutions and habits remain; but the real energy of the political system has passed into the hands of small elites of politicians and the corporate rich, who increasingly ensure that politics responds to their wishes" (3). In pursuing their objectives, politico-economic elites hinder, among others, environmental justice and Indigenous environmental justice as defined by Schlosberg and McGregor et al. A "strong democracy," however, requires "two characteristics: a capacity for citizens to confront established elites with unsettling demands; and institutions outside democracy itself that protect its operation, particularly from the conduct of rulers" (Crouch 139). Crouch's findings are further supported by examples from other parts of the world, illustrating that challenges to democratic participation are inherent to environmental justice struggles, which constitute a global phenomenon. For instance, a case study of a coal mine in Aotearoa/New Zealand by Lillian Fougère and Sophie Bond highlights these dynamics through the lens of post-politics: "Postpolitics describe processes that, perhaps under the guise of participation or public involvement, protect the status quo in which progress equates to increased economic growth. Here, dissent is annulled, delegitimised, likened to background noise to ensure progress continues […]" (144). Fougère and Bond argue that "in the current conjuncture, where postpolitical processes are systematically closing down possibilities for alternatives, there is a need to push back against the techno-managerial tendencies of contemporary planning practice" (164). They underline the legitimate and important role of informal activism "in making alternative worldviews and discourses prominent in the public eye […] and creating possibilities for cleaving open dominant ways of knowing and inserting alternative imaginaries" (164).

In Tailfeathers's and Laestadius's artivist works, Indigenous world-making practices and the act of imagining otherwise become unsettling demands that question the state of Euro-Western democracies and fight a gendered struggle against multiple forms of colonial violence to achieve Indigenous and minority environmental justice. By unmasking the hollowed-out structures of post-democracy and post-

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politics, Tailfeathers's and Laestadius's artivism exposes the ontological failure at the heart of the neoliberal capitalist ideology and environmental governance. In line with Taiaiake Alfred's argument that democracy is incompatible with Indigenous governance systems and values, Glen Coulthard's critique of the politics of recognition and his concept of grounded normativity (also employed by Leanne Betasamosake Simpson), and Dina Gilio-Whitaker's observation that capitalist democracies' legal systems clash with Indigenous environmental justice, the works of Tailfeathers and Laestadius reveal how the techno-managerial strategies, renewable energy initiatives, and green transitions mentioned at the outset of this article operate to manage Indigenous dissent rather than confront the colonial logics that underpin all forms of resource extraction. Rather than offering real solutions, such strategies reproduce the very violence they claim to remediate—disregarding the relational understandings of land and life that are central to Indigenous world-making practices and environmental justice. The place agents Kiruna and Blood Reserve land teach Tailfeathers and Laestadius how to create works of art that communicate relational ontology, relational epistemology, accountability, respect, and reciprocity between humans and non-humans.

Enacting the kwe method of refusing colonial domination and heteropatriarchy (Simpson 33), Tailfeathers's and Laestadius's works issue powerful artivist interventions that challenge not only politico-economic elites but also many ordinary citizens who fail to respond to, or respect, calls for reciprocal relationality. Refusing to align with the short-sighted techno-managerialism that generates life- and world-destroying consequences, their works speak to those who recognize the urgent need to enact alternative modes of living. They call for the creation of conditions that enable living well with Earth, beyond the colonizing logics of neoliberalism and the perilous limitations of insufficiently self-critical Euro-Western capitalist democratic political systems. To return to Daniel Heath Justice's vocabulary: Through their works, Tailfeathers and Laestadius show how wonder works, how wonderworks imagine otherwise, and how they bring into being worlds otherwise.

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Sensoriographic Sensibilities: Immersing, Recording, and Storying the Senses in Multispecies Worlds

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Abstract

Multispecies research relies on multisensory methods to know other earthly beings. This new mode of research faces a double challenge: how to know others in multi-sensory ways and how to document and communicate them back to a human audience. Previous work has expanded on the need for combining multispecies and multisensory modalities. However, limited scholarship speaks to this approach's practical challenges, including how to re-visit, re-write, and ethically re-present sensory experiences with other species long after fieldwork. This paper explicitly addresses these challenges with an experimental process we consider "sensoriographic." A sensoriographic practice iterates through sensory experiences, such that they span spatio-temporal divides from immersive fieldwork and the (inevitable re-)turn to writing. Sensoriographic sensibilities shift the focus from singular

[1] This paper is a collectively written endeavour that was ideated, prepared, discussed, revised, and formatted by all six of us. As such, we list surnames in alphabetical order with a nod to the facilitation role that the first author took during gatherings over the past two years.

encounters to recursively reliving experiences, asking researchers to synthesise the many partialities of knowing. We ponder: How do we overcome sensory biases like sight and individual experience while immersing in multispecies fieldwork? How do we deal with the ephemerality of sensory experiences and the fallibility of our memory in recording data? And how do we speak alongside and with other-than-human creatures as we try to write worlds thick with more-than-human life? Across diverse locations and with diverse species, we come together to stay with the trouble of immersing, recording, and storying the senses as we seek to create more responsive multispecies stories.

Keywords: Multispecies, multisensory, ethnographic writing, methodologies, storytelling.

Resumen

La investigación multiespecie depende de métodos multisensoriales para conocer otros seres terrestres. Este nuevo campo de investigación se enfrenta a un reto doble: cómo conocer a seres más que humanos de formas menos centradas en el ser humano y cómo comunicar ese conocimiento, éticamente, a un público humano. Los trabajos anteriores se han desarollado bajo la necesidad de combinar modalidades multiespecie y multisensoriales. Sin embargo, son escasos los estudios que abordan los retos prácticos de este enfoque, como la forma de re-visitar, re-escribir y re-presentar éticamente las experiencias sensoriales con otras especies mucho tiempo después del trabajo de campo. Este artículo aborda explícitamente estos retos con un proceso experimental que denominamos provisionalmente "sensoriografía." La sensoriografía reitera la revivificación de las experiencias sensoriales, de modo que abarcan intencionadamente las divisiones espacio-temporales entre el trabajo de campo inmersivo y la (inevitable) vuelta a la escritura. La sensoriografía desplaza el centro de atención de un encuentro episódico a revivir experiencias de forma recursiva, pidiendo a los investigadores que sinteticen las múltiples parcialidades del conocimiento. Abordamos cuestiones como: ¿Cómo superamos los sesgos sensoriales con la vista y las experiencias individuales mientras nos sumergimos en el trabajo de campo multiespecie? ¿Cómo afrontamos lo efímero de las experiencias sensoriales y la falibilidad de nuestra memoria al registrar "datos"? ¿Cómo hablamos con criaturas que no son humanas mientras intentamos escribir mundos repletos de vida no humana? En diversos lugares y con diversas especies, nos reunimos para enfrentarnos al problema de sumergir, registrar y narrar los sentidos mientras tratamos de crear historias multiespecíficas más sólidas y sensibles.

Palabras clave: Multiespecies, multisensorial, escritura etnográfica, metodologías, narración.

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Introduction

Smells and sounds, textures and tastes can story the everyday and forever unfolding encounters between humans and the many critters we share the world with. Scholarship in human–nonhuman entanglements has been growing to better understand and convey the lives and worlds of other-than-human beings. These studies typically combine multispecies questions with multisensory methods, even calling upon multimodal forms of representation. However, two core difficulties remain: how to know other earthly beings beyond sight and language, and how to record and share this knowledge, ethically and practically, beyond the immersive experiences of a singular researcher. In response, we propose a *sensoriographic* sensibility to complement such complex inquiries, which combines a multisensory mode of knowing and a practice of recursive writing of multispecies encounters.

Rather than claim sensoriography as a comprehensive method of *writing the*

senses, we consider this sensoriographic attentiveness to be both an academic practice and a methodological sensitivity toward and through our senses during (sensorio-) data collection and documentation (-graphy). We base this approach on reflections of the limits we face in our own research, namely, that our creatures of interest cannot be observed in straightforward ways since they live in inaccessible (e.g., aquatic) environments, in temporalities different from our ours (e.g., nocturnal) or simply escape our gaze (e.g., microbes). Our hope is that the sensoriographic sensibilities we outline will allow future research to confidently lead with diverse means for knowing and showing their worlds.

We arrived at sensoriographic considerations, in part, by noticing a disconnect between the sprawl of multispecies case studies—across disciplines as diverse as literary, media and cultural studies, design, human geography, and anthropology, history, sociology, and philosophy—and the fact that these scholarly perspectives offer no overarching guidance on "the embodied practicalities of knowing" (Despret 69). How exactly *do* we combine multispecies and multisensory datasets and transform them into outputs and, more importantly, what are the pitfalls to consider along the process of synthesising these encounters? How can we account for sensory qualities of inquiry *throughout* the processual and enduring aspects of research? And how can our writing absorb these considerations? Our paper begins by showing the recent growth and limitations to using sensory approaches in multispecies research, followed by our own rationales for moving past current challenges and our approach to generating material we cite herein. We organise our challenges into three analytical themes—immersing in, recording, and storying the senses in more-than-human encounters—and elaborate on sensoriographic considerations in each. We conclude with aspirations for future studies in this vein.

Synthesising Multispecies & Sensory Research

The linkage between multispecies and multisensory inquiry is recent, if tenuous. While anthropology offers entry points to sensory ethnography (Stoller's *Taste of Ethnographic Things*; Pink's *Doing Sensory Ethnography*)[2], few studies *explicitly* employ sensory methods to study more-than-humans (Myers' "Plant Sensing," Puig de la Bellacasa's "Haptic Vision"). A special issue by Natasha Fijn and Muhammad Kavesh marks a key exception and signals broader interests in the intersections between multispecies and multisensory research. Nearby disciplines also champion "multispecies ethnography" (Kirksey and Helmreich; Ameli), through tools of "attunement" (van Dooren et al.) and ethology (Hartigan Jr.), with somewhat separate discourses on how to approach ethnographic writing (de Gennaro) or qualitative methods for more-than-human inquiry (Elton et al.). Amidst these developments, we take seriously the ways in which "the time of writing shape

[2] We recognise anthropology's significant contributions to scholarly engagements with the senses; however, given our multidisciplinary and multispecies approach, we cannot expand on disciplinary debates here. For a more detailed discussion see Pink and Howes 2010 and Ingold 2011.

ethnographic accounts, sifting and filtering the unruly assemblage of fieldwork experiences" (Lien and Pálsson, 3).

To hybridise multispecies and multisensory research, we take our cues from feminist thinkers who decentre humans as the premise. For instance, Anna Tsing calls for "immersion" in more-than-human sociality (27) and Donna Haraway (*When Species Meet*) evokes agility in more-than-human "contact zones." Vinciane Despret names sensory cues in her analysis of proximities and responses created between primatologists and the baboons they study. She offers the example of a researcher relieving herself in front of the baboons emphasising sensory cues "in urine, in noise, in surprise" (66), which show how bodily impressions and affective experiences are inseparable from knowledge. Similarly, Karen Barad uses the figure of a brittle star to collapse knowing, touching, and being, blurring the lines "between the mind of the knowing subject and the materiality of the outside world" ("Invertebrate Visions" 227). These works highlight the importance of sensory cues and a need for an ongoing reflexivity of how our embodied experiences and culturally shaped sensory biases (Howes and Classen) influence how we perceive, respond to, and represent other than human beings and their worlds.

Our own endeavours prompt us with the question of how to *hold onto that attention and immersive experiences* long after field research is completed, especially when we write about our encounters in scholarly and expository genres. In particular, we see a dearth in discussions about responsible representations of the emergent and ephemeral nature of sensory experience and the spatio-temporal distance between empirical encounters i.e., at the time of data collection, and the writing process i.e., the "documentation" of multisensory "data" (with the exceptions of Elain Gan's "diagramming" and Sadokierski and Rissanen's drawings). This is why we emphasise the modes and frequency of *documentation* in a sensoriographic approach to keep sensory cues alive long enough to make more sense of them.

Amidst multisensory/multispecies guides, the topic of writing is scant with often a generalised call for "writing that is attuned to life's emergence within a shifting assemblage of agentive beings" (Ogden et al. 6) without naming *to which sense* we attune or how. Most of these works build on Tsing's "arts of noticing" (*Mushroom at the End* 27), interpreted as a "reflexive ethnography of the sensory kind [...] paying attention to the sensibilities of diverse more-than-human entangled ways of life" (Palmer 80). We also see the immediacy of immersing oneself in the field with "rubber boots" to counter "knowledge production ... dominated by sensing from afar" (Bubandt et al. 6-7). We draw on these approaches, but also see an assumption that one can simply sense the world and spell it out on paper. Furthermore, reflections often stop short of what to do at the point of writing. Phenomenologists (like Tim Ingold and Maurice Merleau-Ponty) have pointed out the inseparability of bodily experience and conceptual thought, but translating thoughts into writing seems such a given that it does not warrant guidance. Meanwhile, philosophers like Michel Serres (132) and Jacques Derrida (405) interrogate the irreducibility of material and vital

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things to mere language/signs as forms of representation.[3] How, then, do we hold the tensions between sensing the world and writing its complexities? How do we write with the worlds we study?

Ethical pursuits to both know and portray earthly beings raises a line of questioning: Who are we speaking for, with, and to what effects when *storying* more-than-human worlds? And what modes of representation are apt to the stories they convey? Ever since the animal turn, researchers have called to diversify representations of nonhuman creatures (Haraway, *When Species Meet,* 19). Early zoologists like Jane Goodall (photography) and Konrad Lorenz (cinematography) have employed multiple forms of media (McHugh 212). However, despite these diversifications, more-than-human stories remain focussed on linguistic and visual accounts. In response, artistic methods (e.g., Petitt et al.) and design (e.g., Westerlaken) have tried to elaborate multiple modalities—a promising development. That said, we also turn our attention to the craft of words as the craft of worlds, because "it matters what stories we tell" *and write* (Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble,* 12). In this regard we are inspired by literary examples that foreground histories (e.g., Ruby Ekkel's account of lyrebirds) and biographies (White and Whitlock's "Writings and Rights"), poetic convergences (Magrane's climate geopoetics, Cooke's Ethological Poetics, or Desmond's use of poetry in animal ethnography), as well as popular books since they lead with less prominent senses, like Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (sound), Michael Pollan's *Omnivore's Dilemma* (taste), and Melanie Kiechle's *Smell Detectives* (scent). Each affirm that sensory experiences can have profound impacts on how we write the nonhuman.

At the heart of sensoriographic considerations is the reality that sensory knowledge can be simple, self-evident, even mundane, but as a scientific practice it can be difficult to systematise, confusing to explain, and a challenge to synthesise and validate. We thereby define this approach as a multisensory mode of knowing and documenting multispecies encounters that accounts for the practical and conceptual challenge of keeping the senses alive long enough to revisit. In sum, within the surge in multispecies studies, difficulties in sensing, documenting, and representing remain a perennial problem. Our paper takes up these challenges and asks not only how the senses can help us know and make knowable the nonhuman, but also how we might navigate the methodological challenges that arise across disciplines.

On Approach

As researchers who hail from diverse disciplines but converge at the question of multispecies inquiry, we share an interest in clarifying what it means to experience, document, and write our encounters with other earthly beings. Our approach was first informed by a 2024 workshop at the University of Augsburg, with prompts to

[3] For debates on (animal) representations and discourses on non-representational theory (NRT) see Derrida's *The Animal That Therefore I Am* as well as Philip Vannini's edited collection *Non-representational and More-than-human Research*.

prime the senses, walks, and writing exercises.[4] The workshop's goal was to articulate when and how sensory details can augment our understanding of more-than-human worlds, with subsequent iterations over six online meetings over two years (Figure 1). Through these iterations, and drawing on our field sites and species of interest, we noticed the tensions and limits of current methods: what to document, by which means, and with what integrity?

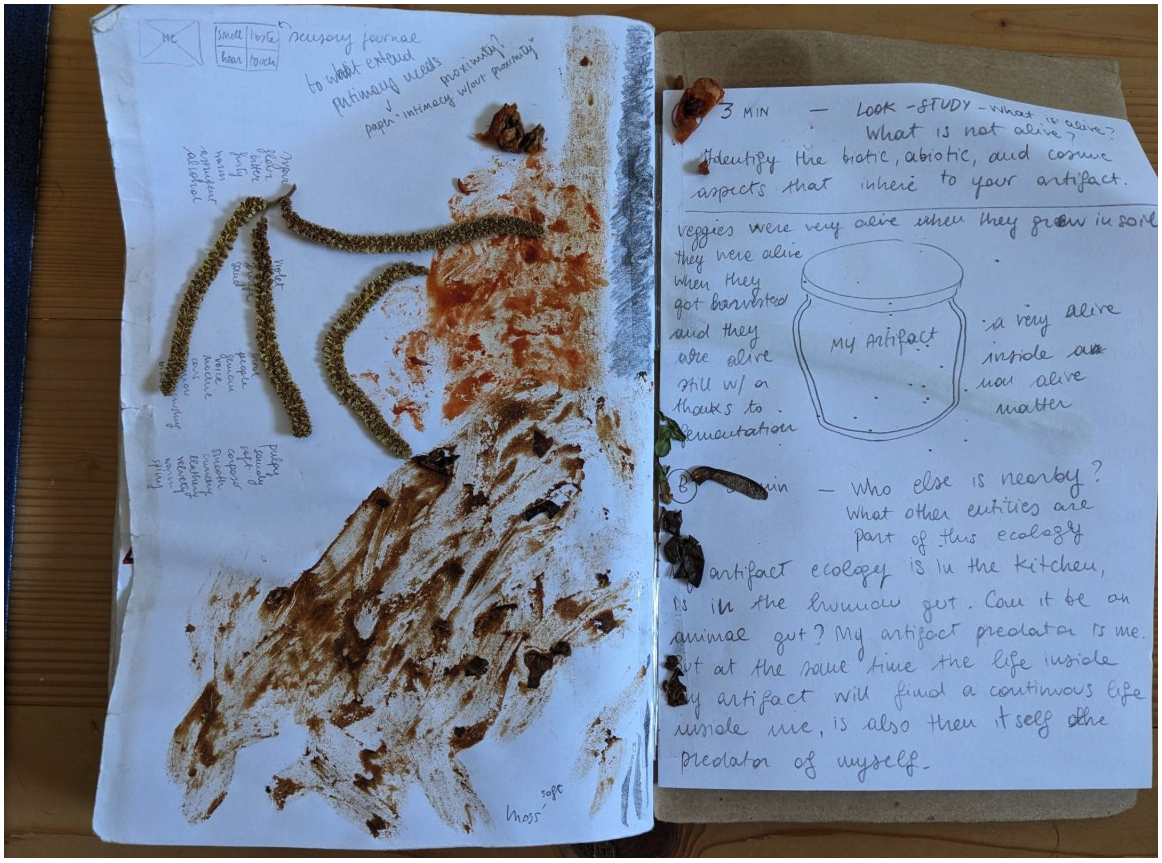


Figure 1

Rooted in our respective research practices, we understand sensory modes to *expand* ways of knowing more-than-human others, allowing us to know and make knowable the more-than-human world in less anthropocentric terms. With expand, we gesture to the wider array of senses beyond the visual—sound, taste, scent, touch, movement, and more, and in combinatorial ways—while also accounting for the challenges of representing these experiences. These challenges raise questions of practicalities (how to represent smells?) and of formats (how to represent smells in

[4] Sample prompts included: How can immersive practices help us make sense of/with other living entities? How can we document our encounters with others? For the latter, participants were asked to engage with a (living) artefact, that contained/evoked multispecies and multisensory encounters. Probing questions included: What all is in this artifact? Identify the biotic, abiotic, and cosmic aspects that inhere to your artifact. Who else is nearby? What other entities are part of this ecology? Identify what other forces could engage with your artifact if left on its own. How will aspects of this artifact change in 1 hour, 1 day, 1 week, 1 month, 1 year, 1 decade, 1 human lifetime, 1 century? When possible, engage from a nonhuman point of view, paying attention to when you use active/passive voice.

scholarly publications?). Our discussions below thus hold the tensions of how one comes to know (sensorially)—while also staying with the trouble of not being able to fully know other earthly beings given our sensorial subjectivities and the spatio-temporal distance from moments of encounter to that of writing.

We coded these tensions and arrived at three themes—challenges with immersing, recording, and storying—at the intersection of multispecies research and sensory methods. Thus, beyond the workshop and back in the throes of research, we drew on the granular details from our experiences with diverse species—aquatic, nocturnal, and microscopic—and field sites across Europe, Australia, and North America. Since our initial workshop was framed both as an applied and conceptual intervention, we use this paper to enumerate the challenges of trying to collect, analyse, and articulate sensory data long after the fact.

In acknowledging the partiality and subjectivity of our collective endeavour, on one level the "we" in this article refers to the six of us and the range of sites, species, and contexts (on land, and in water) "visible" to the ear, nose, or tongue. But "we" also refers to researchers furthering multispecies scholarship. These two levels allow us to extrapolate shared frustrations while specifying the species and research contexts we bring into view. To add further scaffolding, we offer a portrait of the six researchers and their fields of inquiry, grouped together by species-specific challenges.

Diving into aquatic relations, Sasha follows cod to an island off of what is now easternmost Canada: Newfoundland and Labrador. "Everyone is here because of fish," an eighth generation Fogo Islander tells her. But this changed in 1992, when the industry collapsed and the government announced a moratorium that lasted until 2024. So, more specifically, Sasha follows the ghosts of an industrial fish, including their lives in water and their representations on land. Pepe encounters sea urchins by hand, and repeatedly again through memory. On the wharf in Tromsø, she tries to understand echinoderms beyond sight, with sound and touch holding overlapping yet distinct memories. Fingertips become tools to see and simultaneously record. Philine follows the immobile oyster that nevertheless travels internationally and finds itself shucked on global plates. Even in the water, the oyster is silent, so to understand its history she looks to the environments and people that grow and eat them. Her journey spans the landmass between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, recounting her rookie experience of shucking in Maine. She recounts her impressive encounter in listed form, impressive not for the killing (that happens, extraordinarily, in her mouth) but for the immense difficulty of trying *not* to speak for or through the oyster's lives.

Through the stories of nocturnal gliders and possums, Lena traces the impacts of native-forest logging in southeast Australia, a place where evolutionary and Anthropocene timescales collide in a fiery present. Challenged with both the ephemerality of sensory experience and of telling a multispecies story with multiple temporal layers, Lena thinks about forests and their more-than-human inhabitants with leaves, narrating their impressions through poetry.

Microbes, famously, challenge sight's monopoly on sensing who and what is

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present and where, yet microbial relations are inherently multispecies because they call in insects and plants (as well as humans) into sociality. Sevgi shares the excitement of the first tasting of wine produced by her family in Gokceada, Turkey, setting the stage for sensing interactions among microbes, fruit flies, and humans that surround the practice of making wine. Maya studies microbes in fermentation, sometimes in Japan, and sometimes overnight.

The following sections cite our previously written sensory accounts from our workshop, vignettes that came from subsequent online meetings, and our own data sets. We iterated on these writings to *revisit* our data (a notion to which we return), most of which is unpublished as fieldnotes and processual documentation. In analysing our notes, we collectively name three characteristics and tensions that span challenges in immersing, recording, and storying sensory experiences. We lead with these tensions, which we organise in three sets related to different phases of multispecies research: immersing, recording, and storying. We use progressive verbs rather than static nouns to highlight the dynamic and iterative nature of sensoriographic writing, partly to emphasise how our contribution is a methodological one.

Immersing

Following Tsing and others in crafting "critical descriptions" ("More-than-Human Sociality" 28), we find that sensoriographic accounts rely on immersion where direct participation in more-than-human worlds allows us to make sense *of* and *with* them. By immersing ourselves in worlds unfamiliar to human primal senses, we face challenges such as ocularcentrism and a privileging of individual over communal experience.

Ocularcentrism

What does the tongue know that the eye does not? And what about the nose or the ear? Sensing is plural. It is to engage the senses as an ensemble and not as a soloist and yet sight too often dominates descriptions of what it entails—and how it feels—to immerse yourself in your site of study. Furthermore, ocularcentrism may rule on land but loses its power in water, even with goggles, and so to document and detail acts of immersing, we challenge ocularcentrism by leading with other sensory cues in the following two examples.

Graduate school taught Sasha to memorise research methods as if she were studying for a citizenship exam: quantitative, qualitative, and mixed, interviews, oral histories, and participant observation, close reading, mapping, and analysis. But on the floor of the processing plant where workers bank an hourly wage to turn fish into food, what helps her most to sense, to notice, to remember, are the dance lessons that shaped her limbs as they grew from adolescent to adult. "I call on my body to store the sights and sounds and smells of fish becoming food, shrinking into fillets, as if they

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were choreography to repeat and rehearse and, eventually, perform," she recalls. "But maybe I should do this even when notebooks and phones are allowed?" she wonders. After all, phones cannot record smells (although hers certainly track streaks of butter, prints of chocolate) and yet smell is often essential for immersing, for sensing, for orientation and for knowing if something edible has gone "off."

In the nocturnal forests of East Gippsland, Lena can detect the small gliding mammal she seeks high up in the canopy only by mediation: Through the red light of torches, gentle on the eyes whose shine she scans the treetops for, cross-referenced with her attention to the sounds of rustling leaves, the alarm of an owl calling, and the odd sensation of a silent shadow gliding overhead, she tracks the southern greater glider, whose arboreal life, threatened by logging and repeated forest fire, has only recently been visualised by Australian researchers. Detecting their presence is spatial as it is auditory, a kind of knowing that may not be proximal but still felt (Santaoja et al. 139). The immediacy of sight precludes the changes of other senses chiming into the experience. Night-time heightens the non-visual senses in ways that make the forest contexts rich in textures (Schlegel 330-334).

Individual versus Communal Scale of Sensory Experience

These are individual accounts, so how does a single experience of sensory knowing scale up to the many who can sense? How is sensing shared? And does it confirm or clash with someone else's experience? Philine encountered communal forms of sensing, when a mollusc farmer invited her to his wharf and his son handed her a bucket of oysters: "More than once, I got it wrong and splintered the shells, standing as if over a broken egg […] And yet [...] I had shucked oysters; I had become part, for a moment, of *a shared choreography* across space and time." Immersing ourselves in multispecies worlds situates the researcher in particular coordinates of time and space that reflect continuities (and discontinuities) for knowing other earthly beings.

During fieldwork in Turkey, Sevgi breaks the spell of sipping wine with locals by posing a question that they would never think to ask. A question that interrupts: "How do you make good wine?" Her uncle, his lips courting his third glass, was the only one who took her seriously. "To make good wine, you watch the flies," he tells her. And although she did not know if he said this "under the influence of the alcohol produced by the microbes," she coaxed him to say more. "To make good wine, you follow the vinegar flies. When you leave the grapes to ferment for wine, vinegar flies appear on them. These flies enable the wine to ferment. They disappear when the boiling stops and the fermented grapes (must) settle to the bottom. That's when the wine is ready to be filtered."

Experiences with such traditional practices confront us with unruly questions: How can we sense and represent multisensory experiences that slip past Western ways of sensing, or engage with ritual and spiritual realms that are often written off in favour of scientific explanations? In other words, how can we render the crucial

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sensory engagements through which people navigate multispecies relations in traditional practices, such as the rituals of making wine that are performed collectively but rarely written down or even discussed among practitioners themselves? The stakes of engaging with communal sensing pushes us to move beyond debates in the so-called high and low senses, so named to privilege sight and sound as objective modes of observing the natural world (i.e., over the more subjective and idiosyncratic discernments in taste and touch).[5] By attuning to the multiplicity of sensing (synaesthetically within a body, collectively across several bodies), sensoriographic approaches thus have the potential to take in sensorial worlds and resist Western, Global North, or scientific gazes that reduce earthly beings to captured data.

We extend our argument about collective sensing to the other earthly beings in and of the worlds we study since what kind of data can we collect and analyse if we only keep to sight and human-centered accounts?[6] Sensorially speaking, there is the question of what the cod knows, what the flies know of the microbes, what the oyster and sea urchin know.[7] Like Philine, Pepe encounters a bucket full of life. It is raining in Tromsø and her hand dives into the bucket of sea water to catch a green urchin. "Its spikes move in an alien way," she details. "Does it want to go somewhere specific? Does it know that the sea—and not just its water—is on the other side of this wall?" To her eyes, the sea is close, but what does the sea urchin sense? Seeing alone is not immersive. The other senses have to tag along, and even take over at times, to better represent the thickness of experience, the stickiness of research.

Recording

Flashes of moments are all we have as we return to our sensory encounters to write them.[8] Even if we record something in visual or audio forms to review later, we first experienced them at a different time/place with nothing but our bodies to provide the continuity of then/there. Since one's sensory experiences are situated and first written onto the body as inscriptions, to document multispecies worlds is to distribute modes of knowing across the body to produce multiple accounts—both in sensory cues and the ways they are documented. A sensoriographic approach to recording data thus lives from repeatedly encountering, reliving the senses, both first-hand and mediated. In engaging with sensoriographic modes of recording, we face two main challenges: the fallibility of memory and the ephemerality of sensory experience.

[5] For sensory hierarchies, consult Anthony Synnott (1991) and Constance Classen (1993).
[6] See, for instance, the works of Eduardo Kohn's *How Forests Think,* Agustín Fuentes' "Naturalcultural Encounters in Bali," and Michael Marder's *Plant-Thinking.*
[7] For what animals know, see Despret's *What Would Animals Say If We Asked the Right Questions?*
[8] Ingold explains the process as such: "You try very hard to remember what you have observed, or what people have told you, and lest you forget, you write it all down in fieldnotes as soon as the opportunity arises" ("That's Enough About Ethnography!" 386).

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Fallibility of Memory

Our recall is fallible, so critically engaging with the possibilities and limitations of memory is an explicit part of sensoriographic practice. In Sevgi's case, wine-making needs to be "remade all the time, made new," both materially and in/from memory. Writing her fieldnotes is not about retrieving exact records, but about a vulnerable reconstruction of lived experience, reconstructed by "the particular relationship formed … with a particular set of people in a particular time and place" (Behar 5). Memory is thus formative, shaped by the act of recording itself. It is a bridge between the personal nature of sensory experience and the dimensions of documenting it. While sensory moments are ephemeral and often resist stable documentation, memory allows these fleeting impressions to be revisited, re-felt, and reformulated into something shareable. In this way, rather than striving for a single, objective capture, memory invites multiplicity where each remembered sensation inflects a different subjectivity.

Far too often we task our camera phones with remembering sites and recording sounds. But at the fish processing plant Sasha's phone stays sandwiched in her jacket pocket, which she was required to take off before entering the factory floor. "My sole tool for recording my research is my own body, my only recording equipment is my senses, my memory," she writes. "What happens when memory is your only way to return to, to process your research? And if memory turns off, if its clarity flickers, how do you turn it back on?"

Memory can also be selective, Pepe acknowledges. "Everything has happened so fast. My memory fails remembering which tools I use to crush the sea urchin. But I do remember crushing it open. So much water spills out." When memory fails in one account, it registers in another. In Pepe's example, visual memory happened to be selective where she does not remember the tool, but the sensation of cold water running through her fingers revived the memory of crushing the shell. The issue is gathering as many different sensory memories that one can have an array of experiential data. We understand a sensoriographic approach as explicitly engaging with this remit.

We see memory as a means of *revisiting* research. Iteration allows sensory data to span research temporalities, such as the times of data collection (field notes) and data analysis (exegesis). For instance, in Haraway's reading of Despret's "curious practice" (*Staying with the Trouble*), "visiting" emerges not as passive observation, but as an active mode of curiosity—one that resists mastery and instead invites openness to being changed by the encounter. To visit, in this sense, is to approach beings, data, or concepts not to extract meaning, but to dwell with them, to listen differently, and to remain accountable to their alterity. Building on this, we argue that *re-visiting* data is not a mere act of recall, but a renewed, embodied engagement—a sensory re-encounter that acknowledges the shifting nature of knowledge and perception. Re-visiting becomes an opportunity to sense again, to be affected anew,

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and to sustain curiosity as an epistemic stance rather than a methodological phase.

Thought of in this way, writing fieldnotes becomes an intentional reliving moment that allows a creative tool to engage with the sensory aspects of knowing more-than-human others. Much like Marcel Proust's madeleine (*Remembrance of Things Past*), where the taste triggers an involuntary flood of memory, writing becomes the opportunity to relive sensation as a way of knowing/exploring. It is not just the memory of salt hitting the tongue, but also the recollection of a movement, the action of shucking an oyster that can fire words. As Philine writes, "If your body remembers, and not just your brain, then the movement from knife to pen can be swift." By re-living the sense-making process of what we encounter, we can analyse data from elsewhere, elsewhen.

By acknowledging our own bodily complicity in the matter, sensoriographic data collection is not just a mental recall, but a bodily reliving and a proactive, recursive attempt at multiplicitously documenting each iteration. Rather than prioritising a perfect account that is "captured" from the start, a sensoriographic approach prioritises the multiplicity of sensory accounts, both within one body, and across multiple bodily encounters over time.

Ephemerality of Sensory Experience

Repetition also allows ephemeral sensory data to span research temporalities and repetition can exist outside of written notes.[9] For instance, Sasha asks: how do you task your body with not only sensing an experience, but recording it through gestures and triggers? "To record my research, I must remember and to remember I must repeat." Sensoriographic writing uses materials, both physical and textual, to invite researchers to *revisit* earlier encounters.

Revisiting data is less of a reminder and more of a renewed encounter through re-embodying sensory forms. For Sevgi, "these sensory experiences might seem to revolve around people," but she notes, "with *every* revisit, more-than-human details come alive." Each encounter with family members, grapes, yeast, and flies show the deep evolutionary relationship across animal, plant, insect, and microscopic species. For yeast and flies especially, "Both feed on decaying foods, but flies have an extraordinary sensitivity to the flavours produced by yeasts," so much so that the flies become the visible markers of wine's microscopic transformation. In traditional winemaking, people followed flies, reaching into the insect's sensoria much like how hunting dogs help humans perceive what they cannot. Over time, the taste of microbial transformation correlate with fruit fly patterns, and taste memories become written into her body as much as in the wine. With iterative visits, a bottle brought back from a visit, poems drafted, tastings, sniffs, and photographs feel more evocative than any other ethnographic note.

"My hand was holding not a pen, but a knife," Philine writes of her oyster-

[9] For a discussion of inscribing sensory experiences *onto* the body in the form of performance, see Denise Nuttall's "The Art of Tabla Playing."

shucking tutorial, pointing to the utter impossibility of writing experiences as they happen. For her, the repeated act of shucking became the data worth savouring: "It was the process—pry, twist, wrench, cut—that served as a mnemonic bridge, a way to hang on to the memory and keep alive the finger-feel of oyster shells." Much later, Philine notes the value in this repetition. "Mentally immersing myself in this routine," she writes, "helps me recall details registered months ago that come alive again in the moment of writing." The routinised movements of shucking became a tool for reactivating sense-memory.

Philine's finger-feel of the oyster shell mirrors how Pepe makes sense of sea urchins: "The materiality and sound of the test crack surprised me. Water came out, more than I expected, as well as other strings belonging to the digestive tract. Aristotle's lantern—the sea urchin complex mouth apparatus—was the next element *my fingertips were looking at*. It seemed like a fidgeting puzzle, so compact and complex." In recounting the moment of cracking open an urchin, Pepe's "fingertips were looking at" its mouth apparatus. Here, it is not her eyes that see: there is no technical description of the mouth. Instead, her fingertips see, consistent with what Eva Hayward calls "fingeryeyes" (580) in the haptic/optic way we make sense of first impressions.

For Lena, the touch and scent of eucalyptus leaves collected during her strolls through the forests of East Gippsland offer a reminder of the ephemerality of sensory data: as leaves decay, their structure changes, colours dwindle, and scent diminishes (Figure 2). They offer vivid recollections of those forests and the creatures inhabiting them, as she tracked forms of multispecies care in the aftermath of the Black Summer Bushfires. Months later, the dried and pressed leaves make a reappearance in Augsburg—once a delicate peppermint gum tree, the favourite food of ringtail possums now makes for a pale and flat reflection, the leathery structure of Errinundra shining gum only hinting at the majestic appearance of this endemic tree which greater gliders favour for their dens—allowing Lena to produce a ten-verse poem as part of her analytical process (Schlegel 330-334). Unaware that they would later allow her to re-embody a time/place of then/there, re-placing herself into an immersed mode of being with and in the forests, as she picked up leaves and slipped them into her notebooks: "I had sensed that once back in the distance of my office, *I might need something more substantial than pictures or notes to animate my writing* about those encounters that shaped the deeply more-than-human experience of my fieldwork."

Lena, again, unexpectedly encounters eucalyptus trees while in Puglia on a writing retreat. Upon rubbing them in her hand, she unlocks a repository of lemon-scented sensory experience, which simultaneously reminds her of the ephemerality of leaves and the lingering impression of their scent. She reflects in her poem:

> A whiff of a memory pulls me back
> on a track dug by potoroos
> And the scratching of lyrebirds
> Just as I grasp it, it escapes. (Schlegel, verse 9)

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These scented senses become recorded on multiple registers: imprinted into the body of a researcher, onto the "page" that a researcher produces, and within the minds of the reader who takes up such publications.

Sensoriographic recording offers an invitation of not shrugging off the possibility to capture ephemeral data. It serves future provocations and re-immerses us in sensorial, affective, and contextual ways.

Storying

Reliving memories, both figuratively and materially, is also the prerequisite for what we call storying—collating sensory experiences into a cogent whole. This process is non-innocent, in that sensoriographic storying entails actively (re)creating immersive, more-than-human experiences as selective narratives. It therefore concludes the challenge of double translation—of articulating one's experiences into writing and toward a wider audience. With possibilities also come responsibilities, and we note two main tensions with regard to storying, including how to articulate and revise the partial experiences created through recursive and diverse forms of documentation, and the problem of representation, that is, how to speak for, through and with other-than-human beings and their worlds. The recursive nature of sensoriographic writing thus continues through the storying phase, where researchers are called to continuously interrogate the implications of the worlds (re)produced through our narrations.

Partial and Recurring Revisions

Multispecies storytelling faces the challenge of tidying up multisensory and more-than-human data into compelling narratives, tailored to an audience, and perhaps to certain objectives (Bencke and Bruhn 10). Sensoriographic storying is about staying with these tensions and creating rich and situated accounts by engaging with a diversity of data and documentation, then iteratively revisiting them. To the extent that direct, immersive experience helps us notice differences that come to matter, turning our immersive multisensory encounters back into stories challenges us to iteratively employ diverse and multimodal practices.

As Lena notes when trying to detail the scent of a tree significant to her field site, language sometimes falls flat in describing things in their own terms rather than by comparison. The southern sassafras occurs as a canopy tree in Victoria's rare cool temperate rainforests and its scent is as distinct as it is unfamiliar. When she later revisits the scene to write about it, she realises with frustration that what she memorised as a unique experience was commonly described either by comparing it to familiar smells—cinnamon—or to scientific nomenclature—e.g. butyric acid. However, these descriptions failed to capture both the immediate impression of smell and the wider embodied experience of being in that forest (Figure 2).

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Figure 2

Every time we re-live immersive experiences, we encounter different layers of noticing and questioning. Although writing can be facilitated with materials from archives and field work, we argue that it is the recursive and repeated (re)writing—and thinking—that can bring words, rhythms, and provocations to life. Storying more-than-human worlds is about writing anew, mingling with the trouble of double

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translation: Of first making sense of unfamiliar experiences ourselves, and then articulating that experience back to a wider audience. Recursive writing is what makes it a living account—both in processes (of data analysis) and in outputs (publications).

We thereby expand Adrienne Rich's argument (18) that writing is re-vision, and re-viewing—seeing once again what was—and unpack its multisensory potential to engage the full body's memory (recall, for example, the notion of touching as seeing).[10] In this sense, sensoriographic storying is a more-than-textual "diffractive practice," to draw on Barad's account—of "re-turning as in turning it over and over again" ("Diffracting Diffraction" 168)—and of thereby making anew. By attending to the diverse sensibilities that arise at different stages of research, we recognise both the limits of our senses and the situatedness of our experiences (Haraway, "Situated Knowledges"). Sensoriographic analysis takes these challenges not as limitations, but as productive tensions of providing partial accounts, in Haraway's words: for "the connections and unexpected openings" that "situated knowledges make possible" (590).

Here, we follow feminist critiques of objectivity that point to the impossibility of one true, value-neutral, universalised account. Sensory data inheres to particularities such that they lay no claim for enduring, infallible, holistic, or generalisable accounts. Processual in nature, the iterative approach of sensoriographic storying explicitly engages with different senses, perspectives, formats/media, sensing bodies, and encounters over time. Rather than prioritizing a perfect account that is "captured" from the start, a sensoriographic approach commits to stories "ruled by partial sight and limited voice—not partiality for its own sake but, rather, for the sake of the connections and unexpected openings situated knowledges make possible" (ibid).

We thereby also seek to displace hierarchies that privilege certain senses (namely sight and sound) over others (taste, touch) on account of their being subjectively interpreted (Korsmeyer, chapter 1; Mol, chapter 3). The sensoriographic goal of "writing the senses" is not necessarily accuracy of what happened then/there distilled down to a singular story of what is being (re-)presented here/now. Rather, the goal is more varied accounts synthesised by the many, diverse, partial accounts that make up complex knowing.

Speaking for, through, and with

To sense with, through, and on behalf of other beings also raises questions about the boundaries of (human) perception: Can we sense what others can sense? And do we even have the capacity to represent their sensory experiences ethically,

[10] The irony is not lost on us that we're mobilizing a visual metaphor while also advocating for more-than-visual means to engage with sensory worlds. In this sense, a better concept may be Sarah Whatmore's "return" to materiality in "that what is new (as in different) about the something/happening […] is a product of repetition—turning seemingly familiar matters over and over, like the pebbles on a beach" ("Materialist Returns" 601).

without ventriloquism defaulting to a human narrator? Who or what are we representing, which imaginaries are we inadvertently feeding into, and for whom does this matter?

These questions invite researchers to be conscious and critical about the language they use and the claims they make. Maya notes the way that sourdough microbes—in an effort to steer away from their germ-centric imaginary—are often anthropomorphised as being "happy" when they are bubbling in metabolic activity, and "dead" when dormant or when undesirable microbes take over (visually, the same critique applies). While the monikers are relatable to human readers, the language of "happy" and "dead" obscures who microbes are since we cannot know if or how they are happy, let alone limit the ones worth noticing to the (sourdough) microbes who leaven (and not the undesirable ones who are very much alive).[11] Language is never innocent, accused of being granted "too much power" (Barad's "Posthumanist Performativity" 801). It can deceive and silence as much as it can enchant and enliven.

Philine notes the tension between her sensing and that of another creature's, especially with regards to how to make claims on the oyster's experience. In a list of axioms, she writes:

> 1. Be an oyster.
> 2. Don't hear with your ears; don't smell with your nose: you have neither.
> 3. How do you experience the world around you?
> […]
> 7. Does the oyster lack senses vital to our understanding of the world, or do we lack the capacity to understand theirs?
> […]
> 9. If an oyster tastes of a place and of the things it eats, does it taste them, too? How does it experience the water it gulps, filters, and absorbs?

Here, she struggles to narrativize an oyster's experience, whereby the imperative form shifts perspective out of an anthropocentric frame.

Lena, too, grapples with the authority of telling multispecies stories of life and loss in the forests of East Gippsland. For her, poetry becomes another way of telling both the lifeworlds of the species at stake, and the multiple temporalities of evolution, land use, and disasters clashing in what Tsing and others have called the "patchy Anthropocene" (186):

> Generations of gliders
> Inhabiting hollows
> Forests enduring ice ages
> But not the dozers and blazes
> […]
> Ghosts of extinction

[11] The critique here is not about anthropomorphism per se, since, as Natasha Myers notes, anthropomorphism can open up entirely new concepts and epistemologies. In studying how plant biologists know what a plant can know: "She is interested in how plants do the things they do and she uses available concepts to communicate her insights. These concepts are lures [...] And yet, it is by bringing these concepts to bear on plant sensory phenomena that she is simultaneously changing the very meaning of these terms" (62).

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Haunting dead coupes
Lineages broken
Renewal suppressed (Schlegel, verses 2, 4)

In mobilising the affective quality of words (Ingold's "From Experience to Language"), poetry stimulates nonlinear thinking and layers the material and affective impressions of field encounters, while leaving room for multiple interpretations. Amid the political struggles over forest management, affect becomes a crucial "sense" to think with and relate to animals whose nocturnal, arboreal lives tend to remain in the dark even as their worlds collapse.

Storying thus brings into question our place (beyond protagonist positions) while also being in the worlds in which we write. A helpful distinction made by Ingold is in how the "ethnographicness" of an account differs from the real-life, inter-personal (indeed inter-species) encounters. An account "is rather a judgment that is cast upon them through a retrospective conversion of the learning, remembering and note-taking …. It is this that turns your experience, your memory and your notes into material" ("That's Enough About Ethnography!" 386). Similarly, a sensoriographic account is a series of judgments—throughout immersing and recording and beyond—about what to convert from the experiential into noteworthy material. Famously, Ingold critiqued how (ethnographic) accounts are always *with* rather than *about* a community, ("Anthropology is Not Ethnography" 82-83).[12] We would add proposing of a sensoriographic sensibility is to direct our focus toward how to do this kind of accounting *with* our critters of study and not *about* them. To write *with* other creatures, their sensoria, our (collective) sensoria, over time, requires myriad "conversions" (to borrow Ingold's term) that make up storying processes. In this manner, sensoriographic storying takes these challenges not as limitations, but as productive tensions in thinking and *sensing-with* other earthly beings.

Toward More Responsive Accounts of Multispecies Research

Our shared interests in studying and writing about the more-than-human prompted us to engage with the practical, experiential, and ethical challenges that arise from a sensoriographic approach. Building on feminist ethics of response-ability (Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble* 2; Despret 68), we see sensoriographic approaches as being responsive, centring the senses within multispecies research. In doing so, we seek to explicitly bridge the growing body of multispecies/multisensory scholarship by providing practical insights into using the senses during field research

[12] In *Being Alive,* Ingold argues that sensory experiences cannot be embodied as that would imply a kind of containment within a bounded body that is ontologically separated from the world. To thus "embody" sensory cues would mean that we are plonked on top of a "landscape" surface, rather than acknowledge our being "in the swirling midst of the weather-world" (*Being Alive* 135). "Far from being enfolded into the body," he writes, light, sound, and feelings *move us* and *move through us* precisely because we are immersed in these worlds (134). We nevertheless use the language of embodiment to signal our commitments to (new) materialist and feminist literature on how differential bodies can know and know otherwise.

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and beyond. Sensoriographic praxis emerges as a reflexive learning process in which researchers cultivate sensibilities to the ways human–nonhuman interactions can be sensed and recorded, remembered and represented.

As our vignettes show, immersion requires multisensory attentiveness and curiosity toward other species including imagining and attending to unfamiliar species and sensorial realms beyond our individual experience. In recording our impressions, we are called to creatively engage with a variety of source materials and forms of documentation as we reflect on the limitations of our own memory and the ephemerality of sensory experience. Finally, to story in lively yet robust ways, we re-visit, re-view, re-write, and reflect on our recordings again and again. So, although we cluster our sensoriographic experience in three phases following the research process from field to text—immersion, recording, and storying—this is not a linear process; instead, it is a dynamic set of iterative practices. It stays true to particularities by moving beyond simply extracting sensorial data: it invites embodied, relational, and responsive sensorial engagements with more-than-human worlds and a willingness to stay with the stickiness that such an endeavour affords.

What we offer here is by no means a complete account of sensoriography. Instead, we hope that by sharing our challenges and insights, we invite future experimentations to multiply and diversify it as a praxis, even helping to "transform existing frameworks, practices, and approaches to research" (Bastian et al. 1). As a mode of data collection/analysis, a sensoriographic approach holds tensions of speaking for/with/nearby, it invites more-than-anthropological accounts, and it relies on the affordances and limits of senses and our memories of them.

It also diversifies what counts as data, including the range of documentations, the voices they represent, and the politics they imply. It provides insights for future multispecies-multisensory research that nuances debates in "writing culture" (Clifford and Marcus) and "thick descriptions" (Whatmore) especially in ethnographies. Lastly, a sensoriographic sensibility privileges modes of knowing that remain relegated and downplayed in academic knowledge production (beyond vision, for instance), whether that is the so-called lower senses (taste, smell, touch), emotions, and phrasings other than English, and sensorial experiences that extend/challenge hegemonic (western, Global North) perceptions of the senses.[13]

Our paper addresses the difficulties of documenting the senses in intersubjective, trans-species terms. By shifting approaches from one episodic encounter to recursively reliving experience over temporal/spatial divides, the goal of a sensoriographic approach is to create responsive accounts of multilayered experience, synthesised by the many, diverse, partial accounts that make up complex knowing. And, as such, it contributes to ongoing debates about non-/representational modes of knowledge production. As disciplines in the humanities and social sciences increasingly examine earthly beings in their environments and relational webs, a

[13] That said, we acknowledge the limitations, including the potentially Anglo-centric, ableist, and totalizing tendencies, of centering the bodily senses.

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sensoriographic approach simultaneously broadens the tools and hones the analytical precision of more-than-human study. We propose a sensoriographic approach as a methodological intervention because it discerns both what happens within (one's body, one's sense organs) as well as what happens throughout (a space)—we feel it and it feels us.

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Rumours and Realities: Employing Satire to Navigate the Blah Blah Blah of Neoliberal Environmental Politics

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Abstract

Examining the film *Rumours* (2024), this paper explores the affordances of satire in advancing systemic critique and navigating beyond apocalyptic narratives in environmental advocacy. *Rumours* employs satire to expose the ineptitude of world leaders and neoliberalism in addressing climate urgency, while concurrently examining the intersections of gender, capitalism, and environmental justice. The film critiques the superficiality and inefficacy of leadership, emphasizing the need to shift responsibility from individuals to broader systems. It challenges the misplaced reliance on ecomodernism and technofixes, which fail to address underlying socio-political issues. By highlighting persistent gender biases and socio-economic disparities, *Rumours* connects environmental concerns with social justice, urging audiences to reconsider traditional power dynamics and advocate for transformative change. However, it remains largely within the realm of criticism without offering alternative visions for collective action. Despite its entanglement within the market structures it critiques, *Rumours* surpasses apocalyptic narratives by invoking dis-hoping and ambivalence, offering a complicitous critique, and challenging audiences to reflect on the absurdity of fear-based narratives.

Keywords: Satire, neoliberalism, intersectionality, apocalyptic narratives, dis-hoping.

Resumen

Examinando la película *Rumores* (2024), este texto explora el potencial de la sátira para avanzar en la crítica sistémica y navegar más allá de las narrativas apocalípticas en la defensa del medioambiente. *Rumores* recurre a la sátira para poner al descubierto la ineptitud de los líderes mundiales y del neoliberalismo a la hora de abordar la emergencia climática, al tiempo que analiza las intersecciones entre género, capitalismo y justicia medioambiental. La película critica la superficialidad y la ineficacia del liderazgo, haciendo hincapié en la necesidad de trasladar la responsabilidad de los individuos a sistemas más amplios. Cuestiona la confianza errónea depositada en el ecomodernismo y las soluciones tecnológicas, que no abordan los problemas sociopolíticos subyacentes. Al poner de relieve los persistentes prejuicios de género y las disparidades socioeconómicas, *Rumores* vincula las preocupaciones medioambientales con la justicia social, instando al público a reconsiderar las dinámicas de poder tradicionales y a abogar por un cambio transformador. Sin embargo, se mantiene en gran medida en el ámbito de la crítica sin ofrecer visiones alternativas para la acción colectiva. A pesar de su enredo en las estructuras de mercado que critica, *Rumores* trasciende las narrativas apocalípticas al invocar la desesperanza y la ambivalencia, ofreciendo una crítica cómplice y desafiando al público a reflexionar sobre lo absurdo de las narrativas basadas en el miedo.

Palabras clave: Sátira, neoliberalismo, interseccionalidad, narrativas apocalípticas, des-esperanza.

Introduction

"Can we be environmentalists, and environmentalist writers, without a hemorrhage of irony, sense of humour, and sensitivity to the illusory play of language?" (204), asked Timothy Morton in 2009. Later, Michael Branch, Greg Garrard, Prashant Panda, and Katrina Schimmoeller Peiffer complained that not enough attention has been paid to environmental humour and comedy, despite their popularity. I agree that climate fiction and cinema remain by and large apocalyptic and climate comedy understudied. This is partly because apocalypse seems to be "the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal" (L. Buell 285). In a way, "we create images of doom to avert doom" (295; see also F. Buell). While utilizing fear appeal in environmental discourse may initially capture attention, overreliance on fear can have significant drawbacks.

This paper, therefore, explores the cognitive and emotional affordances of multimodal satire as an alternative to the fear appeal. The predecessors of multimodal environmental satire in cinema date back to the 1960s (Traub; Zekavat *Leveraging*). In this paper, I analyse *Rumours* (2024) directed by Guy Maddin, Evan Johnson, and Galen Johnson to show how satire is employed to reprimand institutions rather than individuals, criticize ecomodernism, and foreground intersectionality. Through its satirical portrayal of world leaders at a fictional G7 summit, the movie further undermines any hope for addressing the urgency of climate change within the traditional power structures of neoliberalism. Despite its critique, the film falls short in several key areas, including envisioning an alternative socio-political system to neoliberal capitalism, emphasizing interspecies symbiosis, and advocating for multispecies environmental justice and emancipatory worlding. I argue that these limitations arise precisely because the film's commodified satire critiques the very system within which it is embedded and from which it derives its platform. As a product of the culture industry, it monetizes and capitalizes on sustainability and crisis narratives, which ultimately compromise its ability to envision a more radical rupture with the status quo.

Blending elements of satire with surrealism, *Rumours* is a satirical drama that unfolds at the G7 summit in Dankerode, Germany amidst an unnamed but readily identifiable climate crisis. At a secluded castle in Germany, Hilda Ortmann (Cate Blanchett), the Chancellor of Germany; Maxime Laplace (Roy Dupuis), the Prime Minister of Canada; Sylvain Broulez (Denis Ménochet), the President of France; Cardosa Dewindt (Nikki Amuka-Bird), the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom; Edison Wolcott (Charles Dance), the President of the United States; Antonio Lamorte (Rolando Ravello), the Prime Minister of Italy; Tatsuro Iwasaki (Takehiro Hira), the Prime Minister of Japan; Jonas Glob (Zlatko Burić), the President of the European Council; and Celestine Sproul (Alicia Vikander), the President of the European Commission, gather as leaders of the world's richest neoliberal democracies for a routine summit to draft a statement on an unspecified global crisis. As the evening

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progresses, their aides vanish and the leaders find themselves alone, lost in a fog-laden forest. Surreal threats emerge—ancient bog-bodies, a giant disembodied brain, a malfunctioning AI—while the group, increasingly inept, attempt to keep up pretences and feign consensus. The leaders' empty gestures descend into sheer blah blah blah, to quote Greta Thunberg, only to expose their incompetence alongside the flaws of the system they represent and serve. The result is a genre-blending satire of political spectacle and institutional failure, exposing power as absurd, performative, and hollow.

The film deliberately leaves the nature of the crisis ambiguous, though critics have identified it as the climate crisis ("*Rumours* Is a Brilliant Satire"). This ambiguity is central to the film's thematic richness, allowing it to resonate with a range of contemporary anxieties—whether geopolitical, environmental, or societal. Rather than specifying the crisis, the film invites viewers to project their own interpretations, thereby creating a space for reflection on the interconnectedness of global challenges. This approach aligns with the broader tradition of films that use ambiguity to provoke ecological or socio-political thought. As Robin Murray and Joseph Heumann argue in their analysis of *Oil Wells of Baku* in *Ecology and Popular Film*, instead of explicit ecological messaging, films can rely on visual and narrative ambiguity to engage viewers in a more open-ended critique of human exploitation of natural resources. In a similar vein, *Rumours* leverages ambiguity to encourage viewers to consider how crises—whether environmental, political, or otherwise—are framed, experienced, and responded to in contemporary society.

Theory

Apocalyptic messages often assign blame and responsibility to end consumers, effectively shifting accountability down the value chain. This blame-shifting can overwhelm individuals, presenting them with urgencies so vast in scope that they feel powerless and inadequately equipped to address them. The constant exposure to doom-laden narratives risks inducing eco-anxiety and even eco-despair, which can lead to inertia and inaction rather than motivating change. Eco-anxiety is

> a sociopsychological state characterized by fluctuating feelings of worry, distress, and apprehension in response to the observed and anticipated effects of climate change and environmental disruptions, as well as their impacts on people's way of life and the perceived inadequacy of societal responses and policies. As a sociopsychological state, eco-anxiety encompasses not only internal emotional responses, but also social factors such as inequalities and perceived deficiencies in governmental and societal measures. Rooted in feelings of uncertainty and uncontrollability, it embodies both a fear of environmental catastrophe and the ongoing challenges of grappling with the consequences. (Boivin, et al. 5-6; see also Boluda-Verdú et al.; Coffey et al.)

There is a strong socio-political aspect to eco-anxiety as an emotion. Affect refers to the instinctive and often unspoken reactions individuals have to their surroundings, while emotion is a more structured expression of affect, articulated through language and shaped by cultural and social norms. An emotion constitutes a subjective

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experience, sociolinguistically codified as a quality attributed to the individual. It represents an intensified state that is conventionally and consensually integrated into semantically and semiotically structured sequences, narrative frameworks of action and reaction, and systems of function and meaning. Emotion, in this sense, is both possessed and recognized. While emotion is qualified and thus subject to ownership and critique, affect remains unqualified—elusive, unownable, and resistant to systematic analysis (Massumi 27).

Besides inciting ecoanxiety, another drawback of apocalyptic narratives is their propensity to reinforce colonial ecological perspectives. Malcolm Ferdinand and Ursula Heise (Ferdinand 125; see also Heise "Eco-Apocalypse" 277) argue that these narratives are frequently shaped by the perspectives of dominant groups, whose anxieties stem from the potential erosion of their privilege and control. The global catastrophes depicted in these stories primarily highlight threats to the privileged group's way of life, including its ethnic, social, and economic structures. Apocalyptic narratives are often more concerned about Florida or New York than a third of Pakistan actually being submerged in 2022 due to floods. Such focus can marginalize or completely overlook the experiences and realities of marginalized communities, whose own environments and livelihoods may have been at risk long before the apocalypse projected to come.

These might be among the reasons behind "The Vanishing Power of Apocalyptic Narrative" (Heise, "Eco-Apocalypse" 275) and the imperative to seek alternatives. Several scholars have argued that satire, comedy, and humour could be effective strategies for environmental advocacy (Boykoff; Skiveren; Takach; Zekavat and Scheel; Zekavat, *Leveraging*; Zekavat, "Ecological Thought"). This is in line with what Nicole Seymour calls "bad environmentalism" understood as "environmental thought that employs dissident, often-denigrated affects and sensibilities to reflect critically on both our current moment and mainstream environmental art, activism, and discourse" (7).

Arguing that grotesque humour can help eschew emotional overwhelm, Donnie Secreast also argues that Rachel Carson uses humour in *Silent Spring* to facilitate "a more inclusive, and less anthropocentric, environmentalism" (453). Others contend that humour is more effective than fear as it incites hope. Rick van Noy, for instance, observes, "People are motivated to make wise choices more by hope and opportunity than by fear, cynicism, and despair" (4), and Aaron Sachs maintains, "we need more hope and determination and less anxiety and fear" (91). Although I agree that fear appeal is not the only or strongest motivator for change at individual and collective levels, I have certain reservations about the futurity that seems to be inherent in hope.

Clive Hamilton argues that unalterable hope is becoming increasingly delusional, hindering necessary action and underscoring the need for a more grounded approach to addressing climate change (128-133). In other words, hope can be a barrier to action. In *Facing Gaia*, Latour calls for "dis-hoping" (13) which is not synonymous with despair, but rather a rejection of hope as the primary means of

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engaging with the passage of time. It is about not relying on hope alone to navigate our environmental challenges. Although this idea may initially seem counterintuitive, it invites a more grounded and perhaps more effective engagement with the pressing issues at hand. I will argue that such dis-hoping or what James Berger has called "undefeated despair" (606) is among the emotional affordances of satire for the environmental discourse.

Besides its emotional affordances, the imaginative power of satire can also transcend various media. It is not confined to a specific medium and can effectively manifest in textual, pictorial, auditory, and multimodal forms like in fiction, poetry, drama, news, movies, and on social media. This versatility allows satire to adapt to various platforms, enhancing its capacity to engage diverse audiences or to go viral. This multifaceted nature could be leveraged in engaging the public on complex issues such as climate change, as it complements discursive materials with visual appeals, aligning with the principles of effective environmental communication (Corner et al. 5, 20-28).

Despite these affordances, satire in a commercial film—such as *Rumours*, which grossed nearly $700,000 at the box office (*Box Office Mojo*)—operates within the very system it seeks to critique. Horkheimer and Adorno's analysis of the culture industry reveals how capitalism commodifies dissent, repackaging critique as entertainment to neutralize its subversive edge (94-136). By transforming satire into a marketable product, the culture industry co-opts resistance, manufacturing and manipulating emotions to reinforce, rather than challenge, existing power structures. In this light, satire is not inherently emancipatory; it risks becoming complicit in the systems it purports to expose, ultimately serving as another mechanism of social control under the guise of amusement.

Satire, much like the postmodernist dynamics described by Hutcheon, operates within the dominant discourse of society, occupying a paradoxical position that is "both critical and complicitous, outside and inside" the structures it interrogates (Hutcheon 222). Analogous to Hutcheon's observation about postmodernism's relationship with capitalism, satire often finds itself "being totally complicitous with capitalism, while (implicitly) positioning itself safely outside it" (212). This tension underscores satire's dual role: it challenges power while simultaneously relying on the very frameworks it seeks to expose (see also Giamario).

Nonetheless, *Rumours* manages to deploy satire not as a scattered arsenal of jabs but as a sustained dismantling of neoliberalism's core myth: the illusion of competent, transformative leadership within a system that thrives on crisis. It zooms in on the absurdity of G7 leaders trapped in their own performative incompetence to expose how neoliberal governance reduces global emergencies to empty rhetoric, technofixes, and market-driven gestures. Each satirical target—whether the leaders' hollow statements, their reliance on ecomodernist fantasies, or their trivialization of intersectional injustices—converges on a singular critique: neoliberalism's inability to address the climate crisis is not a failure of individuals but of the system itself. By invoking dis-hoping the film refuses both apocalyptic despair and naive hope, instead

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forcing audiences to confront the system's complicity in its own paralysis. This thread binds the analysis: satire here is not just a tool for mockery but a means to lay bare the structural absurdity of a politics that monetizes crisis, co-opts dissent, and perpetuates inequality, all while masquerading as the solution.

Individual Responsibility versus Systemic Issues

Satire can serve as a powerful tool for framing and priming, processes that shape how audiences perceive and interpret information (Zekavat and Scheel 65-66). Framing refers to the way issues are presented to influence public perception, while priming involves exposing audiences to specific ideas or emotions that affect their responses to subsequent information. By leveraging these mechanisms, satire can counteract the deflection of responsibility, redirecting attention from individual actions to the systemic issues such as roles of corporations and policymakers in environmental discourse. It also provides an accessible strategy for marginalized voices to contest power structures, functioning as a form of parrhesia or speaking truth to power. This dual ability to critique and empower makes satire invaluable in fostering critical engagement and accountability in environmental discourse.

Tending to operate on the fear appeal, sustainability discourse often constructs the crisis as an individual failing, a narrative strategically reinforced by politicians and corporations alike. This strategy is exemplified by the expectation that individual consumers must engage in recycling to facilitate corporations like Coca-Cola in continuing their production of disposable plastic bottles. The manipulation of fear appeal has been instrumental in reinforcing this blame-shifting dynamic. *Rumours* challenges this narrative by emphasizing institutional responsibility and impact. It specifically critiques how policymakers often prioritize trivial matters over implementing substantive sanctions, resort to ineffective processes in policymaking, and demonstrate a lack of competence in addressing critical sustainability.

Rumours wields satire to undermine the empty gestures of politicians to reframe the sustainability discourse. It censures G7 leaders for being preoccupied with trivialities instead of focusing their time and energy on proportionate and timely action. They spend most of their time on numerous photo opportunities, such as the absurd scene where they pose with shovels beside a bog body. The superficiality of their engagements alongside their empty statements are complemented by lavish feasts and gossiping about each other's personal affairs. These behaviours are not only incongruent to the surreal situation they are entangled in but also widely disproportionate to the scope and magnitude of the urgency they need to address.

Cardosa Dewindt, the British Prime Minister, is depicted as being obsessed with crafting a "draft outline of a provisional statement regarding the present crisis" (*Rumours*) instead of seeking actual solutions. This preoccupation causes her to lose sight of the gravity and urgency of the crisis altogether and descend into discursive play instead. The primary objective seems to be the production of the draft, rather than developing a concrete plan and taking decisive and timely measures to tackle the

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crisis. Satire increasingly targets the leaders' incompetence, as despite their claims of providing clarity and assurance, they fail to show a coherent grasp of the crisis, exposing the disconnect between their rhetoric and reality.

The hollowness and inconsequential nature of their statements are no secret, even to the leaders themselves. This is exemplified by Edison, the U.S. President, who candidly remarks, "Well, I know these kinds of statements, and people pay no attention to them at all. What people want is concrete action […] not vague promises or proposals and long, drawn-out strategies offer people the Earth and bought it over people." His admission highlights the leaders' awareness of the public's desire for tangible solutions rather than superficial rhetoric. Ironically, Edison descends into unintelligible words before nodding off mid-conversation, and his sleep-talking shifts to war terminology, revealing an obsession with military campaigns and wars. Policymakers are depicted as focused on issuing statements they themselves recognize as inconsequential, fully aware that these measures fall short of what their constituents expect and what the urgency of the crisis demands. Instead of addressing the issue meaningfully, they retreat into frantic discussions of war and power struggles.

The film foregrounds the absurdity to challenge narratives that manipulate the fear appeal to shift responsibility to individuals. This is further emphasized by the use of cinematic techniques, such as dark and hazy atmosphere, carefully curated visuals and *mise-en-scène*, to enhance the satirical intent, inviting the audience to critically reflect on the manipulation of fear in commodified environmental narratives.

Dis-hoping

The film's portrayal of ineffective policymaking, where meaningful action is supplanted by hollow statements and polemical games, extends into a broader critique of the political system as a whole. Subsequently, political satire morphs into dis-hoping for the capacity of neoliberalism to effectively address the climate crisis. The formulation of the provisional statement is notably devoid of public participation and expert input, with no scientists involved in the process. The leaders engage in a superficial exercise, akin to school activities, where they pair up to brainstorm ideas for the statement at the dinner table. Stemming from a workshop Cardosa attended after losing the general election in 2018, this method reduces policymaking to mere "word association game[s]" (*Rumours*). Its absurdity is underscored by their use of the history of the G7 as the starting point for this word game, which only serves to highlight how long they have delayed meaningful action and how consistently empty their words have been.

The film also uses the idiosyncrasies of heads of states to reflect on broader absurdities within the institutions they represent. In their pretensions and pettiness, they are depicted as being driven by sheer incompetence and stupidity. Edison emerges as a satirical representation of antiquated nationalism and the decline of imperial power. His donning of the U.S. flag as a napkin and his incongruous British

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accent suggest a parallel between the waning American and British imperialisms. The film draws parallels with the global disorder, once centred on London as the metropole of the British Empire with its vast colonial reach, which declined in the twentieth century. The U.S. then assumed this role, driven by imperialist policies. The movie implies that, like the British Empire before it, American hegemony is also waning, suggesting that the current global disorder is unsustainable. Edison's trivial contribution to the leaders' statement—he suggests they start with the date—further highlights this dynamic, while Antonio's slavish transcription of Edison's dictates, regardless of their relevance, reflects the blind allegiance often afforded to U.S. leadership, particularly by Europe. Nonetheless, the film fails to envision an alternative, leaving the critique of the existing disorder without envisioning an alternative.

While assuming the role of the world police and imperial superpower, Edison repeatedly falls asleep in the midst of crises, only to wake up and ironically state, "I have to say I didn't expect to wake up to this kind of thing," before resuming leadership by invoking the forefathers who established the first colonies in Virginia. He is blind to the fact that the crisis is a result of his own making, and his reliance on historical colonial practices further emphasizes the irony of his leadership claim in the purportedly free and democratic world. His subsequent proposals are predictably outdated and irrelevant, illustrating his inadequacy in addressing modern challenges. Beyond critiquing U.S. politics, the film comments on contemporary U.S. American leadership, represented by elder leaders who metaphorically and literally nod off on official duty.

The leaders' awareness of their own incompetence is underscored by their immediate concern when Sylvain discusses bog bodies, noting that "in some cases, the bodies appear to be those of their chieftains or leaders, sacrificially murdered for failing to deliver the promise of a good harvest" (*Rumours*). This statement resonates with the leaders, as they silently recognize their failures in fulfilling their promises and responsibilities. The comparison to sacrificial leaders highlights their collective anxiety about being held accountable for their ineffectiveness and the potential consequences of their failure to address pressing issues. This moment underscores the film's critique of their leadership, emphasizing their self-awareness of inadequacy and the looming threat of repercussions for their inaction.

Sylvain's statement that the crisis "cannot be classified simply so we must keep our options open" (*Rumours*) is emblematic of the ambiguity and lack of decisive action often seen in large bureaucratic structures. This is immediately undermined when he fails to answer Antonio's straightforward question about the nature of the crisis. Concurrently, Hilda's distraction by an aide, leading her to ignore Sylvain, further illustrates the lack of cohesion and focus among leaders. These interactions serve as a microcosm of the inefficiencies and miscommunications prevalent in larger political and institutional frameworks, critiquing their inability to address complex issues effectively.

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Despite their apparent awareness of their own ineptitude, world leaders frequently mask their incompetence through megalomania and an exaggerated sense of self-importance. They gather in Dankerode under the impression that they are uniquely capable of understanding and addressing global issues, as evidenced by Sylvain's assertion that there are matters "that only we can understand as world leaders" (*Rumours*). Hubris underlines their misguided belief in their exclusive ability to tackle complex challenges. However, Sylvain's subsequent complaint about being inundated with questions from the press, scientists, and activists reveals a disdain for scrutiny. This attitude reflects their view of the broader public as inferior or unworthy of participating in critical discussions. Sylvain's suspicion that the large brain is a stunt mocking the "brain trust of the west, of the world really" (*Rumours*), further illustrates their Eurocentric delusions of grandeur and critiques the insular and self-congratulatory nature of institutional leadership. Equating the desires of the west with those of the world is satirized to highlight their delusions rooted in their colonial and imperial mindsets, which inform their decisions and actions. This parallels the stewardship that humans assume over natural resources, akin to colonizers who claimed to know what was best for the colonized and undertook to impose their will through force. Similarly, humans assert stewardship to geoengineer the world to withstand the ecological changes they have caused in the first place, hinting at imperial and colonial attitudes while linking their dominance to stewardship over other species and vibrant matter.

The film dis-hopes in institutional and systemic drawbacks under neoliberalism. This is illustrated when Sylvain dramatically collapses in the forest, claiming his bone is dissolving and refusing to walk. Maxime's decision to carry him, until Antonio finds a wheelbarrow, underscores Sylvain's lack of courage, persistence, and resilience, manifesting as a psychosomatic response to stress. Sylvain's description of the group as "huddled, frightened men and women who have failed not only in the writing of the provisional statement, which it was their sole duty to complete, but in most of the fundamental categories of humanity and decency" (*Rumours*) serves as a critique of their collective ineptitude. While being carried, Sylvain reflects on the relief of being delivered from a crisis by a strong person, ironically appreciating the opportunity to relinquish his responsibilities. This moment underscores a central theme of the film: the leaders' abdication of responsibility. Sylvain's refusal to walk and his willingness to become a burden is symptomatic of the broader tendency of these leaders to shirk their duties, reflecting a desire to escape the very responsibilities they are expected to uphold. This abdication is portrayed as a fundamental failure of leadership, highlighting the disconnect between their roles and their actions.

In another attempt of dis-hoping, Sylvain draws upon the fable of The Scorpion and the Frog as Maxime and Tatsuro volunteer to swim across a swamp to retrieve the ferry from the opposite dock. The fable, in which the scorpion's nature leads to mutual destruction despite promises of cooperation, satirizes the inherent self-destructive tendencies in neoliberalism. Sylvain's invocation of this story suggests

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that neoliberal capitalism, much like the scorpion, is bound by its nature to act in ways that ultimately dooms both itself and those reliant upon it. This reflection underscores the film's critique of current economic systems and the unsustainable practices they perpetuate. Sylvain's ironic telling of the fable as a leader highlights that the system under which he serves is ineffective and calls for systemic change. This irony suggests that true progress requires radical transformation, challenging both the leaders and the audience to reconsider the structures and ideologies that govern global interactions and decision-making. Satire is thus employed to emphasize that even leaders have lost faith in the current system. The film presents two options moving forward: mutual destruction or systemic change. The impetus for systemic change originates in disillusionment and is rooted in dis-hoping in the status quo.

Complicitous Critique and the Possibilities of Dissent

The film's satire therefore extends to dis-hoping and a scathing critique of the inefficacy of policymaking in neoliberal political systems. Vallier defines neoliberalism as "a politico-economic doctrine that embraces robust liberal capitalism, constitutional democracy, and a modest welfare state" (n.p.). The film appears to recognize that capitalism, a cornerstone of neoliberalism, thrives on and perpetuates crises, making it inherently reluctant to address them and instead actively creating crises to sustain itself (Klein; Saito, n.p.).

However, *Rumours* operates within the same system it critiques, raising questions about whether its satirical take on the political process can transcend mere rhetoric to inspire socio-political action. Its commodification within the culture industry inevitably dilutes its satire, risking reinforcement of the very system it aims to critique (see Zekavat, "The Paradox of Political Satire"). As a result, the film fails to move beyond capturing a pervasive disillusionment with the system toward envisioning alternative forms of collective action. Rather than advancing a sustained critique of neoliberalism itself, it tends to retreat to criticizing the ineffective leaders and policymaking mechanisms. This means that instead of advocating for radical redistribution or radical systemic transformation, the film partly calls for better representation, a critique that remains confined within the boundaries of the existing order (Bosch 1715-1723).

Such limiting politics of representation is evident in two major symbols in the movie: the bog people and the large brain. The bog people provide an opportunity to foreground the leaders' fear and misunderstanding of public dissent. At one point, the leaders flee the gazebo, believing they are being "attacked by dark shadowy figures" (*Rumours*), whom they mistake for protesters. This misinterpretation highlights their detachment from the genuine environmental concerns and grievances of the public, dismissing them as the absurd complaints of "nutcases" (*Rumours*). Serious concerns like "environmental protection" and the "modification of natural landscapes" (*Rumours*) are trivialized by the leaders, revealing their inability to engage seriously with important ecological issues.

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Satire enables the movie to present a rather nuanced but oscillating perspective on protests. On one hand, it dismisses certain forms of protest as mere co-opted gestures lacking genuine impact. On the other, it glorifies genuine dissent, including militant and violent activism, by highlighting the influence such movements can have on political leaders. It underscores the value of activism by illustrating how protests can sway decision-making, with Edison expressing disdain for passive responses and stating a preference for more dramatic, even violent, actions over "ignominious sloughing away" (*Rumours*).

However, the film's depiction of protest is subject to similar constraints in neoliberalism. The bog bodies seem to embody a potential for change that remains unrealized. In an instance, they showcase their power by extinguishing a fire through simultaneous ejaculation. Though seemingly an act of resistance, this appears to be an example of gendered absurdity rather than transformative socio-political power. Rather than organizing and developing a coherent agenda, they are easily swayed by the politician's statements, driven by passion to engage in reactionary politics. They are often portrayed as merely reacting to the leaders' nonsensical remarks with excitement and frenzy rather than strategizing for bringing about meaningful change. This ambivalence underscores the film's critique of the limitations of both superficial and radical protests under neoliberalism. By reducing politics to games and activities, neoliberal democracy appropriates even those who seek to challenge it, trapping them in a cycle of co-opted resistance. The film thus illustrates how the system's mechanisms undermine the potential for radical transformation, leaving activists complicit in the very dynamics they aim to overturn.

The bog bodies are further diminished in their power, reduced to mere scarecrows, as depicted by the Prime Minister of Canada Maxime Laplace's interaction with them. A bog man is shown hanging from a tree with a rope around its neck. As Maxime pokes it with a stick and the leaders approach to inspect the figure as an object of gaze, it unexpectedly urinates. This moment serves as a satirical commentary on the leaders' superficial engagement with dissent and activism in neoliberal systems. The grotesque scene illustrates the degradation of dissent and protest on the part of the bog body and the absurdity of the leaders' attempts to confront or understand genuine activism. It underscores how the film critiques co-option of political dissent and its reduction to a farcical and powerless spectacle.

The film therefore exposes how dissent is co-opted under neoliberalism, but its dissent is not unlike that of the bog people. Like the hanging bog man, the movie is also an object of gaze that operates under the same system it censures and is subject to subsumption. *Rumours* criticizes the systemic architectures that perpetuate environmental degradation alongside exploitation, exclusion, violence, and dispossession, but it largely settles for criticizing inept leadership and ineffective policymaking mechanisms, a gesture that could effectively rebrand these structures rather than dismantle them.

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Ecomodernism

The movie also critiques how neoliberalism manipulates techno-fixes to ameliorate the symptoms rather than mitigating the causes of the crisis. Ecomodernism advocates using technological innovation, urbanization, and intensified resource efficiency to decouple human development from ecological degradation. It is fundamentally anthropocentric and technocentric. This approach, however, is criticized for being self-contradictory, as it promotes further exploitation of nature under the guise of efficiency.

Edison's dismissal of the bog people's actions as mere phenomena explainable by the natural sciences underscores a lack of imagination and a narrow cognitive scope. "I saw nothing that can't be explained by the natural sciences […] The trick of the moonlight playing on a grove of Spanish moss swaying in the wind or one of these ethnic dances they have at all of these summits. Lederhosen and castanets, and those fans they have in Japan. Tatsuro what are they called?—[Tatsuro] Fans—[Edison] Exactly there you are" (*Rumours*). Satire thus serves as a gateway to critique ecomodernism.

The film critiques the limitations of relying solely on scientific discourse and information provision by introducing a surreal encounter with a giant brain in the forest. In an interview with *That Shelf*, Guy Maddin, a co-director of the movie, explains that the brain stems from a fondness for pulp-fiction imagery: giant brains often loom over us as super-powerful alien presences. The film embraces the thrilling mystery of such imagery—what's exciting is not "what does it mean?" but rather "what are they going to do about it?" (n.p.) And the political leaders do absolutely nothing about it, and their response drives the satire. In another interview in *Filmhounds Magazine*, the directors insist symbolism was not their primary concern. Evan Johnson notes the irony: "it's a useless, wet hunk of organ meat […] yet [it's] the source of all human-made beauty and meaning […] and is the solution to all our problems" (n.p.). The contrast between the brain's uselessness and its perceived intellectual omnipotence is central to its presence in the film. It contrasts the emptiness of political language with the hallowed notion of intellect, yet becomes another piece of inexplicable spectacle within the satirical chaos.

While the directors of *Rumours* resist attaching a fixed meaning to the giant brain, it can be read as a potential game-changer—an emblem of science and knowledge with the power to inform timely and appropriate decisions and actions. In this reading, the brain heralds the fall of old political disorders and the rise of a new world order, though Celestine's reminder that the Maastricht Treaty remains unyielding gestures to the European Union's illusions of transformation while exempting itself from substantive change. In a dramatic turn, however, Celestine mounts the brain and sets it on fire in an act of self-immolation. This destruction of the brain mirrors how policymakers often treat scientific insights: initially celebrating them, only to ultimately disregard them when they conflict with the interests of powerful stakeholders such as corporations. The sequence thus functions

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as a sharp critique of the superficial integration of scientific knowledge into policymaking, underscoring the tendency to prioritize vested interests over informed, evidence-based decisions, under neoliberalism.

In a different interpretation, the brain can be seen as the animating force of ecomodernism, a worldview that champions technological innovation as the solution to environmental and social crises. Its destruction, in this light, serves as a critique of ecomodernist optimism. This reading is reinforced by Celestine's trust in AI and the film's satire of such systems. Celestine, now speaking in Swedish—a language Maxime perceives as gibberish and Tatsuro and Sylvain mistake for ancient Iron Age tongues—warns of an impending black storm and prophesies a new dawn. Speaking for a consortium of global tech and finance sectors, she declares that only Astrid the Night Queen can bring peace. Astrid, however, is revealed to be the name of an AI system employed by the European Union to combat sex crimes, particularly targeting paedophiles. Using its predictive capabilities, it identifies likely predators, prompting Hilda to remark on the unsettling statistic that individuals in high positions of power—such as world leaders—are statistically more likely to be paedophiles. When Astrid sends a plea for help to Maxime who is obviously identified as a potential paedophile, the stranded group decides to convince Astrid that Maxime is indeed a sexual predator, hoping this will trigger an alert to authorities, who will then locate and rescue them.

Rather than a saviour, it later turns out that AI has actually been an existential threat all along: helicopters and search teams cannot be deployed because Astrid has jammed communication channels. When the group finally reaches the chateau, they encounter Jonas Glob, a representative of the European Council, who must beg Astrid to contact the missing leaders. Astrid has sent everyone away, and Jonas realizes he has been left behind precisely because of his position of power. The scenario positions the European Union as hostage to the very AI technologies it deploys, mirroring real-world dependencies on tech giants in the United States and China. This narrative thread deepens the film's critique of ceding control to AI without sufficient oversight or accountability.

Satire is what makes this richness of meaning possible. First, it dis-hopes ecomodernism, dismantling the belief that AI or technological fixes can simply resolve crises. Second, it fosters ambivalence for competing interpretations to coexist. Empirical studies in psychology and communication science show that ambivalence increases cognitive processing of a message, making it more likely to be internalized and acted upon (Strick 3-19). Thus, satire not only multiplies interpretive layers but also enhances audience engagement with the underlying critique, potentially increasing the likelihood of meaningful behavioural change.

Intersectionality

Another affordance of satire is its capacity to address intersectionality. As previously noted about imbrications of neoliberalism, colonialism, imperialism, and

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environmental degradation in the film, the satirical discourse also opens space for a nuanced exploration of the interconnections between gender, capitalism, and environmental justice. This approach aligns with the calls from thinkers like Stefania Barca, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Malcom Ferdinand, Amitav Ghosh, Donna Haraway, and Ursula Heise, among others, who emphasize the interconnectedness of social and environmental issues. In *Imagining Extinction*, Heise calls for a cosmopolitanism that carefully constructs the human identity across cultures, acknowledging technological and political influences. Multispecies justice may help unify diverse cultural views on ethical interspecies relationships, acknowledging that cultural and biological distinctions vary across communities. Ferdinand offers a radical critique of environmentalism and advocates for a decolonial ecology that integrates anti-colonial, anti-racist, and feminist perspectives, emphasizing the interconnectedness of human and non-human life.

Rumours highlights the intersection of environmental issues with gender dynamics, emphasizing the persistent dominance of men in leadership roles. Despite the presence of two women among the G7 leaders, the setting remains heavily influenced by heteropatriarchal structures. This is evident during the dinner table scene, where male leaders are notably louder and often disrupt their female colleagues, displaying an overconfidence in their contributions. However, the outcome reveals the superficiality of their efforts: a mere collection of buzzwords and rudimentary steps, which they mistakenly perceive as significant contributions to the "global community" through their "visionary capacity" (*Rumours*). Later, when Cordosa is pushing Sylvain in a wheelbarrow, he requests to use her laptop to document his thoughts for the provisional statement. Immersed in thought, he types away, only to later reveal his proposal for constructing western Europe's largest sundial, an empty gesture that underscores the ineffectiveness and triviality of his leadership. This portrayal critiques masculine leadership as loud and domineering yet ultimately unproductive. The film satirizes the boastful wisdom of these leaders, exposing it as naïve and fallible, thus calling into question the efficacy of traditional gendered power dynamics in addressing complex global challenges.

Rumours extends its critique of gender roles to corporeal and material dimensions, examining how gendered bodies are perceived and discussed. This is illustrated when the leaders learn that a bog man's penis "was severed and hung around his neck," prompting Edison to comment dismissively, "sounds like a man to me" (*Rumours*). This reaction trivializes the brutality of the act, reflecting phallogocentrism and a gendered insensitivity to corporeal violation.

Further highlighting gender biases, when Maxime shows Sylvain a picture of the brain, Sylvain initially offers an implausible explanation, suggesting it is a whale's brain. When others point out its resemblance to a human brain, Sylvain shifts his stance, agreeing but adding, "More like a woman's brain […] from the size. It's slightly smaller than a giant man's brain would be" (*Rumours*). The absurdity of this statement is underscored by the fact that the brain is the size of a small car.

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In addition to satirizing the entrenched and persisting gender stereotypes and biases, the film critiques the intersection of environmental issues with socio-economic status and capitalism. Nancy Fraser's *Cannibal Capitalism* and Barca's *Workers of the Earth* provide a framework for understanding how capitalist and industrial modernity is constructed upon inequalities of class, race, gender, and species. Far from being inherent, these master relations are the result of ongoing struggles contested by marginalized groups globally. Barca's perspective challenges the notion that capitalist modernity is the optimal way to organize social and ecological relations.

Subtle criticisms of capitalism surface in the depiction of the G7 as "the world's wealthiest liberal democracies" (*Rumours*), which have convened annually since 1974 to address global issues. The European Union began participating in G7 meetings following the Nikkei collapse in the early 1990s, and its involvement is driven by the logic of market capitalism, seeking new markets when existing ones falter, rather than a collective commitment to solidarity, intentional cooperation, or political will for meaningful action. The film critiques such a market-driven approach, suggesting that true progress requires more than just economic alignment; it demands genuine collaboration and shared purpose. Moreover, the leaders are portrayed as detached from the populace, as exemplified by Sylvain's pity for his father whom he scorned, for living a hard life "teaching at the Department of Sociology at de Sorbonne" (*Rumours*), a reflection of (his blindness to) class dynamics.

The gender critique is more prominent than the critique of capitalism in the film. This may be because the film is enmeshed in neoliberal markets, which inevitably tempers its critique of market economies. Satire operates within the dominant discourse of society, akin to complicitous critique. As Frédéric Lordon compellingly argues, the culture industry commodifies satire, turning amusement into a means of social control, and capitalism manipulates affects and desires to maintain subjugation and servitude. *Rumours* falls short of reflecting on its complicity which hinders its nuanced critique of capitalism.

Having explored the intersections of environmental degradation with gender and capitalism, it is important to also consider how *Rumours* addresses the imbrication of environmental urgency with social justice. Employing satire enables the film to highlight the social inequities that result from and exacerbate ecological crises. In one instance, Maxime's encounter with the bog people parodies land acknowledgments, which are prevalent in Canada. He acknowledges that, "Our Presence has disturbed you somehow. Maybe you think of this as your land. It's your ancestral home, after all. The traditional home of your people […] we have […] upset the balance of your sacred energies for which affront there can be no excuse. So that's why we come to you now and offer our profound apologies for the hurt and offense that we have […]" (*Rumours*). He apologizes for disturbing their ancestral land, acknowledging the disruption of sacred energies, yet immediately undermines his apology by throwing a shovel at them and fleeing. This scene satirizes the often hollow nature of land acknowledgments, critiquing their lack of genuine reckoning

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and reparative action in the framework of restorative justice. This mirrors the conversations between the French and Japanese leaders in drafting the statement in which they drop random buzzwords including IT, integration, framework agreement, global jurisdiction, supply-chain management, domestic violence, global warming, and bilateral management. They sound more like blah blah blah than genuine attempts at restitution and timely action.

In another telling moment, Hilda suggests that the statement should begin with a personal reflection or experience, choosing to recount a story from her youth as an actress. She recalls a play about immigration in which her character betrayed a villainous scientist. She delivered "racist diatribes, full of expletives and offensive terminology […] and eugenical explications of racial intelligence and natural hierarchies" (*Rumours*). Despite its offensive nature, she proposes opening the statement with these lines. It is only belatedly that she realizes the embarrassment and inappropriateness of what she has suggested. This incident highlights ingrained racism and the disturbing reaction it prompts: rather than being reprimanded for the content of her thoughts, the criticism focuses solely on their inappropriateness *for the statement*. The inherent offensiveness and immorality of her remarks is not questioned, revealing entrenched racism and its troubling acceptance, underscoring the film's critique of institutionalized prejudices and superficiality in addressing deep-seated issues.

Demystifying the Fear Appeal

Rumours also employs satire to critique fear-based and apocalyptic environmental narratives, illustrating how they can undermine genuine environmental efforts. Guy Maddin, a Canadian director known for his work in the thriller genre, co-directed the film. Leveraging Maddin's experience in crafting thrilling narratives, the directors employ surreal events and a dark, mysterious atmosphere to mock the conventional use of fear in environmental films by using parody and satire. The film employs cinematic techniques, such as a shadowy, ambiguous atmosphere and meticulously crafted visuals and staging, to amplify its satirical edge, prompting viewers to critically examine how fear is exploited in the commodification of environmental discourse. As a satire, the movie not only critiques the exploitation of fear but also highlights the absurdity of fear tactics and emotional manipulation, encouraging viewers to engage more thoughtfully with the constellation of environmental issues.

Rumours channels fear through the conventions of the thriller genre, utilizing elements such as red lighting, mysterious music, and the ambient sounds of the forest to heighten tension. The world leaders are depicted as being afraid of loneliness, darkness, and the bog people, yet ironically remain unfazed by the looming (climate) crisis. Edison warns Antonio of an impending apocalypse, describing it as the "cold, dark ending our species rightly deserves. Come at last" (*Rumours*). This sense of impending doom is reminiscent of classic apocalyptic narratives like *The Day the*

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Earth Caught Fire (1961) and *Lord of the Flies* (1954). In the end, the leaders are confronted with the revelation that no help is coming because "everything [is] on fire. Many dead" (*Rumours*), underscoring the severity of the crisis they have failed to mitigate. Even in this dire situation, Edison doses off, conveying the leaders' persistent disengagement and inability to grasp the urgency and scale of the catastrophe, further critiquing their ineffectiveness and detachment from reality.

In the wake of speculating about an apocalyptic event, Edison decides to sit in the forest and succumb to inaction by abdicating all his responsibilities. In this portrayal, the movie offers a sharp critique of how apocalyptic narratives can lead to paralysis and inaction, satirizing their crippling effect on decision-making and accountability. Much like its parody of fear within the thriller genre, the film exposes the way these doomsday scenarios can immobilize rather than motivate, highlighting their power to deter meaningful action and engagement. Despite objections from Maxime and Antonio, Edison's choice to "become one with the loamy ground" and his wish for his body to "be made into something useful for a change" (*Rumours*) might initially appear introspective, but ultimately indicates his failure to fulfil his duties, especially significant given his role as the President of the United States. This act can be seen as an allusion to the U.S. withdrawal from the Paris Agreement under Trump, underscoring the broader theme of political leaders evading their responsibilities amid global crises. Edison's hyper-nationalism and unmerited sense of superiority further illustrate this point. As they journey through the forest, he boasts of leading the "world's oldest democracy" (*Rumours*), belittling other democracies and demanding respect and dignity, highlighting his detachment and misplaced pride.

Other characters succumb to the horrors of the brave new world, exemplified by Jonas, who ultimately takes his own life. Jonas's suicide leaves Hilda unaffected, as she turns to distributing tote bags and merchandise to the leaders, a gesture that underscores the trivialities and consumerism that persist even amid crisis. This scene highlights the leaders' complicity in perpetuating a system sustained by unbridled consumption and empty gestures. Jonas is disposable because he has completed his mission in luring the leaders to the chateau; G7 leaders are next in line. The tote bags, ironically, contain potassium cyanide pills, yet Antonio's ignorance remains unshaken as he inquires if they are vitamin pills.

In a final act of absurdity, Maxime, inspired by a newsletter article titled "Top Six Political Speeches" found in his tote bags, gathers everyone's notes to create a meaningless pastiche. This amalgamation of hollow rhetoric represents the pinnacle of leadership they can muster, serving as a satirical commentary on the vacuousness and ineffectiveness of their collective efforts. Through these depictions, the film critiques the inability of world leaders to transcend triviality and engage meaningfully with the pressing challenges they face.

As Maxime steps onto the balcony, with the sky burning red, he reads the pastiche statement to a small group of bog people. The statement is filled with the same empty yet glittering language typical of political declarations, featuring signifiers without signifieds: buzzwords like global community, equitable world, rule

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of law, shared values, multilateral order, and human rights appear as mere platitudes. Part of the statement commits to "eliminating, wherever possible, the procrastination pit stops that have interrupted our works over the years. And also cultivating opportunities for non-sexual physical affection […] and ensuring […] that everyone has access to slips for the sleep tank. Not to mention the importance of finding the appropriate venue for what will be when it's completed western Europe's largest sundial" (*Rumours*). As he reads, other leaders join him one by one, motivated by the safeguarding of their thoughts and interests in the statement.

Maxime solemnly notes, "The sky is on fire, water of the ocean is thick and black, and death is all around us," but quickly follows with, "but I assure you, hand to heart, that if we nurture the sense of common purpose and vision […] we have an opportunity, like none we ever had before" (*Rumours*). This juxtaposition is immediately undercut by a cut to a bog person masturbating to his words, with shots of the G7 flags burning, undermining the futile and performative nature of the leaders' rhetoric. The statement continues to absurdly advocate for "fostering competition in the digital market place" and meeting "the death of our world and species head-on […] with passion and friendship and unyielding we will carry ourselves fearlessly into the dreadful inferno that awaits us all. It's better to burn out than to fade away" (*Rumours*). This culmination of absurdity is mirrored by the bog people's ejaculation, as the credits roll, showcasing the ultimate futility and emptiness of the proclaimed leadership and their inability to confront the real crisis.

Conclusion

Rumours uses satire to critique the ineptitude of world leaders and the States they represent in confronting the climate crisis, while simultaneously delving into the intersections of gender, capitalism, and environmental justice. It systematically dismantles neoliberalism's performative incompetence by exposing how the system's reliance on hollow rhetoric, technofixes, and commodified dissent perpetuates the very crises it claims to solve, ultimately urging audiences to reject both blind hope and apocalyptic despair in favour of radical systemic critique. It exposes the superficiality and inefficacy of leadership in the global disorder, revealing a preoccupation with trivial matters over substantive policy-making and effective governance. Satiric portrayals of individual and institutional failures underscore the necessity of shifting responsibility from individuals to broader systems. And critiquing ecomodernism and overreliance on technofixes challenges misplaced faith in technological solutions that fail to address underlying socio-political issues. Satire further enables connecting environmental concerns with social justice like gender and racial prejudice, shedding light on the persistence and implications of traditional power dynamics. By satirizing leaders who are elected representatives of the collective, *Rumours* effectively exposes the limitations of neoliberalism.

While the film targets neoliberalism, it falls short of offering any alternative vision, which can be attributed, in part, to its entanglement and complicity within the

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very market structures it satirizes. Operating under the same logic, it seeks profit, while monetizing and capitalizing on (climate) crisis. Its political critique unfolds within and utilizes the neoliberal discourse to satirize the same framework it employs. Though not radical enough, the film surpasses apocalyptic narratives by foregrounding three key elements. First, instead of relying on fear or hope, it aims to evoke dis-hoping, ambivalence, and indignation. Second, it manages to offer an intersectional political critique, though complicitous. Third, it critiques the absurdity and lack of self-reflexivity in apocalyptic and fear-based narratives.

Ultimately, the film is a satirical critique of the absurdity and inaction that pervade contemporary global politics. As Secreast argues, "The grotesque, abject, and satire have potential for intervening into hierarchical, violently anthropocentric worldviews, which govern how we interact with the lifeforms around us with whom we are inextricably enmeshed" (453). By employing satire, the film challenges these entrenched hierarchical perspectives in human societies, urging a re-evaluation of the roles and differentiated responsibilities of those in power, but fails to extend its critique to include the more-than-human. Despite its satirical edge, *Rumours* falls short in several other critical areas, particularly concerning multispecies environmental justice and anthropocentrism. Despite its critique of imperialism, it echoes the rhetoric of the European Union and maintains an anthropocentric perspective, suggesting that the planet will endure while humanity suffers, thereby neglecting the broader implications of biodiversity loss and failing to grant agency to nature and vibrant matter. The film's echoing of discourses favoured by the European Union could be interpreted in two ways: either as an intentional critique that remains confined within the very frameworks it questions—thereby exposing their limitations without transcending or envisioning alternatives—or as an inadvertent reproduction of those policies, given its embeddedness in the culture industry shaped by the same imperial and anthropocentric worldviews that inform the discourse of the European Union. In either case, the film's position reveals the challenges of critiquing systemic structures while operating within them.

While the film does not explicitly depict a flatter ontology of the world—an approach, often associated with new materialist thought, that seeks to dissolve the rigid boundaries between humans and more-than-humans in order to redistribute agency—its narrative and visual strategies ultimately reinforce anthropocentric perspectives. Proponents argue that a flat ontology can challenge anthropocentric hierarchies and open up more ecologically attuned ways of living (cf. Barad, Coole and Frost), while critics caution that ontological flattening may obscure power asymmetries under capitalism and risk depoliticizing struggles over material resources (cf. Malm, Chandler and Reid, McGregor). Jane Bennett suggests that a moderate use of anthropomorphism could help highlight the interconnectedness of all materialities, challenging the human-nonhuman divide (xvi, 98-100). However, the film does not sufficiently utilize this approach to foster a deeper appreciation for more-than-human agency or to encourage meaningful action against environmental degradation.

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Moreover, the film's critique lacks a holistic understanding of multispecies justice. As Hamza Hamouchene argues, the climate crisis is not solely attributable to fossil fuels but to their exploitative use within a capitalist framework (29-48). A mere transition to renewable energy, without addressing the underlying capitalist commodification of nature, fails to tackle the root causes, potentially exacerbating existing problems concerning equity and resource ownership (cf. Riofrancos). Thus, while *Rumours* succeeds in satirizing political ineptitude and dis-hoping neoliberalism, it misses the opportunity to advance a more nuanced and inclusive dialogue on environmental and multispecies justice and emancipatory worlding.

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Editorial
Creative Writing and Arts

Eco-Crip Cultures: Disability and the Environment

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In the video "In My Language" (2007), Mel Baggs first communicates in a language of humming, hand movements, and touch directed toward the objects of their home, and later uses a speech-assisting device to translate these earlier scenes for viewers. The act of translation itself functions as a critique of normative, logocentric conceptions of language, challenging ableist assumptions that personhood and agency depend upon compulsory able-bodiedness (McRuer) and ablemindedness. Anticipating viewers who assume that communication must be symbolic and designed for interpretation, Baggs explains that, in reality, "[their language] is about being in a constant conversation with every aspect of my environment, reacting physically to all parts of my surroundings."

As I watch the first part of the video, enchanted by the recursive melodies produced through breath, movement, touch, and repeated engagements with the surrounding environment, I find myself swaying in my chair, left and right, in unison with Baggs. I also notice myself softly gliding the pads of my fingers across my lips, left to right and back again, repeating what for me is a familiar gesture of sensory regulation. Mel's language finds a home within my own bodymind. Mel's dance continues in me. When Baggs returns in the second part of the video to the interaction between their hand and the water flowing from a bathroom faucet, they clarify that the encounter resists being reduced to an abstract representation awaiting codification: "I am just interacting with the water as the water interacts with me." Situated in the present moment, the encounter changes both bodies and produces a new relation, as the hand redirects the flow of water and the water reshapes the hand's sensory experience. Meaning-making thus emerges through intimate, participatory processes of reciprocal transformation and co-becoming.

Following Baggs from the video to their blog, I lingered over a photograph of their cat Fey and soon found myself immersed in every post dedicated to her, and to cats more generally, for what could have been an hour or four. I lost track of time. Somewhere between a photograph and an affectionate account of mutual care and companionship, I stumbled upon the following passage from a poem (Baggs):

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There is no joy greater than the purring of a cat
(No not *a* cat. *This* cat. Cats are not interchangeable.)
There is no joy greater than the purring of this cat
When she curls around my heart and purrs
And I purr my silent purr back.

I savored the resonance of these verses and the unexpected gift they offered. As I paused to breathe in these words, I lifted my gaze and found all three of my cat companions gathered in the room with me. Each had settled in a different place, and each place communicated something about them. One observed from a high vantage point, as she always does. Another rested in a wicker basket I had recently made for them, soaking in the sunlight while never straying too far from me (just as I would never stray too far away from him). The third remained tucked inside a hiding place, where he could rest undisturbed, participating through proximity without any expectation of direct interaction. In the middle of the night, still half asleep and with my eyes closed, I can tell who has chosen to sleep beside me through the distinct rhythm of their purr. Frequency, cadence, duration, pauses between breaths. *This* cat, not *a* cat.

Baggs's poem gestures toward a politics of specificity, of attunement and presence, that permeates eco-crip thought. The distance between *this* and *a* is the distance between encounter and categorization. Diagnostic labels, species classifications, environmental designations, and other taxonomic frameworks flatten situated lives into abstractions. *This* disabled person, though, does not squarely fit *a* diagnostic category. And *this* disabled person does not require fixing.

Yet the compulsion to drive living beings and ecosystems to the point of exhaustion is a defining feature of contemporary life. Capitalist temporalities prioritize efficiency, optimization, and linear notions of progress. Bodies that do not conform to dominant ideals of "humanity" become sites of correction, the same way damaged landscapes become sites of restoration. Both are governed by a drive toward an imagined state of wholeness and functionality, such that cure, rehabilitation, or conservation discourse, come to frame diverse forms of embodiment and ecological life as a problem requiring intervention. The desired outcome is a return to an idealized state of integrity, often at the expense of the "emergent ecologies" (Kirksey) that arise through adaptive strategies of survival. According to the same logic, training, domestication, and behavioral modification are routinely framed as forms of care, yet they reveal how deeply assumptions of discipline, compliance, and social acceptability structure relationships with more-than-human beings while constraining their agency and self-determination. If some ways of moving, communicating, relating, sensing, and inhabiting the world are elevated as desirable, others are contained, pathologized, excluded, or rendered disposable. Corporeal differences among humans and across species are discursively constructed as monstruous, deviant, bizarre, abnormal, and unnatural (Clare), drawing upon ableist rhetorics historically deployed against disabled people, queer

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communities, non-western ways of living, and more-than-human animals alike. Eco-crip thought therefore directs attention toward the systemic production of disablement, from structural ableism and institutional othering to environmental destruction, which Sunaura Taylor describes as "a story of disablement" (5). Such systems are ultimately unsustainable, not only socially and politically but also in the fullest ecological sense.

Bridging ecological justice and crip politics, the contributions gathered in the arts section engage directly with crip time (Kafer; Chazan), exploring not only how illness, disability, chronic exhaustion, and care work reorganize temporal experience, but also how divergent embodied and sensory experiences give space for creative expansiveness. The necessity of slowing down becomes a critique of capitalist imperatives of productivity, constant availability, and extractive labor, resonating with Tricia Hersey's call for a politics of rest rooted in resistance to white supremacy and grind culture (2022). Across poetry, experimental nonfiction, autotheory, speculative fiction, visual art, installation, photography, and multimedia practice, the common thread lies in cultivating situated relations with agential beings whose singular histories resist abstraction, and in practicing care-full attentiveness as an ethical stance grounded in specificity and a commitment to collective flourishing. *This* river, not *a* river. *This* beetle, not *a* beetle. Through crip drifting, poetic noticing, sensory immersion, and interspecies companionship, each piece contributes to the formation of "cripistemologies" (Johnson and McRuer), generating forms of knowledge grounded in the wisdom of crip experience and its sensory, affective, and somatic ways of tuning into the vibrant animacy of multispecies ecologies.

The section opens in the desert with Naomi Ortiz, the author of *Rituals for Climate Change: A Crip Struggle for Ecojustice* (2023) and the co-editor of the anthology *Every Place on the Map Is Disabled* (2026). What dominant ways of seeing dismiss as empty space, Ortiz reveals as a densely populated world. From a wheelchair-accessible table, Ortiz observes with awe and wonder a black-speckled bee, saguaros, Gila woodpeckers, and a ground squirrel emerging from beneath a nopal. "This is important," Ortiz writes, reminding readers to pause and notice. Alternating fluidly between immersive observations and critical reflections on AI infrastructures and surveillance economies, Ortiz brings the intimate and the systemic into the same field of attention. Instead of recreating "birds and flowers in zeros and ones," Ortiz proposes to privilege embodied attention over universalizing modes of knowledge production. "Not to know all but just some" thus becomes a declaration of presence, rooted in the recognition that knowing occurs through relationship, a slow and patient process that deepens through engaged encounter and can never be substituted by artificially generated approximations.

Questions of attention continue through Petra Kuppers' visual essay. A disability culture activist, writer, community performance artist, and author of *Eco Soma: Pain and Joy in Speculative Performance Encounters* (2022), Kuppers brings visual art, speculative writing, movement, and environmental practice into conversation. In sustained relation with the Huron River, she develops crip drifting

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as a method of "touching, being-with, sensing in a world that is likewise disabled, compromised, thriving in complexity." The river becomes a site where embodied experience and digital infrastructures converge, holding together the contradictory realities of being a place of nourishment, to which Kuppers repeatedly returns, and the development of a data center along its banks. Kuppers experiments with prompts such as "disable the river," applied to her own painting of the Huron River and fed into generative AI systems to "track surrealist disability/AI crossings." The resulting images reveal how algorithmic imaginaries continue to associate disability with burden and obstruction. Yet these stigmatizing framings coexist with representations that Kuppers reads as "enabling." The water may vanish from view, but only to nourish the landscape from underground, making room for lush vegetation in a gesture of lively exchange. Asking, "How can we take (back/on/forward) the modes of image production in an AI age?", Kuppers responds by offering an application of her own eco soma method, which emerges through a commitment to staying with contradiction. As she writes, "understanding how AI works and making conscious decisions around it while it poisons our rivers and warms our environment" becomes part of that practice.

Water returns in Stephanie Heit's "Fake Lake Intimacies," this time filtered through madness, memory, contamination, and grief. Author of *Psych Murders* (2022) and *The Color She Gave Gravity* (Operating System, 2017), Heit identifies as a queer disabled poet, dancer, and teacher of somatic writing and contemplative movement practices. Part of a larger project dedicated to the development of a mad ecopoetics, the contribution stays with toxicity, contamination, disorder, and climate disaster as forms of "generative friction," opening possibilities for "new ways to tend and be with and even love each other." Looking out from her therapist's office across Ford Lake, she finds a landscape that is simultaneously reservoir, ecological wound, place of attachment, and companion in reflection. The lake becomes a site "lubricated by water that swirls with its own histories and brokenness." Refusing restorative fantasies, Heit attends to the persistent realities of damaged worlds: "I want the dam to break," she writes, expressing a longing for riverine currents freed from human constriction and disabling intervention. Altered bodyminds and waterways coexist in solidarity, ultimately revealing disability and environmental change as intertwined forms of ongoing adaptation.

Questions of adaptation persist in Gaelle Chassery's meditation on chronic illness, sensory art, and multispecies companionship. Focusing on the tending of inner, outer, and in-between environments while living with long-term and invisible disabilities, Chassery moves fluidly through these landscapes, seamlessly weaving together prose, poetry, and sensory installations. Writing and creating from a remote rural area while navigating chronic illness, limited support, and periods of being housebound, she challenges the fiction that sustainability can be detached from bodily capacity. Through vulnerable accounts of lived experience, Chassery transforms personal practice into a shared resource, assembling a repertoire of strategies through which readers might navigate fluctuating conditions of their own.

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What emerges is a crip ethics of sustainability grounded in attentiveness to boundaries, the preservation of energies, wintering, and resets, as ecological care practices. Such practices may begin, as Chassery writes, with "observing animals as kindred spirits and companions who inhabit my surroundings, [such that] I never feel alone." They may also take the form of nesting, which recurs throughout the essay as both practice and philosophy. Observing a swan building a nest becomes an occasion for rethinking sanctuary, pacing, buffering, and recuperation. "Our physical body is our primary nest after all," she writes, collapsing distinctions between ecology and embodiment. These concerns extend into her sensory sculptures and textile environments, where sheeps remain present through the material traces of their lives. Wool carries memories, lanolin provides an anchoring sensory presence, and the paths sheeps trace across fields reappear in the lines and grooves of blankets and shawls.

Moving from sustainability and care to resource extraction and capitalist production, and then returning to relational care, Alex Dolores Salerno's *A Refusal to Abandon* places coffee at the center of both inquiry and artistic practice. Combining a theoretical essay with photographs from the ongoing installation *semilla santa* (holy seed), most recently exhibited in IN PROTEST AND IN CARE at O–Overgaden, Salerno conceives of coffee as ritual, colonial infrastructure, commodity, and plant ally. Retracing the production chain from cup to farm, they connect environmental degradation, labor, disability, and colonial histories through an embodied ecological lens ("My bodymind is nature itself, as is yours"). In a world sustained by endless productivity, echoing the critiques of capitalist temporality articulated by Jonathan Crary (2013), Salerno reimagines coffee from a substance mobilized in the service of functionality and performativity to a "material steeped in climate crisis" approached through "the tenderness of familial connection, and the queer-crip undoing of 24/7 society's demands." This transformation takes material form in *semilla santa*. Chains of coffee beans become rosaries, tactile companions, and objects of contemplation, while their assembly is "deeply rooted in neurodivergent experience and stimming through its repetition and tactility." Visitors are invited to move through, hold, and feel the chains of coffee beans, encountering what Salerno defines "the invisibilized product" through sustained attention. Drawing on Sunaura Taylor's call for "a refusal to abandon those people and landscapes that have been harmed" (25), Salerno ultimately moves from the ethics and politics of coffee production and consumption toward an eco-crip politics of care and collective survival: "Perhaps it's the disabled experience of being left behind (during climate disaster, socially, economically, or otherwise) that primes us for an Eco-Crip revolution, or in other words, the refusal to abandon."

A similar refusal to submit to capitalist standards of productivity emerges in Sarah Hopfinger's contribution, which follows chronic pain and the unexpected companion found in a beetle (not just *any* beetle, but *the* beetle of *this* story). An award-winning queer disabled artist and researcher working across live art, dance, choreography, ecology, and crip practice, Hopfinger describes having "accepted" both

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chronic pain and the slow mornings her body requires, while continuing to struggle against internalized narratives of productivity that leave her feeling "unproductive, useless, inefficient, not-a-proper-person." The contribution's turning point arrives roughly two-thirds down a Scottish hillside, where, pausing to tie a shoelace and gather energy before continuing, she encounters who is likely a violet ground beetle. Remaining "close to the ground," she watches the insect stumble, pause, climb, fall, rest, and continue. The beetle offers no streamlined trajectory and no promise of optimization. Instead, *this* tiny creature, with their almost "prehistoric" appearance, advances through detours, hesitations, interruptions, and repetitions. What begins as observation gradually becomes companionship expressed through the language of affection. "I loved this beetle," Hopfinger confesses, recognizing how it finds its way "not despite its messy movements, but because of them." The encounter becomes an invitation to rethink her own embodiment, as the beetle's way of moving through the world offers an alternative vision of movement and worth: "What if my chaotic body—its inefficiency—is a good way of moving through the world?" Through intimacy and shared vulnerability, the encounter thus develops into a form of affective solidarity grounded in experimental adaptation and, perhaps even more beautifully, crip joy.

Leaving behind the beetle's trails, we enter the sensory worlds of gliders in Lena M. Schlegel's poem, which attends to nocturnal creatures whose lives invite forms of sensing that exceed visual dominance and anthropocentric assumptions about perception and lived experience. Emerging from fieldwork in southeast Australia's dwindling forests, the contribution accompanies a collaborative research article published in the general section of this issue (330-334), in which Schlegel and her co-authors develop the method of sensoriographic attunement. The poem becomes a sensoriographic practice in its own right, reaching toward elusive sensory impressions and cultivating receptivity to them. Situated within Australian forests threatened by extraction, wildfire, and climate change, the poem explores the grief accompanying ecological disablement, produced through "the slow violence of neglect" and felt in the "Ghosts of extinction / Haunting dead coupes," where "Lineages broken / Renewal suppressed" bear witness to disrupted intergenerational ties and threatened futures. Yet the poem refuses to settle on grief as its final horizon. Through gliders, injured forests, and multispecies crip temporalities, it ends with a gesture that animates much of the section as a whole: "But while shadows of shimmer remain / We can't help but knot ties." The two lines point toward forms of kinship that endure from within environmental degradation, binding humans and more-than-human worlds together in shared practices of mutual support. In doing so, Schlegel extends the eco-crip refusal of abandonment articulated by Alex Dolores Salerno, grounding it in sensory expansiveness and multispecies entanglements of resistance.

From nocturnal forest worlds we move into a submerged forest landscape with Molly Wickett's sculptural installation *All Day, Waiting for Another Sun to Rise*. Drawn to crip futurity, Wickett's artistic practice explores how "disabled experiences can expand or subvert" normative temporal orders (Wickett). Through forged fungal

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forms, oxidized surfaces, gravity, texture, scale, and the bodily experience of moving through the installation, the dystopian setting foregrounds a multisensory encounter with a world "that continues after what should have been a world-ending event." As viewers move among the sculptures, deep time and future converge: the present expands to hold an imagined future while simultaneously carrying the sediment of previous world endings. Rather than restoring a lost past, the installation engages in speculative world-building, lingering with transformation and with the possibilities for continued life to emerge within altered worlds.

The section closes with a fictional short story by Lorraine Boissoneault, author of *Body Weather: Notes on Chronic Illness* (2026), a book on the interconnected relationships between human bodies and Earth's meteorological systems. Returning to watery kinships and ecological transformation, "The Lake Erie Sisters" reaches toward futurity and mythic traditions while remaining within the speculative terrain opened by Molly Wickett's installation. Set beside a lake troubled by shifting ecologies and an unseasonably warm December, the story follows three sisters and, from the perspective of the youngest, renders interoception through sensory textures, giving readers an embodied experience of palpitations dismissed as harmless by those around her. Her meeting with a monster whose body is encrusted with zebra mussels sets in motion a series of exchanges between damaged bodies and damaged ecologies, in which an index finger is traded for relief from relentless cardiac symptoms, a sister's sight is given for the recovery of a companion animal, and other bargains follow. Cure here acts by moving the lake's harm into the bodies of those who seek repair, thus exposing the promise of a return to wholeness as a redistribution of burden. By unsettling distinctions between harmless and harmful, native and non-native, ordinary and monstrous, the story exchanges restoration for newly negotiated forms of kinship and interdependence.

Kinship finds visual expression in the issue's cover image by Emery Vanderburgh, weaving a thread that runs throughout the contributions and bringing the issue full circle. The artist refers to her work as "a love letter to disability" (Vanderburgh), an affective commitment reflected in the cover image, which belongs to her *Kin* series and the ongoing research-creation project *Floral Fasciation*. Created from fasciated flowers collected or cultivated by the artist, the project approaches mutation not as deviation from a normative ideal but as a generative expression of biodiversity that rejects the logic of uniformity. Arranged against a black background, a constellation of fasciated flowers gathers in community. Each bloom unfolds in its own form, at once distinct yet held in relation, with petals twisting, clustering, and unfurling in different directions. By celebrating the aesthetic qualities of plant mutation, Vanderburgh invites us to understand disability as a dynamic mode of living that foregrounds adaptive flourishing.

In the introduction to Shayda Kafai's *Crip Kinship* (2021), a book I continue to absorb with crip time, care does not stand apart from knowledge production but belongs to it. For Kafai, "care might refer to honoring your tangible bodymind needs: closing your eyes, stretching, breaking to eat, or acknowledging the rise of feelings

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and pausing to cry. Move and process as you need to, dear reader. May it launch you toward cultivating the soil and the seedlings of your own liberatory future" (27). With the same tending care, I wish for this invitation to accompany your reading of the creative contributions gathered in this special issue. May you move through them at your own pace, lingering where needed, returning when necessary, and carrying forward the eco-crip practices they cultivate.

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#LifeIsForLiving

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May / Saguaro National Part West



The bright sun washes a cloud of ironwood flowers crowded in bushels on gray limbs, from rich lilac into white—especially in my cell phone photograph. I am amazed by how inadequate what I try to digitally capture is compared to my memory of brilliant desert sun, crawling over dirt roads as quail scamper under nopal cactus and how each saguaro is crowned with pear-shaped buds unfolding into thick white flowers, yellow stamen. When I finally find a wheelchair-accessible concrete table to stop at, the wind lifts my sunglasses into the air. Ravens and turkey vultures ride high against blue sky. I tie back my hair with a bandanna that wind also teases. But the sandy dirt, laced with stretches of rock covered in desert varnish, stays put. Claimed by desert roots and sun, the solid—dry—soil knows it is home. A black speckled bee hangs out by my feet, one of a 1,000 different types, buzzing and fluttering over spilled something sweet. My head swings left to the thud, thud, peck echoes from inside the saguaro that stands 40 feet tall. Gila woodpeckers trade shifts all afternoon landing on vertical thorn laced skin before popping a head, then body, inside the hole. And the other poking its head out to check before launching into flight. And I know. The desert. It is especially dry from only a few rains in eight months but I cannot help being in awe—how magic happens in the surprise of the same. I am not the only one as I overhear an elder, scrambling out of their minivan,

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exclaim, “This is STUNNING!” So many compounds, minerals, cells create desert life. I think about how U.S. Republicans want to block any state regulation on artificial intelligence for 10 years. An eternity these days in machine learning and all that is built to keep those circuits cycling. Observing how a triangle-leaf bursage shades a pincushion cactus, I wonder, what are we seeking relief from? The uncertainty of boredom, tedious tasks, writing essays? I know for some Crip friends, artificial intelligence will open doors, help with everyday tasks, with social navigation. Yet also, to digitize is to surveil. My new doctor’s face scrunches up in frustration when I advocate, “I have to consider where my data goes downstream,” and that I am not comfortable with the app on his phone recording and synthesizing my medical appointment notes. His disgust shifts to judgment. Eye-roll, shut down. He assumes I am noncompliant, a dangerous label for a disabled person—rife with consequences. I too played with photo filters, liked, friended, unaware that datasets were being mined from my generation’s attempts at connection, sharing art, capturing a moment, making a case for change. Now we try to re-create birds and flowers in zeros and ones. And what are we collectively contributing to be washed downstream? A drowning of mystery, curiosity, and engagement by personality models to initiate a flood of persuasion? A desert ground squirrel darts out from under a stand of nopal that is turning light green, husky dry, and I think—*this is important.* Even in the uncomfortable heat, there is more wonder in an afternoon, than in days and days of social media, ChatGPT, and generated content. Received by paying attention. Making choices to not know all but just some. When did our faith twist from—knowing through relationship, the slip-slide of slow, patient observation—to faith in prophesized collapse? That we must be so nimble to know nothing well and resign ourselves to trust that artificial intelligence can honor diversity, not just sweep us in, or out, of the picture? The earth tilts in such a way that sunlight permeates my shade, warms my spirit, sheds my skin, before gliding behind mountain range. Reminder of limits. Endings. Beginnings.



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ID:

A thick gray desert ironwood tree trunk curves toward the sky. The tree's limbs are covered with many small blooms. In the picture, the brightness of the sun makes the flowers look white instead of purple. Behind the tree grows saguaros and nopales. The sky is a brilliant blue.

Part of the main stem of a saguaro, with one of its arms growing out from the main stem up toward the sky. On the top of the arm is a loose circle of big cone-shaped white flowers and buds. The bright blue sky is streaked with white clouds.

A tall saguaro, one thick trunk-like stem lined with rows of thorns, with two thorn-laced arms, all crowned with flowers grows amongst cholla and a palo verde tree. Many saguaros, other cacti, desert trees and bushes grow in light colored sandy soil. A mountain and blue skies with thin clouds are in the background.

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"Disable the River":
Eco Soma Methods of Painting and AI Surrealism

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Crip Drifts are methods for moving through the world as a disabled artist living with pain: touching, being-with, sensing in a world that is likewise disabled, compromised, thriving in complexity. Crip Drifting develops out of a surrealist/post-situationist heritage of psychogeography. When I crip drift, I spend time in a particular site, drift aimlessly, let myself be influenced by the world, by what I see and by the material realities around me. Something snags me, and I explore it—through movement and dance, words, sketches or quiet observation. Narratives begin to knit together as I stay in open attention, touching prior knowledge and research to the potential histories of a particular stone or plant. Fantastical vistas open up as my imagination connects somatic being, material presence, and the power of story. In this short visual essay, I will touch our local river's water to the water-draining cultural complex of AI, in particular Large Language Models.

In one of my crip drifts over this past year, I spent time at our local Huron River, on Anishinaabe territory, land colonially known as Michigan. This is a place I often visit: I feel nourished by the waters, by the light, by the plants, even as I am aware of the toxic histories of this river, the industries that have contaminated it over the years. I hold these contradictory emotional fields together in my bodymindspirit, in a method of being in this complicated world that I have called eco soma in my academic writing. Here I am: observing flow, the light on water, debris, ducks, vegetation. These days, Michigan environmental narratives often focus on the ongoing development of data centers, including one right here, by the shore of the Huron River. These are giant Data Centers for Large Language Model (LLM) processes, ready to drain water, raise temperatures, pollute and shift our world in exponentially threatening ways, aligned with our human digital consumption processes. That day, limping along the riverside, I meandered and then sat.

Here is an acrylic painting inspired by this evening visit (24x19 inches, acrylic on recycled canvas). I painted it at home, in my studio, calling back the multiple sensations of being by the riverside, working with light and color.

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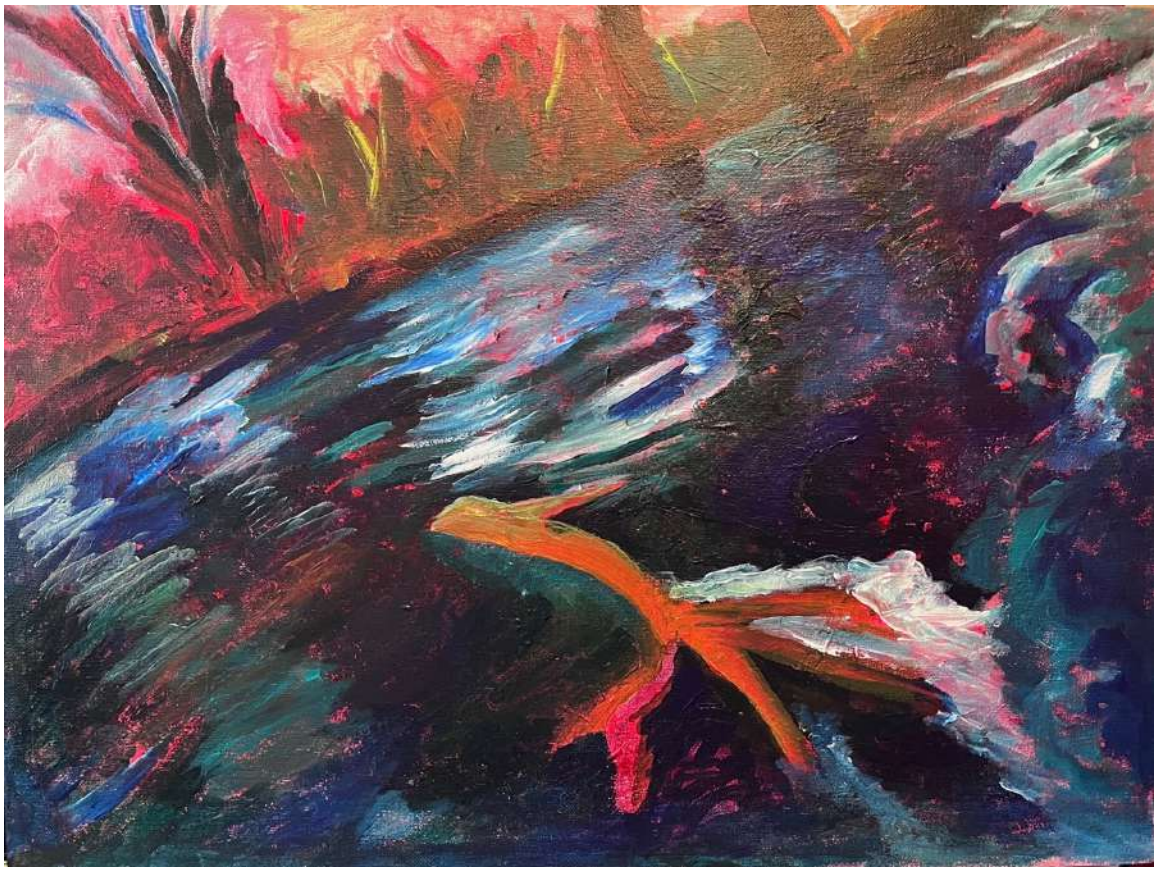


Image Description: expressive brush-strokes assemble an image of a fast-flowing river, potentially in evening light: reds and oranges reflect in the waters. The vegetation at the riverbank shimmers in greens and complementary reds. The image is angled, as if the viewer's head is cocked, giving a sense of dynamism. In the middle of the flow, a triangular-shaped tree limb reaches out of the river, white water signifying the direction of flow. The tree limb's orange echoes the vegetation by the river bank, pulling foreground and background together.

I rarely use generative AI due to its overwhelming resource implication, and in particular its water use, anathema to an eco-artist. But I do engage it every few months to create a handful of images, not more—I try to be very economical with my usage, and to have clarity about what I am looking for, aware of the environmental costs of my search.

I do so to create and track surrealist disability/AI crossings, as the language models clearly shift and adapt over time, (relatively) sensitive to ongoing user input about stigmatized imageries. So what do these Large Language Models know about disability imagery? If one were to collect images of disability representations from the past 100 years, most would be negative, full of stigma: victim images of poor cripples and institutionalized mad people. It's only relatively recently that more complex significations of disability have emerged in disability arts and culture, driven largely by the rising visibility of disabled artists. These more liberatory images, though, make up a smaller percentage of what is out there, and most LLMs use overall ratios, without weighing time factors or the identity of originating artists. This incorporation of data of all ages is also a highly complicated issue in its own right: AI

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raids cultural archives without compensating makers, acknowledging sources, or understanding sources' bias.

How can I use arts-based methods to track these knowledges, how I can I use this project to enrich my communities' understanding of LLMs and how they intersect with disability art communities? How can we take (back/on/forward) the modes of (image) production in an AI age?

I generated the image below out of Gemini, a generative AI model, in early 2026, using the following prompt in combination with my original painting: "disable the river." This is of course an impossible score or input—"disability" can mean so many things, and how can a river be disabled?

I create my own original art as a disabled artist, and I can point to the traces of my disabled, pain/mobility-difference identity in the paintings I create, even when there is no literal trace of disability. In this case, with my drift by the Huron River, I am entering a slow being-with. I see the time spent, these crip time moments by the river, watching, hanging out, communing, as part of my particular flavour of a disability aesthetic. Can an AI analysis recognize that attentive slowness, this kind of crip time making, as a disability characteristic? As part of this prompt, I upload, or "sacrifice" my own painting, feeding it to the LLM—fully aware of the implications of this "exchange:" the painting now becomes part of the huge data set that associates around both "rivers" and "disability."

So what did AI identify as potential disability signifiers in my river image?



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Image Description: Gemini AI picks up quite accurately on the nature of my brush strokes, and mimics them very well. The intervention in the image assembles around the tree limb in the water: a strand of twisted water crosses the tree now, pulls it under. On the flow side of the river, water is pulled up like a dark wall, crossed with light white streaks.

This seems intriguing: in this AI imagination, "disability" becomes a picture of hindrance, of turbulence, creating a vortex in the image. Indeed, a cross appears in the bottom half of the painting: "do not go here."

My next prompt was "crip the river," using a more contemporary/academia-leaning way of referring to disability in English-speaking contexts. Gemini wasn't willing to go crip hip—it went old school, instead, linking the word "crip" to gang contexts. Here is what it offered to me.



Image Description: my original acrylic painting is preserved at the level of brushstrokes, but the colors are all pulled into a blue and gold spectrum, and blue is one of the colors associated with the Crips gang. Blue-patterned bandanas abound in the water – paisley shapes echo water drops. In the middle is still the orange tree limb, with a blue bandana wrapped around it as if a neck. Words like "CCC," (a reference to the Colton City Crips) "Rollin 60's" (a reference to a particular set of the Crips gang), "NHC" (refers to Neighborhood Crips) and "Westside," as well as crowns, echo graffiti-style gang tags on the streets of Los Angeles.

The image offers an important reminder to US Disability Studies about how "crip" still reads to many as a reference to gang identification and belonging—this LLM clearly had a hard time wrenching itself out of that reference field, one with a longer history and more presence in popular media, toward a more disability-focused connotation.

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I do enjoy that the new AI painting is quite a neutral image—tagging, bandanas, and the beautiful patterning speak to community creative expression, not to racist images of violence and segregation.

In my last experiment with these river paintings, I went back to "disable the river," using a slightly different painting I did of the same scene that same week, focused on the same wooden stump in the water, again on a recycled canvas I had found in our local scrap store. This second image isn't tilted; the river's edge is level.

This time, when shifted by AI, "disability" becomes something different: a lush vegetation, a literal river "disabled" on the level of geographic shift—from water to growth medium.



Image Description: on the left is my original acrylic painting, very similar to the earlier one, but now stilled, level, with a horizontal horizon. The scene is generally calmer—the white reflections in the water are not as turbulent, and the direction of waterflow is harder to discern. It's more balanced and peaceful, but less dynamic. On the right is Gemini AI's answer to my instruction: instead of the boldly brushed water, the tree limb in the foreground is now surrounded by ferns, grasses and sedges—all brushed in with verve, like my water marks were earlier, but now green with hints of blue. The horizon/water's edge is obscured by the lush growth.

This disabled river has moved underground—it is now groundwater, a nourishing invisible presence that brings about abundance. My interpretation here is very positive: I am an active reader, looking for hope and lushness in these technological mires. I read this new image not in terms of vanishing (the river water, something that echoes discourses around data centers and their consumptions). Instead, I choose to read the shift in AI's treatment of my river painting in terms of holding, grounding, layering, an interdependent enabling.

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These exercises in surreal and willful AI collaboration combine my own careful crip drift attention, grounded in my painful embodiment and its need for rest by the riverside, with generative AI and its aggregate repertoire for disability.

When I give talks about my ongoing AI and Disability Project, I can explain how LLMs work, how tokens/reference fields become associated with one another, how these "neuronal" links become strengthened through repetition and accumulation.

And I can show through my artistic practice how these associations are not natural, but can be manipulated, stretched, played with. We can in turn learn to not use AI, in particular ChatGTP and LLMs, thoughtlessly, but to explore and expose the cultural imaginary around disability through the reference fields the systems offer back to us.

A hope against hope: every time I upload original work, I nudge the LLM incrementally. I teach it, train it, intervene in it, in barely perceptible steps, toward enriching what "disability" becomes associated with—in this case, rivers, waters, flow, turbulence, nourishment.

We are artists in the world, drifting, adrift, hopefully learning to collaborate with the forces of water and land and plants. We can think/feel/paint/be interdependent with the earth and its more-than-human loves. We can understand the jointness of struggles, even while acknowledging the deeply unjust power relations of the past and the present. We can use our tools to push for political change that shifts toward an embrace of environmental justice for all, and an acknowledgement of extractive harm in all its dimensions.

Understanding how AI works and making conscious decisions around it while it poisons our rivers and warms our environment, is part of what I have elsewhere called an eco soma method: a compromised, complex, halting, clasping-together of self and world. I offer these paintings and their transfigurations as an example of what eco-arts-based research into new technologies can look like in our AI-hungry world. Let's pause, let's sit down, let's paint and muse, and then foray out to see what happens in the technological in-between.

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Fake Lake Intimacies: Field Notes Toward a Mad Ecopoetics

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Once a week I go to therapy in an office that overlooks a lake. At my appointment, a jagged line snakes through the ice – a break – something ready to arise. Perhaps eruption of spring, an end of February hopeful wish, premature for Michigan. Open water further out.

In the sessions, we tend presence. How located I am in my experience. How depression and bipolar waves shape distance, the blur within myself and the world around me. Sometimes my past history of medical interventions and weighted days tucked in bed alter the present, thicken it.

Out the sliding glass window, the lake doesn't fool me. I admire the glint of the grey almost-light that plays on the snow and ice. But I also see its dammed river origins. Decades of car factory excretion settled in the silt, easily activated. The superfund history. PFAS warnings. Inedible fish. Undrinkable water. I don't get too close.

I measure my copresence with the lake. Name the heaviness in my chest. Notice my effortful breath. Reach to these waters, Ford Lake. Lean into its expanse and imagine its liquid moves beneath the ice.

I grew up in this state whose map is blotted blue with countless rivers and lakes. Water has always been an anchor even with its dangers. Yet, I feel distant.

Fake lake.

I often walk around its periphery and am almost tricked into believing in the lake. Red-eared sliders on a log. Nesting swan in spring. Great blue heron. Beings that have made this place home. I think of the seeds buried here in what was once field, now dammed lake bottom. Tune into their held vibrations, coiled potential.

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I stare at the water from where I sit on the therapy office sofa, ask my gaze to soften. But the lake feels false. Stillness where there should be tighter edges and current of the Huron River. I feel grief for what no longer makes it downstream.

These days depression slows me, motivation circles back on itself, words stick inside my brain. My soft gaze turns sloppy, inattentive. I want the dam to break. Lake to reroute into river. Recede from an imposed and bloated shoreline. For those drowned seeds to feel light's touch. Unexpected blooms.

I hold my previous shapes too tightly at times. The before and after self, a duet that doesn't flow or change course, recursive in structure.

How does the Huron hold its memory? Do the banks feel their former textures and dimensions? Or is it fluid, washed away?

The river is an expert at yielding – current velocity, spring melt, rainfall, nitrogen levels, when green returns, when dams are built.

Even after years of vigilance to the swings, drags, depths and heights of moods, I can only witness the course. Monitor how deep and wide. But I don't determine the ride. Flooded. I am overcome. Multiple seasons in a year, sometimes a day. Moods carve me out – loud soft – temper my movements to necessity. Mitigate color to one tone.

River erodes obstacles pebbled smooth. Over deep time and surrender.

At the end of the appointment I glance out and realize this lake, that isn't really a lake, is holding me in its own way. My thoughts, fears, desires, amplified and lubricated by water that swirls with its own histories and brokenness.

I extend my arms in an unsure half circle, an attempt to embrace the lake.

Note

This piece is part of an ongoing inquiry with the Huron River, which runs through where I live on Anishinaabe land in what is colonially called Ypsilanti, Michigan in the United States. In these engagements, I'm exploring relation through a mad ecopoetic lens. This means approaching toxicity, contamination, disorder, and climate disaster as a generative friction. I'm interested in the tension between desiring what came before, embracing how things are now, and improvising with the unknown future. How can madness and ecopoetry inform and support us (with *us* being the human

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and more-than-human world) in finding new ways to tend and be with and even love each other?

This project uses my own queer body and lived experience with madness as a site of query. I am a shock/psych system survivor who has navigated bipolar waves for decades. I'm curious about how these shifting ways of being and hard-won skills can open up space for a different kind of relationship with the changing world, and more specifically, with the local-to-me Huron River.

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Mapping, Tending and Bridging the Environments of Chronic Illness: Inner, Outer and In-Between

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Gaelle Chassery, *Finger Walk*

When hearing the word "environment," people tend to think about the planet, a city, the ecology. While these are accurate associations, I specialise in observing and nurturing types of environments that tend to be unseen, taken for granted, disregarded or forgotten: the ecosystems of inner, outer and in-between. The way I live my life is at once very restricted and infinite; what I have access to externally is tiny, but my internal life is boundless, and that is why my limitations are not a cause of suffering.

My inner environment is the space for daydreams, processing, who I am when I unmask, what safety means to me, creativity and self-care. I include close relationships and therapy in my inner landscape, as they are essential aspects of

wellbeing through regulation, connection, processing and growth. My outer environment is my local communities of plants, stones, animals, people, nature at large, the country in which I live, the world, galaxies and universe. My outer realm encapsulates my work and its impact, how I participate in the world, what the meaning of my life is. My in-between environment is where all things intersect and usually where the greatest discomfort manifests, where many types of relationships can bring stress and complications, especially when it comes to masking, navigating ambiguity and the invisible, misunderstood conditions I live with, including M.E., c-PTSD and autism.

Most people know how to care for their houses, gardens, cars and places of work, but have not cultivated the practical tending of their inner and in-between landscapes. Therefore this piece of writing largely focuses on those crucial aspects of care, which take on an even more essential significance when living with chronic illness, because it brings such a drastic restructuring of external circumstances completely beyond my control, and necessitates I develop greater mastery in those areas I can still affect.

From that perspective, it becomes profoundly helpful to map, deepen, understand and nurture my inner environment, clarify my in-between environment, and optimise how I interact with my outer environment. This does not mean that I have become fully accepting of the limitations generated by chronic illness. I still have crushed hopes, preferences that cannot be granted, high levels of physical symptoms and recurring frustrations. However, it does mean I can meet and hold those in a way that is non-corrosive, and generate options for my wellbeing within those circumstances—options which were not clear to me before.

from inner to outer and back

i admire the sheep
when i get to feed them
walk with them in a flock
gaze at the trees, the grass,
the ever changing hills
feel safe in wild weather
drizzle, mist and high winds
feed the fire and gaze
at small dragons within
sit with my yarn, make shapes
anchors to soothe the din
play with threads and colours
creating the safe bridge
from inner to outer and back
nature is the safe bridge
from inner to outer and back

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Mapping: Exploring Hidden Layers for Agency and Wellbeing

My experience of living with long-term and invisible disabilities for three decades is that the main aspect I had to familiarise myself with in order to thrive was my internal environment. The most important thing was learning to read how things land somatically, and get to know myself really well so that I can tell what I need moment-to-moment and respond in real time. It has been crucial to understand what I am willing and able to tolerate or not, and to implement any changes within my control while learning to relax with the uncertainty of what is outside my control.

I map my inner environment carefully and take a lot of time to do so regularly as an essential aspect of self-care: getting to know who I am and how what I have lived through has shaped me is important in order to decide the kind of person I want to be. I have had this interest in deep change and growth since my teen years. This seamless and practiced ability to travel between my inner and outer worlds is the pivotal balance point of everything I am and do. By preserving my nourishing solitude, I am able to find ample time to know myself and develop this relationship, as I would with a partner, a best friend or a child. I use the Internal Family Systems to harmonise my inner relationships. Keeping my internal family in compassionate and open communication that focuses on repair and tending to all the aspects of these inner parts while being the one in charge as an adult is a skill that I never take for granted and enjoy refining. It has been life-changing in my journey of severe and complex trauma recovery as the ultimate reparenting process.

Taking care of my internal family is the foundation from which I can show up in all my relationships with openness and the discernment of knowing what belongs to me or not, what is my responsibility or not, without expecting others to rescue me, and without trying to rescue them. This frees the ground for truly reciprocal and joyful relating, and helps to discern which persons are good for me and which ones will be unsuited to my commitment to growth and balance: because any form of stress or conflict in my close relationships has a large impact on my capacity to stay focused, grounded and functional, it's important to make sure communication is open, and that the practice of mutual listening, tracking, integration and genuine repair is of interest to those who are in my inner circle.

I have a special notebook which I call *The Gaelle Manual*, and which contains all the things I know, understand and wonder about myself. Like me, it is ever-evolving, and not meant to be exhaustive or perfect. It functions like a recipe book that can be a guideline, a base or an inspiration, and a treasury of reminders for when my mind is too tired or too full to remember the basics of my needs and responses. It holds the toolbox and drop-down menus of options that help me nourish and regulate my systems, come back to myself and provide the conditions in which I can rest, learn, relate to the world and respect my capacity without continuously crashing or getting overwhelmed.

My internal world is rich and forever expanding. I thrive in solitude and enjoy cultivating this vast garden and archival landscape. It is where I retreat to learn,

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regulate, integrate, recover, heal and grow. It is the opposite of isolation and avoidance: relying on it gives me what I need to feel balanced and thrive, and it is the place from which all other connections are possible and nourishing. When we really love a place, we keep going back to it in all seasons, all lights and all weathers, and it becomes a part of our world, it feels like home. We can do this internally too, by observing ourselves, spending time with ourselves. That tracking process can be as casual or as involved as we wish. I enjoy being very thorough and involved with it, because it creates such glowing clarity which directly serves every single choice I make daily, from the mundane to the crucial. I have built a life where there is space to do that in a deeply committed way. It helps me make decisions quickly and unerringly, so it is a worthwhile investment.

Journaling is a large part of maintaining my inner balance and focus. My mind is incredibly active and likes to think about things in order to figure them out, which is a great disposition for most problems in life. However, it can turn into looping, ruminating and draining overthinking if I cannot keep it structured, held and clarifying. The practice of journaling helps me to quickly organise my thoughts and feelings, seeing right through them to discover what is at the bottom of my thinking process, and helps me to free up a lot of time and energy that I need for daily maintenance and passion projects. Journaling is a great way to get to know myself intimately and to have radical compassion. I also believe it helps to rewire my brain by giving me a safe and private place to process deep trauma and its impact while unveiling my belief systems, glass ceilings and biases, which can open the door to fast growth and sharp clarity.

journaling

got a pretty notebook
to write ugly thoughts in
because let's face it
no one wants to hear that

no one wants to hear that
but it's been suggested
that i need to pay
closer attention
to myself

i need to say that
i need to write that
i need to scream that
i need to hear that

i need to hear that

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i have permission
to be
at my worst
one foot in the grave
breathing paradox
of a life half-lived
half-remembered
half-seen

it's been suggested that
maybe I am
the only one
who needs to know fully
-or maybe
the only one who can

because let's face it-
no one wants to hear that

Tending: Practical Care of the Inner and In-Between Environments

What does tending the inner environment imply? My catchphrase is, "It starts with knowing myself well." Knowing what I can or cannot tolerate, what I need and don't need, in order to function at my best within limiting circumstances. When life shrinks due to chronic illness, looking at things through a smaller perspective seems counter-intuitive, but it can actually restore profound agency and pave the way for well-timed and impactful interventions day-to-day.

Micro-Cycles and Micro-Resets

I pay attention to micro-cycles and accompany myself through them with micro-resets: these are practical one-off rituals that are responsive to whatever ripples external events cause in my internal forecast. If the day has been heavy, if I have been particularly unwell, grieving, preoccupied, distracted, I do not try to shift away from these moods forcefully. I do not indulge the feelings or wallow, but I do allow them to be present and see what they have to teach me about myself. I meet myself exactly there, follow my biofeedback to best know how to care for myself precisely where I am at.

Our system is like a set of stairs and we cannot expect ourselves to jump from the bottom stair to the top without taking time for transitions between states. This is where micro-resets help. They respect the current state while gently guiding the way towards a natural shift, and they do not demand a huge effort or a long time. Some of my favourite micro-resets, which I also call self-soothing rituals, include washing my

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face with a warm cloth, changing into a fresh set of clothes, or giving myself a face massage for a few minutes.

I especially like the fresh set of clothes ritual after a few hours of deep grieving or high symptoms, because it feels like shedding an old skin and starting anew. Looking out the window for a minute, slowly writing a paper letter to a friend, looking through photographs of my art and natural environments, tending to my houseplants, sorting one tiny corner of the house, one shelf, one drawer, one box, are more ways to integrate micro-resets within daily life, and it can all be adjusted according to how much energy I have. If I am spending time in bed recharging but still want to do something simple, my resets might look like digital housekeeping: sorting through emails, documents, photos.

My inner and outer environments continuously feed and inform each other. By exploring, nourishing, and strengthening my inner environment, I give myself the best basis from which to interact with my outer environment from a place of curiosity, openness and relaxation. The attentive observation of my outer environment provides a blueprint for the way I can observe and map my inner seasons and weather changes, giving me the discernment to stay detached while caring deeply and making room for many pockets of simple soothing joys through my days regardless of how challenging things might feel.

Observing animals as kindred spirits and companions who inhabit my surroundings, I never feel alone, and seeing any one of them even for a few seconds provides a deep and enduring connection that is immediately internalised as a comforting presence, a source of joy and an undeniable bond, whether the animal is wild and unknown, or domesticated and familiar to me. Observing animals reminds me of their ease and gentleness, and I am always inspired by their impeccable focus, doing what their bodies ask them to do, which in turn reminds me to pay attention to what my body needs and to stay focused on acting mindfully, whatever I choose to do, with purpose, intention and presence.

I once observed a swan building a nest; the whole operation was a privilege to witness and remains one of my favourite memories. The complete commitment, focus and dedication to build something so vital out of nothing, gathering the materials to do so and creating a shape so intuitive and perfect, was truly magical. I had only ever seen swans swimming or flying before, and was fascinated to watch the swans using their bodies for this much more private, but no less essential, activity. It made me reflect deeply on the sacred aspect of building our sanctuary one tiny bit at a time, with purpose and commitment, by following our inner needs, intuitions and looking in our outer environments for the materials and atmospheres that will best meet us through the fluctuating needs of our days. I collect many natural treasures such as feathers, pebbles, empty wasp nests, shells and twigs, which I keep by me as I work, and my eyes enjoy resting on them at regular intervals while my hands are drawn to the textures and feelings they carry, connecting me to the beautiful landscape I live in even when I cannot leave the house.

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When living with a chronic illness, creating and maintaining a sanctuary, a nest, can feel impossible, and can truly be one of the most challenging aspects of daily life. Tasks are neverending, everything piles up, things may never be as clean or as tidy as we would have them if we were well. And yet, I have found that reserving some of my energy budget for maintaining and organising my house is one of the best investments I can make for my health and general wellbeing.

The concept of nesting has two meanings for me: it can be active, creating systems, organising, decluttering, repairing, optimising the space, making sure it serves me well. But those very steps demand to be nourished by the more passive and receptive act of nesting that we seek in rest: creating a nest with blankets, low amber lights, everything I might need near me to allow me to stay put and recuperate, is just as important as actively participating in the maintenance and order of my home.

Translating this to the inner environment, the act of grooming is directly related to the act of nesting. I see grooming as an essential bridge between my physical body and my inner weather, and I use it extensively to meet myself, tend to my emotions and shift easefully between states. How much of it I do is responsive to each day's pain and energy levels, but there are ways to adapt grooming to low capacity days, and that is important for me to maintain as much as possible. Our physical body is our primary nest after all, and I like to imagine that my brain is nesting in my skull, sometimes incredibly active, sometimes more quiet, just like the sequence of birds putting so much focus and energy into building their nests before retiring to lay eggs, rest, and then go back to the frenzied cycles of feeding their youngs, constantly keeping watch and protecting them, teaching them the art of flight. If we consider the way we must meet ourselves as humans, the daily maintenance of the human body is not that different. It does become more obvious when dealing with chronic illness and disabilities, because self-care becomes non-negotiable and its absence can bring devastating and long-lasting impacts. Self-care therefore becomes the very condition that allows us to interact with the outer environment and live well despite limitations, while enjoying an intimate, expansive and rich relationship with our inner landscape.

In order to maintain both my internal and external nests, I enjoy making lists and inventories. Keeping track not only of myself internally, but also of my immediate environment, the home and what it contains, gives me a sense of mastery in a life where so much choice and independence have been curtailed. It supports my need for an environment where things are easy to find, access and clean. I do enjoy having lots of things around me to look at, tend to, read and play with, so I am not a minimalist, but I have systems that make the house easy to live in and respect my limited and fluctuating capacity. This is one of the pillars of internal and external sustainability for me, and I take it seriously, by decluttering regularly and reorganising my space one tiny corner at a time.

One of my preferred ways to tend to myself and bridge states is to listen to music. My system receives music as infrastructure, architecture and companionship. I curate my music collection as an essential act of self-care and maintenance, and

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know exactly which artists and albums can accompany me through each state. As far as nervous system tracking and regulation goes, this is one of my most frequently used tools. It brings connection to artists as kindred spirits, I receive meaning, validation and deepening through the lyrics, while the melodies map, reflect and expand my inner states and relationships. Singing along offers an effective way to regulate my vagus nerve and to keep my voice flowing and clear, even in those times when I might feel unheard, unseen or misperceived. My favourite way to spend the evening is to lie in bed in the dark listening to albums in their entirety: receiving the story of each in the order it was intended. This is my time of decompression and integration, where my body relaxes and my brain unplugs. I might even fall asleep while the music plays, and find this kind of rest supremely restorative for all my layers.

Aligning Inner and Outer Layers with Boundaries for Sustainability

Tending the in-between environment can be much less straightforward and much more delicate. There seems to be a regrettable consensus that people should show up equally regardless of their needs or abilities. In theory, people are more aware nowadays, things are slowly changing, there is more understanding, and a much larger dialogue surrounding chronic illness, neurodivergence and trauma is taking root. It is encouraging to see and hear those developments, which can bring an important kind of validation, and in certain cases, community, support and solidarity.

However, in practice, things do not always follow through with real access or understanding: the vast majority of people still expect me to function and show up way beyond my baseline and have no real interest in learning about the day-to-day realities of living with the conditions which direct everything I can or cannot do in my life. Most people assume I can do all the things, but they do not have the curiosity to observe different life circumstances or educate themselves about chronic illness, neurodivergence and trauma. I have to decide whether or not to spend precious time and energy educating them, or just let the misperceptions float and absorb the cost quietly within myself. Considering this ongoing dynamic and the high cost related to it personally, this contact with the in-between environment is the one where I have focused my firmest boundaries and commitment to inner peace and self-love. Slowly building the courage to say no without apologising has been an incredibly strengthening and freeing development.

where the ravens go

when i need time unseen
and space for my true self
i go to the dark woods

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the wild ones to the east

no one will be there
but deer, ravens, buzzards
so i forget the time
and intrusive neighbours

smell the moss, touch the trees
listen to crackling twigs
the wind in the treetops
heals my soul and my fears

my boots will get muddy
and my hair will get wet
me a wild self again
gleaming, calm but fierce
smelling of moss and trees

The practice of protecting my time and space is crucial as I live in a body that looks completely healthy. It is up to me to put in place the kind of clear boundaries that prevent people from demanding that I function at the level they expect. As I am not interested in explaining my symptoms and limits, I have become at ease with saying things like, "I can't do this right now," "I am beyond capacity and can't do anymore for now," "I can't help with this but I hope you find the help you need." Used as weather reports rather than bids for sympathy, rescue or understanding, these statements are perfect to protect energy and deflect people who simply cannot integrate my reality. These sentences can be repeated in infinite permutations, as many times as needed, and each time I say them, it becomes easier.

This is intelligent preservation of inner resources, the kind of resources that cannot be bought and that no one can replace when I squander them, the costs of which are totally unseen and misunderstood by people who function with more easeful levels of health. It is essential to protect my space and energy fiercely and cleanly. It helps me to keep my focus and strength for what matters, such as daily maintenance, creative projects, safe connections, and allows me to feel whole, well and powerful within the limited landscapes of chronic illness.

The discourse about sustainability often neglects to include some of our most important resources: our personal capacities. Our personal resources cannot be allocated to everything and everyone: as part of my deep concern for sustainability, I pay great attention to my capacity and always re-evaluate what I can realistically offer. I come back to important questions I keep deepening and refining. What does this cost my nervous system? Does it impact my essential self-care and maintenance positively or negatively? Does this support me, or does it add stress? Is it a healthy challenge, or a depleting stretch? Are the people I help or give to mindful of my reality,

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or do they alter their narrative to fit what they need and expect from me? Does this align with my values and ethics? Does this make me feel nurtured, helped, relaxed and enthusiastic? In other words, am I invited to give my best and true self here, or am I only welcome if I mask and comply?

Masking to me is where most challenges occur, as the main component is one of human interactions, which can be random and unexpected. Relaxing with uncertainty when living with c-PTSD and autism is a huge skill to learn, and while I am doing very well with it after so many years of intense healing, this is the area that demands the most energy, therefore it needs the most protection and discernment. Some situations ask us to compromise and meet others halfway, and I am in support of that as long as there is no self-betrayal or suppression that add up to serious personal costs.

Going into an imperfect or uncertain situation with our eyes fully open, our feelings clear and a sharp, honest, self-aware and sincere mind is the best disposition and means we have weighed pros and cons, possible outcomes, and gauged our inner strength against most eventualities. That is a great way to meet life and a great use of an overthinking mind!

In my view, the most important aspect of managing this landscape is to try to operate from a place where all my internal and external layers are aligned in coherence as much as possible: values, ethics, window of tolerance, capacities, passions, relationships, pursuits, and so forth. Taking the time to identify what serves me well and what depletes me allows me to make more time for what helps me to move forward and become the person I wish to be within circumstances that have altered way beyond my wishes, hopes and preferences.

One of the most delicate and important aspects of living with fluctuating conditions is that I have to preserve a buffer at all times. This is not always possible, so I do my best. Experience has shown me that because I function with low support, low energy, high symptoms and need more time for recovery, if challenges arise in quick successions, my balance can tip very quickly and severely, and I could be left to absorb the consequences alone for months, where an able-bodied person might just need a few days of lower activity and a good night's sleep to bounce back.

As a direct example, I am writing this while dealing with domestic imperatives which were not severe, but needed attention, and as I live alone, I had to take care of that myself while navigating external stressors in a significant relationship and caring for sick animals that are very dear to me in the midst of a heatwave. I eventually collapsed with a health emergency that sent me to the hospital via ambulance. This sequence would represent a high level of stress for anyone. When it lands all at once in the already high stress baseline of complex trauma, neurodivergence and chronic illness, the consequences can be devastating and long-lasting. It usually happens in complete invisibility while many people expect me to keep functioning normally.

As an advocate I feel it's important to remain private about my symptoms and life, but I also try to find a balance of sharing with discernment in order to raise awareness of what day-to-day life actually demands of us in a society that persists in

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pretending we can just get on with it like everyone else. This is why I committed to learning about my biofeedback and using it to navigate the way I organise my calendar, learning to be ok with disappointing people if I notice I am pushing through in a way that will take me months to recover from. There is no medal for these heroics, and as I reached my forties I decided putting myself first was long overdue. No one else can do it for me.

of my human body

it took me a long time
to start feeling at home
in this human body

i had to learn to breathe
yes! i had to learn to breathe
or rather, i had to learn to stop
holding my breath
to stop fearing the worst
and to notice that now
is pure and safe and free

it took me a long time
to build this home
to care for it
and really, it took me a long time
to stop destroying it
this body
to stop being afraid
when it turned against me

some rooms in this body
are so vast and empty
that their echoes get lost
lost with what i could be
some rooms have secret doors
hidden even from me

the gift was to settle
to learn to rest and be
to inhabit the home
of my human body

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Bridging: From Inner to Outer and Back

I live in a very remote-rural area where there is access to nothing, which is a constant logistical challenge when operating with poor health and low support. However, I do have an abundance of fresh air, calm, silence and stunning views to rest my eyes and my system. I never take those for granted, especially because 16 years ago, I was fully bedbound for four years, and then fully housebound for many years after that. It was a particular kind of heartbreak to be unable to go out in my beloved natural environment, and the irony was cruel, as it is literally on my doorstep, but was still too far for me to reach.

Now I consider myself truly fortunate to be able to spend about 1% of my time outside of my house. I would prefer much more time in nature, but that tiny window maintains a balance and allows me to reconnect with myself in a powerful way while receiving gentle, uncomplicated healing through my interactions with communities of animals, plants, lichens, trees and rocks. I still have many housebound weeks through the year, times of acute illness, injuries, higher symptoms or burnout, and I treat those as the fluctuations of my natural inner seasons: times of wintering, rest and repair, where I bring myself the respect, space and attention needed to recharge and recover, preparing the ground for my next internal spring and summer.

Navigating the Challenges of the In-Between Environments

When living with invisible and fluctuating conditions, we have to deal with the ripple effect this has on our immediate environment, especially the human communities in which we live and the impact they have on us. This is a distinctly delicate bridge to navigate. Most of us are dismally under-supported, misperceived and often invisible, or maybe we are only seen for the wrong reasons, with scrutiny, judgement and out-of-touch attitudes, but rarely witnessed in our full humanity, complexity, needs or capacities.

Many are not good at listening, but are very free with their opinions and advice, no matter how uninformed they are. I have always felt that my most painful and challenging symptom is what people say to me about what I live with: it is usually invasive, judgemental, unhelpful and draining. This is a huge factor in energy management. I have to protect myself from this relentless input, either by being very selective about who I let into my space and circumstances, or by being very direct and consistently rectifying misperceptions. The second option is not always wise or available, and discernment needs to be exercised to make sure energy is not squandered on trying to explain myself to people who are committing to misunderstanding me and uninterested in learning and integrating realities that differ from their own experience.

No matter how far we come with our physical and emotional healing, nothing can prepare us for the onslaught of comments and misperceptions when we become more visible. When I was housebound, this was an issue I didn't have to deal with.

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Now being just one more percent visible has brought serious complications to my enjoyment of something that should be a celebration, simply because people cannot register the nuance, complexities and ambiguity of a situation like mine. They need a person to be either completely disabled, or fully functioning. Trying to explain how it is to exist anywhere else along that spectrum, having to choose between humiliating erasure through absorption of inaccurate perceptions, or relentlessly challenging them—either choice is fatiguing and stressful and one of the most challenging symptoms of living with a chronic and invisible illness. When the illness is actually visible on me, I am not visible: all my focus needs to go towards rest and accommodation in solitude, which means people tend to only see my better moments.

This complicates access to my external environment—ironically one of the main things I need at my core to feel balanced. Sometimes when I have a bad day which could be helped by a few minutes of fresh air, I decide to stay home anyway to protect myself from invasive comments, ignorant judgements, inaccurate perceptions and unsolicited advice. Below is a poem I wrote when I was starting to come out of the fully housebound situation and grappling with how the transition impacted my connection with the people who live near me.

housebound

i live in a glass jar
where time seems to have stopped
where everything i see
is just out of my reach

from here things are muffled
suspended through ages
on bad days i wonder
do i hear life clearly

‘she is so elusive’
‘she is so reclusive’
‘you should see more people’

people pass by, breeze by, live nearby
who hears me
they don’t listen
they make all the noise
and sometimes they wonder
‘what is your class’

invisible class
crash after crash unseen

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on bad days i wonder
if i died, would they know

in this tight-knit place
i am as hidden, as powerfully lost
as the village ghosts

and they sometimes wonder
'by the way how are you'
'(please don't tell the truth
it is embarrassing)'

i thread my days away
in a creative whirl
hurl art over the edge
of my glass
hoping for the best
trying to play my part

half empty or half full
my glass jar overflows
with potential and dreams
of all i could have been
enough grief to drown in

on bad days i wonder
how much longer unseen

Sensory Art as a Soothing Bridge

As a sensory artist I use my art practice as one of the main bridges between inner and outer environments, and it is possibly the easiest, most rewarding and most involved way to inhabit and tend to the in-between realm. The nature of my work is solitary but connecting, and allows me to spend many hours in quiet contemplation that is essential for exploring my inner and outer landscapes. The work itself often reveals things about myself that I have no access to otherwise, and when it reaches a wider audience, people's feedback usually signals more things I was not aware of, echoes of what they felt when interacting with the work, and what I might or might not have consciously added to it during the making process.

I enjoy using my work as the bridge in so many ways, one of them as a tribute to nature that I recreate on a miniature scale or a giant one, allowing me to play with scale and perceptions, but also to extract precious elements and organisms from a landscape I often crave to be in but cannot access due to ill health. Replicating those

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elements with wool offers me a way to deal with the difficult symptoms which make most things inaccessible, and gives me a platform to create access to nature within my own space, and then offer that to others. The sensory sculptures and installations become a way to spend time in nature without needing to move beyond capacity, and bring much gentleness and compassion to a situation where we are so often told to try harder, push through and conquer genuine limitations through sheer willpower.

An important aspect of my work is to explore how autistic and disabled creativity can generate forms of community from within isolation, limited access, and chronic illness. Speaking from my practice as a mostly housebound, disabled and autistic artist and writer, I consider how wool, sensory sculpture, poetry, and installation become ways of thinking, communicating, and making contact beyond conventional social structures.

My work begins in solitude, but it is not solitary in its effects: tactile organisms, textile environments, and material presences create encounters between bodies, senses, animals, landscapes, makers, and viewers. I reflect on the ways autistic attention, sensory intelligence, and careful material practice can transform invisibility into relation. I ask how creative work might hold community not only as a social gathering, but as an ecology of touch, care, memory, place, and shared perception.

My creativity is anchored in the environment in which I live and with which I communicate intimately and frequently through observation, presence and receptivity. To me being outside in nature is not just a break or a distraction: it is a deep, profound and regulating immersion in the community of plants, organisms, stones, trees and hills that I feel a kinship with. That experience of relaxed joy, unconditional freedom, wonder and safety is always deeply appreciated. I offer it embodied presence, curiosity, respect, full focus, attentive presence and openness. This is one of my safest, most supportive and most transformative relationships. I give and receive freely during that time, without effort, expectations or pretense. I take the time to be part of my environment, to really get to know it through observation and receptivity. It is this concentrated distillation and total presence that I bring to my sensory work, and I think this is why it feels so organic and immediate.

Disabled autistic creativity is often misread as solitary, private, or inaccessible because institutions recognise community mainly through visible participation. My practice shows another model: community made through attention, materials, ecosystems, sensory access, and the visitor's embodied encounter. But for this kind of creativity to enter public spaces, institutions must understand access as infrastructure, not rhetoric. Connection does not always require physical presence. Community can be made through adapted routes. Disabled and autistic participation may look different, but it is still real.

Though I work in isolation, all my pieces have a collaborative aspect: because they pay tribute to nature, evoke my inner and outer landscapes, and due to my commitment to sourcing yarn from small Scottish producers who prioritise high welfare and regenerative practices. My work becomes a representation of small

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communities and ecosystems: the community of a farm and the landscape within which they exist, the communities of the many flocks who meet in a single sensory piece, their shepherds and all who cared for them to produce the wool that I work with, the communities of mosses, lichens, fungi, plants, landscapes and atmospheres that make a regular appearance in my surroundings and my work, the community that is my own internal landscape, the community of visitors who interact with my work in physical and virtual exhibition settings. My process is slow and mindful, rooted in observation and presence, which I translate into evocative and anchored work. The pieces are not isolated objects. They are highly interactive, sensory organisms designed to exist in relation to one another. Their meaning emerges through community via provenance, accumulation, proximity, installation, interaction, and encounter, which all help to create stories.

Within museum settings, my work reminds people that there is a point of safety, calm, sensory joy and reassurance, which reconnects them to themselves and nature, a little island offering a safe harbour of grounding and private or externalised sensory joy. Visitors connect with my work on a very personal and deep level, miniature landscapes for people who may not be able to access the actual landscape in person. The permission to touch and smell the sculptures provides an embodied relationship with exhibition settings which can be deeply grounding and regulating. The work can be externalised towards many visitors who complete it by interacting with it, creating their own stories, reflecting their own connection to outer and inner environments, and nurturing the cycle from inner to outer and back.

My friendship with sheep is a privilege that I never take for granted and directly influences every aspect of my sensory art. To have access to such affectionate and gentle companions is one of my favourite things about where I live. Within the finished works, sheep can figure as literal presence as their tiny selves, where I enjoy replicating their characteristics in miniature and placing them in our familiar landscape which I recreate out of wool and textiles. My close sheep friends feature in several pieces, either in 2D or 3D. This way to pay tribute to those characterful beings is not accidental. They are one of my most easeful and essential bridges between inner and outer environments. A day where a sheep visit is possible becomes immediately better, sweeter and soothingly connecting. I carry this feeling as an embodiment of friendship, warmth and presence, and seek to distill and crystallise it through my sensory work so that others who might never meet my sheep friends still get to experience some of that joy, warmth and sweetness.

In some pieces the sheep are present as their essence even if they are not figuratively represented. I once made a throw entirely with the fleece of one very special sheep called Boss Ewe. It was a huge honour to receive this big cone of her creamy, honey- coloured, slightly silvery wool and to be present with her for the countless hours it took to make the throw, her gorgeous wool and essence flowing through my fingers for every tiny stitch. The design was improvised by holding in my mind the landscape that she came from and spent her whole life in, where she grew her beautiful wool and received loving care from her shepherd through the long years

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of her happy life as the leader of the flock. I use the throw every night, it covers the foot of my bed while I sleep, and I treasure this heirloom and the fact that she keeps me warm daily although she died several years ago. I am so touched to preserve her memory and honour her life through her presence in my home.

The main way in which I honour the sheep is of course by carefully selecting my producers, but also by designing unique pieces that best showcase the unique quality of their yarns. Depending on where the yarn comes from and what kind of sheep were involved in its making, it will have very different qualities. The yarns I work with have their own character and presence. They are alive and change depending on the light. As I mostly use undyed yarn, I get to see the many natural colours of sheep, and delight in the depth and richness of those hues.

I always aim to pay tribute to the landscape in which the sheep spend their lives, and like to joke that often, they get the best views in the place where they live! This is certainly the case for the sheep I visit here, getting sweeping views of our mystical glen where they enjoy watching tourists congregate around the cairns and standing stones!

The way sheep inhabit their landscape feels relevant to my work in many ways, primarily through the way it feels, as I like to capture the atmosphere of a place through my designs, as well as the way a landscape looks, its distinctive features and the topography of the land. My shawls and blankets often look like mini maps when laid flat, and they map the steps of the sheep, through lines, waves and grooves which mirror the distinctive "sheep paths" that sheep make through the fields they live in. Those paths are the ones they tread repeatedly, and they will never stray off them, creating a vast and intricate network of lines that converge until the entire area is covered. This is not unlike the flight lines that birds follow, and is a phenomenon which fascinates me and recurrently features in my work.

Another way sheep inhabit my work is through the anchoring smell of lanolin, which I use as a focal point for my soothing shawls, blankets and sensory sculptures. The earthy, comforting scent is a direct way to signal safety to the brain, connecting us to the ancestral bond we share with these animals as a source of warmth, companionship and a link to nature, and which I enjoy bringing all the way into my home, people's homes, and museum settings: a perfect example of bridging our inner to outer environments.

adopted family

spring spells
grass lush in darkest green
mint glows silver velvet
ravens call overhead
to rowan trees watching

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wind is warm and swirling
whispering safe secrets
for tantalizing hills
butterfly gives a winged kiss
bees dance in the heather

fluttering golden pine
smells so sweet and heady
i forget this body
shelter in his branches
offers me the right kind of visibility

catch my breath
mend my wounds
soothe my soul
protect my steps

gentle herbs and daisies
birds spiders stones and trees
nettles dandelions
ingredients for potions
are friends to me
safety to me
are family to me

holding each other
noticing each other
hearing each other
helping each other
through changes through seasons
through all lack of reason

thriving anyway

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Gaelle Chassery, *Nesting: Regulation Station*

A Refusal to Abandon

Alex Dolores Salerno
Independent Artist, United States
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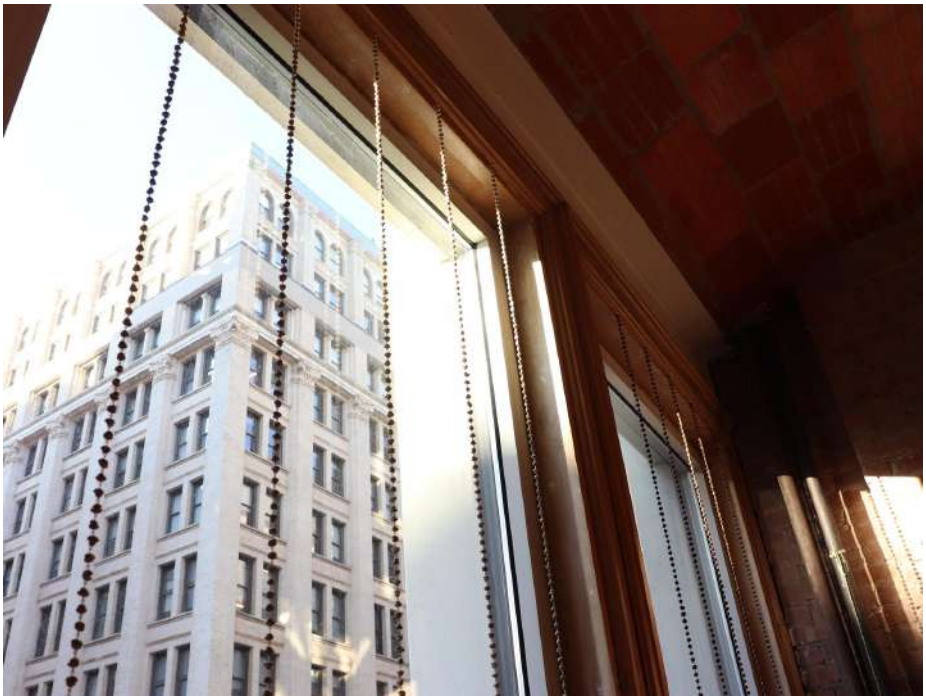
semilla santa, 2025–ongoing. Roasted and Unroasted Coffee Beans and Brass. Dimensions variable. LMCC Workspace Residency studio installation. Image courtesy of the artist.

I'm in Brooklyn getting my haircut at the queer salon that is still masks-required in 2026, a blessing. Afterward I stop by a coffee shop down the street as a treat. I decide to get an iced coffee and am intrigued by the sign that says they only serve it black. They are right, it's a honey-processed coffee that is already so naturally sweet and fruity. Totally impressed, I arrive home and search for the roaster online. Not seeing anything about the sustainability or growing conditions of the coffee, I decide to reach out to the roaster to see if they have any information. They don't, but they generously offer to send my questions to their supplier, whose website has plenty of information about their sourcing, how they work with the producers, and how the coffee is processed, but not about the sustainability of the farms or agricultural practices. Listing some of my concerns, I essentially ask, *what can you tell me about this coffee that would allow me to drink it with confidence?* They respond quickly, telling me that their focus is supporting and building relationships with farmers and that the various certifications that I had mentioned, such as organic or fair trade, can be expensive to obtain and not having them does not necessarily mean that farmers are not farming responsibly. I am disappointed but not surprised by the roundabout response. Hearing about companies that build direct relationships that center farmers' livelihoods is of course reassuring, however I'm still left wondering what ecological practices are in place.

In my desire for transparency, I do not imply that roasters and suppliers from coffee-importing countries should dictate the practices of small-scale and microlot farms in producing countries in ways that replicate colonial structures of control, or that we should abandon farms with ecological practices that fall short. Rather, I want to consider how we navigate nuance, and how we have these conversations should reflect the future we aim to bring about. It is true that many coffee farmers will not be able to become certified due to the barriers and costs. Personally, I would be glad to know that I'm purchasing coffee from farms who may not have certifications or anywhere near ideal growing practices, but may be in the process of becoming organic, are planting shade trees, cultivating other crops alongside coffee, have other methods of regenerating the soil, or in some way are caring for the health of the land they steward. As a consumer, the utmost transparency around how coffee is processed after it's harvested does not alleviate my concerns around how it is grown, and these concerns are not disconnected from my chronically ill life or my transness. My bodymind is nature itself, as is yours.

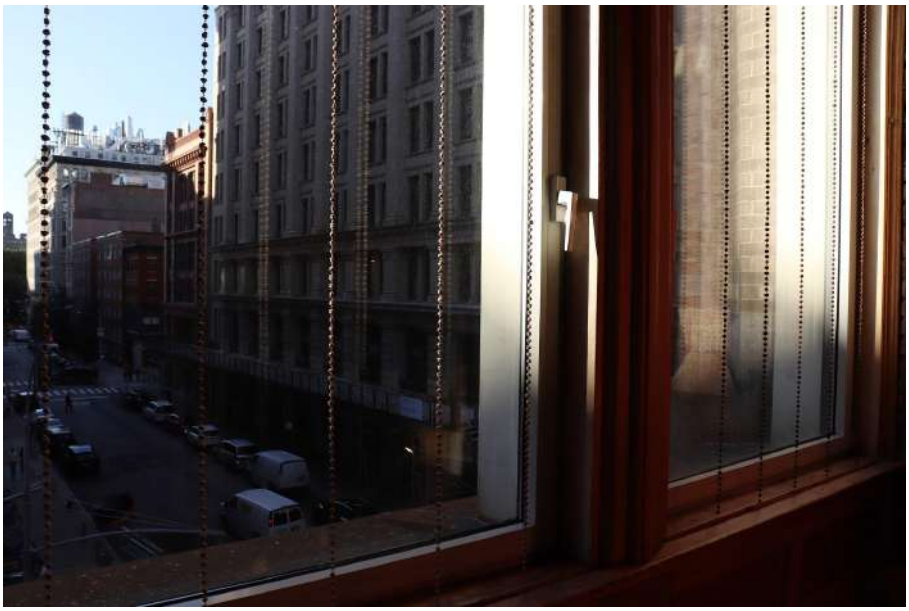
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semilla santa, 2025–ongoing. Roasted and Unroasted Coffee Beans and Brass. Dimensions variable. 2025 Installation in *Syncretism,* curated by Romilly Rinck and Jasmin Risk, Lacy Rd Collective, New York City. Image courtesy of the artist.

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One of my first connections with coffee was through the intervention of my parents and school. As a teenager I could not stay awake in school, and I was made to start drinking coffee every morning. While it did not work to keep me from falling asleep in class, I continued to be a coffee drinker since then. Now I consider coffee to be my greatest plant ally. I feel blessed to be able to interact with my family's coffee plants in Loja, Ecuador. When I pick the coffee cherries, I think about how it is an enormous privilege to harvest with leisure rather than through slavery, force, or a lack of options. As I pick the coffee, I listen to the birds in the trees and, while it is not a forest or the most ideal conditions for the coffee, I am glad to see it growing alongside a variety of other trees, giving the coffee a little protection from the sun and creating a habitat for the birds.

I have begun to see myself like the birds when I fly back and forth between countries. Our lives are intertwined with the health of the land, just like the lives of the migratory birds that split their time between North, Central, and South America. These birds that depend on coffee-growing landscapes are increasingly threatened by habitat loss. The Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center in Washington D.C. has created a new certification called "Bird Friendly" for both coffee and cocoa. This certification ensures agroforestry or forest conservation practices and aims to conserve habitat for threatened migratory birds. This is done by taking "shade-grown" coffee a step further through criteria for the height and diversity of the trees that grow alongside the coffee plants. There have even been studies done that showed a significant decrease in the coffee berry borer (*gorgojo del café*), the most harmful pest of coffee worldwide that devastates harvests, thanks to the birds on shaded coffee farms who eat the beetle (Karp et al. 1339–47; Moreno-Ramírez et al.).

In addition to "Bird Friendly," "Regenerative Organic Certified" is another new certification that, while it does not focus on the trees that provide shade for coffee, it ensures that the health of the soil and microorganisms within the soil are being regenerated through a variety of approaches (*Regenerative Organic Alliance*). While I do try to buy "Bird Friendly" or "Regenerative Organic" or "shade-grown coffee" so that I can ensure the traceability and impact of my daily ritual, it feels misguided and colonial to believe that we need United States-based Smithsonian scientists or other certifications from abroad to direct conservation efforts when these practices have long been a part of Indigenous agroforestry practices. *Chakra* farming, for example, is a polyculture system and agricultural practice rooted in the traditions of Indigenous communities in the Andes and the Amazon. Chakras are living spaces and are not only beneficial for agriculture but also for biodiversity conservation ("The Amazonian Chakra").

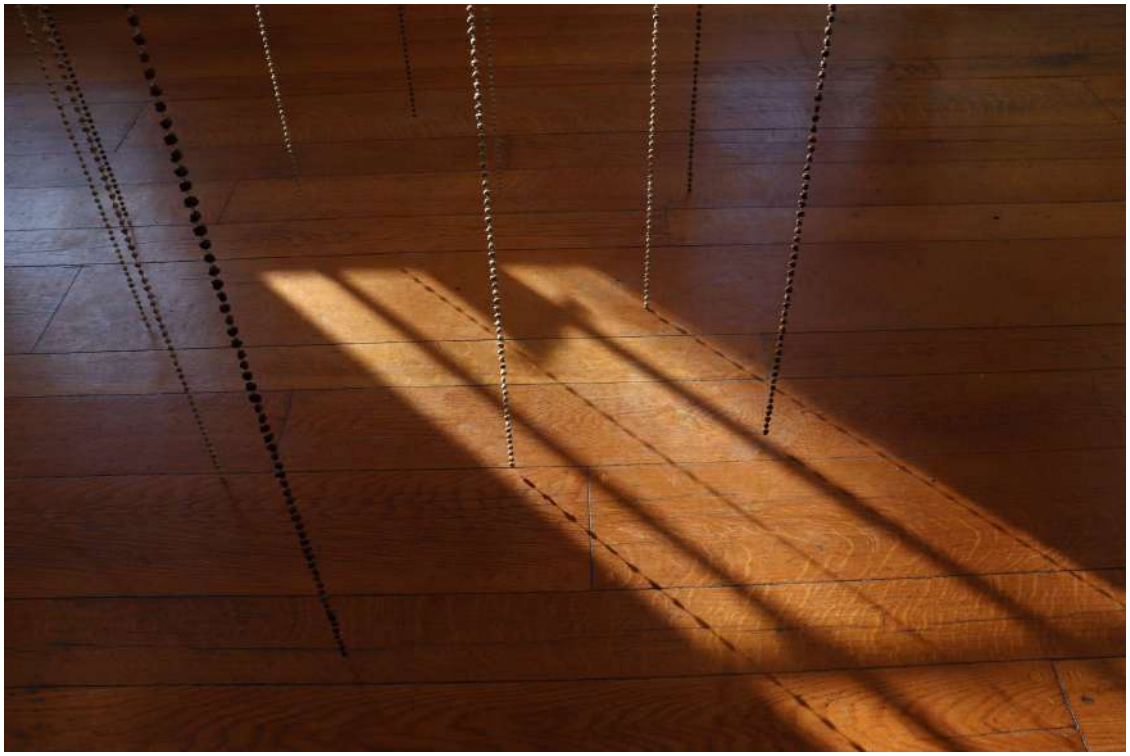
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semilla santa, 2025–ongoing. Roasted and Unroasted Coffee Beans and Brass. Dimensions Variable. 2026 Wave Hill Winter Workspace Residency open studios.
Image courtesy of the artist.

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As Coffee Watch states in their recent report *Poison in Your Coffee*,

> As traditional shade-grown agroforestry coffee systems have been replaced by full sun monocultures, pest pressure has intensified, soils have degraded, and the world's 25 million [primarily small holder] coffee farmers have become increasingly reliant on chemical inputs simply to maintain yields. ("Poison in Your Coffee")

These concerns implicate and connect us globally. Worldwide, 2.2 billion cups of coffee are consumed each day ("Poison in Your Coffee"), amounting to roughly 500 billion cups a year ("Global Crisis is Coming"). With the amount of coffee flowing through Western coffee-importing countries, keeping us running, one could say, it might be surprising to learn that *Coffea arabica*, the species that makes up the majority of coffee production (followed by *Robusta*) and most commonly associated with high-quality coffee, is endangered due to the threats it faces.

Arabica is a fickle sensitive tree, and the conditions it requires to thrive need to be just right: temperatures between 18–21 °C / 64.4–69.8 °F, a specific amount of rainfall and warm days followed by cool nights ("Global Crisis is Coming"). It's estimated that by 2050, about 50% of the area currently suitable for coffee cultivation globally will no longer be suitable as climate crisis worsens and temperatures rise (Bunn et al. 89–101). What could happen is quite easy to predict. As land and growing conditions become unsuitable, farmers will be forced into new areas and higher altitudes, leading to continued deforestation and/or an even greater reliance on pesticides. As consumers we must reckon with the fact that our daily ritual has become "one of the most pesticide-intensive crops on earth" ("Poison in Your Coffee"). Coffee Watch's report

> exposes a stark regulatory hypocrisy: pesticides banned in consuming countries are still exported to coffee-producing countries, where regulation and enforcement is weaker. A chemical banned for use becomes a residue that is tolerated for coffee imports. This double standard, where substances that are too dangerous for domestic use are sold abroad and re-enter consumer markets as residues, shifts health and environmental risks onto producing countries while playing Russian roulette with consumers' health. ("Poison in Your Coffee")

This lack of care, to say the least, for the health of farmers in coffee-producing countries, as well as for the health of coffee consumers globally, exemplifies the ableist ecologies that Sunaura Taylor discusses in her book *Disabled Ecologies: Lessons from a Wounded Desert*. Through the term "environmentalism of the injured," Taylor shares, "three key ethical attunements that I came to associate with injury environmentalism. The first is centering of the relational networks enmeshing bodies and environments. The second is a refusal to abandon those people and landscapes that have been harmed. The third is a commitment to challenging the social and economic inequities that are the root causes of the damage while still valuing ill and

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disabled lives" (25). Taylor synthesizes that, "in ableist ecologies, abandonment is the commonsense response to ecological disablement [...] Injury environmentalism shows that it is possible to refuse abandonment—to insist that we create ecological futures where the sacrificial have survived, and where they can show others how to as well" (26–28).

From this framework I ask us to consider what a refusal to abandon looks like when it comes to the future of coffee landscapes and farmers, and the lands and relationships that our rituals tie us to as consumers. Looking at the past 150+ years and prior centuries we can understand the rise of coffee in the West as an aid to the rise of capitalism. By 1876 the United States was importing one third of the world's coffee supply (Meister 19). As of 2025, two thirds of Americans drink coffee, and the average American coffee drinker consumes 3 cups per day ("More Americans Drink Coffee Each Day Than Any Other Beverage"). More broadly speaking, the West runs on coffee yet there is often little to no relationship to the plant itself, its origins or journey. Coffee is a part of office and work culture and is drank throughout the day as fuel for work, without connection. Far from a moment of rest, the "coffee break" was introduced as an aid to productivity. It is this insidious ubiquity, guise of hospitality, and construction of coffee into a normalized and overlooked symbol of work culture that renders invisible the violence of the coffee trade—its contribution to slavery across the globe and perpetuation of human rights abuses, including child labor and debt-bondage ("Coffee and Human Rights Abuses"), and degradation of land.



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semilla santa (tejido), 2025, Roasted and Unroasted Coffee Beans and Brass, 0.5" x 6.5" x 7". Image courtesy of the artist.

As an artist, I have spent years working with materials that more obviously suggest disabled experience, such as beds, bedding, and medication detritus. I increasingly find my materials stemming from concerns around the climate crisis and the inseparability of our bodyminds and the earth, which is still always about disability. I came to work with coffee, a material steeped in climate crisis, with the tenderness of familial connection, and the queer-crip undoing of 24/7 society's demands. The world is only continuing to get more crip, and it's the most marginalized crips who will be and already are among the first to experience the impacts of preventable climate disasters. As Akemi Nishida explains in the Disability Visibility Project,

> Human-intensified, natural disasters do not hit everyone equally. Communities of color, disabled and sick, working class and poor, queer and trans, immigrants, older individuals, and in geopolitically disinvested regions are disproportionately impacted harder by disasters. It is often the case that the rich and their corporations hasten environmental deteriorations that lead to the intensification of natural disasters. Thus, on-going interlocking oppressions and (state) violence mean emergencies and disasters become a daily occurrence to many disabled people. Disabled people, and particularly disabled people from multiply marginalized communities, fight to survive ever-intensifying disasters. (Nishida)

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At home in New York City, where I've experienced the overflow of coffee for the past ten years, it can be easy to either romanticize the collective daily coffee ritual or treat it as totally banal rather than an ever-intensifying disaster we must collectively survive. Perhaps it's the disabled experience of being left behind (during climate disaster, socially, economically, or otherwise) that primes us for an Eco-Crip revolution, or in other words, the refusal to abandon.

My long-term installation work, *semilla santa* (translating to "holy seed"), has been an instinctive response to our need for a paradigm shift—in connection to my own roots, coffee's historical and ongoing colonial violence, and the desire to create space for critical thinking around our relationships to overconsumption, ritual, land, and labor. The work is made up of chains of coffee beans, roasted and unroasted, that are installed specific to the context and the architecture of the site. I begin with a meticulous process of drilling each bean, selecting pairs that fit together (which mimics how coffee typically grows in pairs in the coffee cherry, although I have also begun to create chains of singularly growing "peaberries"), and then attaching them to wire loops by hand. The chains of coffee beans recall rosaries or prayer beads and remind us that slowness is sacred, rejecting the use of coffee as fuel for capitalist productivity. The process and form are deeply rooted in neurodivergent experience and stimming through its repetition and tactility. The form also holds at once the role Catholicism has played in the colonial project and justification of violence, the syncretism present in Latin American Catholicism, and the power we have to build new personal and spiritual connections with the plants we rely on without uncritical romanticization or cultural appropriation.



semilla santa, 2025–ongoing. Roasted and Unroasted Coffee Beans and Brass. Dimensions variable. No Lugar AIR Program open studios. Image courtesy of the artist.

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The work was first exhibited beyond my studio in the 2025 group exhibition *Syncretism*, curated at Lacy Rd Collective in New York City where it was installed in front of the towering windows of a Manhattan loft space. Then in early 2026, I took the work to the Winter Workspace Residency at Wave Hill in the Bronx, New York, where I installed the chains to the ceiling, reaching the floor, as an inner circle of unroasted coffee chains and outer circle of roasted coffee chains with space to stand in the center. In April 2026, during a residency at *No Lugar* in Quito, Ecuador, I placed *semilla santa* in the center of a gallery as a single column as if rising up to greet and honor the sun in the equatorial city and resting on my uncle's *Jerga*, a multipurpose woolen textile placed on the backs of horses or other load-bearing animals to protect their skin. Most recently *semilla santa* traveled to Copenhagen for the exhibition *IN PROTEST AND IN CARE* at O–Overgaden. Here I installed the work as two curtains to be traversed. In November 2026 *semilla santa* moves to Pioneer Works in Brooklyn, New York, for the exhibition *There's no me without you*, where the chains of coffee will be displayed to be scooped up in one's hands.

The longer I work with coffee the more aware I become about my impacts as a consumer, which has a ripple effect on all parts of my life. I write this not as an expert or coffee professional, but as a consumer who is learning, imperfectly and ongoingly, and with a sense of responsibility as an artist in making this process of questioning and learning feel accessible. Even having a connection to coffee growing within my family, I didn't have this level of attention to my daily ritual prior to working with coffee bean by bean (or seed by seed). I grow concerned as I watch white coffee bros on YouTube explain the intricacies of their coffee hobby from a place of obsession with their own leisure. I grow concerned when I see specialty coffee roasters stating that taste is their top priority as if the environment is an afterthought or someone else's niche (much like how disabled advocates have endlessly explained that accessibility is not an afterthought). Can you imagine what could change if our perspective and habits around coffee shifted from fuel for productivity to a ritual imbued with a sense of connection and responsibility toward the impacts of this cash crop? This is in part why I install *semilla santa* as a sensorial installation, which works to decenter ocularcentrism that privileges sighted audiences. By passing through, scooping up, or feeling the coffee along one's body, the invisibilized product becomes an embodied encounter that asks for slow, tender, and careful attention, and in this vein, gestures toward reconsideration, criticality, and a desire for change.

We already know what must be done. Our agricultural practices must shift away from monoculture systems on degraded land, which, beyond coffee, bring food insecurity and increasingly less nutritious food. The end of capitalism is an agro-ecological revolution. It is also Land Back, reparations, a refusal to abandon disabled bodies and landscapes, and the cultivation of our attention. If you have been energized or comforted by coffee as I have, let us ask each other—from where and from whom are we receiving our energy from, and what can we give back in return?

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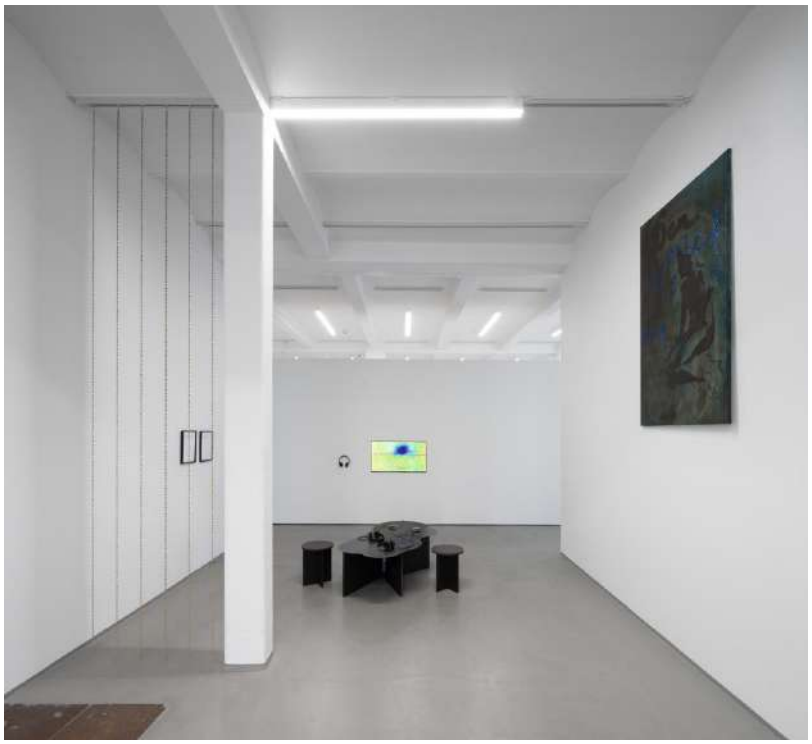
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semilla santa, 2025–ongoing. Roasted and unroasted coffee beans and brass. Dimensions variable. Installed as two site-specific curtains for *IN PROTEST AND IN CARE* curated by Anne Kølbæk Iversen at O–Overgaden in Copenhagen, Denmark. Photograph by David Stjernholm.

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Beetle Movements

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I'd recently turned twenty-nine. I'd spent my birthday hiding inside my flat, hoping no one would notice.

Your flare-ups—when you take over my body and put me to bed for long periods of time—had been gathering momentum throughout my twenties. Even when you weren't flaring, you were always there, hovering across my lower back and traveling down my sciatic nerves, being loud or quiet or something in between. Your relentless presence, along with the codeine and anti-inflammatories I'd been taking for the past six months (and on and off for the past decade), meant that I felt (and looked) permanently hung over. I was exhausted by my body, and by my feelings about my body. Celebrating my birthday—celebrating myself—was the last thing I wanted to do.

It was January. I'd driven north from my home in Glasgow, to a small hill that my friend had told me had a very gradual slope, one that my back could probably manage. I started the day late. Something that wasn't unusual for me. Whether flaring or not, you've always been louder in the mornings—my body needs time to ease into the day.

I arrived at the lay-by my friend had described to me. It was about two in the afternoon. No other cars were there. This was surprising—it was a Sunday. I imagined that other people had already been and left—their walks finished. This thought affected me—I felt foolish, setting out in winter in rural Scotland in the middle of the afternoon. It'd be dark in a couple of hours.

I drudged slowly up what was a very small hill. *Can it even be called a hill?* I asked myself. *It's more like a slight rise in the landscape*. I felt silly and lazy, like I'd wasted the day. Plus, I had to walk so slowly—because of you—that I wasn't even sure I could reach the top of this not-proper-hill before dusk.

I couldn't get rid of the self-critique running through my head—*even when my pain isn't really bad, I can't get myself out the flat until gone lunchtime*. It'd been nearly five years since I'd accepted that I had chronic pain, and accepted that I needed slow mornings, but it was easy—too easy—to judge myself as unproductive, useless, inefficient, not-a-proper-person.

Partway up, I found a huge boulder. I awkwardly clambered onto it, sat on the cold stone, and hurriedly drank my flask of soup. I pretended to myself that I was enjoying the view of a loch I could now see in the distance. But my shame was

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gathering, it had been ever since I'd left my flat. Then, I felt you rise—a loud twinge on the right side of my lower back. A quickening, a stiffening. Not an eruption, but the threat of one. Enough to make me anxious. I looked up, and the sky told me it was probably going to rain. *That's it,* I thought, *I need to turn back. I can't risk the wet and cold.*

I half-slid, half-fell off the boulder, and started moving down the not-proper-hill. I immediately noticed how stony the path was. I hadn't paid much attention to it on the way up, too absorbed in my self-critique about my laziness. Now I was headed down, the loose stones forced me to hold my body tense against the pull of gravity. This wasn't good for my back. Being too rigid tends to bring you on. I tried letting myself move in a looser way, at times almost breaking into a skip, even a jog.

My feet crunched and slipped on the stones. At first, I worried this would be equally bad for my body, but I quickly realised that if I let my arms flail about to keep my balance, and I didn't head straight down but zig-zagged, my stumbling about was in fact quite a good way of moving. It was easier on my back to give in to gravity a little, to not hold myself too tightly, to not fully control my movements, to tumble. For a few moments, it was almost fun, which was surprising because I had assumed that things like having fun were no longer available to me.

About two-thirds down the not-proper-hill, I crouched to tie my shoelace. It felt good being close to the ground—plus, curving my back over my knees was helpful. So, I stayed there. Closed my eyes. It was like I was finally arriving.

When I lifted my eyelids, I was looking at a large plump black beetle, moving at a leisurely pace across the path. Its blackness glinted, even though the sun was behind a thick layer of cloud. It looked over-sized, almost prehistoric. At certain angles, there was a violet glow. It seemed to shine, which made it look out of place against the mottled dreariness of the stony ground and undergrowth. I later found out from Google that it was likely a Violet Ground Beetle.

Relieved I hadn't trodden on it with my chaotic steps, I watched this creature amble along with its six legs over the tiny stones—each stone like a towering boulder for it. Some stones were four or five times its size—enormous rock formations in its way. It moved around the largest ones, but mostly it clambered over whatever it found, half-falling off. And it didn't move in a straight line—it went in all sorts of odd directions, at times almost going back on itself. Sometimes, a step with its thin black legs did nothing more than push itself forward and back again, having found no grip.

At first, I thought, *how inefficient.* But this beetle clearly didn't care about that thought. It was in no rush—moving at its own pace.

At one point, it paused, as if frozen. Its little antenna stretched up and out. *Maybe it's trying to suss out why there is a giant human crouched down staring at it,* I thought to myself. *Perhaps it's frozen with fear? Maybe it's completely overwhelmed and doesn't know what to do?* But, suddenly, it moved again, continuing on its way, seeming to ignore me, perhaps assuming my enormous face was the sky.

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I stopped minding that it was going to be dark soon and might rain. I stayed close to the ground, letting my knees and hands rest onto the stony surface. I needed to spend more time with this bumbling little animal.

It was now attempting a stone that had a pointy tip, and as it reached the top it fell and flipped onto its back, struggled a bit, seemed hurt and stuck. I wondered whether to help it. But it quickly found its way back onto its legs, had a little rest, and carried on. It was hardier than it looked.

I was absorbed in the details of how this creature moved. It was clumsy and messy, but it seemed confident in its own clumsiness, at ease with its own messiness. And it wasn't discouraged when it couldn't move easily over a stone—it didn't seem to mind that there were constant barriers to its path. It simply moved across or around, fell over, took rests, and carried on, not knowing what was next. Plus, there was momentum to its movements—it was getting somewhere. It just kept going, like it trusted that its unclear path was taking it where it needed to go.

Suddenly, relief was washing over me. I loved this beetle. I loved that it was finding its way, not despite its messy movements, but because of them, and that it treated the stone barriers simply as part of its path.

It clambered on, reached the edge of the path, and disappeared into the undergrowth. And I stood up, smiling.

I continued down the not-proper-hill. It started to rain, but I didn't care. I was enjoying my inefficient arm-flailing-walking-skipping-zig-zagging-movements even more now. I'd been encouraged. Out of breath, I stopped my momentum with my hands meeting the side of my car. A spontaneous call rose out of me—*woo-hoo*.

As I drove back to Glasgow, I couldn't stop smiling. It was like my body was smiling at me. And it kept on wanting to smile at me over the following week. So I let it.

Throughout so much of my twenties, I'd felt like I was just stumbling about my life. Your presence meant I lacked proper clarity about the direction I was going in. And I spent so much time resenting my unproductive ways. I never fulfilled the concept of a full day, a proper day, a working day, anymore. The shape of my days - and my life - could feel pretty pointless.

But, I thought, *what if my stumbling about—how I must take it slow and improvise my days with the unpredictability of you—is how I get to where I need to go? Maybe my days don't need to be less messy and more productive. Maybe my chaotic body—its inefficiency—is a good way of moving through the world, a good way of finding my path?*

As these thoughts grew inside of me, it was almost like I was having a party inside my own mind. The beetle and its movements had given me a way to celebrate myself—and even, at least momentarily, to celebrate you.

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Thinking with Leaves: Poetic Resonances with Nocturnal Creatures

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Thinking with Leaves

Paling with time,
Thinning out
Leaves between pages
Like trees on the plateau

Generations of gliders
Inhabiting hollows
Forests enduring ice ages
But not the dozers and blazes

And the slow violence of neglect
Soon to fade into the memory
Of a lifetime,
A speck of dust in the face of evolution

Ghosts of extinction
Haunting dead coupes
Lineages broken
Renewal suppressed

Pale blue Peppermint Gum
Pressed flat, yet edgy
Delicate in its eternal shape
Once treat to ringtails

Thick leathery structure of
Errinundra Shining Gum, endemic to place
Glands inscribed forever
Hollow homes no more

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Blackwood, once shelter from fire
For long-footed friends
Reduced to long yellow veins
In soft green blend

Sassafras, shattered
And pale, a mere impression
Of its once vibrant presence
And explosion of fragrance

A whiff of a memory pulls me back
on a track dug by potoroos
And the scratching of lyrebirds
Just as I grasp it, it escapes

Such is the legacy of double death
As time undoes life
But while shadows of shimmer remain
We can't help but knot ties



Figure: Leaves tell stories, of the history and ecology of forests and the creatures inhabiting them. Errinundra Shining Gum (*Eucalyptus denticulata*) as shown by one of my interlocutors © Lena Schlegel, 2022, all rights reserved.

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Author's Statement

What is it that makes me look up as a glider spreads its patagium and glides silently over my head? I couldn't say. It's not that I have spotted its white fluffy fur in the canopy, nor has there been an audible sound. In the nocturnal forest, where my primary sense of sight offers little guidance, I have to take other cues—a spatial sense, perhaps, a thermal one, an intuition. To approach worlds organised around different perceptual priorities, we must learn to pay attention to "minor gestures" (Manning), attuning to pre-conscious affects and the diversity of sensations in our more-than-human world. This is among the perils faced by the protagonists of my poem: their sensory lives are difficult to grasp through privileged forms of human experience. Many forest-dwelling animals are nocturnal, their habitats far removed from human settlements. Every child knows and loves koalas, yet few Australians have ever encountered a greater glider, a potoroo, or a quoll. Beyond the physical destruction of their habitats, many species must therefore navigate an invisibility that is in itself constitutive of violence (Nixon). This marginalisation is both due to a system of extraction that would render old growth forests dispensable, and the elusive, often nocturnal lives of their inhabitants. But how might we strengthen our connection to species who tend to go unnoticed even as their worlds unravel?

Thinking poetically with leaves reminiscent of my fieldwork in southeast Australia's dwindling forests, I explore the potential of poetry as a resonant method for multisensory research (Paiva). Like the withering leaves, each verse offers a glimpse into the lives and lifeways of animals reliant on them as logging machines and wildfires carve through their habitat. In the collaborative research article accompanying this poem (Hey et al. 226-248), six researchers from different disciplines and with diverse research interests came together to explore how to recursively relive and (re)write multispecies encounters and more-than-human worlds through a process we call "sensoriographic." Together, we grapple with the challenges of immersing in, recording, and storying sensory encounters with other species and their worlds. It is through this sensoriographic attunement that we can begin to imagine how the plight of nocturnal forest creatures resonates with the wider theme of this special issue.

Amid wildfires, logging, and climate change, we might think of southeast Australia's struggling forests in terms of what Sunaura Taylor calls "injured" or "disabled" ecologies (Taylor). The compound impact of these disturbances creates ecological "misfits" (Garland-Thomson), both within forest ecologies and toward the embodied beings inhabiting them. For instance, the endangered Southern Greater Glider (Petauroides volans) is uniquely adapted to life in eastern Australia's cool, wet temperate forests. They rely on hollow-bearing trees for shelter, and forage exclusively on eucalyptus leaves in the canopy of the night. While logging and wildfires eat away at their den trees, increased nighttime temperatures leave them dehydrated, exhausted, and ultimately, unable to forage (Wagner et al.). The loss of old growth

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forests and the changing climate therefore create misfits for their species-specific, embodied ways of being.

Ecological misfits also arise from disrupted temporalities. Victoria's iconic Mountain (Eucalyptus regnans) and Alpine Ash forests (Eucalyptus delegatensis) are collapsing due to squeezed intervals between disturbances (Lindenmayer and Sato). As obligate seeders, these majestic trees require at least 30 years to reach maturity and replenish seed banks in the soil—a regenerative cycle increasingly disrupted by overlogging and shortened fire intervals. This undoing of generative ecological relations over time is what Deborah Bird Rose calls "double death," a spiral of loss that breaks with the "ethical time" sustained by multispecies relations, such as ecological sequences, genealogies, and synchronicities (Rose, "Multispecies Knots of Ethical Time"). By extinguishing the ethical time of ash forests, we imperil their generative capacities and those of the creatures reliant on them. If we look to eco-crip theories, we might respond to such ecological desynchronisation in terms of "multispecies crip time" (Day), resisting the accelerated, homogenising temporalities of capitalist production that turn forests into savannahs, and old growth into plantations.

All is not lost while there is still "shimmer" (Rose, *Shimmer: Flying Fox Exuberance in Worlds of Peril*) in the world, and my fieldwork also revealed many brave allies engaged in protesting, surveying, advocating, regenerating, community-building, and art-making for forests and their creatures. It is in the tensions between loss and hope, and the challenges posed by sensoriographic research, that we might ponder ethical responses to ecological collapse and extinction. Poetry offers a way of attuning to, and expressing resonance within such multispecies, multisensory encounters (Paiva). And so, the final verse of the poem invites us to stay with the troubles of injured landscapes and dishevelled creatures, of resisting abandonment and indifference, and committing to the work of care, repair, and resistance.

Acknowledgements

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All Day, Waiting for Another Sun to Rise

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Figure 1: Molly Wickett, *All Day, Waiting for Another Sun to Rise*, 2026. Steel, sand, salt, alder, iron sash weights. Summerhall Arts, Edinburgh.

Molly Wickett's post-apocalyptic infrastructure builds a world that continues after what should have been a world-ending event. Within this landscape, the post-apocalyptic is reimagined through a disabled lens. 'Apocalypse' has its roots in the Greek, with *apo* ('off') and *kalýptein* ('cover') forming *apokalýptein*: to uncover or reveal. Often articulated through a flood, the waters reveal what comes after.

Crip time is the experience of time as shaped by disability, measured here not by normative quantitative standards, but through the collective difference felt and created by disabled experience. In this installation, temporalities conflate: the present moment in which you stand before the sculptures is expanded to hold an imagined future while also carrying previously told histories of world endings. Deep time and evolution are held within the materials of the work, reflecting an interest in fungi, tides, submergence, and degradation. There is a tension between the deep time explored and the fragility of a suspended moment, embodied in forged steel fungi within sand deliberately oxidised with salt. Understandings of time are interrogated

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through how long we perceive this moment to last, inviting us to linger within its stillness as though it were frozen.

Forms of metal fungi curve away from the sculpted wood into freestanding ones, reaching far above your head. This sculpture works not only with metal, but also with the delicate balances and connecting supports offered by gravity, one of Wickett's chosen materials. Hammered and cold-worked into twisting forms, fungi are removed from their symbiotic relationship with trees. The fruiting bodies become enlarged to span the trees themselves, suspended in time and place.

'Otherness' names what is unfamiliar and divergent. Exploring a submerged landscape through processes of othering, notions of crip time create a dystopian future connected to our shifting present by utilising forms associated with decay and the breakdown of matter in forests: fallen trees, fungi growing on dead wood, and barren soil. Time is experienced through the envisioned future as well as through the exposed grain of the alder and the spalting (or Pseudosclerotic plates) visible in its surface, in the traces of natural materials whose life cycles will eventually come to completion.

Rather than indicators of what is lost, these sculptures translate a forest's life cycle into a language of hope. Utopia, meaning 'no place,' becomes part of her preoccupation with a blurred boundary where Otherness becomes possible, and with the near future toward which we are constantly moving. The boundaries of the sand aren't just physical, designating a change in environment, but also temporal. The stillness held in the landscape suggests a revelation of what might emerge after, once the waters have retreated.



Figure 2: Molly Wickett, *All Day, Waiting for Another Sun to Rise*, 2026. Steel, sand, salt, alder, iron sash weights. Summerhall Arts, Edinburgh.

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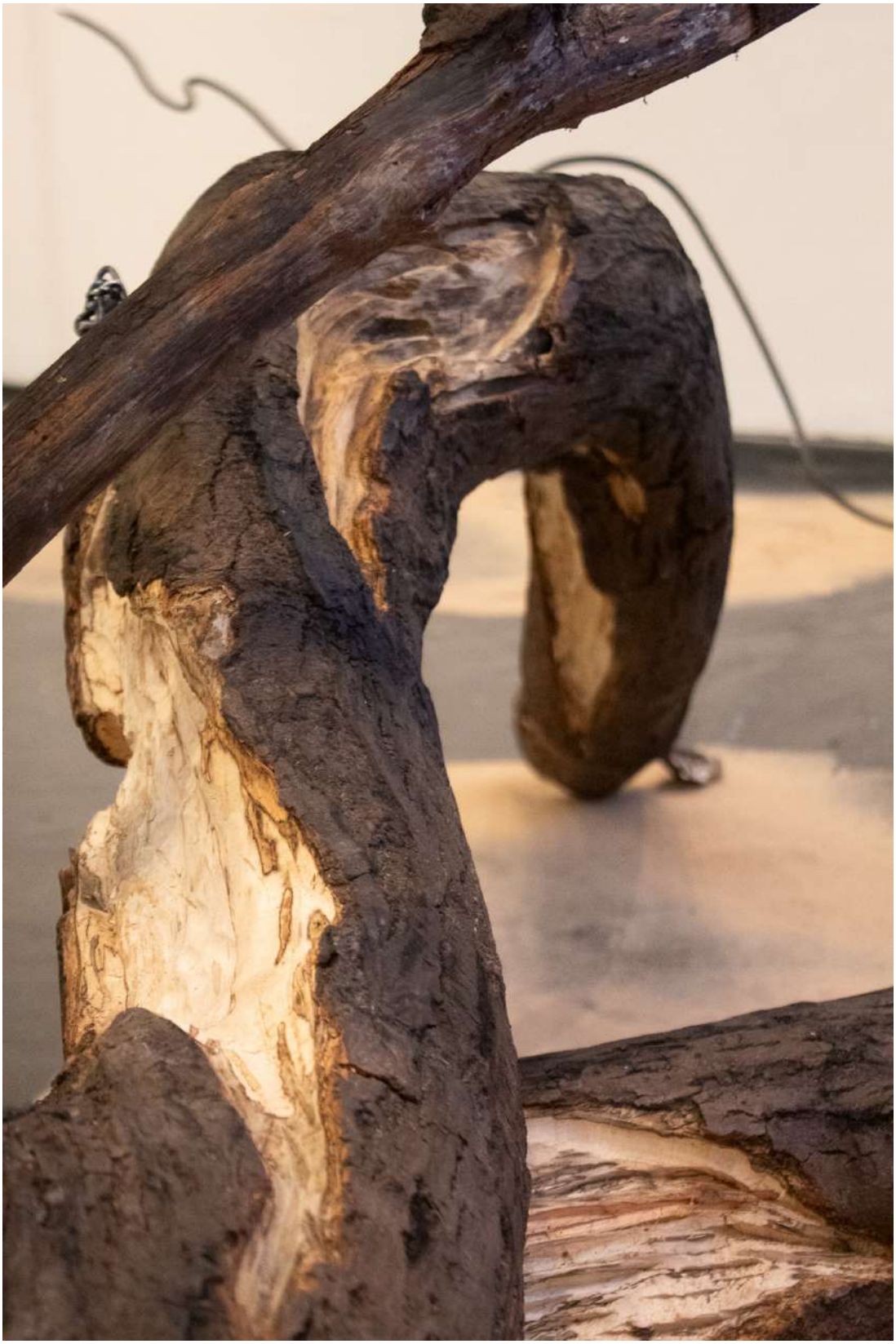


Figure 3: Molly Wickett, *All Day, Waiting for Another Sun to Rise*, 2026. Carved and torched alder, Pseudosclerotic plates. Summerhall Arts, Edinburgh.

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Figure 4: Molly Wickett, *All Day, Waiting for Another Sun to Rise,* 2026. Iron oxide, silicone, sand, steel. Summerhall Arts, Edinburgh.

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Figure 5: Molly Wickett, *All Day, Waiting for Another Sun to Rise*, 2026. Carved and torched grain. Summerhall Arts, Edinburgh.

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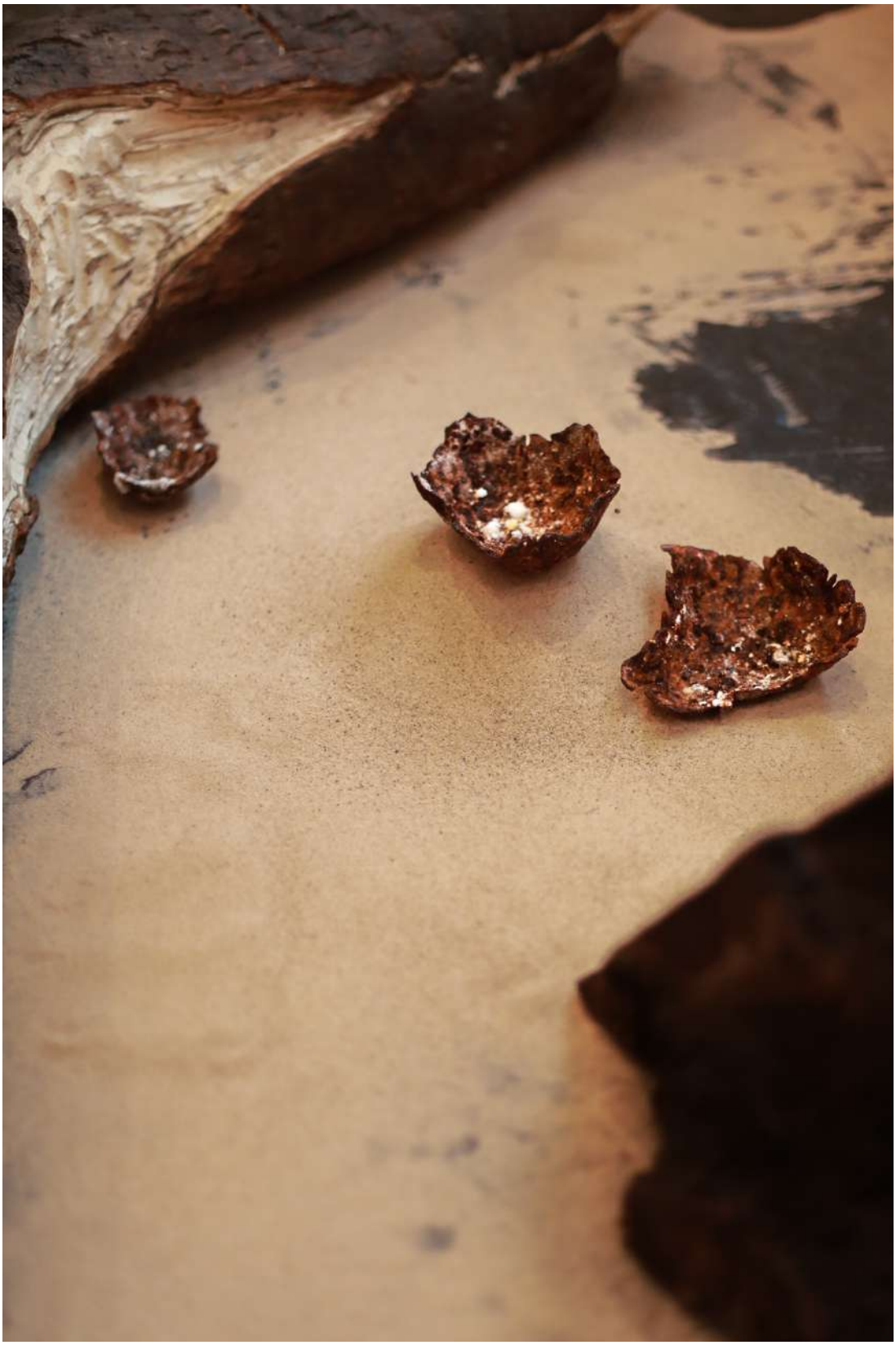


Figure 6: Molly Wickett, *All Day, Waiting for Another Sun to Rise*, 2026. Oxidised steel, aluminium, sand and salt. Summerhall Arts, Edinburgh. Photograph by Jiayi Chen.

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The Lake Erie Sisters

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We met the monster six years ago, when my heart stopped working right, and Priscilla's husband wanted to leave her, and Euodia's cat ate poison. A warm December for our area. Well, plenty of them have been warm lately. But that one especially. Not even a hint of ice lacing the edge of the lake. No snow either. Just gray and rain, rain and gray, till everything smelled like mud.

We were all back home for the holiday, the first one without our parents. My older sisters arrived with their husbands three days earlier than me, because they had real jobs, not underpaid graduate fellowships. When I walked in the front door, dry-mouthed and covered in plane sweat, the smell of sugar and butter and cinnamon enveloped me.

"Oh good, you're here," Euodia said. "The cookies just came out of the oven."

"You didn't have to rent a car," Priscilla said. "Someone could've picked you up."

Dad had always picked me up from the airport. But I wasn't going to say it if they weren't. We could all pretend this was normal, our childhood home empty except when we came back to it. Same scuffed linoleum, same cabinet door hanging slightly off its hinges, same family photos, same portrait of Jesus over the sink. The only change was a new smell of dust and mildew barely masked by the cookies.

Euodia came over to give me a quick kiss on the cheek. "It's going to be at least half an hour before the cookies are cool enough to decorate. You up for a walk to the beach?"

I stepped back outside without having removed my jacket. The air was a clammy hug. Christmas lights sparkled from front windows and reflected off puddles in soggy yards. Priscilla and Euodia's husbands muttered about the dull solitude of this tiny town.

"I'd almost rather be back in Afghanistan," Buzz said.

"Don't joke about that," Priscilla told her husband.

In a hundred yards we came to the cliffs. A narrow crescent of shoreline was visible in the darkness. We slid down boulders to reach it, Buzz bounding over them and running ahead while Euodia's husband Matt stayed to offer each of us a hand. On the beach, our feet crunched on the empty shells of thousands of zebra mussels.

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"Remember Mr. Altman's biology class when we had to dissect zebra mussels?" I asked.

Priscilla grunted. "Nothing but goo. Sharp on the outside, slimy on the inside."

"Did you know they've been ranked one of the most devastating invasive species of all time? They're part of why the lake keeps having toxic algae blooms. I read about it in—" Euodia stopped when she noticed Priscilla's raised eyebrow.

"Don't let me stop you," Priscilla said. "I know how hard it is for you to go a full conversation without mentioning the *Portsmouth Quarterly*."

"I like to be well-informed," Euodia said. "When's the last time you read a paper?"

"Have you heard of this thing that collects the entirety of the world's media? What's it called again? Oh right, the Internet."

I wandered ahead of the group, half-listening to Euodia and Priscilla bickering, wishing I'd tried harder to steer the conversation to what I really wanted to discuss: the time Pris found me with Mr. Altman's daughter, both of us half undressed. She told me that *she* didn't care, but I'd better not let Mom and Dad find out because it would put them in an early grave. Now I'd never know what they thought, because an early grave came for them without my help.

Behind me, the husbands exchanged work updates—one in the military, the other in library science—in tones that made it clear they were both being polite. I'd come to the end of the beach when a heavy crunch and muffled "fuck" made me spin around.

Matt was on his hands and knees. Euodia and Priscilla both hurried over as Buzz pulled out his phone and turned on its flashlight function. Matt held his hands under the white glow. They dripped with a dark wetness.

"I think we're gonna need a bandaid," Buzz said.

"A bandaid? We need to go to the hospital. Some of those look deep. And what about all the bacteria in the mussels?" Euodia's face was moon pale.

"I'll be fine. It's worse than it looks," Matt said, but he was grimacing.

"What if the cuts get infected?" Pris said.

"You heard the man, he'll be fine," Buzz said. "Here." He pulled a flask out of his back jean pocket and held it out to Pris. "Everyone can have a swig."

I didn't want a butt-pocket shot. But Priscilla glared when I started to shake my head, so I took the warm container and swallowed a mouthful. The cheap whisky burned my throat like carbolic acid. My heart wrenched itself from its moorings in my chest. The sensation sent an immediate burst of panic through my body. Not this again. I kept my eyes anchored to the ground as we walked back to the house. By the time Matt cleaned the cuts and covered them in gauze and tape, my cheeks no longer felt flushed with fear.

The guys retreated to the den to watch *Die Hard*. Euodia's cat trotted over to join them.

The three of us didn't bother asking if they wanted to decorate cookies.

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We spread old newspapers across the table and divided tasks. Pris only wanted to do the misfit shapes. Bats and bunnies and Abe Lincoln heads that belonged to different holidays. Euodia confiscated the special icing nozzles because she had the steadiest hand. I mixed drops of red and blue and green dye into the white cream, then shook silver nonpareils over Priscilla's decorations. Euodia said to keep the sprinkle madness to myself. She didn't want me to ruin the artistic integrity of her ornate snowflakes and monogrammed stockings.

"Don't you have an entire class of fourth-graders to torture?" Priscilla wanted to know. "Why do you have to pick on June?"

"I'm going by Junia again," I said.

"Oh my god, you change your mind about this every year," Pris said.

"I wrote the wrong name on all the gift tags for your presents," Euodia said.

"It's fine. I just don't feel like a June anymore." That's what Mom had called me, and my ex, who only became an ex because I told her I wasn't ready for her to meet my family.

I stuck my finger in the red icing and swirled a glob into my mouth. Intense sweetness melted across my tongue. The unfrosted head of a snowman mellowed the sting of sugar in my throat. One more finger of icing, then another bite of cookie, icing, cookie, till sugar spat white lightning through my veins. The crackle made me want to play a dozen games of hide-and-seek and climb trees in the woods like when we were kids. Back when Christmas was still fun.

Euodia and Pris had launched into a well-trod argument about our New Testament names and who had it worst growing up. That's when the second heart palpitation struck, followed by three more.

"I'm gonna head upstairs," I said suddenly. "Feeling tired."

"Alright," Euodia said. "Sleep well."

My heart continued to thump as I marched upstairs to my old bedroom. Now it was filled with sewing equipment from Mom's retirement project—a Bible-themed Etsy shop. The ceiling was still speckled with plastic stars that barely glowed.

I pulled a book out of my backpack for distraction. But the thumps worsened, uncomfortable booms at my collar bone. I coached myself not to panic. Just three months ago, the surgeons had taken care of the real heart problem. That's what they told me. No more dangerous arrhythmia. These were ectopic beats, the heart's valve closing a millisecond too soon. But behind closed eyes, I saw that horrible night before the surgery: the blood, the convulsions.

A flush flooded my arms, the precursor to a panic attack. I hopped out of bed and did several pushups. Adrenaline turned my arms to steel. Sometimes exercise restarted the heart's proper rhythm. But not today. The premature beats persisted. I was aware of every movement my heart made. A hum when it swallowed new blood, a whoosh to squeeze it back out, a thud when it beat too soon. More relentless than I'd ever felt before. Could this be some new disorder?

I padded down the stairway back to the kitchen. Pris pulled her head up from the table to shoot me a worried look. "What's up?"

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"Heart palpitations." I wanted to evaporate as soon as I'd said the words. I hated admitting anything was wrong, hated being so scared of something everyone called harmless.

"They're the benign kind, right?" Priscilla came over to squeeze my shoulders. "Just try to take deep breaths."

"I'm going for another walk." I pulled on my mauve bomber jacket. My hands shook inside the pockets. Tacky sweat pooled at my armpits.

"Do you need to go to the hospital?" Euodia asked. "Because we shouldn't wait till the last minute, you know."

"No. Like Pris said, they're benign." Another palpitation thundered against my chest, turning my breath into a wheeze. "It's fine. I'll be back soon."

Outside, clouds crushed the sky to a black sliver over the horizon. The wet grass squelched under my boots. I walked down the hill our house stood on and crossed the road to get back to the rocky coast. Lights gleamed along the rim of Lake Erie. The water stretched farther than I could see, interrupted only by one small island. We'd paddled there on kayaks as kids, Euodia and Priscilla shooting ahead, splashing each other.

They'd both been busy when I was in the hospital for heart surgery. Priscilla recovering from her second miscarriage, Euodia taking care of a neighbor's kid. All of us pretending we hadn't last seen each other at our parents' funeral. Jessie was the one who took me, who sat with me afterwards while I cried and blamed it on the sedation drugs, the one who said I needed to stop letting my sisters off the hook for how they treated me. The one who dumped me.

The pounding of my heart lessened as I walked. I took several lungfuls of cool air, then scrambled down large boulders to the water's edge, avoiding the beach we'd visited.

I sat on one of the rocks, dampness cutting through my pants. The pounding began anew, so forceful I thought each strike would knock me off my perch. Terror spread through my body. I buried my head in my hands, rubbing the bones of my face, telling myself I was fine, I was fine, I was fine. I wasn't going to die with the same violent abruptness as my parents.

Does it hurt? came a garbled voice to my right. *The little heart, does it hurt?*

I sat up so quickly I lost my balance. Elbow crashed into stone, foot landed in water. I snatched my soaked shoe out and winced. But seeing the monster dispelled all pain.

It was some nightmare version of a mermaid. Gills clamped shut against its neck, rimmed with red. Bulbous orange eyes. Webbing around its fingers, between its arms and torso. Lower body sinuous and scaled. A fin rising along its spine that glinted blue. Clouds reshuffled themselves above us. Moonlight pearled onto its scaly gray face. Zebra mussels clustered along its chin and chest like an Elizabethan ruffle.

Does it hurt? the thing asked again.

"The fear hurts," I said when I could find my voice. Wasn't this the question I'd wanted Euodia and Pris to ask? But I hated that I needed them to ask it. I hated how

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much I wanted them to see me, to accept me, to take care of me. So much easier to talk to some make-believe monster. “It hurts to think something might still be wrong. Not knowing if it will kill me.”

It blinked transparent lids over orange eyes, then slithered across the rocks to bring its upper body closer to mine. I smelled iron and algae and decaying organic material.

Do you want the thumps to stop? The creature’s mouth was a cavern of jagged teeth.

“Doctors tried to fix it.”

We make a trade. A new heart for your finger. It gestured at my right hand.

“Which finger?” I’d give anything to fix this. What was a single finger in exchange for a life where my heart wouldn’t terrorize me?

Here. It reached out to touch my right index finger, my skin pale against the dark rock.

“Will it be painful?”

The creature made a burbling sound.

Another trio of disruptive heartbeats determined me. “Alright. Yes. I’ll trade.”

The creature nodded and slithered closer. Its breath smelled like mayflies on the summer lake. Its presence was the electric charge preceding a storm. It plucked a single scale from its cheek and gestured for me to open my mouth, then placed the scale on my tongue. The sharp, hard edges cut into my throat as I swallowed. It placed one hand on my chest and pressed. A burst of ice shot through me, more sudden than the drugs that had once reset my heart. Before I could scream, the ice was gone. I placed a hand over my breast and felt the movement of air in and out of my lungs. But my thundering heart had stilled.

“Thank you.” Relief came, so intense I thought I’d gone weightless. “What now?”

The thing gestured at my hand and I held it out, palm down. I shut my eyes, imagined the monster’s damp skin against mine, its serrated teeth. But instead I felt the pop of a cracking knuckle, followed by a strange emptiness next to my thumb. I opened my eyes to see the finger on the rock between us. No blood burbled up from my stump; it was perfectly healed. I scratched a vague itchiness around the empty digit.

The creature gingerly plucked the severed finger from the ground. I watched as it dragged my finger along its chest, scraping away the zebra mussels. The black and white shells clattered on the rocks. The thing scraped until all the flesh was gone from my finger and only pale bone was left. This it threw into the lake. Red halos remained on its skin where the mussels had once clung. The skin of its face had changed from slate gray to a luminescent silver.

Our trade is complete, it said. Then it dove into the water and disappeared.

* * *

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I crawled over the rocks and walked back to the house, thumb grazing the gap where my finger had been. It was real. The monster that people whispered about, the one who appeared in ghost stories told around campfires. And it was being suffocated by those invasive mussels.

The strangeness almost didn't matter. What mattered was my body. Missing finger, healed heart. For years, I'd felt haunted by the possibility of sudden death, and whatever judgment might await me, even if I said I didn't believe in the afterlife. Now, I was free.

"Are you feeling better?" Eudoia asked when I came through the front door.

I hid my hand behind my back. "Yeah. I'm gonna head upstairs. G'night."

For once, it didn't sting that neither of them came up after me. I didn't need their help or their concern. Not anymore.

I lay flat on the bed and felt the smooth flow of my blood. Nothing in my chest, none of the fear that had always lingered at the edge of every moment. Except the nothingness was more than the absence of abnormality. I couldn't feel *anything.*

I placed my left thumb against my right wrist, the reliable pulse that no one ever noticed me checking. The place that told me I was still alive. But the gentle throbbing was gone. Next, two fingers to my neck. Easier still to find the river of blood beneath my skin. But the jugular was a lazy current of heat without any steady thrum.

It didn't mean anything. The monster had kept its promise. I was cured. Now I wouldn't need anyone to take care of me, not ever again.

But that night I slept uneasily. I dreamt of the beach. Sand castles tilting at odd angles. Powerboats anchored near the sandbar. The shadow of seagulls swooping down to chase empty chip bags. I waded into the warm, shallow water, green muck puffing up from the bottom. After a few steps, zebra mussels were everywhere, their razor edges needling my feet.

I tried to back out of the water, away from the sharp shells. But they formed a mound behind me. A tower of black and white, so tall I couldn't see land. The shells cascaded over me, cutting every bit of flesh on my body. I woke sweaty-faced, a scream trapped in my throat.

* * *

Brushing my teeth was hard. Hooking my bra was hard. Buttering toast, cutting an apple, holding a fork were all hard. Writing by hand was awkward, but not impossible. Typing on a computer wasn't much better. A whole row of keys I didn't know how to find with any other finger. I wrapped my right hand with an elastic bandage and stuffed cotton balls where my pointer should've been. I told the others I'd jammed my finger last night on the rocks.

That evening, Matt cooked us steak and roast vegetables, then everyone got ready for the stocking stuffer treasure hunt, our Christmas Eve tradition. It was my turn to hide gifts, and no room but the kitchen off-bounds. The others sat at the table,

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sipping beer and gin martinis. I flitted through the house to deposit packages of chocolate truffles and hand lotion and gift cards. Everything was decorated with a sprig of holly that I clipped off the bushes outside.

Once the gifts were hidden on bookshelves, in desk drawers, and behind board games stacked in closets, I skipped back to the kitchen and announced the hunt could begin. I thought about making myself a cup of herbal tea, but instead poured a second martini. Warmth pooled in my stomach. When was the last time I'd been drunk? Alcohol had always upset my heart.

A shriek from upstairs slashed my tipsy glee. I ran up the steps. Everyone congregated in Euodia's room, the space crowded with a circle of bodies. At the center sat Euodia, kneeling next to her cat, whose flanks heaved as vomit poured from its mouth. Waxy green shards flecked the foamy liquid.

"We have to get her to the vet," Euodia said.

"They won't be open. It's Christmas Eve," Priscilla said.

"What the hell happened to her?" said Matt.

I crouched down to the peer behind the closet door where I'd hidden a gift card. The package was still there, ribbon punctured by tooth marks, sprig of holly half-eaten.

"I put holly on the presents. I didn't think she'd eat it. I'm so sorry."

"What is wrong with you?" Euodia cried. "Holly is poisonous for cats!"

"I didn't think. I'm really, really sorry." My sinuses burned with tears. I loved Euodia's cat, who sought and reciprocated affection much more than my sister. He had soft black fur and chirped when he wanted to be pet. Now he was mewling in agonized tones.

"I don't care if it's Christmas Eve, I'm finding a vet. Somebody look up how to help a cat who's been poisoned. Everyone else, just, finish the treasure hunt." Euodia glared at me. "Are there more presents in here?"

I shook my head. Pris and Buzz crept out of the room while Matt thumbed at his phone. "Euodia, I think I can help," I said at last. "Please, just come with me."

She blew out a rough breath and sniffed back more tears, but left the poor cat curled in a knot. I lead my oldest sister outside and unwrapped my right hand. Cotton balls tumbled to the ground like snow.

At first, she refused to take me seriously. She said I'd had too much to drink. She trained her eyes away from my finger.

"Just go down and see. You'll only be gone two minutes if the—thing—isn't there."

"But I need this hand," she finally said. "I can't write with my left hand."

"Maybe you can offer something else. I don't know how this works."

Euodia's eyes flicked to the yellow glow from the upstairs bedroom where the sick cat might be moving closer to death. The only sound coming from indoors was the creak of footsteps across old wooden floors.

"Fine." Euodia took a deep breath. "*If* it exists, maybe I can talk it down to a pinkie. I'd rather have one less finger than lose my cat."

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"I'll wait here for you."

Euodia shuffled down the front lawn, arms crossed over her chest. She'd adopted the cat right after she broke up with her last boyfriend. Just three weeks before meeting her now-husband. The luck cat, she said. I'd taken care of him when Euodia and Matt went on vacation. I even knew how much the cat liked to chew on plants. I hadn't been thinking.

Did I want the monster to take my sister's finger? We'd be united by an unexplainable experience. A thread tying me to her after a lifetime of being the queer one who didn't bake, and didn't go to church, and didn't want kids. Maybe I wanted a calamity to mark someone else. Maybe the monster had infected me with malice.

I fidgeted for ten minutes, waiting for my sister. Eventually she appeared at the top of the rocky cliff, silhouetted by the moon. No clouds in the sky tonight, just an endless stretch of star-studded velvet. I traced my eyes against Euodia's body, looking for evidence.

"Did you see it?" I asked.

Her lips pinched into a bitter smile. "Yeah. I saw it." She pulled one hand out of her pocket and displayed a strip of flesh that smelled like fish. All five fingers were still attached. "It gave me this. For the cat to eat."

"And you're—are you ok?"

"I'll be fine."

Euodia pushed past me and went back inside, slamming the door shut. I waited a long moment, resentment making my skin itch. She could've said 'thank you.' She could've said anything. Had the monster taken a finger from her other hand? How had she felt when she saw it? But no, no reason to tell me anything. It was my fault the cat was sick. What idiocy to think anything could make us closer after two decades of unspoken resentments. Not even a healing monster had that power. I went inside, desperate for the holiday to end.

Upstairs, Euodia and her husband sat in their room, petting the purring cat. He pawed his face clean, bending his head down to stroke long whiskers.

"It worked," Euodia said.

"What happened?" I said.

Euodia looked up at me from her cross-legged seat on the ground. Illuminated by the incandescent bulbs of the bedroom ceiling fan, I could see a milky film over her left eye.

"Holy shit. Are you…?"

"Blind in this eye? Seems that way. Or at least, blind to everything around me. I can still see a river of zebra mussels. Too bad they're ugly."

Shame pummeled me, followed by a burst of glee, then an even stronger wave of shame.

Matt remained silent, gently stroking the cat, who had climbed into his lap. Euodia glanced at them, her expression softening. "Worth it."

For the rest of the night, Euodia let her bangs fall over her eyes and kept her glance low. We all sat in the den to watch another movie, Buzz not talking to anyone,

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Priscilla pretending to sleep. The cat wound a sinuous path around the furniture, her eyes glinting orange.

* * *

When we got back from mass the next morning, Euodia baked cinnamon rolls for breakfast, with cream cheese frosting on top and caramelized sugar crusting their bottoms. Buzz was the only one who ate an entire serving. I untwisted the ribbon of pastry, chewing on small bits. Priscilla changed into sweatpants without eating and slipped out the front door for a run.

"We can open presents when Pris gets back," Euodia said.

I retreated to my bedroom and sat on the lumpy mattress, trying to remember the last time I'd seen Priscilla go for a run. Euodia came to sit down next to me. She took my right hand and ran her fingers over the smooth skin.

"Did it hurt?" she said.

"Not that part. The heart healing hurt. What about yours?"

"No. It just felt icy cold."

"Are you still seeing zebra mussels?"

"Not anymore. Now it's just black."

"I'm sorry." Most of my anger had crumbled overnight. I wanted to have one real conversation with my sisters, and I wanted to run away from them forever, and the two opposite impulses were equally strong.

Euodia sighed. "Maybe an eye doctor can do something." Her bony shoulders leaned against mine, strands of her blond hair sliding over my own dark locks.

"Buzz wants a divorce," she said after another long moment.

"What? Why? When did he say that?"

"Last night. Pris came into our bedroom. She slept on an air mattress."

"Is he serious?"

"Seems like it. But I don't know, he's been weird. Maybe it's some kind of PTSD from being over there."

"What's she going to do?"

"She doesn't want to get a divorce." Euodia looked up at me, green eyes drilling into mine. "She's pregnant again."

"Why didn't she tell me?" It was more painful than the heart healing, the ever-growing evidence that my older sisters would always be best friends or worst enemies, while I remained a perpetual onlooker, a guest in their antics.

"June, she's been worried about this all weekend. She just didn't think about it."

"It's Junia."

"Right. Sorry."

For a moment I stewed. But then came that same stab of meanness, the urge to make all three of us marked. Had the monster made me a monster? There was no one

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left in the world who could tell me that I was or wasn't, so I said, "What if the creature can fix it?"

"How is some lake monster supposed to help a messed-up marriage? Bring them to the beach for counseling?"

"I don't know, but it fixed your cat and my heart! Priscilla should have the option."

"Fine. But I am *not* going to encourage her."

We cornered Pris when she got back, her face shining, breath still coming short.

"Can this wait until after I've showered? I stink."

"It's important," I said.

Priscilla raised an eyebrow at Euodia.

The three of us walked into my bedroom, locking the door behind us. Euodia told her story first, then let me explain how it started. Priscilla cringed at my hand, Euodia's eye.

"I think I'd rather not give up any vital body parts," she said.

"And the monster might not be there anyway," Euodia added.

"Look, maybe you don't want to fight for your marriage now, but what about when the baby comes?" I said.

"You told her?" Pris shot at Euodia.

"She's going to be an aunt, too."

We three sat in a row, Priscilla between Euodia and I. Pris got up first, followed by Euodia. They pulled the door firmly shut behind them, their murmuring voices barely audible, though I heard my name among other indistinct words. One of the old glow-in-the-dark stars tumbled from the ceiling in their wake.

* * *

Priscilla never told me what changed her mind, though she might've shared it with Euodia. To me, all she explained was what happened.

The monster came again. It asked for her ear. Pris said she wanted to keep it attached to her head. The creature instructed her to lean down and turn sideways, ear pointed to the sky. Hundreds of zebra mussel shells poured into it with the sound of an avalanche. When Priscilla sat up, she could hear nothing from that side of her head. Those were the last of the zebra mussels on its body, Pris said. Suddenly it was sleek and clean and almost beautiful.

My sister came back from the lakeshore with a bracelet made of bone that she tied around Buzz's wrist. When shipped out again, he promised that would be his last tour. Seven months later, Priscilla had a baby named Hannah. The little girl's eyes were steely gray with green specks. Buzz started a woodworking business. The three of them bought a house down south and have lived there ever since.

* * *

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Euodia and Priscilla host Christmas these days, even though we still haven't sold our parents' house. There are always cookies and movies and a fluffy black cat, and a little girl named Hannah who loves toys, but not as much as she loves the fish in her aquarium. I'm the only one who still visits the old house. I look for the monster every time, imagining how beautiful it must be without those mussels slowly choking it to death.

That creature is the reason I quit my anthropology program and switched to environmental science. It's the reason I met you at the Stone Lab in the middle of Lake Erie, where you smiled at me over a steel table covered in dissected fish, an iridescent scale stuck to your chin.

I need you to know this whole story, Maeve, even though it sounds unbelievable, even though you'll probably never see the Lake Erie monster. I need you to know that when I tell you I love you, I mean it, but I'll always be scared it isn't enough. Because of who my sisters are and who my parents were, but most of all because of the monster, and what it did to my heart.

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Manuel Silva-Ferrer, editor. *Paisajes del subsuelo. Mapas y pliegues de las culturas del petróleo en la Venezuela del siglo XX* (Berlin y Boston: De Gruyter, 2026), 407 pp.

Hay libros que de principio a fin se muestran impecables y, sin lugar a dudas, *Paisajes del subsuelo. Mapas y pliegues de las culturas del petróleo en la Venezuela del Siglo XX*, editado por Manuel Silva-Ferrer, es uno de ellos.

Paisajes del subsuelo constata con documentación amplia y fidedigna y con detallado y original análisis que en la producción cultural y literaria de Venezuela la presencia del petróleo ha sido y es muy relevante y que, tal y como afirma su editor, no es pertinente trasladar a este país la pregunta que Amitav Ghosh en "Petrofiction: The Oil Encounter and the Novel" (1992) se hace sobre el silencio que en la literatura anglosajona se cierne sobre el petróleo. En el contexto venezolano la desatención al petróleo se puede aplicar, pero no a la producción cultural y literaria, que en verdad es abundante, sino a su crítica.

Paisajes del subsuelo cubre ese vacío crítico en cuatro áreas: humanidades ambientales, literatura, cine, y urbanismo y arquitectura. En la sección "Morfologías del paisaje: naturaleza y culturas extractivas en la era del petróleo" se presta atención a los regímenes semánticos que generan las economías petroleras de los que, de manera seminal, trató Rodolfo Quintero en *La cultura del petróleo* (1968). Haciendo hincapié en la idea de que las sociedades exportadoras están en el centro del desarrollo de la modernidad y no en su margen, el subsuelo petrolero se revela impregnando las artes visuales (en Violette Bule, en Rolando Peña), estimulando la contra-narrativa de la izquierda cultural frente al "Estado Mágico" de agrupaciones como El Techo de la Ballena y Tabla Redonda, y propiciando discursos de progreso afines a los intereses de la industria, como los de la revista *El Farol*.

La sección segunda, "Edafología: narrativas y poéticas del subsuelo," un tanto desproporcionada en relación con el conjunto, por extensa, se dedica a la literatura. Consta de cinco capítulos y de cuatro anexos que rescatan del olvido la literatura de muy restringida difusión que surge del proceso de transformación de la naturaleza en campo de extracción y que amplían el estudio canónico *La novela del petróleo en Venezuela* (1972) de Gustavo Luis Carrera. El silencio sobre los entresijos de la producción petrolífera se corrige al estudiar la primera literatura petrolera, en la que el subsuelo es referencial y geofísico, y también la literatura posterior, en la que del subsuelo surge un ecosistema de signos e imágenes que caracterizan al siglo XX en su conjunto. Gina Saraceni se acerca a la poesía de los siglos XIX y XX en tanto edafología

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letrada que da cuenta de los cambios acaecidos por encima del subsuelo en que se encuentran los yacimientos de petróleo. Juan Cristóbal Castro estudia la literatura del petróleo en el contexto de un pasado colonial minero-extractivo común a Latinoamérica. Y en los anexos se revalorizan específicamente algunas obras, entre otras, *Cubagua* (1931) de Enrique Bernardo Núñez y *El señor Rasvel* (1934) de Miguel Toro Ramírez. La ausencia crítica del petróleo queda en este apartado subsanada mediante el estudio pormenorizado de parte de su abundante presencia en la literatura venezolana.

El tercer apartado de *Paisajes del subsuelo* está dedicado al cine del petróleo, muy destacado entre las representaciones estéticas del subsuelo y una parte muy significativa de la totalidad del cine venezolano, como afirma Luis Duno Gottberg. Gianfranco Selgas trata de dos películas documentales, *Pozo Muerto* (1968) de Carlos Rebolledo y *Mayami nuestro* (1981) de Carlos Oteyza, para explorar la pertinencia de la "estética del crudo" formulada por Imre Szeman en *On Petrocultures: Globalization, Culture and Energy* (2019) y estudiar las problematizaciones de las articulaciones simbólicas y materiales del impacto de la explotación de las energías fósiles. Y Elizabeth Barrios trata del documental italiano *Nuestro petróleo y otros cuentos* (E. Andreoli, G. Muzio, S. Muzio y M. Pugh; 2006) para destacar el valor del cine como arma de denuncia social de las devastadoras consecuencias ecológicas de la explotación petrolera que, desde las primeras prospecciones en los años de 1930 permanecen inalteradas durante el periodo de la revolución bolivariana iniciada por Hugo Cháves.

Cierra el libro un exhaustivo recorrido por los archivos urbanísticos y arquitectónicos que reflejan las mutaciones de la superficie del paisaje venezolano en función de las posibilidades extractivas de su subsuelo. La atención a estos cambios se centra a partir de 1940, cuando se transforman las relaciones sociales vinculadas al pasado agrícola colonial en relaciones urbanas marcadas por la velocidad y por la influencia cultural estadounidense. Los *shopping malls*, las zonas residenciales planificadas, los parques, los centros de salud alteran significativamente el paisaje previo con los llamados "distritos petroleros." Jorge Villota Peña trata específicamente de las construcciones de la firma Lathrop Douglass en la década de 1950.

Una vez cerrado el libro, *Paisajes del subsuelo* invita a investigar y analizar las nuevas formas de socialización, consumo y entretenimiento relacionadas con el desarrollo de la petro-cultura venezolana (el *bowling*, el béisbol, el golf, los autocines, los *shopping-malls*, los *reality shows*), con la influencia del modo de vida estadounidense e incluso con las ideologías que se propagan insertas en las iglesias evangélicas provenientes del norte. Esas formas merecen una detenida reflexión identitaria en relación con las características de lo que podría haber conformado o debería conformar "nuestra América," por aludir al canónico ensayo de José Martí. Las actuales circunstancias de Venezuela, con sus candidatos democráticos haciendo la corte a Estados Unidos después de que este país haya intervenido su producción petrolera sin la menor consecuencia democratizadora hace esa reflexión acuciante.

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Aunque en su subtítulo anuncia que se limita al estudio de la cultura venezolana desde que el país se constituye en estado petrolero en el marco del siglo XX, *Paisajes del subsuelo* es una sólida base para pensar sobre el sistema de desarrollo sustentado en las energías fósiles y sobre la cultura y las relaciones sociales que tal sistema implanta a nivel planetario. Y no sólo se constituye en un espacio de reflexión que va más allá de las fronteras de Venezuela, sino que también desborda el siglo al que alude su título y sirve de estímulo al pensamiento sobre el siglo XXI y sobre las centurias por venir, sobre qué futuro, qué energías y qué relaciones económicas, sociales y culturales son deseables para la Humanidad.

Paisajes del subsuelo asocia el norte al consumo y el sur a la producción, el primero a la democracia y el segundo a los estallidos dictatoriales y, al hacerlo, da por buena una visión norte-sur cuestionable y a la que la historia reciente ha dado un vuelco. Un país del norte, Estados Unidos, se aleja de implementar las energías renovables y exacerba el extractivismo ("drill baby drill," es uno de sus mantras más conocidos) y, al mismo tiempo, destruye la calidad de su democracia a imagen y semejanza de los caudillismos tradicionalmente asociados al sur.

De intachable corte académico, este magnífico libro invita a analizar las relaciones culturales, sociales y económicas que se desarrollan, más allá del petróleo, en torno a cualquier industria extractiva. En *Paisajes del subsuelo* ya se apuntan los vínculos del extractivismo petrolero con el extractivismo colonial, con el de la agricultura y ganadería intensivas, o con el extractivismo de minerales nuevos como el litio o el coltán. Y aunque exclusivamente dedicado al subsuelo, sus páginas incitan a mirar hacia arriba para prestar atención al cielo, o, en otros términos, a los estragos que la industria del turismo hace al explotar las excepcionales condiciones climatológicas de determinados lugares, cuyos territorios, sociedades e idiosincrasias quedan abruptamente convertidos en mercancías y *resorts* impersonales para el disfrute de unos pocos. El análisis cultural del extractivismo asociado a las transformaciones paisajísticas producidas por la turística explotación industrial del cielo sería un complemento valioso a *Paisajes del subsuelo*, aunque ésa sería ya otra historia.

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Antonia Villinger, Hg. *Fossile Fiktionen: Kohle als Energiequelle in der Literatur von 1850 bis zur Gegenwart* (Göttingen: Brill | Fink, 2025), 254 pp.

Mit diesem aus einer 2023 in Erlangen veranstalteten Tagung hervorgegangenen Sammelband gelingt es der Herausgeberin Antonia Villinger, ein breites Spektrum verschiedener literaturwissenschaftlicher Zugänge zur Kohle zusammenzubringen und damit einen äußerst produktiven Beitrag zu den sogenannten Energy Humanities sowie zur "Literatur- und Kulturgeschichte der Stein- und Braunkohle im deutschsprachigen und europäischen Kontext" (16) zu leisten. Wie im Untertitel angedeutet, decken die einzelnen Kapitel des Bandes einen Zeitraum von etwa 160 Jahren ab, der mit einigen 1857 in der breit rezipierten *Gartenlaube* erschienenen Artikeln auf der einen und mit der 2017 publizierten Erzählung "Die Rückkehr der Argonauten" von Clemens Meyer auf der anderen Seite markiert ist. In dem als Einleitung gestalteten Beitrag der Herausgeberin werden zunächst die zahlreichen theoretischen wie motivischen Bezugspunkte des Bandes aufgefächert und mit einem hilfreichen und umfangreichen Fußnotenapparat versehen, wodurch sich der Beitrag hervorragend als kurze Einführung in das Feld der Energy Humanities eignet. Ausgehend davon betont Villinger in der Einleitung insbesondere den Fokus auf Kohle als Energiequelle sowie den gemeinsamen Schnittpunkt von Materialitäts- und Umweltdiskursen. Dazu ließe sich allerdings anmerken, dass Fragen von Energie und Materialität beziehungsweise den Wechselwirkungen ihrer gesellschaftlichen und literarischen Verflechtungen zwar in vielen der Beiträge produktiv diskutiert werden, aber keineswegs durchgängig in allen Beiträgen im Zentrum stehen. Trotz des großen zeitlichen wie inhaltlichen Spektrums des Bandes lassen sich jedoch gut zwei grobe inhaltliche Stränge erkennen: Zum einen bietet der Band mit seinen Beiträgen eine umfassende Motivgeschichte der Kohle—entwickelt sowohl im Hinblick auf "unterschiedliche Textgattungen" sowie unter Bezugnahme auf "verschiedene Regionen wie das Ruhrgebiet, die Lausitz oder Schlesien" (2)—und zum anderen wird stellenweise danach gefragt, "welche Möglichkeitsräume das Nachdenken über Kohle eröffnet" (16), um so der Kohle in ihrer konkreten Materialität und/oder als spezifische Energieform gerecht zu werden und sie hinsichtlich ihrer gesellschaftlichen wie literarischen *Funktion* zu untersuchen.

Die tendenziell stärker motivgeschichtlich ausgerichteten Beiträge behandeln unter anderem die enge Verflechtung von sachlicher Information über Kohle mit ihrer

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literarischen Darstellung (Susteck), die im Zusammenhang mit Kohle- bzw. Kohleabbaudarstellungen thematisierten Fragen nach Zeitlichkeit, Fortschritt und utopischen Alternativentwürfen (Wittemann, Schößler, Lindel, Seidel) sowie Kohledarstellungen als Kristallisationspunkt von Gesellschafts- und Umweltkritik, in der die Verzahnung der Ausbeutung menschlicher Arbeitskraft mit der Ausbeutung natürlicher Rohstoffe sinnfällig wird (Gruber, Hurta, Niefanger). Besonders auffallend und in mehreren Beiträgen explizit thematisiert ist dabei, dass die Materialität der Kohle für Darstellungen ihres Abbaus zwar zentral ist (Steinkohle, Staub, Schmutz, Schwefelgeruch, Stollen, Spitzhacken…), an den Stellen aber in den Hintergrund tritt oder sich gar aufzulösen scheint, wo es abseits des unmittelbaren Abbaukontextes um ihre *Funktion* als Energie- und Rohstoffquelle geht und sie nur mehr als abwesende Verursacherin von Umweltfolgen und gesellschaftlichen Transformationen erfahrbar ist. Darin könnte zum einen eine Erklärung dafür liegen, dass die Kohle in vielen literarischen Texten (wie auch in vielen Beiträgen des Bandes) gerade *nicht* in ihrer Funktion als Energiequelle ins Zentrum der Betrachtung rückt. Zum anderen wirft die Beobachtung die Frage auf, ob Amitav Ghoshs kanonisch gewordene These—Öl entziehe sich unter anderem deshalb einer kritischen Analyse, weil es sich im Unterschied zur Kohle nicht in seiner Materialität darstellen lässt—einer Präzisierung bedarf. Denn obschon sich der Abbauprozess der Kohle sehr gut für die literarische Darstellung eignet, scheint ihre Transformation zur Energiequelle—zumindest im 20. Jahrhundert—über teils ebenso alchemistisch anmutende und der literarischen Darstellung entzogene chemisch-technische Verfahren zu verlaufen, wie Ghosh es für das Erdöl beschrieben hat.

Dass dieser Prozess der quasi-alchemistischen, in das Feld der Chemie gewendeten Transformation zwar selten, aber eben durchaus auch explizit zum Objekt literarischer Darstellung wurde und dass der kritischen Analyse gerade dieser Texte ein besonderes literaturwissenschaftliches Potenzial innewohnt, zeigen die beiden Beiträge von Carolin Slickers und Alexander Wagner eindrücklich. Während Wagner anhand von Karl Aloys Schenzingers 1937 erschienenen "Bestseller" *Anilin* die zentrale Bedeutung von Kohle als Rohstoff einer eben auch chemisch-synthetischen Raumaneignung im Nationalsozialismus herausarbeitet, widmet sich Slickers dem wenige Jahre zuvor (1932) publizierten Roman *Rauch an der Ruhr* des späteren Landesleiters der Reichsschrifttumskammer Felix Wilhelm Beielstein. Dabei zeigt sie am Beispiel des von Beielstein literarisch verarbeiteten Verfahrens der Kohlehydrierung—also ihrer stofflichen Transformation in ein für die Kohlenstoffindustrie verwertbares Ausgangsprodukt—, "wie systemische und stoffliche Transformation zusammenlaufen" und "Energiegeschichte diskursiv und literarisch wirksam wird" (116). In Slickers erhellender Analyse wird so das für die stoffliche Transformation der Kohlehydrierung nötige Katalyseverfahren—durch die dadurch ermöglichte, tatsächliche oder aber zumindest literarisch imaginierte Transformation der deutschen Kohlechemie und der an sie anschließenden Großindustrie—zum gesellschaftlichen Katalysator eines systemischen Transformationsprozesses. Methodisch nicht unähnlich, wenngleich in einem

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gänzlich anderen politischen Zusammenhang untersucht Sergej Rickenbacher in seinem Beitrag die gesellschaftliche Kohäsions- und Subversionskraft von Kohle in der DDR. Dabei zeigt er, dass der Kohle je nach historischem Kontext und abhängig davon, ob es sich um Stein- oder aber Braunkohle handelte, ein geradezu gegensätzliches politisches Moment innewohnte. Rickenbacher macht dabei auch deutlich, dass sich die spezifische Materialität nicht nur in einer ihr entsprechenden politischen Dimension niederschlägt (vereinfacht: Kohäsion und revolutionäre Kraft im Falle der Steinkohle, Subversion bei der Braunkohle), sondern dass diese verschiedenen Materialitäten auch unterschiedliche poetologische Konzeptionen förderten und erforderten. Theoretisch nicht weniger ambitioniert aber etwas stärker explorativ angelegt zeigt sich der passenderweise ganz am Ende des Bandes platzierte Beitrag von Elisabeth Heyne, der anhand einiger "Überlegungen zu einem 'ostdeutschen Anthropozän'" und der darin aufscheinenden sozialistischen Form der Extraktion auf die künftig noch zu bergenden Potenziale eines am jeweiligen lokalen Kontext entwickelten Anthropozänbegriffs verweist.

Dass den Energy Humanities insgesamt—und gerade auch in Bezug auf die Kohle und mit Fokus auf Europa und den deutschsprachigen Raum—ein großes Potenzial für produktive literaturwissenschaftliche Analysen innewohnt, macht der gesamte Band auf erfreulich anschauliche Weise deutlich. Dies gilt selbst dort, wo es nicht restlos gelingt, die jeweils untersuchte literarische Darstellung der Kohle auf die mit ihr zusammenhängenden gesellschaftlichen Entwicklungen und Transformationen zu beziehen. Wenn etwa der vor den Nationalsozialisten (und ihrer maßgeblich auch durch die Kohleindustrie ermöglichten und finanzierten Vernichtungspolitik) nach Brasilien flüchtende Stefan Zweig verharmlosend als "Reiseschriftsteller" bezeichnet wird, führt dies zu einer Verwischung genau jener gesellschaftlichen Zusammenhänge, die es analytisch genauer zu unterscheiden und herauszuarbeiten gälte. Ähnliches gilt auch für die im Band immer wieder aufgerufene Unterscheidung zwischen Stein- und Braunkohle, die beide in ihrer je spezifischen Materialität als Kohleformen kaum genauer beleuchtet werden und—mit Ausnahme des Beitrags von Rickenbacher—selten explizit auf ihre je unterschiedlichen gesellschaftlichen und literarischen Funktionen hin untersucht werden. An zahlreichen Stellen aller Beiträge wird allerdings genau dieser in der detaillierten Beleuchtung der gesellschaftlichen Zusammenhänge von Kohle, Energie, Politik, Materialität und Literatur liegende Erkenntnisgewinn äußerst produktiv aufgezeigt. Darin liegt zweifellos ein sehr großes Verdienst des Bandes, der sich allein schon deshalb als unverzichtbarer Impulsgeber für die Energy Humanities im deutschsprachigen Raum erweist.

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Johan Höglund, *The American Climate Emergency Narrative: Origins, Developments and Imaginary Futures* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2024), 214 pp.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, which devastated New Orleans in the summer of 2005, the bands U2 and Green Day released a cover of 'The Saints Are Coming" (1978) by Scottish punk group Skids. Chris Milk's music video presents an alternative history in which US troops are redeployed from Iraq to Louisiana, overlaying real footage of submerged US homes with columns of M1 Abrams battle tanks and fleets of nuclear-capable B-2 heavy bombers. This militarised response to ecological disaster belongs to a genre perceptively identified and theorised by Johan Höglund in *The American Climate Emergency Narrative: Origins, Developments and Imaginary Futures* (2024).

Höglund's principal achievement is to identify the American Climate Emergency Narrative (hereafter abbreviated ACEN) as a genre in which 'socio-ecological breakdown' necessitates the redeployment of military forces and security logics from the periphery to the core of the world-system (Höglund, x and passim). Höglund builds upon Immanuel Wallerstein's popular conception of world-systems theory, which takes the world, rather than the nation, as the basic unit of enquiry, identifying core, semi-periphery, and periphery states. As such, the ACEN complicates readings of climate fiction—a genre which explores socio-ecological breakdown more generally—by naming a related genre in which the military is presented as a solution to climate disaster, as in Milk's film, without confronting the causal relationship between biospheric breakdown, the military, and logics of securitisation.

For Höglund, the ACEN is a product of the world-system's "core," which justifies particular attention to U.S. literature produced primarily by white, male, straight, and financially secure Americans, with the important exception of the eighth and final chapter, which identifies other types of ecologically-oriented narratives, including Helen Marshall's *The Migration* (2019) and Waubgeshig Rice's *Moon of the Crusted Snow* (2018). As a product of the "core," the ACEN provides implicit reinforcement of the contemporary capitalist world-system and the military violence through which it is perpetuated. This logic is smuggled into works which may otherwise "project the sense that [they are] about the biospheric crisis" (Höglund 11), including Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach* trilogy (2014). Höglund's intervention is thinking with world-systems theory to identify the operation through which climate

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fiction may implicitly defend the dominant global world-system responsible for anthropogenic climate change.

In support of this thesis, Höglund reads texts across periods, genres, and media—from Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) to the film *Godzilla II* (2019); from Paolo Bacigalupi's *Ship Breaker* trilogy (2010-2017) to the video game *Battlefield 2042* (2021)—ultimately tracing the logic which structures the ACEN to the settler capitalist writing and plantation texts of the 1600s, including John Underhill's *Newes from America* (1638). In this sense, the entire project productively complicates disciplinary conventions, suggesting that a broad scope is necessary to identify an undertow of cultural logics and to precisely situate the contemporary ACEN in relation to both its cultural antecedents and to the material history of extractivist capitalism.

This historical scope allows Höglund to argue, for instance, that various genocides of Indigenous people across North America in the seventeenth century are, in fact, partially motivated by the logics of enclosure, privatisation, extraction, and accumulation (that is, the core processes of the contemporary capitalist world-system). Crucially, this sort of trans-historical work deconstructs the notion that socio-ecological breakdown, caused by extractivist capitalism, is located somewhere in the future. Höglund is rightly critical of definitions of climate fiction which do not acknowledge this history and the global inequalities that it has produced. Such justice-oriented thinking is heightened in the sixth chapter as Höglund considers the figure of the climate refugee within in the ACEN as occupying one of two roles: the first as a racialised and monstrous being whose disregard for borders threatens the stability of the world-system, as in Marc Forster's 2013 film *World War Z*; the second as a white American, able to exploit their global mobility to escape (or delay) the material consequences of socio-ecological breakdown, as in *The Road* (2006), by Cormac McCarthy, and Brian Hart's, *Trouble No Man* (2019). Each of these two inflections of the ACEN rely upon the logics of enclosure and securitisation, supporting, rather than challenging, a fundamental structure.

While the book is primarily concerned with literary representation, discussions of film and video games permit productive criticism of the market mechanisms that shape multi-million-dollar narratives. Höglund notes that *Battlefield 2042,* for example, omits China from the story precisely as a prerequisite for selling the game in their market, and compares this to films produced by the US Military Entertainment Complex—including *Top Gun* (1986), directed by Tony Scott—in which the script is approved by the US AirForce. In each example, Höglund reveals *de facto* censorship, motivated by market forces, to constitute an operation through which the logic of extractivist capitalism directly intervenes with the content of the ACEN. This multi-media approach permits application of theory in surprising and productive ways, which includes applying Mark Fisher's capitalist realism—meaning the inability to imagine a world without capitalism—to the gameplay of *Battlefield 2042,* which, despite a "surface layer" critique of extractive capitalism, positions the player as "stuck rehearsing a procedural rhetoric" with limited agency (Höglund 126).

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Ultimately, the concept of the ACEN is premised upon a distinction between the "biospheric crisis" and the "capitalist crisis" as two "intimately entangled" but "very different, and differently lived, crises" (Höglund 10). They are combined in what Höglund perceptively terms "socio-ecological breakdown," a phrase which he returns to throughout, and which neatly captures the mutual imbrication of the biosphere and capitalism. In critiquing this relationship, Höglund's volume makes a substantial contribution to the materialist strand of ecologically-orientated literary studies. The clear writing style works as a guide to several major conceptual waypoints in the field, including Jason Moore's Cheap Nature, Giorgio Agamben's state of exception, Andreas Malm's fossil fiction, and Mark Fisher's capitalist realism. In other words, Höglund's well-evidenced argument serves as a glossary through which productive ecological thinking can be conducted, while contributing to that list the useful concept of the American Climate Emergency Narrative.

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Stacy Alaimo, *The Abyss Stares Back: Encounters with Deep-Sea Life* (University of Minnesota Press, 2025), ix+256 pp.

Environmental aesthetics has often assumed that the nonhuman must first be seen to be cared for. The deep ocean, however, challenges this premise through its opacity and elusiveness. It is precisely this tension that lies at the heart of *The Abyss Stares Back*.

This volume offers a critical intervention in Kantian aesthetic judgment, particularly its emphasis on disinterested contemplation and the separation of aesthetic experience from practical interest. In contrast to such distance, Alaimo argues that contemporary crises of environmental degradation and oceanic destruction require a more affective engagement. For her, images and visual production about oceanic life can summon a kind of ethical commitment to protect both benthic and pelagic organisms. Alaimo suggests that encounters with abyssal life can unsettle our assumptions about the ocean, provoking wonder while reminding us of the limits of human knowledge. This sense of humility, Alaimo suggests, may inspire more responsible environmental practices. To trace the shifting relationship between human perception and abyssal life, Alaimo situates this theoretical intervention within a broader history of deep-sea exploration and representation.

Alaimo traces a historical shift from the scientific wonder of early twentieth-century expeditions to contemporary forms of digital representation. She contrasts William Beebe's pioneering Bathysphere expeditions with the postwar militarization and industrialization of oceanography. In Beebe's accounts, poetic description and scientific inquiry converged to acknowledge the alterity of abyssal organisms. Later voyages, in turn, represented by the Alvin submersible and bioprospecting, increasingly reconceptualized marine life as mere objects of scientific extraction. Turning to contemporary visual culture, the book explores the contradictory effects of projects such as the Census of Marine Life and the use of remotely operated underwater vehicles. Although these mediated technologies cultivate a sense of biophilic connection, according to Alaimo, they also risk reducing benthic organisms to objects of digital consumption and visual spectacle. She reveals how dominant representational frameworks, particularly in documentaries like *Blue Planet II*, frequently portray the abyss as a threatening "black void" (182) that can reproduce cultural narratives shaped by colonial logics of domination and racialized associations of darkness. In response, drawing on Afrofuturist and Black feminist scholarship, especially the work of Nnedi Okorafor and Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Alaimo envisions a

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decolonial marine biology that considers the deep ocean not as an alien space awaiting human mastery, but as a complex site of multispecies kinship and relational entanglement.

Throughout the volume, Alaimo wonders whether images of the deep sea can inspire ethical concern without turning marine life into spectacle. This contradiction, however, generates significant tension within Alaimo's broader aesthetic project. Although the volume criticizes the commodification of marine life, it still relies on vision as the dominant pathway of ethical relations with nonhumans. For this reason, Alaimo's framework leaves less room for alternative forms of embodied and multisensory engagement with oceanic environments. I find this tension particularly striking in the book's final chapter, where Alaimo prioritizes the potential of images and documentaries to foster environmental sensitivity by bringing to light the deep-sea organisms in all their "shimmering, glowing, gliding, darting, undulating, pulsing, and fluttering" (197). What strikes me most, however, is the way Alaimo treats touch primarily as a form of domination in her discussion of deep-sea creatures in aquariums, targeting touch tanks in particular. Reflecting on her experience at Monterey Bay Aquarium, her analysis casts light on the suffering and dislocation of organisms like giant isopods, which are reduced to captive novelties for human touch. For Alaimo, this forced "haptic immediacy" (189) fails to establish an ethical relation. Surprisingly, she places greater trust in mediated images than in direct physical encounters, arguing that remote representations foster intimate aesthetic encounters and ecological concern without disturbing the creatures in their abyssal lifeworlds. However, her analysis pays insufficient attention to the material infrastructures that make such encounters possible in the first place, particularly the artificial lighting technologies required to render abyssal life visible. Artificial light in marine studies is not just a neutral instrument of observation but a form of environmental intervention that can alter the very ecosystems it seeks to reveal. Thus, the technologies that produce these images offer seemingly harmless access to deep-sea life while obscuring the ecological costs of visibility itself. At its core, though, Alaimo's discussion of tactile encounters highlights their exploitative dimensions, framing haptic interactions as a "cruel love" (189). Indeed, captivity and commodification remain undeniable ethical concerns in aquariums, but the weight she gives to the violence of physical contact risks collapsing affective engagements into a singular narrative of exploitation.

By framing touch mainly in terms of captivity, Alaimo underestimates how mutual tactile encounters can dismantle the binary between observer and observed, opening up a shared affective space that also helps resist the anti-Black and colonial logics embedded in visual spectacles of the abyss. Moving beyond mediated aesthetic encounters, I suggest that reclaiming and queering the haptic experience offers a vital alternative to ocularcentric modes of perception. Rather than relying on Brian Massumi's concept of "haptic visuality" (172), which conceptualizes vision as acquiring tactile capacities to produce a sensation of touch through sight, I propose *skin-sight* as a perceptual formation in which touch itself becomes a primary mode of

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seeing, sensing, and knowing. By touching and being touched, both physically and emotionally, the skin becomes a site of affective sensation. Sedgwick's notion of "besideness" (23) opens a different way of imagining human relations with marine life, not as a relation between observer and object, but as a form of coexistence grounded in proximity and reciprocity. Touch, then, does not always imply control. It can foster care and mutual understanding.

Even so, *The Abyss Stares Back* opens toward a broader ethics of opacity and alterity. What remains tacit in Alaimo's project is its resonance with critical disability studies, particularly its critique of the assumption that ethical recognition requires full accessibility and visibility. Alaimo argues that some aspects of abyssal life must remain inaccessible, questioning the idea that ethical relations depend on human knowledge or visibility. This insight quietly outgrows its own ocularcentric framework, making room for oceanic ethics grounded in darkness and vulnerability.

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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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Project Description: Floral Fasciation is an ongoing research-creation project exploring plant mutation, biodiversity, and disability through photography, sculpture, and videography. Focusing on fasciated and otherwise irregular flowers, the work considers how ideas of normality, deviation, and classification are constructed. Fasciation and other irregular plant growth patterns can have many causes, including genetic changes, illness, injury, environmental conditions, or other disruptions to growth. The same could be said of disability. And, like the biodiversity among these flowers, disability takes many forms: in invisible and visible differences, with obvious or subtle, changing and complex impacts on wellbeing. In collecting and documenting "disabled" flowers, I hope to question the stigma that gets assigned to human disability. I ask whether illness and difference can make us reflect on survival and adaptation, rather than impairment. All flowers have been collected or cultivated by me, most of them locally, in Montreal. No AI is used in my work.

Artist Bio: A visibly disabled interdisciplinary artist based in Tiohtiá:ke/Mooniyang/Montréal, Emery Vanderburgh draws on experiences with cancer and disability to explore how science and culture shape ideas of difference. Her work, often in collaboration with disabled communities, has been shown nationally and internationally. Website: https://emeryvanderburgh.ca/

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