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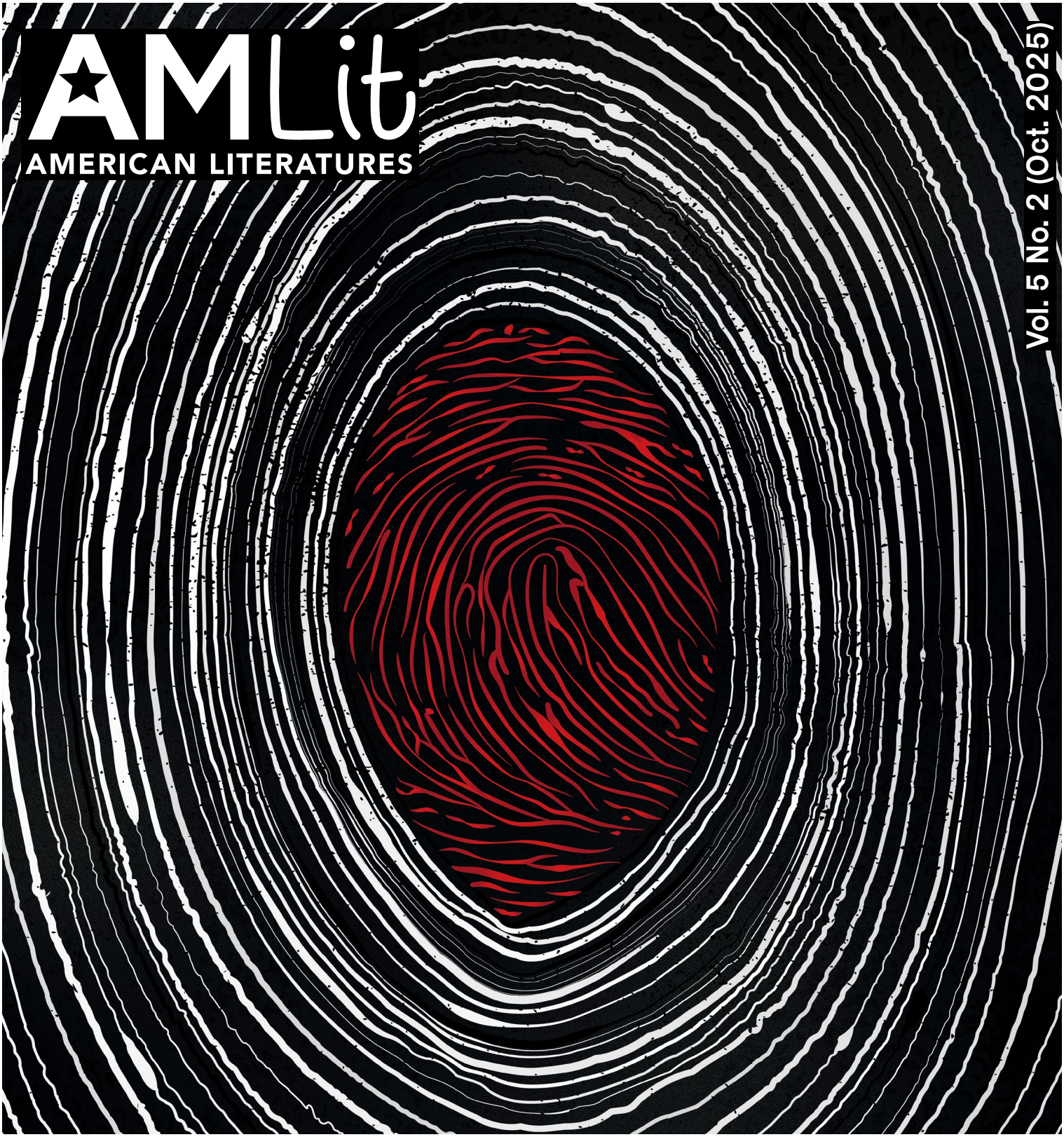

Living and Dying in the Anthropocene

Responses in Contemporary Literature from the Western Hemisphere

Brian Railsback
(Guest Editor)

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Content

Introduction:

A Threat Personal and Global

Brian Railsback
Western Carolina University

> Our children and grandchildren, seeing how tentative our response has been to global climate disorder . . . have framed already their objections: Why did you not prepare? Why were you so profligate while we still had a chance? Where was your wisdom?
>
> Barry Lopez

With the possible exception of nuclear war, human-engineered climate change is the greatest threat to our species, and all the species of the world, that we have ever faced. "The scientific evidence is unequivocal: climate change is a threat to human wellbeing and the health of the planet," the 2022 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report states, "Any further delay in concerted global action will miss the brief, rapidly closing window to secure a liveable future" (IPCC). Often described as an "existential threat" – a term coined by UN Secretary-General António Guterres in 2018 at the Austrian World Summit – climate change pervades global environmental discourse ("Climate change"). Significant additions to our popular discourse indicate its impact on the individual ("climate anxiety") and its worldwide reach ("Anthropocene"). Glenn Albrecht is credited with introducing the term, "eco-anxiety," often used interchangeably with "climate anxiety" or in conjunction with "solastalgia," "eco-angst," or "environmental distress"; with varying nuance, these terms indicate that a human being suffers mental distress by personally experiencing disturbing changes in the environment (Coffey et al. 1). In a 2017 guide produced jointly by The American Psychological Association, Climate for Health, and ecoAmerica, the authors raise the concern that "Climate change–induced extreme weather, changing weather pat-

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terns, damaged food and water resources, and polluted air impact human mental health," thus "Increased levels of stress and distress from these factors can also put strains on social relationships and even have impacts on physical health, such as memory loss, sleep disorders, immune suppression, and changes in digestion" (Clayton et al.). Climate change has become so ubiquitous that many scientists agree we have moved from the Holocene epoch to a new epoch of human-driven environmental change: the Anthropocene. After fifteen years of debate, the international Subcommission on Quaternary Stratigraphy voted on March 4, 2024, against declaring the Anthropocene. The decision was largely due to a lack of consensus among scientists about its start date and definition (Witze). While the terminology may continue to be debated, however, the Anthropocene "remains a broad cultural concept already used by many to describe the era of accelerating human impacts, such as climate change and biodiversity loss" (Witze). Despite debates in terminology or impact, temperatures continue to rise; the 2023 IPCC Synthesis Report notes with "high confidence" that global temperatures are rising at an accelerating rate (IPCC). Climate change and the subsequent alterations in the environment that come with it present a threat with global implications but one that can be felt on a very personal level. Environmental degradation from rising global temperatures has the potential to touch the human experience in totality.

This special issue of *American Literatures*, *Living and Dying in the Anthropocene: Responses in Contemporary Literature from the Western Hemisphere*, comprises a survey of perspectives from sixteen authors, in some cases presented through four translators, by writers from North America, Central America, and Europe. My introduction is in two parts. The first reflects on the personal nature of climate change, considering environmental changes I have observed in western North Carolina, as an invitation to readers to consider what—if any—environmental changes they have witnessed firsthand. I believe this first section resonates with the personal approaches to the climate issue in the interview with the author, Ron Rash, and the special curated commentary (including first person narrative and poetry) from Central American writers. The second part of the introduction provides a more traditional review of the scholarly essays that round out this special edition of *American Literatures*.

The Personal Reach of Climate Change

I have lived for thirty years in the high mountains of western North Carolina in a house that sits near a pass at an elevation of four thousand feet (1,219.2 meters). Our land is north facing, in the shadow of a steep ridge, and we enjoy a widescreen view of the distant Balsam mountains. Aside from the occasional spring blow or winter snow, this region has long been known for its dependable four seasons: cool summers, beautiful fall colors, winters of relatively light snowfall,

and glorious blooms of wildflowers in the spring. We live in a resort area, with nearby tourist attractions such as the Great Smoky Mountains National Park or quaint country club towns like Highlands. In an era of changing climate, our mountains have been recognized as a haven and lately our towns and the city of Asheville have felt a population surge and the press of gentrification.

Like most places across the globe, however, recent environmental degradation has become hard to ignore. In a short period of time, our wild Eastern Hemlocks have died out, unable to overcome the invasive woolly adelgid and warming temperatures ("Climate Change Connections"). The hemlocks on my property all died within two years. Now the ash trees are dying, killed by another invasive species: the emerald ash borer ("N.C. Forest Service"). Presently I am helplessly monitoring the death of the ash trees on my acreage and the surrounding forest. As Elizabeth Kolbert noted in her 2014 Pulitzer Prize winning bestseller, *The Sixth Extinction*, we are witnessing such a massive diminishment of living things that a human being in a normal lifespan can observe alterations in species diversity that would normally take thousands of years. From a scientist's point of view, she hopes to convey "the excitement of what's being learned as well as the horror of it" (Kolbert 3). She ruefully acknowledges that we are all living in a "truly extraordinary moment" (3).

Along with species decline, unusual extreme weather events add to a sense of unease about the local environment. After a prolonged dry spell in November 2023, a wildfire blew up and my wife and I watched from our deck as it almost topped a ridge nearby. Stunned, we wondered if we should evacuate. On May 9, 2024, just after midnight, an F2 tornado touched down in our yard. We surveyed the damage the next day, amazed by how old trees on our land had been ripped apart, their broken trunks crushing our car in the driveway. Across the road, the forest we used to take long walks in looked like a World War I battlefield. Local people could not believe it had been a tornado—certainly not in our mountains—until official confirmation came from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration on June 6, 2024 (Coulter).

The remnant of Hurricane Helene that fell upon the mountains of western North Carolina on Friday, September 27, 2024, hit with a power beyond imagination: a plague of howling winds, sheets of rain, landslides, and flash floods. Helene shook the belief by many people in the region that we might be spared the environmental changes of the Anthropocene. Regarding the destruction caused by the storm, an October 23 CNN report noted: "It's all a far cry from the image that some media outlets, real estate agents and residents painted of Asheville, located hundreds of miles from the Atlantic Ocean and Gulf of Mexico: a place relatively safe from the climate extremes affecting other parts of the US" (Paddison).

A look beyond the mountains of western North Carolina confirms that disasters such as Helene arrive with dizzying frequency. As I write, wildfires sweep

across Southern California and hurricane-force winds batter Ireland, Scotland, and the northern United Kingdom. We read about recent flooding in Europe and catastrophic wildfires in Canada, Greece, and Russia. Or we discover, from the environmental site Earth.org, that half of the fourteen worst typhoons in Asia in recorded history have occurred in the 21st century—six in the last fifteen years (Lewis). Responding to the World Meteorological Organization's confirmation that 2024 was the hottest year ever recorded, continuing a trend in the last decade, UN Secretary General Guterres said, "Global heating is a cold, hard fact . . . Individual years pushing past the [Paris Accord] 1.5 degree limit [like 2024] do not mean the long-term goal is shot . . . There's still time to avoid the worst of climate catastrophe. But leaders must act—now" ("WMO confirms").

Guterres issued his statement on January 10, 2025. Less than two weeks later, the newly inaugurated President of the United States responded by announcing the U.S. withdrawal from the Paris Agreement. The policies enacted by the previous administration to curtail carbon emissions and slow the world's race to devastatingly high global temperatures have now been reversed. Each day it becomes more difficult to dismiss the famous first line of David Wallace-Wells' 2019 comprehensive book about climate change, *The Uninhabitable Earth: Life After Warming*: "It is worse, much worse, than you think" (3).

Contemporary Artistic and Scholarly Perspectives of the Climate Change Crisis

This special issue of *American Literatures* begins with an interview of Rash, one of the most celebrated Southern authors in the United States, whose poetry and fiction intertwine environment, people, and culture in ways that reflect the complexity of the climate change crisis. Although some of Rash's works, such as the novels *Serena* or *Saints at the River*, would easily fall in the category of environmental literature, the author strives not to write, as he puts it, "mere propaganda." Rather, as in *Saints at the River*, he creates the most "morally complex" situation possible, one that portrays the vexing conundrums when cultural, economic, and environmental interests compete. "When I write about environmental issues," he notes, "I do not want to simplify them." The attention to place that is one of the chief characteristics of his fiction and poetry invites the reader to consider Nature: what we had, what we have now, and what we stand to lose. As in his novel, *Above the Waterfall*, Rash wishes to leave the reader with a strong appreciation for the natural world—the wonder of it.

From the Southern Appalachians, this issue travels to a special section, curated by Luz Lepe Lira, Rita M Palacios, and Paul M Worley: "The Lands and Languages of Indigenous Futures: Perspectives from Latin America." The section provides a unique opportunity to read, in translation to English, prose, performance, and poetry by Indigenous authors from Mexico and Guatemala. The collection of works here fall outside the discourse of academic essays and, as the curators point

out in their introduction to the section, would not therefore be available to readers of *American Literatures*. "They sing about the relationship between diminishing rainfall and diminishing crop yields; they write poetry about the threat of multinational corporations that exploit spaces inhabited by sacred beings for oil, gas, or mineral wealth" the curators note, adding, "Are these expressions somehow less valid or pressing because they were not originally done for an academic audience?" The voices of the Indigenous authors in this section provide direct witness to the devastating impacts of climate change in North and Central America.

The individual works in this section are introduced by the curators, but I will add that the Indigenous voices represented demonstrate the insidious nature of the Anthropocene's ill effects, creating a picture of intertwined environmental degradation, body toxicity, cultural subjugation, and political oppression. This section, along with the body of Rash's work and his interview, portrays the incredibly complex and hemispheric (if not global) foundations of environmental destruction; for human beings, a systematic pathway to devastation that will prove suicidal to our species if not averted. The tone of urgency throughout the works in this section comes from authors on the ground in the midst of regional crises. There is haunting beauty in the words as well, as in these lines from "Gift" by Mikeas Sánchez (translated from Spanish and Zoque into English by Wendy Call):

> There is no greater gift to the gods
> than the vulture's reverence.
> There is no greater gift to the gods
> than human silence.

The remainder of *Living and Dying in the Anthropocene: Responses in Contemporary Literature from the Western Hemisphere* comprises eight traditional scholarly essays that examine the works of authors from several countries.

Jessica Cory's essay, "Another Apocalypse: Climate Change, the Anthropocene, and Coastal Indigenous Poetry," coheres with the topics of the curated special section as she introduces four Indigenous poets, Craig Santos Perez, dg nanouk okpik, Houston Cypress, and Thomas Parrie. Through her analysis, Cory considers how Indigenous peoples mitigate the effects of climate change by using traditional ecological knowledge (TEK). She writes, "I want to think through the works of these four writers from a variety of coastal regions to better understand how these poets and perhaps their larger Indigenous communities frame climate change and respond to it, especially where these adaptations rely on and engage with land-based knowledges and specific Indigenous histories and lived experiences." Cory's essay examines colonialism's connection with the acceleration of environmental degradation, as she concludes, "Unlike (predominantly white) settlers who often lack the recent layers of disenfranchisement tied to land and landedness, these

poets understand how the effects of climate change are simply one part in a much larger, complicated system and to have any future for *any of us*, these larger systems require collective dismantling."

In "'The Chance to Love Everything': Mary Oliver's Poetry of Affect," Ljubica Matek contemplates the restorative power of literature. The poetry of Mary Oliver, Matek asserts, moves us from the debilitation of climate despair and back to the brighter hues of British Romanticism and American Transcendentalism. Oliver's work (like the poetry and fiction of Rash) reminds us to lean on the *wonder* that Nature still provides. "Mary Oliver subscribes to the Romantic aesthetic," Matek writes, "which highlights the beauty and necessity of love for the world as the cure for contemporary eco-maladies." Through Oliver's largely unexplored poetic development of *affect*—one's shifting physical or mental communion with the world—her poetry "*moves* the reader by making them see and feel non-human life as wondrous and therefore also precious." Matek suggests that Oliver's work often asks us to be open to affect and to be drawn to Romantic ideals and contemporary (surviving) natural wonders to navigate, if not endure, the troubling era of the Anthropocene.

Moving into the environment of our bodies, Loredana Flip's essay, "Towards Multisensory Aesthetics: Mundane Materiality in Richard Powers' *Plowing the Dark* and *The Overstory*," argues that visual representations in literature have privileged the visual for centuries, resulting in a limited view of nature and its subsequent commodification, exemplified in our data-driven, mechanical (Cartesian) view of our bodies. What results is a desire to escape or overcome the natural boundaries of our biological bodies with the help of technology. Richard Powers' *Plowing the Dark* suggests a multisensory approach and a reconnection with the material world to return to a natural order. As in Powers' work, authors who draw on all the senses might "blur the boundaries between human and nonhuman experiences, crafting more inclusive and ecologically conscious narratives." Filp concludes that "this kind of writing fosters a deeper connection to the environment, emphasizing the interdependence of all living and nonliving entities and encouraging a more profound awareness of the world's intricate materiality."

Another view of the relation of the human body to toxic environments, and a commentary that directly confronts the perils of fracking, oil extraction, and carbon emissions, is presented in Teresa Botelho's "The Vulnerable Body in Extraction Literature: Eco-sickness in Caridad Svich´s *The Way of Water* and Jennifer Haigh´s *Heat and Light*." Botelho's focus on the two texts, Svich's play and Haigh's novel, highlights the ongoing debate about fracking and oil extraction still raging in the United States (if not around the globe). Botelho examines the narrative strategies in both texts "to make visible the environmental damage caused by these extraction regimes" in a way that expands "the concept of a wounded eco-sphere to include scenarios of human vulnerability, mobilizing the trope of

sickness to signify the interdependency between the natural world and the human body affected by the same toxic threats."

In "The Polymodernity of Planetary Domesticity: Polycrisis, Life, and Form in T.C. Boyle's A *Friend of The Earth* and Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of The Living God*," John Cross considers Boyle's and Erdrich's texts in light of the bewildering cascade of problems arising in the Anthropocene—an era of polycrisis. He examines a reconfiguration of human thought to overcome paralyzing states of despair: a holistic approach recognizing interconnections among the individual, nature, economic and political systems, and even time itself. Cross suggests that the texts in his discussion illustrate a way forward: "In both Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God* and Boyle's A *Friend of the Earth*, readers are invited to contemplate entanglements of the cultural, domestic, social, and symbolic with the biological and present literary narratives as sites of cultural repair for a new way of thinking through the current planetary crises and resist falling into despair, cynicism, or unwarranted optimism, and the belief/disbelief discourse of Progress."

The emphasis on new ways of thinking continues in Karoline C. S. Huber's "Coming of Age in Crisis: The Bildungsroman and Resilience in Climate Fiction," which explores Lily Brooks-Dalton's *The Light Pirate* and passages from Jessie Greengrass' *The High House* to illustrate new pathways in the coming-of-age story for children in the Anthropocene. Huber argues that the *Bildungsroman* genre finds new relevancy through reimagined nature to culture stories that exemplify new agency and resilience for children faced with environmental upheaval. "This updated and future-oriented version of the Bildungsroman can endow young people with agency by depicting how they display resilience in overcoming adversities in times of climate crises," Huber writes. Her essay reminds us that coming generations will bear the burden of the Anthropocene, making coming-of-age stories that realistically acknowledge adaptation and resilience in rapidly changing environments more essential than the obsolete nature to culture tales of the past.

This special issue of *American Literatures* concludes with a provocative essay, Sarah Marak's "'Learning to Fight in a World on Fire': Imagining Political Violence in the Anthropocene." As government and capitalistic systems all too slowly work (or not) to abate the climate crisis while peaceful protests and acts of civil disobedience lack sufficient impact, how do we reckon with violent political acts in the name of saving the environment? Marak finds answers through her reflections on the works of Andreas Malm, Herbert Haines, David Klass, and Kim Stanley Robinson. Noting that earlier texts "have portrayed radicalism as detrimental to the environmental movement's goals, and as a phenomenon that needs to be fought both by the state and the movement itself," Marak observes that the selection of works she discusses and others like them support "a radicalization of the climate movement." While her analysis illustrates a more aggressive, or at least urgent, direction for contemporary climate change literature, Marak captures the appre-

hension and even desperation that arises in the arts as more and more it seems our time is running out.

Living and Dying in the Anthropocene: Responses in Contemporary Literature from the Western Hemisphere offers a sweeping view of climate change from authors across one half of the world, as interpreted by commentators living in Croatia, Germany, Guatemala, Mexico, Italy, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America. In most cases, the literature discussed seeks answers to the gravest threat to our species. How do we overcome deadly apathy or crippling despair? Does the way forward come by recognizing the remaining wonder of Nature, or by completely reimagining our systems of commerce and government, or by turning to the ancient wisdom of Indigenous people, or by reinventing the way we think or the stories we pass on to the next generation, or even by protests that extend to violence? The writing contained here provides many important questions to consider. And we know none of the answers will be easy.

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Biography

Brian Railsback is a Professor of English at Western Carolina University, where he has served as Department Head of English, Founding Dean of The Honors College, and Chair of the Faculty Senate. He teaches creative writing and U.S. literature. He has published *Charles Darwin and the Art of John Steinbeck* (1995), *The Darkest Clearing* (novel, 2004), co-edited with Michael Meyer *A John Steinbeck Encyclopedia* (2006), short stories, and numerous essays (over twenty on John Steinbeck). He has lectured or taught courses in Cuba, Georgia, Hungary, Japan, Mexico, Morocco, and Portugal. A Fiction Participant at the 2022 Bread Loaf Writers Conference, in 2023 he was named the Steve Kemp Writer in Residence at Great Smoky Mountains National Park; his essays about living there are in the Fall 2024 issue of *Smokies Life Journal*. His latest essay, "Searching for 'True Things' with John Steinbeck," is in the book, *Steinbeck's Uneasy America: Rereading Travels with Charley* (2025). In 2025, the Whitehead Family Dr. Brian Railsback Honors College Scholarship was endowed in his honor.

“That Sense of Wonder”:
A Conversation with Ron Rash

Brian Railsback
Western Carolina University

Ron Rash, the Parris Distinguished Professor in Appalachian Cultural Studies at Western Carolina University (WCU), North Carolina, is among the most celebrated authors of the Southeastern United States, well known for his poetry, short stories, and novels. Born in Chester, South Carolina (September 25, 1953), Rash spent a large part of his summers as a child and youth at his grandparents’ farm in Aho, North Carolina, in the high Southern Appalachians, a place where his family has roots that go back over a century. After attaining his BA at Gardner-Webb University and his MA at Clemson University (both in English), Rash taught at the community college and university levels before coming to WCU in 2003.

His first book, *The Night the New Jesus Fell to Earth and Other Stories from Cliffside, North Carolina* (1994), is a collection of short stories (the first of seven collections). His first book of poetry, *Eureka Mill* (1998), has been followed by three more. His first novel, *One Foot in Eden* (2002), won the Novelo Literary Prize, ForeWord Magazine’s Gold Medal in Literary Fiction, and was selected as the 2002 Appalachian Book of the Year. He has published seven more novels, the most recent being *The Caretaker* (2023).

His work has won numerous prestigious awards, including the James Still Award from the Fellowship of Southern Writers (2005), the O. Henry Prize for short stories in 2005, 2010, and 2019, and the Frank O’Connor International Short Story Award for his collection, *Burning Bright* (2010). Three of his works have made *The New York Times Book Review* bestseller list: *Serena* (novel, 2008), *The Cove* (novel, 2012), and *Nothing Gold Can Stay* (short story collection, 2013). In 2024, Rash was inducted into the North Carolina Literary Hall of Fame, where he was recognized as a writer of the culture and history of rural Appalachia who sensitively portrays the region’s dilemmas of economic stress, social upheaval,

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and environmental degradation. His work has been translated into several languages; he enjoys a significant following in France, where his novel, *The Cove* (2012), won the 2014 Grand Prix de Littérature Policière.

The following interview was recorded on Zoom at WCU on October 16, 2024, three weeks after western North Carolina was devastated by flooding from the remnants of Hurricane Helene on September 27.

The interview was transcribed by Lottie Lannigan (WCU professional writing intern) and edited for clarity and concision by Brian Railsback and Ron Rash.

Brian Railsback: From your first novel, *One Foot in Eden*, and before that with your poetry, how have environmental issues been introduced in your work?

Ron Rash: It is important to show that nature exists, and while doing so I hope to evoke a sense of wonder that connects with the reader. I get more into this in the fiction, but I think in any genre, it's more poetry—trying to describe in a way that opens up a real sense of connectedness with nature for the reader.

My novel, *Serena*, deals with how easily something can be lost, particularly wild environmental spaces. But I don't want to write mere propaganda. When I wrote what I think is my most overt novel about ecological issues, *Saints at the River* (2004), I created the most morally complex situation that I could. I did not want a black and white situation, you know, where it's only about these noble people protecting this river. You can't simply write for the people you want, those who already believe what you're saying.

[J. M.] Coetzee, the South African writer, says that the battle pitched should be on the highest plain. And I like that idea because I think you're really getting to where it's the most morally complex situation. When I write about environmental issues, I do not want to simplify them. Even in *Serena*, I think my depiction of the loggers shows the tragedy of people destroying their own environment to survive. And I felt like not to acknowledge the cost of creating the park [the Great Smoky Mountains National Park] and how the people would be driven from their homes would be too easy.

Brian Railsback: Please tell me about your own background, your personal experience with the environment, and how place shaped the way you write about it.

Ron Rash: Well, I think I was always aware, even as a child, that my family had very deep roots in the Appalachian Mountains. I was very fortunate growing up in that I was able to spend so much time on my grandmother's farm [at Aho, North Carolina] in the higher mountains near Boone. The Blue Ridge Parkway was there so I could go into wild places. I was comfortable there and found a great deal of

solace. I learned not to sentimentalize nature; I could slip and break an ankle or be bitten by a rattlesnake. But I felt a kind of connectedness. And I saw that with my relatives too, because several of them were farmers, and there was that interaction with place, certainly, in the sense of protecting the land. How does one keep soil healthy year after year—that kind of ecology, and what the writer, Wendell Berry, talks about a lot. I think I've really come to be more and more fascinated with how the landscape that people grow up in affects their psychology.

Brian Railsback: Could you talk a bit more about Aho, a foundational place for you as a writer, and what it meant to you when you were younger?

Ron Rash: I spent so much time with just my grandmother on that farm, and with my older relatives, some older than my grandmother. There was a sense of these stories in that region being passed down, some that were from before the Civil War. There was a connection of time and place. I would see it in the cemetery [adjacent to the family farm] where there were the graves of my great-great-grandmother's family and, you know, in America that tends to be rare. We are a very mobile country, except for a few areas, as in northern New England, where people have stayed in one place for generations. I thought the presence of my ancestors there was a gift, I really did. And it allowed a kind of view that I have found helpful in my writing.

Brian Railsback: You mentioned *Serena*, and that is a story about a logging operation that by the end of the novel, and this is right out of our regional history, ends in total devastation of the landscape. However, your novel, *Above the Waterfall* (2015), leaves a different impression—a consideration of the environment that is quite different from the dark vision of *Serena*.

Ron Rash: I would absolutely agree. I never want to repeat myself in a novel. I think *Above the Waterfall* is about what we can gain by being attentive to the world. If you are attentive to nature, you're going to care about its destruction. This is not a sentimental idea—we know that physiologically and psychologically, we need a certain amount of connection to the environment. I'm fascinated by how this works in different cultures. For example, from my reading I've learned that in India, when people are very disturbed or perhaps grieving, even to the point where they almost have to be bound, they would be set beside a river and brought back to themselves by the sound of the water.

What struck me the other day, I was with my young grandson and we were walking in the woods and he looked up at a tree and told me that it was as tall as heaven. And I thought that was just magical and, I mean, I'm going to use that some day.

That kind of connection is wonderful. In *Above the Waterfall*, you see that [the schoolteacher] Becky is trying to give children in her class that sense of wonder.

Brian Railsback: This is that notion of inscape that is so important in the novel.

Ron Rash: Well, yeah, Becky's favorite poet is [Gerard Manley] Hopkins. He's one of mine, too. Regarding nature, he gives one this sense of the sacredness, the connectedness, that something can be both individual and connected and that we're all part of that. And I mean, that's just the truth. If we don't recognize our connectedness to nature, we're doomed. This disconnection is why we're in such bad shape right now.

Brian Railsback: In your work, considerations of the environment are often intertwined with culture and spirituality as well.

Ron Rash: There definitely is a spiritual aspect to my work. Growing up the way I did, there was always a sense, particularly among the older relatives, that the world is more mysterious than we can comprehend. Francis Bacon said the role of the artist is to deepen the mystery. To me, there's that mystery of existence, even on a spiritual plane. There is something beyond mere materialism. And I think I was fortunate that I grew up in a culture that I believe embraced that. I think if you spend a lot of time in the woods, out by yourself, you start to sense a kind of connectedness that really is fascinating. I would sense things that there was no way I could know. One time I was ready to step over a log and it was as if my leg involuntarily jerked back. I didn't know what had happened, but then I looked over the log and there was a huge copperhead. I could not have seen it. I've had friends who spend a lot of time out in the woods and they have very similar experiences. I love the mystery of such moments; they evoke further religious dimensions, which, you know, I'm open to.

Brian Railsback: And Appalachian culture, and how it is deeply rooted in the mountains, seems to be another important aspect throughout your work.

Ron Rash: It is. I'm very interested in cultural geography and the connectedness of mountain cultures around the world. Regarding my readers, I've received letters from the Andes, the Himalayas, and mountain regions across Europe. My Italian and French publishers have said that my audience seems to connect most strongly with my work in the mountainous regions. These readers seem interested in how the landscape of the mountains affects the way they perceive the world. Mountain regions can be both intimidating, with the sense of smallness as you see the peaks

surrounding you, but also they can be almost womb-like. My novels have dealt with both of those things.

Brian Railsback: Playing off what you said earlier—that because of our treatment of the environment we might be doomed—we have just gone through this terrible storm and a lot of commentators have observed that people thought western North Carolina would be almost immune to climate change. It couldn't happen here as it does in California or Florida. And yet it just did with the remnants of Hurricane Helene. So, from your point of view, where might there be hope after all? Or is there?

Ron Rash: I have hope in human beings. I will go back to what [William] Faulkner said, that he believed most people were a little bit better than their circumstances ought to allow. I believe that, and I think it's true of Appalachian culture traditionally. People of all mountain cultures, because often they are so spaced apart, they have to be resilient, able to fend for themselves. There can be some problems culturally, such as the idea that you don't have to obey the law, but there's always a certain stoicism. I've seen that in my family. I'm not saying that's true of everyone in mountain cultures, but I have experienced neighbors helping each other in crisis, taking people in and so on. I think sometimes it takes the worst of circumstances for us to get past our differences and get to the core of what's best in us.

But there are also the realities. You've read my work, and my story [in the 2020 collection, *In the Valley*], "The Belt," is about the 1916 flood here. If you know enough about the history of this region, you know that the mountains funnel water into deadly flash flooding, just as we saw last month. But I do think this is different. What's happening now is becoming more frequent and we really are in a rough situation.

Brian Railsback: I doubt we are going to do what's necessary to avert what we just experienced here—that kind of climate disaster, coming on with more frequency.

Ron Rash: If we're being completely honest, any solution is going to have to be worldwide. And I don't know how we're going to manage all of the political complexities. But we do what we can in our own spaces. As Voltaire says, we have to cultivate our gardens. And I'm certainly capable of great feats of hypocrisy about this, you know, as I drive my car around—

Brian Railsback: My Fiat Abarth has two tailpipes.

Ron Rash: We have to make a better effort. This illusion that we can escape into our laptops, you know—sorry, Elon Musk—it's not going to save us.

Brian Railsback: Thinking beyond your work, are there other writers who you believe are moving us in the right direction?

Ron Rash: If we have a prophet in the United States, it's Wendell Berry. And I know he's a real prophet, because when I read him, I find myself knowing I failed. That's what a prophet does, making you go to that deep place of your own lacking. Poetry is very important, particularly how it presents the environment so that nature makes its own kind of statement about honoring the world. The poetry of Mary Oliver comes to mind, and that of Seamus Heaney.

I've really grown attached to the work of the French novelist, Jean Giono. His sense of the natural world is amazing. He's a writer I don't think people have recognized for his connection to the environmental movement. As he wrote as far back as the 1930s and 40s, I doubt he would have called himself an environmentalist, but when you read him, it's there. And I would add another one to this list; you should read the Swiss writer, Charles Ferdinand Ramuz.

Special Section:

The Lands and Languages of Indigenous Futures: Perspectives from Latin America

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Introduction

When working on creating an anthology of Indigenous thought in Latin America several years ago, we found ourselves confronted with the problem that many of the Indigenous thinkers with whom we collaborate do not typically use the terms of dominant discourse and were even less inclined to write formal academic essays about these topics. While we work with a number of Indigenous writers and activists who do indeed write academic texts in the terms of global present discourses, setting aside the intellectual production of those who do not strikes us as highly problematic and an exercise in making these People's thoughts and philosophies conform to our own academic ways of reading and writing.

Turning to the topic of this dossier, the Anthropocene, our friends and colleagues have expressed their growing concerns orally in song and poetry. They sing about the relationship between diminishing rainfall and diminishing crop yields; they write poetry about the threat of multinational corporations that exploit spaces inhabited by sacred beings for oil, gas, or mineral wealth. Are these expressions somehow less valid or pressing because they were not originally done for an academic audience? Are they somehow less powerful because they do not directly situate themselves within what we would call the Anthropocene? While

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we would emphatically say "no" to both of these questions, we acknowledge that many others in academia do not feel the same way. Therefore, we are thankful to the editors of *American Literatures* for their willingness to give us this space to share the following pieces that address, broadly, "living and dying in the Anthropocene" from diverse Indigenous perspectives in México and Guatemala. In keeping with the intellectual production of these Peoples, the selection here varies widely in terms of formal genre, ranging from poetry to prose to performance, and offers the reader a glimpse of how Indigenous responses to our current global crisis take shape. We are also grateful to Nancy González and the Colectivo Comunidad Tz'unun Ya', Aura Lolita Chávez Ixcaquic, Mikeas Sánchez, and Pedro Uc Be for their willingness to have their work included in this space, as well as to Whitney DeVos, Gabriela Ramirez-Chavez, Wendy Call, and Melissa D. Birkhofer for the time and effort they have given to their respective translations of the pieces included here.

In "Plastic: a regime of silent violence rampant in Lake Atitlan," Nancy González and the Colectivo Comunidad Tz'unun Ya', a woman-led collective that guards the lake, address the degradation of Guatemala's Lake Atitlán due to an abundance of single-use plastics in the region that make their way into the lake's waters. This article is a report on a collaborative performance these women staged with artist Manuel Chavajay Morales to visibilize pollution in and around the lake, to demonstrate that plastics are not simply pollution but "forms of visible and invisible violence", and to "to challenge sustainability as a concept that can often be boiled down to a series of proposals to sustain the economy instead of Mother Nature." In other words, they question the very terminology used to frame these issues globally.

A more traditional essay that was originally published as a pamphlet, Aura Lolita Chávez Ixcaquic's "Indigenous Women: Bodies, Territories, and Communal Life," focuses on the role that Indigenous women can and do play in struggles for life and sovereignty, underscoring the intimate connection between female bodies and the territories in which they dwell, not only highlighting the power of Indigenous female thought but also challenging us to engage with an Indigenous alternative for living, "Buen Vivir."

We have two contributions from the poet and columnist Pedro Uc Be, each of which addresses aspects of the relationships between language, bodies, and territory. "The corn with Maya Skin" examines the role that corn plays in Maya communities as both sustenance and a sacred plant that gives meaning to Maya Peoples. As seen, for example, in the K'iche' Maya text, the Popol vuh, humans are literally formed from corn, meaning that corn's present-day cultivation is an activity that structures Mayas' connections with the natural world, as the corn garden or milpa is a space of reciprocity between humans and the environment. Planting GMO corn or using chemical fertilizers are therefore not mere agricultural choic-

dation mirroring language endangerment and, perhaps, the pending murder of one implying the murder of the other.

The two poems by the poet Mikeas Sánchez, "Gift" and "Feast," address the concerns of the other essays and performance in a different way: They show the intricacy and importance of connection and relatedness of all beings of the world in which we live. Across all of these contributions, the binary between human and Nature (capital "N") slowly breaks down and we are encouraged to recognize that, ultimately, humanity is not at all separate from Nature but a single strand within it. We do not stand apart from Nature and we are certainly not, as the Biblical story is frequently interpreted, given domain over it. Rather, we cannot act on the environment without acting upon ourselves. We are Nature and we are the environment. They are also us.

We hope our presentation of these texts provides the reader with a window into the great work being done by Indigenous writers, artists, and activists in Latin America, and how they offer alternatives to dominant culture's understandings of life in the Anthropocene. Even as we all dwell on the same planet and in the same century, not all of us come from a philosophical tradition in which humanity occupies creation's center stage. Many Indigenous Peoples consider humans as part of a whole, not less or more valuable than other living and non-living beings, but equally important. In addition, there are reciprocal relations and responsibilities between all members: healthy relationships lead to a good life for all. Non-Indigenous people's engagement with decentering the human and embracing a horizontal understanding of life and all its components opens up the opportunity for collective paths forward as well as alternatives to the environmental disasters we are facing.

Biographies

Paul M. Worley is a settler scholar from Charleston, South Carolina, and Professor of Spanish at Appalachian State University, where he serves as Chair of the Department of Languages, Literatures, and Cultures. Co-written with Rita M. Palacios, his most recent book, *Unwriting Maya Literature: Ts'iib as Recorded Knowledge* (2019), received honorable mention for Best Book in the Humanities by LASA's Mexico Section. Together with Melissa D. Birkhofer, he is co-translator of Miguel Rocha Vivas's *Word Mingas* (2021), whose Spanish edition won Cuba's Casa de las Américas Prize in 2016. In 2023, he and Birkhofer won *the North Carolina Literary Review*'s John Ehle Award for their article, "She Said That Saint Augustine Is Worth Nothing Compared to Her Homeland: Teresa Martín and the Méndez Cancio *Account of La Tama* (1600)." He has also translated selected works by Indigenous authors such as Hubert Matiuwaa (Mè'phàà), Celerina Sanchez (Mixteco), Manuel Tzoc (K'iche'), and Ruperta Bautista (Tsotsil).

Rita M. Palacios holds a doctorate in Spanish with a specialization in Latin American Literature from the University of Toronto. She is a professor of languages in the School of Liberal Studies at Conestoga College in Kitchener, Ontario, and her research examines contemporary Maya literature from a cultural and gender studies perspective. She recently co-authored the book *Unwriting Maya Literature: Ts'íib as Recorded Knowledge* (March 2019) with Paul M. Worley, in which they privilege the Maya category *ts'íib* over constructions of the literary in order to reveal how Maya peoples themselves conceive of cultural production.

Luz María Lepe Lira is a researcher, scholar, and member of México's National System of Researchers, who obtained both her MA and her doctorate at the Autonomous University of Barcelona in Spain. She is widely recognized for her work on Indigenous literatures, oral traditions, and Indigenous languages. Her work has garnered a number of prizes, such as an Honorable Mention in Cuba's Casa de las Américas Literary Awards (2013) for her book *Relatos de diferencia y literatura indígena, Travesías por el sistema mundo*. In 2009, her book *Literatura indígena y crítica literaria: traducción y tradición: recovecos del pensamiento oral* won the XXI Alfonso Reyes National Literary Competition. She also won the Andrés Bello Award for Latin American Memory and Thought in 2004 for her book, *Cantos de mujeres en el Amazonas*. She is currently a professor in the MA Program in Amerindian Studies and Bilingual Education in the Department of Philosophy at the Autonomous University of Querétaro.

Nancy Nancy González / Colectivo Comunidad Tz'unun Ya'

Plastic: A Regime of Silent Violence Rampant in Lake Atitlan[1]

translated by Whitney DeVos and Gabriela Ramirez-Chavez

Originally published as: "El plástico, violencia instaurada, silenciosa y dispersa en el Lago Atitlán." Prensa comunitaria, 24 Oct. 2022, prensacomunitaria.org/2022/10/el-plastico-violencia-instaurada-silenciosa-y-dispersa-en-el-lago-atitlan/. Accessed 21 October 2024.

Tropical Storm Julia and recent flooding have washed large amounts of trash into Lake Atitlán, mainly single-use plastics. Images circulating in different media outlets and on online platforms exposed how mass amounts of plastic debris collect on the Lake's surface. In the not-so-distant future, most of these materials will disintegrate into dangerous particles, blending into and becoming imperceptible in the waters; others will sink to the bottom of the Lake, while the rest wind up floating toward the shores of nearby towns, asphyxiating the lives of the many species that depend on the sacred Lake Atitlán. Each winter, this cycle repeats.

This scene is a mirror that reflects the inconsistencies of consumerism imposed upon us by the capitalist system, which drives us to destroy the resources Mother Nature provides. However, this destruction is by no means unrelated to the relations of domination and forms of violence that characterize the present capitalist, patriarchal, and sexist system.

Existing environmental regulations and organizations in Guatemala are lax and weak, subject to the interests of national and transnational economic power. In 2022, powerful interest groups attempted to create a "Super Ministry of the Environment." Had they succeeded, the Ministry would have eliminated the few existing checks and balances on decision-making regarding natural resources, instead concentrating all technical, administrative, and financial decisions under a single governing body.[2]

Single-use plastic is the quintessential symbol of the comfort and convenience promised by modern life; however, it has brought imbalances to the environment and surrounding communities, destroying entire ecosystems and deteriorating the health of local populations around the Lake.

In 2018, Ninoshka López, a biologist from the Universidad del Valle de Guatemala, found that seventy percent of the Lake is contaminated with microplastics, which are as detrimental to the health of nearby communities as they are to the Lake and the species that depend on it; this type of violence is difficult to observe because it spreads silently.

We cannot confront the deterioration of Lake Atitlan's ecosystems if we ignore its root causes. We can no longer continue to cover up the damage,

especially with proposals that demand that local populations take on a financial burden to repair problems they had no part in creating.[3]

We can no longer take a simple approach to a complex issue—investing large sums of money to reclassify solid waste and sacrificing irreplaceable ecosystems to convert them into landfills—for the sole purpose of satisfying technical mandates that do not require the consultation of Indigenous peoples. Cleanup proposals should not become a profit motive for the same industry that causes pollution in the first place.[4]

At times, the Lake has been at the center of the developmentalist imagination, which at different moments has meddled with its waters. In 1862, dictator Rafael Carrera's government announced its intentions to drain Lake Atitlán by redirecting its water toward the Southern Coast. In the 1960s, the administration of President Miguel Ydigoras Fuentes introduced black bass and carp in an attempt to bring foreign tourists interested in recreational fishing to the Lake.[5] In 2017, the Supreme Court failed to prohibit Agropecuaria Atitlan S.A., a company owned by the Torrebiarte family, some of the nation's wealthiest and most influential landowners, from pumping out millions of liters daily for crop irrigation.[6] More recently, especially in 2019, different media outlets featured a proposal for a hydroelectric plant that would control life and monetize water and sanitation rights. Any proposal to revitalize the Lake should not center on technocratic posturing, but must take into account the political consensus of local communities and, above all, the vast knowledge Indigenous peoples have held for thousands of years.

Colectivo Comunidad Tzu'unun Ya' invited the multidisciplinary artist Manuel Chavajay Morales to bring public attention to the complex reality of Lake Atitlán, where plastic floating on the Lake's surface and microplastics hiding in its waters engender forms of visible and invisible violence.

Chavajay's performance piece attempts to recreate the yearly "Bringing of the Fruit" procession along the Lake's southern shore, carried out each Holy Wednesday. According to many scholars, this practice has roots in the celebration of Wayeb, a short month of five days that concludes the Haab cycle of the Maya calendar. Following the procession, some of the fruit is displayed throughout the town as a show of gratitude for a successful harvest season. During the performance designed by Chavajay, plastics are used instead of fruit in an act of protest and consciousness raising, as a way to make visible and denounce the stealthy and lethal violence destroying the lake. The artistic demonstration feature Samuel Cumes and other artists, as well as women from San Pedro la Laguna who volunteer their time collecting trash. They are guardians of the Lake who, in addition to organizing volunteer clean-ups, have defended its waters from extractivist projects.

This political art performance confronts the symbolic space of the status quo, challenging the plastics industry and its flawed logic. The industry has

attempted to hide its own socio-environmental impact in the Atitlán basin by shifting the blame onto local communities and their consumption habits. The plastics industry even took legal action in the Constitutional Court to try to suppress an initiative that would have reduced the local use of plastic and banned styrofoam.[7]

This artistic intervention is driven by a desire to challenge sustainability as a concept that can often be boiled down to a series of proposals to sustain the economy instead of Mother Nature. In fact, in practice, 'sustainability' has been used to legitimize ways of organizing, transforming, and destroying nature. For this reason, such practices are not enough to revitalize Atitlan, a living entity, a part of life, and the material and spiritual survival of surrounding Indigenous communities. We need to move away from legal anthropocentrism and toward biocentrism and new narratives so that our legal system more closely reflects the rights inherent to nature.

With their procession of trash, participants call attention to the contradictions inherent within our consumer society and invite us to reinterpret our relationship with and ties to Abuela Lago, while at the same time awakening the dormant conscience of industry and demanding a stop to the plastic garbage that flows into our municipality. We demand these industries seek real sustainable alternatives and recognize Nature as a subject with rights. We demand the State protect her through its legal system and public policies.

San Pedro la Laguna, Sololá, October 22, 2022.

Notes

[1] Translators' Note: Lake Atitlán is a volcanic lake located in the southwestern highlands of Guatemala. It is one of the nation's most visited tourist destinations, the result of decades of state-sponsored initiatives designed to bring foreign money to the region—often with disregard for the environmental and social consequences.

[2] T.N. Initiative 6054, or «Ley que Sitúa bajo la Coordinación del Ministerio de Ambiente y Recursos Naturales las Instituciones de Competencia Ambiental» [Law that Places Institutions of Environmental Responsibility under the Coordination of the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources] proposed eliminating those governmental bodies responsible for environmental protections, transferring their budget and responsibilities to the Ministry of the Environment. Environmentalists and critics dubbed 6054 as "The Super Ministry of the Environment Law," since it would grant total control, including control over a vast amount of resources, to a single agency. See Cuevas.

[3] T.N. A major problem afflicting the Lake is contamination by raw sewage, the result of an increase in tourist activities and the damage done to a wastewater treatment plant in the lakeside city of Panajachel during Hurricane Stan (2005). After the storm, the local municipality had the opportunity to repair the existing plant. Instead, the Inter-American Development Bank successfully lobbied officials to construct a new $90 million plant whose exorbitant operating costs prohibited it from

Notes

ever being used at full capacity; the plant was shut down entirely one year following its completion. Instead of solving the problem of contamination, this initiative left local communities without a solution. As Jeff Abbot points out, other possible solutions are "prohibitively expensive, or are themselves wrapped up in corruption and special interests, or both." Local communities are, in effect, saddled with the responsibility of responding to a problem stemming from state-sponsored tourism projects and inadequate natural disaster relief. Yet by a rhetorical sleight of hand, "Indigenous communities across Guatemala are regularly blamed for the contamination and environmental destruction that companies and the wealthy create." See Abbot.

[4] T.N. In 2013, the Friends of Atitlán [Amigos del Lago Atitlán], a non-profit NGO made up of vacation-home owners and funded by private businesses, put forth one such proposal: the construction of a mega-collector, a network of sub-aquatic pipelines that was supposedly going to divert and treat the sewage polluting the lake. However, according to Débora Quiacaín, a lawyer and member of the Tzunun Ya' Collective, "what they really wanted to do was sell the waters for monocropping on the southern shore" (Guarchaj and Gonón). Under the terms of the proposed project, control of the water would be transferred from fifteen local municipalities to a centralized, public-private entity whose ultimate commitment to community accountability is unclear. A common concern about the project is that water rights may ultimately become privatized, forcing communities to pay for water they currently have access to for free. In 2021, the Collective successfully obtained a writ of protection from the Constitutional Court, on the basis that local communities had not been properly consulted about the project. See Guarchaj and Gonón.

[5] T.N. The introduction of black bass was done as part of a plan for Pan Am, the US-owned airline company, in an effort to encourage tourism through sport fishing. The venture failed, and the non-endemic species wreaked havoc upon the lake and its endemic species; over 16 native fish species are estimated to have been killed off. For more, see Aburawa.

[6] T.N. In the wake of the decision, community members took it upon themselves to block the further extraction of water. See Julajuj.

[7] In 2016, the municipality of San Pedro la Laguna banned residents from using single-use bags, containers, and straws made from plastics, polystyrene, and styrofoam. Members of the plastics industry challenged the legislation (Acuerdo Municipal 111-2016) in the Constitutional Court, which upheld the community's right to enforce their prohibition. See Corte de Constitucionalidad, 5956-2016.

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Biography

Nancy González is a Maya woman and one of the coordinators of the fight to clean Lake Atitlán.

Aura Lolita Chávez Ixcaquic

Indigenous Women: Bodies, Territories, and Communal Life

translated by Whitney DeVos and Gabriela Ramirez-Chavez

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Introduction

Achieving a collective understanding within our communities and between living beings means seeking out more humane relations between women and men, ones in harmony with the web of life and the cosmos...

Consejo de Pueblos K'iche's[1]

This essay is rooted in the sovereign collective wisdom of women who walk along the Web of Life.[2] On this path, we create ways of knowing, feeling, and taking action within historical processes that have largely been silenced, forgotten or suppressed by the systems imposed on all of human existence. Nation States have historically delegitimized our existence as Indigenous women, which is undeniable if you read their history books.

Daring to write from our perspectives as Indigenous women means recognizing here and now the legacy and wisdom of our grandmothers, the women who came before us and wove our collective knowledge, in a cosmogonic, existential, and intergenerational commitment (Mérida).

It takes courage and historical clarity to write in an environment with powerful recreations, in which Indigenous peoples are on the move, in which we make decisions and wage internal and external battles, and in which Indigenous women are fighting for a dignified life free of violence. To write in an environment in which our territories, our source of strength and what binds us to life, are coveted by world powers and transnational companies that have steered the course of capitalism and invasion. This monstrous history has meant death and destruction for us, because they've been perpetrating it generation after generation for hundreds of years, perfecting their perverse ways. In this context, the written word is an ally: it moves between worlds, inspires critical thought, allyship, commitment, strong bonds, and communication. In short, it creates ways of relating that go beyond a simple, concrete process of writing and reading, because it moves thoughts, feelings, and actions towards more humane, just ways of life. This process is intimate, encouraging, and empowering.

It is also wonderful to write in this moment of history, in a territory still deep in the mountains, where we live among the trees, cornfields, plants, birds,

the outdoors, and fresh air free from pollution, where chickens roam free in the yard, where our people know they are part of a community and act in community.

In some of the sections that follow, we provide examples of actions, what we call "Seeds that bring light and hope for change." This essay is an expression of the collective, transformative light that we create together as Indigenous women. Here, we share our reflections and critical views; we share our concerns as well as our movements.

We are in living territories! And we greet all the species of different shapes, sizes, and life forms with whom we coexist.

Our Bodies and the Territories Where We Develop

> It is important to respectfully recognize the connections shared between different cultures and the many diverse species making up life, in all its fullness…
>
> K'iche' Peoples' Council

Often, people overseas, or in territories outside the region or the American continent, think America is only the United States. In the same way, they also form an idea about who we are based on our appearances, what nation States say about us or, worse still, what corporate marketing depicts in photos. Generally, there is the idea that we are passive, defenseless, strange beings. We have long been framed through the lens of private property, of possession, so that farmers, bankers, and officials have historically referred to us as "my Indian women" and, at times collectively, as "our indigenous women."

It's important we recognize ourselves in history. To know and make known that we are women, that we are beings, that we exist, that we live, that we contribute, that we think, feel, and are always in constant movement. That we have cultures thousands of years old which sustain our own cosmovision, with life systems we put into practice in our territories. That we are not the property of humanity, nor of States, nor of men, nor of white people, nor of millionaires. We are people who recognize histories; we recognize our permanent outrage at the fact that, historically, we have been conceived of as enslaved and taxable masses. We critique the cruelest historical periods lived, such as the eras of assimilationism and protectionism, brought about by the consolidation of States, itself an outcome of colonization. We always remember that the term "Indian" comes from a mistaken gaze, a historical error of geographic location. We recognize wars in our territories during which acts of genocide have been committed, and that these acts have left traces, such as the gendered division of household labor and the strategy of utilizing women's bodies as spoils of war.[3]

We have proposals and questions for humanity. As women, we often ask ourselves, "Why do men see us as their enemies at home and in bed? What is it

that causes this brutal transformation whereby our partner becomes our number-one abuser, who discharges all of his accumulated violence against us?" This brings us to the colonizer, since recognizing that he was the owner of women, of their bodies, helps us understand that the man of the family, of the community, that is, the men with whom we live on a daily basis, also have to work on the relationships of oppression they experience in their being.

As women, we recognize that we are facing contexts adverse to our worldviews, our aspirations, our ways of relating. That means permanent threats for us.

The Web of Life

Indigenous women recognize that we are part of the web of life, which is related to the fabric of life. This web encompasses the relationships among our species, between all species and the different spaces they inhabit, between the elements and the energies that span the entire planet and interact throughout the universe. In this way, nature teaches us it is not possible to determine or delimit a linear vision of life. Our analyses will be one-dimensional if we separate human society from nature.

Cosmovisions

Over the course of our lives, we have shared thoughts, practices, and feelings with our grandmothers and grandfathers. The path we've traveled has left us a history and a heritage, one which is important to return to.

Our ways of being as women—how we interpret, explain, react, feel, and think—draw on those our ancestors developed for life. This allows us to understand the universe and form relationships within the territories where histories and environments come into being. This, in turn, makes way for spirituality, science, knowledge, art, organization, economy, politics... that structure and give meaning to our existence interrelated with the cosmos, plants, animals, and human beings with the Earth.

Territories

We are living in our territories, we love life and we love the way we coexist with biodiversity. Territories are, for us Indigenous women, constructions of vital spaces for communities. They encompass historicity, culture, identity, education, politics, the economy, coexistence between beings such as animals, plants, minerals, cosmos... Our conception of territories goes beyond physical spaces: we identify them with existential elements that give life to a community; for example, the ties connecting people who remain active and aware, attentive to and participating in the processes taking place in the defense of life, despite no longer residing where they were born. Such is the cross-border experience of

La Consulta de la Buena Fe,[4] which was carried out with sisters and brothers of the Maya K'iche' people, residents of Los Angeles, California, United States. They also made decisions regarding the defense of their territory. These decisions are being made from local community territories to national and international territories.

Abya Yala

Abya Yala is the name given to the American continent in the Guna Yala region of Panama and Colombia before the arrival of Christopher Columbus and the Europeans. Literally, it means "land in full maturity" or "land of vital blood" (López-Hernández 10). Indigenous women recognize and claim this name to refer to the continental territory. Instead of saying "America," by using this name we take a stance and, with our thinking, we aim to decolonize ourselves biologically.

Clash of Cosmovisions, Source of Violence

Different models of existing, clashing worldviews, impact our women's bodies, which show these violent ways of existing. A clash in ways of seeing and relating to the world has led to intense territorial confrontations throughout our existence, to long wars, and to long processes of systemic violence. Prevailing is the imposition of nation States with patriarchal, capitalist, and racist structures, which generate invasion, slavery, repression, exclusion. Our existence is affected by violent modes of life, expressed in the trajectory of our life histories, from the intimate and communal realms and expanding to the national and regional.

It's important to ask ourselves the following questions: How are our bodies? Where are they? What are they doing and who are they doing it for? After these violent transits of existence, we say that we are located in strategic territories, because the region where we live is one of the world's richest in terms of biodiversity. These characteristics constitute a power including strategic natural assets such as water, mountains, or the bowels of the earth, home to a variety of minerals, naturally purified air... with which we can continue living for thousands more years, satisfying our needs in accordance with our worldviews, for the common good, taking from nature "only what we need," following the maxim of non-accumulation. However, mercantilist macroeconomic models have determined that the transnational capital of foreign companies will be invested in Indigenous territories, regardless of our existence or our will. They have been given the power to invade us with armed forces, without States providing any protection to our peoples. Territories made up of diverse communities coexisting with biodiversity make us a strategic model for life: for humanity's survival, even.

Life and Our Histories as Indigenous Women

There is a historical route of violence, transmitted generationally, where[by] the ties that bind perpetrators and victims together persist. The stories our grandmothers

tell us mark our lives since they are stories that engender ways of life, feelings, and models of behavior; they continue to shape cultural attitudes, developing a legacy that is almost always invisible. These lives are marked by systematic sexual violence. Indigenous women have been considered spoils of war. Deep within our being are stories that reflect the droit de seigneur/right of pardon that the white man used to assume ownership of our grandmothers, forcing them to have sexual relations before getting married. Many of these atrocities were established through the imposition of the State and they are still practiced in many territories, among other cruel forms of treatment.

In another sense, Indigenous women have consolidated our own historical wealth along the way. We have amassed the different experiences of our grandmothers and therefore it is important to recognize that our stories as Indigenous women, the ones we recognize and keep alive, have not been imposed upon us by the invaders. Our stories are legitimized by our grandmothers, by our ancestors, by ourselves, by our daughters, and by our granddaughters. These stories give us knowledge and underpin our origins, our identity. Our stories demonstrate how deep the violence has gone within our own organizations.

Decisions have been made without our consent, against our wills; they have invaded our being with immense violence, violating The International Labour Organization Convention 169[5] concerning Indigenous and tribal peoples in independent countries. Isn't this exactly what transnational corporations do? What governments do? What exactly do we mean when we use the term "good government"?

> History has shown us that our path has been obstructed, interrupted, and assaulted by numerous actors, among them: churches, political parties, defeatist governments, transnational companies, militarization, local officials, and international aid that seeks to introduce the false promise of development, which comes with dispossession and plunder, among other things.[6]

> These people impact our communities in many ways, and the following stand out: they sow division, utilize our being, violate our rights, foment chaos within our struggles, co-opt leadership, kill and destroy. They have caused our critical thinking to stagnate, as they shift the focus of everything toward accepting absolute truths imposed by faith. They entertain us with political games or absurd meetings, robbing us of valuable time. We often go to church, and many churches play on our needs and examine us in detail. They have professionals who make assessments of us.

> Instead of going to local meetings organized to defend our rights, we often choose to go to church or political assemblies or presentations in support

> of government programs, all of which entails decisions being made for us because we are ashamed to say no, a fact that results in conformity and submission. Others decide for us. Then, when they violate us or want to take away our property, the political parties and pastors and parish priests, among others, do not get involved. They say it is not their responsibility; on the contrary, they instill fear of protesting. We feel guilty and this robs us Maya women of courage, strength, and spirit. Many Maya women accept what happens to them because they believe their faith tells them this is just what they have to live through. It has even happened to those of us who have devoted ourselves to struggle. (Chávez Ixcaquic)

Multiple Oppressions

Indigenous women, down to the very core of our being, experience multiple oppressions at different stages of our lives. In general, oppression begins in childhood, even in our mother's womb. These multiple oppressions operate within our bodies, they multiply, accommodating and interacting with one another, implanted in such a way that the violence they produce becomes naturalized and normalized. States express their approval on a daily basis.

Internalized oppression has caused the profound illnesses of fear and guilt. They are deeply rooted and naturalized in our being; they produce complications in our thinking, attitudes, dreams, feelings, and cause problems when we interact among ourselves or others. Many times, we do not value ourselves or other women.

How Do Indigenous Women Experience Racism

Over time, dominant forms of thinking have been legitimized. Within our historical context, the systems imposed on us place the white man as the dominant referent, strong and powerful. What he says goes; he makes the decisions in our territories. Naturally, this becomes institutionalized in the symbolic realm and daily life, which results in subordination. They annihilate us from history and enslave us again, focusing their efforts on controlling our minds. As a result of all this, Indigenous women are the targets of racism in the States in which we live. This racism is reflected in statistics, where our real situation as women goes unaddressed; the sparse data we have available has been achieved only through applying constant pressure and waging ongoing struggle.

Colonial remnants persist in the thinking of the dominant class and their racist modes of classification that have brought categories of Indigenous women into the language of daily life. These people talk about the "mute Indigenous woman," the "ignorant Indigenous woman," the "stubborn Indigenous woman," "Maria the Indigenous woman." They extol those whom they approve of, referring to them as "intelligent, obedient, competitive, knowers of the one true faith,

rational, prestigious, modern, classy, of stature." On the other hand, they reject the other "savage, crazy, rioting, trouble-making, terrorist" Indigenous people. This is what they call those of us who have had the courage to fight for life, for Mother Nature, for the land, and for our territory. In this way, they offer prestige to the chosen ones and manufacture violent power struggles between women, in a clear exercise of societal breakdown and the instantiation of deep relations of exclusion.

Patriarchy and Colonialism in Our Communities

Deep-rooted in our communities, colonialism equips men, including Indigenous men, with privileges they, unfortunately, wield against us. To some extent, their holding these privileges has to do with our bodies. Thus, the end result is a series of unequal relationships that we contest, in part by making demands for change, since it is important to recognize that all of us, men and women, are committed to creating patterns of change in the name of territorial defense.

Indigenous men have control over the bodies of Indigenous women. This is not the result of a political accord between women and men, but a patriarchal imposition, an oppressive pact that must be eliminated from our territories. Having constantly reflected on the experiences that have marked our lives, we call upon conscious men to do this work. When we walk alongside male comrades, we think and feel that our path is a shared one, that our strength is shared, that they recognize our ancestral principles such as Tzq'at, reciprocity: "I am you and you are me." We trust that he is a "compa," a brother who shares our sense of suffering and will not harm us. Along this path, and over time, we come to realize we were wrong: that the man we thought was a "comrade, a brother, a friend" attacks us, brings violence into our lives, bloodies us, insults us, humiliates us, defames us, persecutes us, makes fun of our inequalities, harasses us, blackmails us, and many times, sexually violates us. For the most part, when we report rape or sexual harassment to groups or organizations in our communities, we are not met with reciprocity but rejection and reactions like this:

> You're fucking us over. You must be in bed with the government or with mining companies because they want to destroy us. The oligarchy bribed you, no doubt. What happened to you is nothing compared to what we went through during the war. Now that was awful, because they pulled guns on us, they threw bombs at us, they kidnapped us…

Violence and Power

We Indigenous women are redefining our relationships, so that violence and power do not act on us. Addressing the violent deaths of Indigenous women, as well as rampant impunity and injustice, is not a priority to Nation-States. This

becomes abundantly clear when we women come together and share our stories and draw our own conclusions. It becomes clear that the violence we experience exists across many territories—although violence is perpetrated in distinct ways in each, our experiences as a whole reflect a widespread pattern of patriarchal violence throughout Mesoamerica and other regions.

For hundreds of years, the systems imposed on us have silenced our historical wounds and the ongoing, systematic violations we have experienced.

Because our territories are affected by serious crises of systematic violence, we continue to face not only historical forms of oppression—due to class, cultural identity, gender, and the aftermath of imposed wars—but also ongoing invasion by multinational companies that perpetuate severe inequalities, discrimination, and impoverishment.

Guatemala is in Mesoamerica, a region of the American continent with the highest rate of inequality and increasing poverty among Indigenous women. We work triple shifts for minimal pay: it is not enough to cover basic living expenses. Over the years, a culture of impunity has taken hold in the region. In El Salvador, for example, 99% of femicide cases go unpunished (Mateos Herraiz).

In Guatemala, we're now up against a government led by a genocidal, military president, Otto Pérez Molina, who is owned by transnational corporations, powerful states, national oligarchies, and drug trafficking, among others. He has been programmed to violently repress the people since he was first trained as a K'aibil. The K'aibiles are the elite soldiers of the Guatemalan army, trained in and subjected to extreme conditions, forced to complete trials based on the famous theory that the mind dominates the body, a phrase often repeated in each training session. Another one of their mottos is: "If I advance, follow me; if I stop, urge me on; and if I retreat, kill me."

Sexuality as a Terrain of Power

Challenging systems of power through sexuality is a wonderful thing: this territory must be respected! As we Indigenous women go about our lives, we come to recognize the way men perpetrate violence day after day. There are many experiences, many moments in history that we remember and fill us with outrage down to the tenderest parts of our being, our sexuality…

For violent men, there are no limits to the sexual obligations we must fulfill. Indigenous women are mandated to obey, to attend to the desires of men at any time and in any place. Inside our homes, the violent man wields power; there, the husband's power is superior to any other. Not only his violent acts, but also his controlling behaviors are institutionalized.

Birth control, for example, is not readily accessible. If a woman has contraceptives, in many cases she must keep them hidden from her husband or risk the grave consequences of being discovered. She feels a huge weight on her

chest, full of dread because she is hiding something, and she worries, "What will he do when he finds them?" From the moment we begin to think in such a way, we become more susceptible to tolerating the violence inflicted upon us.

In this sense, when we come together as Indigenous women, fostering spaces for critical and self-critical analysis in order to promote radical change, we are profoundly struck by how systems continue to separate sexuality from what is considered the political sphere. However, sexuality is not a natural relationship. What we know about sexuality today is a social and historical construction, an effect of our relationship to culture.

How Patriarchy Controls Women's Bodies and Sexuality

It is important to recognize that sexuality is the result of a socially and historically constructed process, and therefore different peoples have their own ways of relating to one another. The body and sexuality are also political: throughout our lives and histories, we have experienced how power relations are exerted upon our bodies. For this reason, communities have rules, punishments, limitations, and discourses that reinforce male dominance.

These days, little is said about the spoken and unspoken agreements between men and how they control our sexuality. Men's role here in seldom analyzed, given that they are born into a society that grants them access to our bodies in order to sustain the system of domination. Accepted codes of conduct demonstrate and reinforce men's right to dominate women's bodies; the end result is rape, a logical conclusion of existing societal structures. Obviously, all of this produces unequal power relations. So, violence against our bodies is the result of a system of domination, one that is not spoken about in the home, nor in schools, and much less in churches. To deconstruct this system of domination as Indigenous women, we had to undergo a process of educating ourselves and questioning systemic power structures, which is why it is essential for us to have our own autonomous educational spaces.

Nation States imposed by the patriarchal system have implemented life models whereby our existence is considered as a body property, a body that belongs to someone else. That is the current generic identity, which is why many systems do not recognize violence against Indigenous women, because this is socially accepted and gives men the legal authority to make decisions about and control our bodies. Power relations are institutionalized through marriage, by means of permanent rules and surveillance. Our sexuality is reduced to a single function, namely, reproduction. It is acceptable only within a specific intimate context, marriage, and with a socially acceptable person, a man. Any other expression of our sexuality is harshly punished because it represents a danger to the patriarchs. Either we belong to one man, or we belong to all men: this is the basis of the patriarchal order.

Thousands of us Indigenous women and girls are being trafficked for the purposes of sexual exploitation. Over time, human trafficking has become increasingly associated with forced migration. In Latin America, nine million people are victims of this business, which moves more than $16 million (USD) each year.[7] Mexico and Central America are prime areas for the recruitment and trafficking, primarily of girls, who are vilely exploited and sexually enslaved upon their arrival in the United States.

The violation of sexual and reproductive rights also involves other types of actors, such as the State, which can imprison women for up to decades for having terminated a pregnancy, the result of the profound power held by fundamentalist groups and enduring religious hierarchies.

Not all violence against people is made visible: it depends on where it is perpetrated and who perpetrates it, all of which has to do with the dominant powers. Violence against Indigenous women is nothing new within the Nation-State. It has been naturalized to such a degree that societies see rape as normal,[8] or they blame us. Domestic violence has become so naturalized that it seems strange if there is no violence, the same can be said of violence within social movements or within Indigenous communities.

Pacts Between Indigenous Women: Seeds of Light and Hope for Change

In the face of the patriarchal political order, many Indigenous women have given another meaning to life; we have decided we have no loyalty when it comes to this violent approach, so we are contesting this system. It is wonderful to say this aloud and even more intense to live it.

This has led us to be creative, to find one another in order to identify alternatives and reconstruct new referents for our social relations, all the while having critical and self-critical positions and recognizing how we have been shaped and educated to serve the all-powerful. It is important to recognize and demystify the power relations that mediate our experiences with sexuality and our intimate relationships.

We have forged our own path, following the seeds that offer light and hope for change and recognizing how we are anatomically and physically built. Recognizing the parts of our bodies, calling each other and reassuring one another, having safeguards between us that allow us to make our own decisions in our own spaces, practicing autonomous processes of self-determination, clearly expressing our freedom.

This process involves making our own political pacts: covenants of love, respect, and reciprocity; creating bridges between us; recognizing that we have sexual and reproductive rights and coming up with strategies and determining spheres of action with our greatest strengths being rebellion, opposition, and redefinition.

We have declared that our bodies have the right to rest, that we have the right to decide if we want to reproduce. These are struggles we are also currently waging in our territories, because we recognize sexual and reproductive rights as human rights, as universal, interdependent, and indivisible. This journey is a long one, and that's why it is important for this work to be carried out intergenerationally.

In community assemblies, we voice our agreement that our territories be declared free of transnational companies. Likewise, we also want these same territories to be declared free of violence against women. So, every day we fight to reclaim our own bodies: as more bodies are able to exercise their capacity for self-determination, the more we, as women, move towards the good life. We take another step along our path!

Seeds That Offer Light and Hope for Change

The two cases we present below offer hope in breaking the silence around sexual violence against Indigenous women.

On May 9, 2014, the Guatemalan justice system sentenced former dictator Efraín Ríos Montt to 80 years in prison (50 for genocide and another 30 for war crimes). A criminal court found the ex-military man guilty of genocide and crimes against humanity that were responsible for the deaths of more than 1,700 Indigenous people. Although the conviction was later overturned, this was a historic trial for Indigenous women in Guatemala, since it set the precedent that sexual violence and violence against women constitute war crimes and genocidal strategy (Chiquin). In the process, Ixil women narrated the atrocities they suffered at the hands of Guatemalan soldiers between 1982 and 1983, and how members of the army systematically abused them sexually. These events occurred when the Ixil women were between 11 and 30 years old. According to the Report on the Recovery of Historical Memory of the Guatemalan Episcopal Conference, humiliation was used as an instrument of torture and sexual slavery, including the repeated rape of victims.

Another recent example is the Sepur Zarco Case, in which two soldiers were prosecuted on counts of rape and sexual slavery committed during the war in Guatemala.

Sepur Zarco is a community located in the municipality of El Estor in Izabal. There, in 1982, during the worst years of the war and genocide, a military base was built. Here, and elsewhere, the military committed a series of crimes against humanity, including the rape and sexual enslavement of approximately 20 women over the course of at least six months. Several of these women also had their husbands or relatives disappeared or murdered (de León).

On October 14, 2014, Judge Miguel Ángel Gálvez of the High Risk Court B decided to try two soldiers for war crimes committed during the Civil War (1960-

1996). Former lieutenant Steelmer Reyes Girón stands accused of crimes against humanity in the form of sexual violence, sexual slavery, and domestic slavery of eleven Q'eqchi' women; he is also charged with the murder of Dominga Choc and her two underage daughters, Anita and Hermelinda Choc Pop. Heriberto Valdés Asij is going to trial for the forced disappearance of seven Q'eqchi' peasants on August 25, 1982, as well as for sexual violence against two women, constituting crimes against the duties of humanity.[9]

What Does Self-Determination Mean to Us, Indigenous Women

To us, self-determination means making our own decisions as a daily practice. This understanding guides our approach to life—from personal to communal, from private to public, from individual to collective, in their multiple expressions. This is how we realize our aspirations: to strengthen ourselves politically, economically, socially, and culturally.

Self-determination means enacting practices that move us toward greater autonomy, turning a critical eye on the way we have individually and collectively internalized oppression, and breaking with learned patterns of resignation, submission, inferiority, humiliation, and helplessness. We are starting to take these steps in our territories, in order to undergo processes of personal and collective healing and slowly, one step at a time, reclaim our power as Indigenous women.

It means anything and everything we are already doing in our territories: resignifiying our being, strengthening our spirituality and lives, and honoring life with our ancestors' seeds.

It means revolutionizing our thoughts, our feelings, and our actions every day, and generating other forms of being.

It means having the freedom to rebel and exercise the tools of rebellion, inventing alternative forms of relating that bring forth our own systems of life.

It means making individual and collective decisions as Indigenous women through democratic, assembly-based, and autonomous processes.

Self-determination also means walking with our people, carefully considering which of our traditions work in these times and do not violate our lives, analyzing them, and working to strengthen life.

It means remaking our entire way of life to incorporate foundational aspects, such as holding authority as Indigenous women, learning to hold authority, in an intergenerational way, living our lives as a collective, taking up other ways of being.

It means going through a learning process as women and experiencing deep transformation across many generations, as a result of multiple processes.

It means creating our own collectives and forms of production based on a communal economy and enacting changes as a community.

We are women who face different struggles, in many different territories, with our own forms of expression and ways of being. We have established ourselves as defenders, leaders, spiritual guides, authorities, spokespersons, and leaders. The systems imposed on us do not recognize our wisdom, our political positioning, or our constitution. They don't even see us! And when they do, they call us crazy, troublemakers, rioters, bitches.

We are decision-makers in our territories, we practice self-determination and are determined to fight so that our territories and decisions are respected. For Indigenous women, this means freeing our territories from State violence, systemic violence, and the violence enacted on our bodies.

We are tired of hearing you talk about us—how our bodies are found dismembered or how we exist only as man's counterpart: we do not belong to any man (not even our partners, fathers, children, or friends), any system (patriarchal, capitalist, racist, or neoliberal systems), or any religion. Stop referring to us as "our indigenous women": we will continue fighting so that parish priests, presidents, state officials, and owners of multinational companies are not the ones making decisions about our bodies. We do not come from a rib, we come from Life and all the ways it is expressed in the human form, no more or less. We are the only ones who can make decisions about our bodies—we will make them within us, between us, for us.

We face battles in our territories and continue to fight so that our choices are respected. The right to have as many children as we want. The right to break free from physical, psychological, financial, and sexual abuse. The right to inherit, to give ourselves a break, and to rest. The right to be more than symbolic vessels.

We are continuously violated in our territories, and hiding this fact would be a huge historical error that would cost more women's lives. That is why we recognize the ongoing gender conflict that has still not been brought to light. What is clear, however, is the strong effort to silence, hide, attack, and continue to exercise control over us, including on the part of international aid groups that seek to separate our demands from those of the broader community. Such efforts serve the patriarchy, its institutions and models, and thus we not only face the transnational companies that invade us, but also the problems stemming from a permanent patriarchy that each day perpetrates violence against us.

We are actors with critical awareness of the past, present, and future, and we know what we want as Indigenous women.

That we carry out our own analyses of the gendered division of labor is truly meaningful. The work of human reproduction is rendered invisible. Our living presence is absorbed, like a silent, submissive, emotional record player on repeat, and we are thought of as devoted, self-sacrificing, all-giving.

This is based on the continuation of a perverse system that makes us work long hours each day and erases our labor so that we do the same thing the

next day and the day after that. As Indigenous women, we know that erased labor is silenced labor, it is work that does not exist and, at the end of our hard workday, it's as if we did nothing at all. Every day the system enslaves us more, until we waste away alongside the thousands of women who die young due to illness. They are killing us without allowing us to fully exist.

We affirm that we are not only life-giving mothers. We are mothers and so much more. We choose whether or not we want to be mothers, because motherhood is not a divine mandate. We are women who hold deep wisdom!

How We Rethink Leadership as Indigenous Women

Our collective reflections are part of an ongoing process of formation that is both self-reflexive and liberatory. They allow us to rethink ourselves, since we refuse to reproduce leadership practices that hand over our decision-making power to someone else who manages our freedom. We likewise refuse to reproduce leadership practices that emphasize individual characteristics and thus place us in various degrees of competition with one another, emphasizing differences among us instead of the collective objectives we need to achieve through those leadership practices. We recognize that Indigenous women can build new forms of leadership and allow for processes that build lives for everyone, recognizing the leadership of other beings of the planet.

We recognize and are striving toward forms of shared, rotating, intergenerational leadership. Inspired leadership that builds relationships and attends to the spirituality of people, that encourages and focuses on clarity of purpose, that learns from practice and encourages the ritual arrival of both joys and sorrows.

We are inspired by forms of shared leadership that foster collective support and create safe spaces for expression, self-care, participation, and the development of leadership skills.

The Commitment Indigenous Men Make: Generating New Masculinities That Combat Violence Against Indigenous Women[10]

In some territories, when we demand that men declare themselves free of violence against women, they begin to transform their lives, first by recognizing themselves as sexists, taking on the commitment to be self-critical in the interest of radical change. As Indigenous women we have witnessed these processes of transformation: they form a finely-woven fabric, which takes shape slowly but constantly. Regarding this space of self-reflection, it is most important to highlight that:

- These men recognize that one of the deeply-embedded personality traits they must change is the hubris of wanting to remain always in control of what they were taught belongs to them, that is, women, and they recognize this

hubris as an element of machismo they inherited, voluntarily or involuntarily, in childhood.

▯ They realize they need to put a stop to their feelings of anger and frustration and the conflicts that have arisen regarding conception. These are generational troubles they have borne since inception, because custom has instilled the expectation that the first-born child should be a boy. When this does not happen, women are blamed, often violently, and the men start along a path in which the main object is to conceive a male child. This is neither sustainable nor conducive to a harmonious life at home and affects societies more broadly, since men who have only daughters are singled out as incapable because they do not give birth to males. Many men who have questioned and transformed their machismo express that they do so for several reasons: one of the most frequently mentioned being a newfound sense and vision of life that values equality between and dignity for both women and men.

▯ Based on their own experience, men know how they have treated their mothers, partners, sisters, and other women. Men know they have acted violently toward the women in their lives and they recognize that other men have also. When they have daughters, they are perfectly aware of what violence against them would mean; they recognize the fear this engenders and this is why they are willing to radically change.

▯ Appreciating women's intelligence is one of men's predicaments. They are working on this, as the changes need to come from the oppressor. One prime example is leadership envy, since men do not accept when women exert their leadership and decision-making capacities. Therefore, changing the relationships produced by patriarchy is their challenge, since they are part of its system of power.

▯ Within the interior life of the male being, the call to happiness means becoming "sentipensante."[11] To transform the sexual division of labor and domestic roles, we must reassess old habits meant to accommodate men and instead take up principles and habits that facilitate life as a community and collective. As soon as we put this into practice, the family lives more peacefully, and men are far less likely to experience alcoholism or drug addiction or resort to prostitution.

▯ They recognize that, in our communities, men need to undergo a process of healing in order to transform a sense of being that has been enslaved by the oppressor. Men also recognize that Nation-States are complicit in their violent acts and vice versa; they exist together in a perverse relationship, since impunity and corruption in justice systems make violent men stronger. It is important we agree that couples no longer reproduce sexist beings; that is the way forward.

Territorial Invasion in Abya Yala: the Ruses of Development

> Certainly, there exist many worldviews, where Indigenous peoples do not necessarily want false development; there are other ways of life, ones that challenge global powers.

Transnational companies, whether related to hydroelectric projects, mining, oil, monoculture agriculture, etc., all come with well-crafted discourses about "development" that promise to get people out of so-called "underdevelopment." They use this message to invade our territories, offering everything from jobs, health, education, and well-being for all, to the distribution of profits—with great inequalities, of course. An example of this is the mining law in Guatemala, which grants 1% royalties to the Guatemalan state. Nation-States, increasingly privatized, are becoming the property of oligarchies, world powers, and multinational corporations. We Indigenous women cannot keep trusting in states that have been taken hostage and fail to respond to our concerns.

We know what the arrival of multinationals in our territories is like. Generally, it is facilitated by the long-standing oligarchies of the countries involved. Multinationals ally themselves with state officials and clandestine networks, including organized crime. At the local level, they act similarly, allying themselves with local state and municipal officials, entering our land without permission. We often see technicians taking land measurements, lying to communities, and buying large swaths of land, without asking for permission or informing Indigenous authorities. They don't have the slightest sense of respect.

When communities and peoples ask for explanations, demand respect, and say no, what do companies do? They criminalize us, intimidate us, go after us legally, perpetrate violence against our most vulnerable; pursue illegitimate cases and manage to have us imprisoned illegally. Today, many political prisoners remain unjustly incarcerated; states implement repression against people officially by declaring states of siege, evictions, and murders, all within a framework and scenario of complete impunity. It is evident that the logic of development is being imposed and disseminated militarily, and that the weapons wielded by companies and governments are the main actors in this ongoing imposition. In the Mesoamerican region especially, the army is one of the most powerful governmental institutions operating today.

Transnational corporations, especially those carrying out mining operations, are ever-present and encroaching on our territories. They are carrying out—and getting away with—massacres.

The development model is riddled with major errors that are evident in our situation, position, and condition of life as Indigenous women. This is reflected in State statistics, where one can plainly see that States, without even the

slightest bit of shame, use the bodies of Indigenous women to subjugate and dispossess us and to satisfy their unending desire for greed and domination.

Our messages are potent: They say "Mining is development"; we say "The mine destroys and pollutes!" They say "Mining is going to contribute enormously to the economy and development"; we say "Mining poisons, pollutes, sickens, and kills." We defend life and our territories and we women have waged battles as political actors, as demonstrated in our many interventions:

- Indigenous women have our own spaces for: critical analysis and resignification, historicizing our existence, and strengthening ourselves intellectually and emotionally, as well as through self-care.
- We are participating in local processes related to the defense of life and territory; in political assemblies and mobilizations, we take up positions against transnational companies and in the defense of our rights, from the intimate to the public, from the individual to the collective, from the local to the regional.
- We are constantly speaking out, engaging in direct actions that break the silence about our lived experience with violence. We use and recreate tools, of healing and self-care, as a transgressive political tool.
- We build networks with other Indigenous women, including those from other continents.
- We are saving and protecting seeds alongside young people, men, and elders. In September 2014, the Law for the Protection of Obtaining Vegetables, known as the "Monsanto Law," was repealed in Guatemala.[12]
- In certain territories, we keep records of attacks on human rights defenders, taking into account that we are targeted for being Indigenous women and because most of us live in rural areas.
- We are creating networks among ourselves and training ourselves through forms of national and regional legal advocacy.
- In certain territories, we are making decisions about our bodies in relation to aspects such as reproduction, rest, fun, exercise training, and sexual and reproductive health.

We know that we need to work with local communities to foster cultures that eradicate violence against Indigenous women. For this reason, we will continue to insist on analyzing in more detail those global strategies that have local impacts. Speaking out against Nation-States and exposing their systems of multiple oppressions is an important challenge to take on; we insist that this must be taken up by communities on a local level.

Women Taking Action and Participating in Territorial Defense

We recognize how diverse we are as Indigenous women and that we have always participated in Indigenous rights movements. We joined the struggle to eradicate economic exploitation and fight for decolonization, and to eradicate the

oppression we have historically faced because of our gender, Indigenous, and class identities, in every facet of our lives.

As women, we recognize that the earth cannot be sold. We see this happen in our territories. For instance, in the Maya K'iche' region in Guatemala, men are usually the ones who hold property titles, which has led to clashes with men who say, "This land is mine, I bought it, and I'll hand it over to whoever pays up." Women in the community respond, "Yes, it's yours, but where does it come from? It comes from our ancestors, our grandmothers and grandfathers. What did they tell you to do, sell it?" Women in the community go back to the words of our grandfathers and grandmothers, go visit their graves to gain a new understanding and consciousness. Women do so much consciousness raising!

We actively and consciously participate in Consultas Comunitarias de Buena Fe, community meetings where we make decisions collectively. For us, this is a practice in autonomy, self-determination, and strategic political positioning, one rooted in the knowledge our people have held for thousands of years and which keeps us moving forward. In our communities, we adhere to the principles of consultation. This means we carry out the things we've committed to as a community, the decisions we've made at community meetings where women, men, girls, boys, and elders are consulted on a given matter. Thousands of us have participated in these consultation processes, but the number of women involved has declined. We believe this is because women financially depend on their husbands, a fact many women have mentioned when we have engaged them in dialogue.

Some of us activist women have partners who support us financially, encourage us, and fight alongside us to defend our territories. For women to participate in these actions, we must either be financially independent or have a supportive partner because, as we say, we aren't getting paid for this. Most of the time, we have to cover the costs associated with mobilizing ourselves and defending our territories, and for many women this is a barrier to participation.

As women, when we defend our territories, we are defending every life-sustaining space, every feeling, every thought, every body, every principle, every story and every history, every horizon, and every element that coexists. Indigenous women from different territories have decided to come together, rooting ourselves in a critical understanding of our history and recognizing that our present conditions and our existence are embedded within a network of interrelated systems. We have decided to speak out and challenge the silence that has marked our lives, to challenge systems, spaces, concepts, worlds, models, authorities, and men. In short, to challenge everything that engenders violent forms of relation in our lives.

We are living proof that there are other creative forms of existing, ones that generate life in community and fullness. We keep walking toward them. We may get frustrated, tired, and come up against obstacles along the way, but we are walking and opening new paths towards a dignified life. So we come together,

drawing on principles from our cosmovisions, our principles of reciprocity, to create a holistic way of relating, and safe and strategic spaces. We recognize current existential voids, mistakes, conflicts, and, above all, that the situation of Indigenous women has not changed: they are subjected to structural violence and violence produced by the machismo prevailing in our communities and among our peoples. We are outraged by misogyny, including within our territories, communities, and peoples. That is why we stress the importance of our own spaces and environments, and then move on to address the collective agreements we make as communities, between distinct communities, and between women and men.

> In both Mexico and Central America, Indigenous women are leading their communities in the struggle to defend their territories and natural resources, opposing unregulated extractivist projects and land grabs carried out in the name of 'development.' Whether it is the Kuna of Panama or Mixtec communities at the U.S.-Mexico border, women call out the injustices committed by mining and logging companies. In addition, they expose corrupt policies carried out by their governments, which deploy police and military units to repress activist communities. (JASS)

Living in harmony is not something that only women or only men can bring about; otherwise, we would be unable to call it harmony or balance. For women to live well and in harmony, we need men, women, movements, communities, peoples, nations, all of us who are deeply committed to harmonizing existence.

How Do Indigenous Women Experience Criminalization in Our Territories

We are currently experiencing a wave of criminalization in our territories. One must concede that the legal system benefits groups holding economic and political power. Our own lives as women who defend life and territory makes this clear and is the reason we are criminalized and persecuted legally. All of this affects us in our territories: high rates of impunity, social and economic inequality, police and military forces, as well as the presence of private security companies. We've seen a constant, daily escalation of persecution, punishment, and criminalization related to our actions, and the demands we make in defense of our collective rights as Indigenous peoples and our rights as Indigenous women.

These are some of the cases of our colleagues criminalized for defending life and territory.

> The only thing I have done and we have done alongside local communities is defend our territories, defend the land, defend mother nature. (Hermelinda Simón, 2013)

Like other women, Hermelinda Simón Diego has been criminalized for her territorial defense of Santa Cruz de Barillas, Huehuetenango, Guatemala, amidst the construction of the Hidralia Ecoener hydroelectric plant, a project rejected by local communities. A warrant, issued by the Public Ministry of Santa Eulalia Huehuetenango, is out for her arrest. She is falsely accused of aggravated robbery, the destruction of machinery, and the unlawful detainment of security forces employed by the Hidro Santa Cruz company.

Blanca Julia Ajtún, human rights defender and CODECA (Committee on Campesino Development) activist, has been criminalized and imprisoned due to allegations made by the Energuate company. Along with two human rights defenders, she was kidnapped for several hours on June 26, 2014, by people who claimed to be affiliates of this company. They were "allegedly" released by the Human Rights Ombudsman and the National Civil Police, before being transferred and locked up without a court order. They were charged with specialized fraud and national security crimes, without any legal argument to substantiate these charges. Three days later they were released on bail.

> Everything I have written I have written responsibly, ethically, with social commitment, with conscience, for the right to life and the rights of women, children, young people, Mayan peoples, Xincas, and Garífunas, and especially all those who are struggling against extractivism today. (Francisca Gómez Grijalva)

> To inform is a fundamental human right related to the freedom to access information. I bring information to light, but all citizens also have the right to be informed, to choose what type of information to read and listen to, but this is not the case with mainstream media, because they adhere to a hegemonic narrative, one that always represents the absolute truth of those in power. It shouldn't be that way, because if we are talking about a human right guaranteed in state constitutions, the "ley de emoción del pensamiento" [the law protecting freedom of the press in Guatemala], in international agreements and conventions on human rights and freedom of expression, then we are talking about fundamental human rights. If they silence us, if they take away our voices, what do people expect us to do; we cannot keep our heads down. (Francisca Gómez Grijalva, August 11, 2014)

> When they captured us, they physically and verbally abused us; they treated us badly. The Government failed to guarantee our human rights; they caused us psychological harm, yet the Public Ministry does not investigate those responsible, nor does it investigate the private citizens who detained us... They said we are like a malignant cancer that gets worse every day. (Francisca Gómez Grijalva, September 30, 2014)

Francisca Gómez Grijalva is a Maya K'iche' journalist, Prensa Libre columnist, academic, and Human Rights defender who is currently being threatened for speaking out against the violations of the special rights of local Indigenous communities. The extractivist company Cementos Progreso filed a lawsuit against her for writing an article called "¿Agua o cemento?" on February 6, 2014, which brought attention to a series of problems caused by Cementos Progreso in the Kaqchiquel Maya territory in San Juan Sacatepéquez.

Buen Vivir

> The land as a referent of life, not slaughter. For this reason, we call ourselves to unity, to communal labor, to exercising our legitimate rights in our territory and to creating a planet for all species, colors, sizes, and forms…
>
> K'iche' Peoples' Council

Buen Vivir ("good living" or "living well") is a model of life that Indigenous peoples are presenting as an alternative to the so-called "development" model.

Unmasking false development is a task that we Indigenous peoples have taken up for ourselves. We invite the peoples of the world to join us in this journey, which is neither simple nor easy; it is difficult and complex, but it takes us on a journey beyond systems and States and puts as a referent Life itself, a woven fabric always in motion. From our bodies to our nationalities, this collective journey invites us to unlearn and recreate learning.

If we destabilize the patriarchal, colonial, and capitalist order, we destabilize the violent domination and submission that threatens us. This inspires and strengthens not only Indigenous women but the many worlds suffering from these systemic diseases.

> Buen Vivir, which we welcome, is integral. It fosters coexistence and complementarity, freedom and natural rights, the self-determination of persons and peoples, the self-determination of identities, bodies, sexualities, and territories. It is collective and encourages care for life and pleasure, love, joy, and the different ways of expressing care as well as sentipensante knowledge. Buen Vivir recognizes as life everything existing in the cosmos and everything that has essential life and an active part in the construction of good living. To foster it, we make pacts, agreements, and alliances, without forms of hierarchization. Buen Vivir recognizes the value of all those who are part of the covenant, from children to elders. (Confluencia Nuevo B'aqtun)

The model of Buen Vivir begins to take shape and gather strength the moment our communities put our own decisions into practice.

Indigenous women are walking towards Buen Vivir, recreating our existence in many ways through deep critical analysis.

We walk along a very hopeful path; we have life and we have life in community, so we will keep moving, honoring the steps taken by our mothers before us, who also accompany us in joy, together, in our frames of reference, our frameworks of coexistence, of diversity and creativity.

We will continue to defy borders because our communities do not create those borders. The more we Indigenous women exercise our right to freedom, our right to a life without violence, our right to self-determination, the more we will bring them into being.

Because we are free beings… we will continue walking onwards, because we draw inspiration from life, our life, the life of our grandmothers and the life of our granddaughters, we will continue our march towards el Buen Vivir!

Notes

[1] Translators' Note: This statement was made at the end of Oxlajuj B'aktun in Q'umarkaaj, K'iche', Guatemala. The Oxlajuj B'aktun ends a period of 5,200 years, per the long count of the calendar of Maya culture: the long count is a system that records time linearly, combined with cyclical rhythm. Its calculation expresses the number of days elapsed since the date 4 Ajaw 8 K'umku', on which Maya Grandmothers and Grandfathers began to count the Fourth Era of the world, which ends on 21 December 2012 and begins a new cycle.

[2] Translators' Note: One of the twenty nawals of the Maya calendar, "K'at," refers to the net: physical nets such as fishing nets and nets for holding mazorcas (corn cobs), as well as the relational nets composing the "web of life" or "network of life" that connects all beings energetically, spiritually, and materially.

[3] This relationship is reflected in numerous episodes that took place during the Civil War in Guatemala, when Indigenous Q'eqchí women were raped and enslaved. The Sepur Zarco outpost case is only one example. As discussed in a later section, two former soldiers were tried and convicted for war crimes in October 2014. The utilization of women's bodies as spoils of war includes the forced exploitation of women's domestic, reproductive, and care work.

[4] La Consulta de la Buena Fe is a right communities are granted in accordance with national law. This took place on October 22, 2012, when more than 27,000 people from Indigenous communities expressed a resounding "no" to extraction and exploitation in their territories, particularly those of large-scale mining and hydroelectric projects.

[5] These struggles are waged on the basis of rights guaranteed by the International Labor Organization Convention 169 [the Indigenous and Tribal People's Convention] (1989) and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007), as well as in the community laws known in Guatemala as "customary rights," which were part of the 1996 Peace Accords.

[6] Translators' Note: This appears as an open quote in the source text and is perhaps a typo.

Notes

[7] Translators' Note: The author likely drew these figures from an article published in La Razón reporting on the Organization of American States's Third Meeting of National Authorities on Trafficking in Persons held on October 15 and 16, 2012, in Guatemala City, Guatemala ("La trata de personas"). However, there is some discrepancy between the figures reported by La Razón and those reported by Ambassador Albert R. Ramdin, Assistant Secretary General of the Organization of American States. The OAS, for example, reports human trafficking to be a $16 billion-a-year business in Latin America and the Caribbean (Ramdin 1), rather than the $16 million reported by La Razón.

[8] Translators' Note: Such as in Euro-Western hetero-patriarchal societies.

[9] Translators' Note: Reyes Giró and Valdés Asij were found guilty in 2016. For more, see United Nations, "UN Fund for Victims."

[10] Interview conducted by the author with a member of the K'iche' Peoples' Council, K'iche', Guatemala, 2014.

[11] T.N.: Sentipensante—a portmanteau combining the Spanish words sentir (to sense or feel) and pensar (to think)—is theorized by Laura I. Rendón as a pedagogical approach based on "wholeness, harmony, social justice and liberation" (132). She encourages educators and other individuals to integrate their inner affective knowledge (sensing) and outer intellectual learning (thinking).

[12] The Monsanto Law was passed by the Guatemalan government in June 2014, as a provision of a 2005 trade agreement between the United States and Central America. It would have granted exclusive ownership rights of a few genetically modified seeds to a handful of transnational companies. Organizations in Guatemala mobilized against the law, arguing that it violated the Constitution as well as the right of Maya peoples to the traditional cultivation of their land in their ancestral territories. In granting patents for new plant varieties to transnational seed companies, the law essentially privatized seed ownership in a country where seed varieties have a long, multifaceted history and where about 70% of the population dedicates themselves to small-scale agriculture. Furthermore, the Monsanto Act could have criminalized small farmers who have been growing corn and black beans for their own consumption for generations: if their seeds were crossed with patented seeds of other crops as a result of pollination or wind, they would be accused of breaking the law unless they paid Monsanto for a license. Another possible risk was that the costs of patented seeds would have caused prices to rise, worsening a food crisis for families who could not afford to purchase a seed license, and intensifying existing violent social conflicts between local Maya communities and transnational companies. The National Alliance for the Protection of Biodiversity opposed the law for being "a direct attack on knowledge, biodiversity, life, culture, the traditional rural economy, the worldview of the Peoples, and food sovereignty." On September 4, 2014, Maya communities protested before the Guatemalan Congress and the Constitutional Court, taking to the streets for 10 days, marching through the capital and demanding the law be abolished. Ultimately, the Congress decided not to review the legislation and threw it out. For more information, see Sandberg, 2014.

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Biography

Aura Lolita Chávez Ixcaquic is a K'iche' human rights activist from Guatemala and a leader in the fight against extractivist industries.

Pedro Uc Be

The Corn with Maya Skin

translated by Paul M Worley and Melissa D. Birkhofer

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"The general public is advised that beginning today a kilo of tortillas will cost 22 pesos owing to the high price of corn." This was broadcast from a car with a speaker on its roof today in my hometown as the day had, with a certain laziness, barely begun to awaken from the deep calm of a night that had fastened itself across the four corners of the community.

During the last few months, the price of tortillas has risen amidst a noisy debate among some citizens about the prices of things like gasoline, natural gas, electricity, and now tortillas; some said that thanks to the current government things have not gone up in price because they had taken charge of creating "services and products wellbeing" like the banks and gas; others countered by saying that it was better under previous governments because even if it is true that they were shameless thieves, there were more jobs, better access to medical care, more medicine in hospitals, and a few more people who cared for the land.

A third party intervenes in the discussion to state that the problem of the increase in the cost of tortillas is historic, as when Yucatán was a henequen-producing state, there were times when the people stopped making milpa and there was a subsequent shortage of corn, and so the hacendados and the government sold corn at a high cost. When the henequen industry collapsed in 1992, many farmers returned to the countryside and went back to making milpa. Even though they didn't have much money in terms of cash many families could eat well with everything they grew in the milpa, like beans, squash, *iibes*, sweet potatoes, *makal*, bananas, chiles, onions,[1] and many other things that let a farmer have sufficient sustenance, so the increase in the price of corn didn't impact the population too much.

However, the offers of well-paying jobs in the centers of development like Cancún and the Maya Riviera, advertised in the mass media, impacted the attitudes of many young Mayas who opted to leave their communities and live on the edge of misery in those places, working in a space so alien to where they are from, alien to their color, to their language, and finally, to their own hearts.

For men and women one hundred years ago, corn wasn't discussed as a matter of commerce, production, or something peripheral; corn had to do with life, not my life, but life that flourishes like water, like the land, like a cloud, like a tree, like a stone, like the wind, like rain, like color, like sound, like sleep, like

plumage, like a thorn, like heart and breath; that's how corn was thought about, that's how Maya men and women were created, that was their faith in corn. That's why when you hear what is said in the *Popol vuh* about the creation of human beings, the face of each man and each woman becomes happy, a smiling, in plenitude.

Until a few decades ago, the main individual, familial, and communal activities of the Maya centered around corn and celebrations such as the *ch'a'acháak*, the *waajilkool*, the *k'uub*, the *tíich'*, the *bankunaj*, the *nook*, the *jets'lu'um*, and the *píibilnaal yéetel áak'sa'*. All of these are celebrations of corn. If the tortilla maker had decided to announce an increase in the price of a kilo of tortilla back then, which moreover wasn't even real corn, the people would have laughed out loud as if they'd heard a salesperson trying to sell a table to a skilled carpenter. But families who had stopped making milpa and had accepted the government handouts, those young people who "were destroying" their futures, and those who they say are cultivating a life but one without corn, were put in a bad mood by today's morning announcement. These people's faces grew long with pained looks of rage, and they cried out impotently because the money they were going to purchase tortillas with was no longer enough, neither the money nor the kilo itself, so they had to redistribute the number of tortillas given to everyone at breakfast.

In the time of our grandparents, the *nojoch wíinik*, celebrations of corn weren't just part of the heart of the town, but the community fiestas as well. The food and drink were made of corn, there were tamales, and atole made with squash seeds or the new corn, arepas, and *iswaaj*, a grilled or stewed cob. In other words, the life of the community was the life of corn from beginning to end, women sprout when they are pregnant and children are born like small stalks with tender scalps caressed by the south wind that fills them with color and energy. Lamentably, this belief, these celebrations, these fiestas, this identity, has been hit in the head and the heart by the fierce hammer blows of employment in the service industry, hotels and restaurants in the tourist zones where the people dirty plates, sheets, floors, spoons, bowls, and toilets, raising many larger walls to block Indigenous Peoples from having access to this kind of relaxation. But what they do need are Indigenous hands, and many young people of the Maya community who have renounced corn in their hearts decide to go live there. Many even believe they "were" Maya, as they have surpassed this previous identity and now stuff themselves into police uniforms behind a badge with an official number, and have permission to detain and torture those who continue to be "indios." Even so, they are still not a part of the luxurious scene of the hotel zones, the shopping centers, and the bars.

If this seems to be a passive issue, in reality, it is not. Maya culture is not being lost, it is being exterminated; the Maya language isn't being lost, its speak-

ers are being murdered; the Maya jungle is not being lost, it is being deforested by industrial megaprojects, and so on. After the deforestation and ethnocide committed by the regime of henequen haciendas in Yucatán, cattle ranching became one of the principal destroyers of the Maya jungle, destroying thousands of hectares of jungle in the northeast of Yucatán including the mangroves on the coast that have become cattle ranches and that today belong to people who don't even live on the Peninsula or are even from México.

Then they introduced monoculture of hybrid and genetically modified corn, and soon after, the mega project of genetically modified soy. Through these activities they completed the despoilment of the Maya territory in which they did not just violate the jungle, plants, and animals, but Maya culture itself, as they forced the young people to withdraw to smaller spaces until they decided to immigrate to the poles of capitalist development to survive. That is how the seeds disappear, they are extinguished and they begin to become scarce. However, the Indigenous communities in southern Yucatán decided to hold a seed fair after a powerful hurricane passed through in the early 90s, destroying a large part of the Peninsula. This was a very wise move, as many farmers were able to recuperate seeds that had long been absent in their region. Thanks to this exchange they made, year after year, they managed to diversify the Maya milpa again. Sadly, this activity that has been going on for almost three decades is being monopolized by intermediary organizations, researchers, and even commercial interests, becoming a new source of plunder. The point is that corn as a Mesoamerican cereal has, in its Maya version, been suffering persecution, violence, plunder, and death, as has the corn of flesh and bone that is the Maya women and men who farm and continue to be tied to this way of living, believing, feeling, celebrating, and loving. They are suffering the same kind of persecution, violence, plunder, and death.

Today, many people who live on the Peninsula are self-proclaimed Mayas, but in reality, they are genetically modified men, the *Popol vuh* would say they are mud and wood, creatures of the political system that existed before the fourth transformation, with their children being of the fourth transformation itself. They repeat a refrain that has been derived from petroleum and implanted in their electronic brains. When they are asked why they do not work the land, why they do not make milpa, their prefabricated response is that the land no longer provides the kind of crop they hoped for, the rain no longer falls regularly, and what little they harvest isn't enough for them to survive. Well, how can the land give you a crop if it is deforested, fumigated with poison, burned, and torn apart? Moreover, the men and women have stopped being made of corn and changed their hearts for one branded by Monsanto, they no longer perform the *Ch'a'acháak*, the *waajilkool*, and other celebrations that weave together nature's form of life with men and women who recognize the lives of the *Yuumtsil* who give us hearts of corn.

But, what does it mean to believe in corn? What do men and women of corn think and feel? Some brothers and sisters in a community in southern Yucatán did

an exercise, a brief reflection on this topic almost three decades ago; according to this *tsikbal*: Economically, the story of the men and women of corn is based in being and not individually possessing or accumulating; politically, it seeks to build a community tapestry; spiritually, one feels a part of a family whose last name is "Life," which blooms in the nature that can be seen as well as that which is unseen, like the wind or the darkness where the ancestors live.

Economically, what the men and women of corn demand (what they are asking for or seek) is to organize their labor; politically, they want deep, structural change for the benefit of all; spiritually, they ask for almost nothing, but always offer food to the *Yuumtsil* who provides for the community, always looking for the truth.

Economically, politically, and spiritually, the actions of the man and woman of corn are the being of the male and female creator, consistent with building integral transformative communal alternatives in opposition to the colonialist, individualist, egoist system.

Economically and politically, the intimate attitudes or disposition of the men and women of corn consist of working to serve for the benefit of their family, their community, and humanity (the common good). Politically, they are dreamers of a diverse world. Spiritually, they are guided by honor, love, justice, liberty, solidarity, and service. They dialogue, propose, announce, denounce, forgive, and learn to learn.

Economically, the responsibilities or obligations of the man and woman of corn consist of promoting processes or new ways. Politically, they lead by obeying. Spiritually, they serve the community. Economically and politically, the commitments of the man and woman of corn consist of offering up words from the heart. Spiritually, they are permanently free (autonomous), committed to cultivating a full and dignified life for everyone and everything.

Politically, when holding power, the man and woman of corn always look for the needs of the common good and only use it when the community demands it; spiritually, they understand power as service, it is voluntary (free) and can be renounced, it gives space to (respects) everyone, it cannot be restrained, it knows how to negotiate, it is rebellious and loyal.

Economically, the imaginative, forward-thinking, propositional capacities of the man and woman of corn are continual, creating new labor opportunities with the available resources in their territory, like the trades and the arts in their community. Politically, they are continual, opening up new awareness. Spiritually, they receive the light of Yuumtsil through the Pueblo and share it with the community.

Economically and politically, the historical memory of the man and woman of corn consists of knowing their history well and using it to better the life of the community. Spiritually, they know their beliefs well, promote their authentic identity, and defend it through the political use of power and against the cloning of

folklore and exoticism.

Economically, the foremost wish of the man and woman of corn is everything for everyone. Politically, it is the common good, that is, a new society where everyone has a dignified, full life. Spiritually, they enjoy the land and the territorialization of life.

Through this reflection we see that losing corn, that is, letting others wrench corn from us, is the same as losing or letting others wrench from us our way of thinking, it means losing our heart, it means losing our identity before the men of mud and wood who have become political instruments used to promote megaprojects that appropriate Maya territory to destroy it by polluting the water and the air, killing our territory because it is in the interests of political and economic power. But we men and women of corn are interested in life, our own health and that of our territory, so that our children have a chance to sprout, so their soft hair can play with the wind, with the sunlight and the misty rain of the coming millennia.

Notes

[1] Iibes are a kind of bean; makal is an edible tuber grown in Yucatán.

Biography

Pedro Uc Be was born in 1963 in the municipality of Buctzotz, Yucatán. He is a Maya Indigenous person, the child of monolingual Maya farmers. He is a founding member of the Assembly of Defends of Maya Land, Múuch Xíimbal. He writes in Maya, his mother tongue, for which he has won awards for his work that straddles the boundaries between story and poetry. He has a degree in Educational Media from the Department of Social Sciences at the Normal Superior in Campeche. At present he is a professor of Creative Writing in Maya Language at the State Center for Beaux Artes in Mérida, Yucatán.

Pedro Uc Be

Foundation of the Maya Word

translated by Paul M Worley and Melissa D. Birkhofer

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During the last few years in the lands of Indigenous Peoples, denouncements of racism, marginalization, and disdain towards descendants of the First Peoples have sprouted like flowers. From the corners and even the center of this continent we demand the acknowledgment of our rights as Indigenous Peoples: being guardians of our territories, to speak and be spoken to in our Maya language at least in schools, government offices, court hearings, and hospitals; that is, the right for our language to come out of hiding and recover its space in the light. After 27 years in this dreamed-of garden, we are followed by the challenging reality that has not ended, as our territory is being invaded and our maternal language, which was left to us by our grandparents as they were entrusted by the *Yuumo'ob* with it, has been gravely profaned.

The jungle is the house of the *Yuumtsilo'ob*. You can perceive some during the day and hear others during the night. With a little luck, you can see them. They take turns accompanying the men and women who live with them under the shade of the *noj k'áax* or high jungle. There, we Maya learn the names of the trees and plants and discover their medicinal properties.

The birds are the *piixan* of our grandparents. They teach us the Maya language with their songs or wailing, they let us name the colors of their plumage, and show us the love they show each other when they build a nest and lay eggs together, eventually seeing their offspring achieve flight into the hands of *Yuum K'áax*, who waits for them with its arms made of *kopo'*, of *chukum*, of *tsalam*, of *ja'abin*, of *chakte'*, of *chéechem*, among other branches. They feed them with their *k'úumche'*, *wayúum*, *tsakam*, *xnúumts'uutsuy*, *waya'te'*, *ya'*, *jmak'*, and other fruits.

The animals are the strength of the *Yuumo'ob*. They teach us to be precise in our Maya language through their great fiesta, like the *báaxal kéej*, the military like *káaxil k'éek'en*, and the *kitam*, the *áakam* of the *ayim*, the hidden *jaaleb*, the construction of our house that appears like the *baj*, the patience of the *tsáab kaan*, the nobility of the *weech*, the protection of the *kok áak*, and the wisdom of the *ka' koj*.

The first voice or melody of our language is in the *Yuum K'áax*, under his shade, in his nests, in his caves, in his waters, in his dry leaves, in his colors, in his fruits, in his stones, in his dust, in every animal that walks in the jungle and in every bird that sings it like the *k'aay kuuts*. There is the first word; there is the

strength of our Maya language, that's where our Maya footsteps, our Maya gaze, and our heart are directed if we have ever dreamed of curing our wounds. If we delay, modernity could confuse a wind turbine with the great *piich*, the way people who pretend to speak the Maya language desperately look for a name for solar panel in Maya in the name of language revitalization.

The milpa, the altar of the *Yuumtsil*, the school of the language of the young Maya boy and girl, is also the space where they learn math through the *jolche'* and the *p'isk'áax*, adding the *ts'áak* to create the units of the *yáalk'an* and mark them with the *xu'uk'*.

Children discover fractions through the *súulub* which turns the milpa into the geometric figure of a circle, square, rectangle, or triangle. They recognize that the jungle has a *Yuumtsil* whom you ask for forgiveness for chopping down trees and that the earth, sun, wind, and rain have given them life and their grandeur.

The milpa is the first contact they have with the *Yuumtsilo'ob* who receive a *joma'* of *sakab* so that men and women can come together to prepare the earth to produce food.

Children discover how *Yuum K'iin* is one of the beings who helps them to make milpa when he dries out all of the felled trees. They also find themselves in the milpa with *Yuum K'áak'* who devours the *che'kool*.

They know the variety and quantity of seeds that the earth holds in its lap which has been fertilized by *Yuum Cháak* in the first few days of May. That's how they can confidently name in their own language that they have been taught in their school the stages in the growth cycle of corn, from *púuts'*, *bult'u'ulil*, *jumpool píixil*, *bulchuunche'il*, *jumtseemil*, *jumbulaj*, *táan u wáach'al u yi'ij*, *táan u p'o'ochajal*, *sakpak'e'en*, *chakpak'e'en*, to *ek'jute'en* and *k'áants'ile'en*.

Being educated in this area is to learn the Maya language, to know its soul, it's taking the primordial seed, it is what prevents us from confusing the milpa with an eco-tourist attraction. Revitalizing the language does not consist of using the sounds of the Maya language to come up with a name for a wind turbine. It's returning to the milpa for those who have grown distant from it, it's returning to our culture which is the storehouse of our word.

The rites are the celebration of the word, the most powerful word that the *aj Meen* pronounces only when he is prostrate before the offering which patiently waits to be accepted by the *Yuumtsilo'ob*, those who guard the colors that paint the trees, the feathers, the skin of the *báalam*, the stones, and the flowers.

The *sujuyt'aan* or original word, onomatopoeia, is that which is suitable for *Yuum iik'* and *Yuum Cháak*, it is the invitation to build a point of connection between flesh and breath, between the *Yuumtsil* and the *lu'umkaab*, it is a word that is not a word but a feeling, a commitment, a sung *mokt'aan*, a prayed, sobbed, babbled, stuttered *xmukult'aan*.

Suuyt'aan or word whirlwind is the word the circular movement of the word as it travels, embracing what it finds in its path like an offering, the emotions, colors, commitments, the sincerity found on a single face, not the *j ka'p'éel ich*. It is the word that emerges from our truth.

Rites are the *ch'il* of our sacred word, the communal word that implicates us with the Maya *meyajtsil*. However, the white shirts and red belts worn by adulterous intellects confuse revitalization with touristic commercialization, they have profaned our word with their false fire in the name of authority. Our hearing, our breathing, our seeing and our feeling would not be allied with showbusiness, with the *j ka'p'éel* ich and its synthetic firewood blessing solar and wind farms that destroy *Yuum K'áax*, enslaving *Yuum Iik* and *Yuum K'iin*.

Our grandparents are the great trees, the guardians of memory that protect the word born of water, the wind, colors, solidity, form, resin, the flower. They are *nukuch chuun che'ob*, *nukuch béeko'ob*, *nukuch xchu'umo'ob*, *nukuch xjúumch'íich'ob*, they are *yuum k'áax*, house and home of the *tsáabkan*, of the *k'óok'ob* and the *kalam* but also of the *xi'ipalkaan* or *x-ek'uneil*.

At this time, when a *nool* dies, a territory is lost and when the monsters with blades devastate the jungle, an *Ak'abal* dies. The *Xya'axche'* is the grandmother who has been satanized by a modern racism, who goes out to save those colonized by the strange word, she who plays with her grandchildren with her flying *piits'*, carrying the ancient word to plant it secretly in the light of *Yuum K'iin* in the farm of the *ts'uul*.

The territory is not a polygon, it is not a biocultural landscape, it is not a parcel, it is not an ejido.[1] The territory is memory that dances in the jungle, made word by our ancestors, it can be heard in the heart of *Yuum K'áax*, in the *jéebkal* of the *yuuk*, in the *xóob* of the *noom*, in the *áakam* of the *ayim* and in the *ts'íikil* of the *chakmo'ol*. To revitalize the Maya language is to enter the *áaktunsajkab* and take a seat before our grandmother and grandfather to weave the word with them. That's how the recovery of our territory will be possible.

Notes

[1] Translators' Note: In México, an ejido is communal land held by a community and farmed by the community's members.

Mikeas Sanchez
"Gift" and "Feast"

translated by Wendy Call

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Wenhti'

Sapa' te' mäja'ju'ki,
syukpa' te' najs,
yaku'ajkyajpa mäjarampä syaja'ram
sirijtpa käsi'anhkas, syi'ukyajpasenh'omote' ona'ram
Syi'asa'ajkuy mäjapäre
tekoroya kasäjpa myojkpa
yä' nasakopajk.

Sapa' te pät, mayapa',
nhtyi'a'tzyiä'pya yijtkuy, ja' nyiä' irä'anhkä saja',
maka'ankä' ya'e' syi'asa'ajkuy, maka'ankä atzyi'pä'aje'.
Te' wäpä' wenhti' nhtä nhkomi'koroya
ju'kiste nhkyonukskuy.
Te' wäpä' wenhti' nhtä' nhkomi'koroya.
pujtpa' ji' wyewenek' te' pät.

Ofrenda

Despierta el zopilote rey
y besa la tierra, extiende sus formidables alas
y vuela hasta bailar con las nubes.
Su mayor encanto
es su maestría
para limpiar el mundo.

Despierta el hombre y sufre,
maldice por haber nacido sin alas
y con una belleza tan fugaz.

No hay mejor ofrenda para los dioses
que la reverencia del zopilote.
No hay mejor ofrenda para los dioses
que el silencio del hombre.

Gift

The vulture king wakes up
and kisses the earth, stretches his impressive wings
and flies until he dances with the clouds.
His greatest gift
is his mastery
in cleaning the earth.

Humans wake up and suffer,
cursing for having been born wingless
and with such ephemeral beauty.

There is no greater gift to the gods
than the vulture's reverence.
There is no greater gift to the gods
than human silence.

Te' meke

Ji' nhkiänatzä'yoyepä' papynyi'omo'is
syi'nawajku nhwyt'
tese' nhki'omusku'päjki'aju sone' tzame'ram
jiksekanhte myatyajupä te' mä'ä'pät teserike te' tuj'pät,
kora'ayajpa' ne' myanyi'aju'ankä yom'nhtzame'ram
sutu' nyi'ujkya'ä te' tzame'ram
wäkä' yajk' wyruya'ä jojpajk'omoram,
tzajp'omoram,
matza'omoram,
kotzäjk'omoram,
tzu'omoram teserike jama'omoram
tese' mytyi'aju äj' nhtzätzä' tzeke'ram
äj' nhtzätzä' tompijtz'tam
teis'tam nyi'etyaju kyowa'ram, syusku'tyam
jiksekante te' sawa'pät te' mä'ä'pät
poksyajupä wäkä' nhkyämanäya'ä
te' sasapyä' wane' pujtupä jiksekpä' tzayi'omo.

El festin

La muchacha subversiva que soy
rompió las amarras
y cayó con furia sobre cada palabra prohibida.
Entonces vinieron los dioses del trueno y de la lluvia
alegando la imprudencia de lo femenino,
quisieron capturar las palabras
y regresarlas de nuevo a los ríos
a los cielos
a las estrellas
a los volcanes
a la noche y al día,
pero vinieron también las hermanas tortugas
y las hermanas tuzas
con sus instrumentos de percusión y de viento,
entonces los dioses de la lluvia y el trueno
se sentaron a escuchar
la hermosa sonata que salió aquella tarde.

Feast

The subversive young woman I am
broke barriers
and fell furiously on every forbidden word.
Then the rain and thunder gods showed up
irritated by such feminine recklessness,
tried to trap my words
and return them to the rivers
to the skies
to the stars
to the volcanoes
to night and day,
but our sisters the turtles and gophers
also showed up with their flutes and drums
and so the rain and thunder gods
sat down to enjoy
the sweet sonata unleashed that afternoon.

Biography

Mikeas Sanchez is an Indigenous Zoque poet, translator, educator, radio producer, and activist in Ajway, Chiapas, Mexico. She holds a master's degree from the University of Barcelona and has published seven books of poetry. Her first English-language collection, co-translated by Wendy Call and Shook, was published by Milkweed in 2024, in a trilingual edition.

Another Anthropocene:

Climate Change, the Anthropocene, and Coastal Indigenous Poetry

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Abstract

While scientists have sounded the alarm regarding anthropocentrically-fueled climate change for decades, global governmental and even smaller-scale responses to slow or halt this process have sometimes been sluggish or wholly ineffective. Yet Indigenous peoples whose homes are on lands claimed by the United States, particularly coastal peoples, have been engaging with climate change's effects and working to mitigate them for decades, often using traditional ecological knowledge (TEK). Kyle Powys Whyte, Zoe Todd, Gregory Cajete, and other Indigenous scholars working in the environmental sciences, environmental humanities, and Indigenous studies more broadly have explored and documented how various Indigenous communities are refusing displacement from this latest crisis caused by colonization.

Indigenous activists and scholars have long connected climate change and the Sixth Extinction with settler colonialism and colonization more broadly, noting that the systems responsible for the increased carbon output, namely capitalism, directly result from colonization. Todd and Heather Davis, for example, argue that the Anthropocene's golden spike should begin with colonization in the 15th century, a suggestion taken up in varying degrees by non-Native scholars, such as Mark Maslin and Simon Lewis, and Kathryn Yusoff.

This essay examines the work of several Indigenous poets, particularly those belonging to coastal peoples whose homelands are currently claimed by the U.S., such as Craig Santos Perez (CHamoru), dg nanouk okpik (Inupiaq-Inuit), Houston Cypress (Miccosukee), and Thomas Parrie (Choctaw-Apache Tribe of Ebarb) in order to gain insight regarding how these regions and peoples both frame climate change and respond to it through contemporary ecopoetry.

Keywords

Climate Change; Coastal; Ecopoetry; Indigenous; Native American; Sea Level Rise.

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While activists, scientists, and even politicians have sounded the alarm regarding anthropocentrically-fueled climate change for decades, global governmental and even smaller-scale collective responses to reduce or halt this process have been slow and sometimes wholly ineffective.[1] Yet Indigenous peoples whose homes are on lands claimed by the United States, particularly coastal peoples, have been engaging with the effects of climate change and working to mitigate them for decades, often using traditional ecological knowledge (TEK). Potawatomi environmental scholar Kyle Powys Whyte defines TEK broadly yet in scientific terms, observing that

> for some people, the term has come to refer to indigenous peoples' legitimate systems of knowledge production. Such systems have empirically tested (and testable) understandings of the relationships among living things and their environments, though there may be notable differences with scientific approaches characteristic of disciplines like ecology or biology. ("On the Role," n.p.)

Whyte, Zoe Todd, Gregory Cajete, and other Indigenous scholars working in the environmental sciences, environmental humanities, and Indigenous studies more broadly have explored and documented how various Indigenous communities are refusing climate displacement from this latest crisis caused by colonization.

Indigenous activists and scholars have made many connections between climate change and the Sixth Extinction with settler colonialism and the broader impacts of colonization, especially as the capitalism which fueled colonization is largely responsible for the increased carbon output that continues to devastate our planet. For example, Todd and Heather Davis argue that the golden spike responsible for our current Anthropocene should begin in the fifteenth century with colonization. The "golden spike" is, essentially, the measurable marker indicative of a particular ecological event. This indicator can be used to define particular geologic markers of time, such as eras and epochs. Non-Native scholars Mark Maslin, Simon Lewis, and Kathryn Yusoff have taken up Todd and Davis' suggestion as well, which I explore further near this essay's close. This essay will examine the work of four Indigenous poets who belong to coastal peoples whose homelands are currently claimed by the U.S.—Craig Santos Perez (CHamoru), dg nanouk okpik (Iñupiaq-Inuit), Houston Cypress (Miccosukee), and Thomas Parrie (Choctaw-Apache Tribe of Ebarb). Rather than focusing this paper on a single poet, I want to think through the works of these four writers from a variety of coastal regions to better understand how these poets and perhaps their larger Indigenous communities frame climate change and respond to it, especially where these adaptations rely on and engage with land-based knowledges and specific Indigenous histories and lived experiences. Their varied ways of theo-

rizing climate change through eco-poetry demonstrates how Indigenous place-based relationships shape climate change narratives and, potentially, outcomes.

While much TEK and thus climate change mitigation or management is quite local to specific environs, I am interested in exploring the similarities in response and framing across peoples and locations, especially considering the global nature of this Sixth Extinction. Whyte's scholarship on climate change offers a framework for potential solidarity as he notes that many Indigenous peoples (and thus writers) view climate change as yet another climactic shift rather than an apocalypse, a view based on their millennia of generational knowledge. He argues that settlers frame climate change and the resulting extinction as apocalyptic because they and their people have never experienced (or at least have not documented) such changes before, whereas Indigenous peoples have TEK and stories to help understand these changes and the need for adaptation. In thinking about climate change adaptations, ideas of visibility and balance often permeate the pages of the four coastal Indigenous poets whose work I examine here. Many of the experiences and perspectives they share through contemporary eco-poetry highlights changes to the land and thus to the beings, including humans, who inhabit it.

Coastal-dwelling people, and particularly coastal Indigenous people(s), are at forefront of sea level rise due to climate change. As Cajete notes, "coastal tribes are impacted by sea rise to the extent that some villages may have to be relocated" (3). As examples, the Tuluun, sometimes called Carteret Islanders, of Papua New Guinea and Taro Islanders of the Solomon Islands are just two of the communities already impacted by sea level rise (James; Yeo).[2] The former community began official relocation efforts in 2003 though many families still inhabit the island. Also near Papua New Guinea, the Takuu weigh their options between relocating to Bougainville or remaining in their homes (*There Once*). However, more than Pacific Islander communities are at risk, which is why I also include poets from the U.S. Gulf, Alaska, and the Everglades. In these coastal communities, much like in the Pacific Islands, as sea levels continue to rise, more and more coastal-dwelling people and their lifeways will be affected. A prime example of this dilemma is the Isle de Jean Charles (IDJC) Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw Tribe, many of whom have relocated to higher elevations on mainland Louisiana (Comardelle).[3] The writers whose works I analyze here pen poems that deeply connect to place; in some cases, the writers' people have resided in a place since time immemorial and in other cases, for at least several centuries. Cajete observes of these place-based relationships,

> Climate change significantly affects cultural ways of life and place-based rights of many Indigenous tribes. Species and treaty boundaries are directly affected because they are based on place. There is loss of traditional

> knowledge due to the loss of key plants, animals, and the cultural contexts that formed the traditional foundation of relationship tribes once had with these entities. (3)

Thus, as these poems illustrate, climate-related displacements and potential relocations not only threaten the homes and lifeways of these writers and their communities but also have the potential to sever deep kinships they have formed with the lands, waters, and ancestors.

Therefore, the risk of climate change to these Indigenous communities and their plans to adapt or mitigate climate change's effects is urgent, and this urgency is mirrored in the process of creating poetry. Poetry lends itself well to pressing matters, including discussing the climate crisis through the genre's brevity and ability to capture important ideas in a short span of time. As a poet myself, I know that poetry, at least rough drafts of a single poem, are faster to write than a longer form such as an essay or a novel, even if the poem requires years or decades of tinkering to meet one's expectations or satisfaction. Too, the length of a poem means that it must get to its point quickly. Unlike a novel or a longer work of creative nonfiction, there is not room to provide ample background information, to develop a plot, or to wind down to the perfect ending. This limited context and space thus invites readers in delve into further research on their own and learn more about the histories of these peoples and the threatened places they call home. Poetry's musicality, rhythm, and imagery also make the genre suitable for intertwining with multimedia, such as Houston Cypress's work or "Rise: From One Island to Another," a collaboration between poets Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner from the Marshall Islands and Aka Niviâna from Kalaallit Nunaat (Greenland) that focuses on climate change impacts in the Arctic and Pacific Islands. The use of images, music, and other aspects of video poems thus not only reaches a broader audience but also provides additional context that enhances the poem's meaning, which viewers and scholars can consider and analyze. Through analyzing these poems (including video poems), readers and scholars can better understand the connections between colonization, global capitalism, and the climate change effects that impact us all.[4]

Craig Santos Perez

One of the difficulties that coastal-dwelling Indigenous communities face with the increased impact of climate change is a lack of media and news coverage, which works to invisibilize these peoples and the climate-related environmental dangers they face, according to Craig Santos Perez. Santos Perez is perhaps one of the best known Indigenous ecopoets writing today and his focus on environmental climate change is highlighted most poignantly in his collection *Habitat Threshold.* Santos Perez is CHamoru, the Indigenous people of Guåhan (often

known as Guam) and currently writes from Hawai'i, so he is quite concerned about what rising sea levels might mean for his Pacific Island homes and these emotions are captured in many of his poems. What makes this threat of sea-level rise more worrisome, however, is how the invisibility of these islands often means that the climate-related issues they face are not widely known across the globe, potentially reducing both support for recovery and reducing the global populus' understanding of how severe the effects of climate change can be. Some of his earlier collections explore this invisibility, including the preface to 2008 collection *from unincorporated territory [hacha]*, which reads in part, "On some maps, Guam doesn't exist: I point to an empty space in the / Pacific and say, 'I'm from here.' On some maps, Guam is a small, / unnamed island; I say, 'I'm from this unnamed place'" (Santos Perez 7). Other CHamoru writers, such as Lehua M. Taitano in her collection *A Bell Made of Stones*, echo Santos Perez's discussion of Guåhan's invisibility.

Santos Perez writes of how this lack of climate and disaster-related media coverage impacts the realities of island dwellers like himself in "Disaster Haiku." Following the title, a line appears in italics, almost like a dedication: "*after cyclone winston after typhoon yutu after hurricane maria after…*" (Santos Perez 15). The repeated word "after" in this line invokes a sense of constant presence, the weather's never-ending assault on his homelands, which the ellipsis at the end of the line only amplifies. Notably, too, are the lowercase names of the storms. Often uppercased in weather reports, Santos Perez's lowercasing of these monikers seems to remove some of their agency or power, perhaps his attempt at managing them and the disaster they bring in some small way.

When examining "Disaster Haiku" on the page, several aspects of the poem stand out, including its use of only lowercase letters, lack of punctuation, position and shape on the page, and number of syllables. These elements of the poem work together to draw the reader's attention to the very real and ongoing climate-related disasters that threaten the Pacific Islands in ways that the media often ignores. The bolded title and italicized contextualization are the only two lines left-aligned on the page. Santos Perez centers the poem, capturing and focusing the reader's attention on the middle of the page where they cannot help but see what is so commonly invisibilized. While the title prepares the reader for a haiku in its typical three-line, five-seven-five syllabic pattern, Santos Perez subverts those expectations into a six-line poem with no stanza breaks. The syllabic pattern reads three-four-four-two-three-two, creating both a visual and verbal downward siphoning that resembles a hurricane's inverted triangle, as shown below:

the world
briefly sees us

only *after*
the eye
of a storm
sees us. (Santos Perez 15, italics orig.)

The poem's syllabic pattern omits the expected 5-syllable line at any point, yet if readers return to the storms listed at the top of the page, each of the three disasters occurring from 2016-2018 is a category five storm. This omission-yet-inclusion suggests that Santos Perez avoids the five-syllable line because of the number's association with these devastating events or perhaps readers are to consider the listed category 5 events as a sort of poem as well. Moving away from the syllabic structure of haiku a bit, Santos Perez's invocation of it in this poem also subverts the content of a traditional haiku. While haiku typically focus on aspects of one's natural environment, the images depicted in this form are often more meditative and less fraught. Santos Perez's departure, however, from expected haiku topics works in tandem with the other aspects I have noted to focus the reader's attention in an urgent way, both as resistance to societal invisibilization and because climate change is, quite literally, a global emergency. Santos Perez then echoes this urgency through the poem's lack of punctuation which allows for its unceasing forward and downward movement.

Aside from the aspects discussed above, the language of "Disaster Haiku" is also notable, as it brings together the planetary experience of climate change and the unique Pacific Islander experience. Harkening back to his (and other CHamoru writers') work on the invisibility of the Pacific Islands, Santos Perez writes "the world / briefly sees us," highlighting how little attention the region receives, even as, like many coastal areas, the Pacific Islands are ground zero for sea-level rise and severe tropical storms (15). He then enhances this brevity by confining it to a single repeated moment: only "*after* / the eye / of a storm" impacts their island communities in this area seen by "the world" (Santos Perez 15). While Santos Perez's words highlight the islands' invisibility to the larger global community, the phrase "sees us" appears twice in these six lines, comprising four of the fourteen total words, working to compensate for this global negation or oversight. Through "Disaster Haiku," Santos Perez insists, or perhaps demands, that the world actually *sees* the Pacific Islands and not only in times of duress. His insistence, however, is not only for this geographic area; he is also pressing readers to bear witness to the entirety and effects of climate change, which humans may often brush off as happening or impacting places far asea. As he reminds us, however, human and beyond-human beings populate even far-away places and the effects of climate change on such places eventually impact the larger planetary ecosystem.

dg nanouk okpik

Iñupiaq-Inuit poet dg nanouk okpik addresses climate change in her latest collection *Blood Snow* not only through the ecosystemic impacts but also through larger global systems, such as colonialism, enslavement, and the energy sector, particularly her home state of Alaska's involvement in the oil and gas industry. While her work highlights the global impact of the connection between fossil fuel extraction and usage and climate change, okpik also roots her poems in place. okpik sets her poem "Fossil Fuel Embers" in "Red Dog Mine," a census-designated place that is a large lead and zinc mine accessible only by air and operated by Teck Resources on land owned by the Northwest Alaska Native Association (NANA) Regional Corporation ("Red Dog Mine," *Division of Mining*).[5] The Alaska Department of Natural Resources, Division of Spill Prevention and Response, lists Red Dog Mine as a contaminated site, noting the "fugitive dust" that escapes during ore transport results in high concentrations of lead and zinc in the tundra along the DeLong Mountain Regional Transportation System ("Red Dog Mine," *Division of Spill*).[6]

In "Fossil Fuel Embers," however, okpik explores more than the mine's current status, tying it to larger systems of dispossession and exploitation:

> At Red Dog Mine boys and girls
> (~~displaced~~) as trade dogs
> for the Yankee sailors, slaves,
> as large gul-guled wooden ships–
> started by taking coal. (31, strikethrough in orig.)

While Red Dog Mine first opened in 1989 and is not a source of coal, the act of mining at the site nonetheless connects Red Dog Mine with other mines and with larger systems of land-based extraction. These recent and ongoing extractions, however, stem from the colonization of her homeland, as such exploitation and extraction are foundational to imperial and settler colonial projects. By weaving Alaskan and Alaskan Native history through this poem, okpik provides a trajectory that not only highlights these related practices but moves forward to connect histories of enslavement and exploitation to the larger climate crisis, a topic I briefly discussed in the introduction and will return to near the conclusion.

Though Russia colonized the territory in the eighteenth century before the United States purchased it in 1867 and subsequently forced Alaska into statehood in 1959, okpik's critique of colonialization targets America.[8] okpik's mention of "Yankee sailors" and "large gul-guled wooden ships" as responsible for early exploitation in the region refers to (largely white) American male settlers who hunted bowhead whales nearly into extinction in the mid-nineteenth century, though American settlers also infiltrated the area to trap and trade furs begin-

ning in the early nineteenth century and to seek gold in the mid-to-late 1800s.[9] Further, okpik's inclusion of "slaves" bears a bit of context as well, as enslavement in Alaska was quite different than in the continental U.S. While the slave trade in the lower forty-eight primarily (though not exclusively) centered the kidnapping, importation, and enslavement of Africans and their descendants, slavery in Alaska largely consisted of certain Native peoples (notably the Haida, Tsimshian, and Tlingit) along with some white settlers enslaving other Native persons. While the U.S. purchased Alaska in 1867, two years after the 13th amendment abolished slavery in the country including in Alaska, enslavement in the state continued for roughly a century in some cases, with some Native Nations arguing that their sovereignty precluded them from US laws that declared slavery illegal.[10]

okpik makes these connected exploitations more concrete and visible by describing their embodied physical manifestations. Following the lines quoted above that point to historical enslavement and ongoing extraction, she writes

> …Red
> from the dog mine. Black lungs
> shiny in dead crawls. Each death,
> I cut a notch on the driftwood. (okpik, 31)

These depictions of stained skin, chronic disease, and the resultant deaths from these forms of extraction humanize the effects of these larger exploitative colonial systems and make their impacts less abstract. okpik's way of making these consequences more visible exposes the connection between abuses of (often non-white) persons and the land(s) upon which they reside. However, rather than simply indicting these systemic practices and the climate change to which they are related, okpik offers a sense of hope through a juxtaposition of the speaker's own choices that appear to disengage from or offer an alternative to extractive practices.

This disengagement from settler colonial systems, and even intertribal enslavement, in order to envision and create a world free of these exploitative and extractive ways of being is what Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson calls "generative refusal," a "productive refusal" of colonialism in all aspects and framings that creates unity toward Indigenous Nation-based and community-based futurity, including how to best cope with or reduce the effects of climate change (176-178). The last three lines of okpik's first stanza, from which all of the previous lines come, read "I cut a notch on the driftwood / log, in my home, where I burn / because it makes embers" (31). Readers can see this generative refusal in the speaker's reliance on wood for heat, as this act removes the speaker (at least partially) from the systems of coal and oil extraction that are such large drivers of climate change. This emphasis on "embers," though,

as it appears in this line and in the title, suggests the possibility of enacting larger-scale community and societal change. Embers, of course, can represent a dying fire but they are also indicative of potential, the potential for larger fires to form, for ideas to catch on and spread.

The speaker's refusal to participate in the fossil fuel industry's role in climate change insists on alternative, more sustainable possibilities and futurities, hopes that the poem echoes in its final three lines. These lines appear in their own stanza set below and to the right of the rest of the left-aligned poem, almost as if this final stanza is block-quoted. These last lines read, "way in and one way out / blackwood cooked slow over done / skies whale gray-blue" (okpik, 31). Notably, okpik does not capitalize the first word (nor any other words in the stanza) despite that the previous stanza ends on a period. Further, unlike the first stanza, which includes periods, commas, hyphens, and em dashes, this last stanza contains no punctuation whatsoever. Given these distinctions, readers might consider the first stanza with its ten lines that follow standard written English as emblematic of settler colonial influence and the many problems it has wrought. In contrast, the final three lines may be indicative of Indigenous (and perhaps global) futurities that depend on the collective refusal of settler colonial norms and ideals, including mundane or everyday influences such as using particular punctuation, in addition to the larger extractive and exploitative worldviews that contribute to climate change.

Beyond the absence of expected punctuation and capitalization, these last three lines of "Fossil Fuel Embers" also offer a glimpse into the futurity garnered by generative refusal through its climate-related descriptions. The first line of this final stanza "way in and one way out" suggests through its absence of "one" at the beginning of the line that the reasons for our current state of climate change are multiplicitous, an idea perhaps opposed by those scholars, such as Todd and Davis, who suggest that the spread of colonization should be the golden spike of our current proposed epoch (okpik 31). Yet, even as okpik views the causes as numerous, the result is that there is only "one way out" of our current mess, a disavowal of the settler colonial global capitalist systems which currently shape our world (31). The second line, "blackwood cooked slow over done" appears to compare our planet to a fire log, warming and burning until it is "over done" and no longer exists (okpik 31). okpik's choice use of "blackwood" in this line is interesting because it could either refer to the color of charred wood or the blackwood tree, which refers to various types of timber trees largely native to Australia, several areas of Africa, and Southeast Asia. Given that no blackwood trees grow in Alaska, one might read this line as "charred wood," though thinking about this line through the spread of colonization, the latter reading is also compelling. Despite this image of a potentially charred planet, however, okpik leaves readers with a glimpse of hope evidenced in her vision of a future rid of extraction and exploitation. The final line of the poem,

"skies whale gray-blue" not only draws on Iñupiaq lifeways but offers a future vision free from fossil fuel pollution, a planet healing from the effects of climate change, a depiction that the planet continues on despite all that we've done.

Houston Cypress

While okpik ends on a hopeful note, Houston Cypress carries this message throughout his video poem, which focuses on the Everglades having intrinsic value not only to him via his deep historical and spiritual relationship to this place but also to global citizens concerned about the changing climate and resultant endangered wetlands. Cypress, a member of the Otter Clan of the Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida, is an interfaith reverend and a two-spirit artist, activist, poet, and founder of Love the Everglades Movement.[11] His video poem, "…*what endures*…," created in partnership with the Institute of Contemporary Art in Miami, features a mixture of dialogue with Sister Robin Haines Merrill, a minister and artist based in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, that brings together his Miccosukee teachings, his faith, and his desire to protect the Everglades. Throughout Cypress's video poem, an example of what Carmen Concilio calls the "eco-digital humanities," he explores one's connection to the land and appreciation of its beauty and abundance in order to urge viewers and listeners to protect the place he calls home from the effects of climate change.

The first phrases of the poem read "*[insert protocol of joy here]*" atop an image of treetops with a small body of water visible and "*[insert love here]*" atop paths and waterways crisscrossing the flat Florida landscape with a bright blue, cloud-dotted sky overhead as the viewer hears orchestra strings whirring in the background. Beginning the poem with these words and images does not negate the threat of climate change, rather these images and phrases give reason to protect these incredible lands from that threat. As these words and images appear on-screen, a static-like sound begins that might remind the audience of wind rustling fields of wheat or corn or perhaps rapid water passing over rocks. Shortly after this sound begins, Cypress adds a single minor chord played by strings. The former sound seems to represent the natural world with its mimicry while the minor chord creates a feeling of concern within the listener and draws a connection between the environment and its often-endangered status.

As the video poem moves forward, human relationality with this magnificent place becomes emphasized over the music. At the 1:40 mark, Cypress voices the phrase "Speaking to the world and listening deeply for her reply" as the scene cuts to him walking along a boardwalk through the Everglades, shading his eyes to gaze up at trees and walking with this palm overhead and open to the wind. We might view Cypress's movements in this scene and throughout the video as an embodied poetics. While it remains unclear who coined the term "embodied poetics," the phrase rose in academic popularity in the late twentieth through the twenty-first century to describe the use of the body and physical senses for

expression rather than simply the written word, linking it in many ways to affect theory.[12] Cypress exemplifies this notion of embodiment by drawing a connection between humans and the trees upon which he gazes in the next line: "We all grow so elegantly when spoken to so gently" (Institute, 1:55). Comparing humans with trees or other more-than-human kin might seem an odd framework for combating climate change and saving the Everglades, but addressing anthropocentrism in this way may potentially help humans see connections between themselves and other creatures and these similarities might result in humans thinking that these other beings are worth saving.

Cypress at the 2:05 mark brings intergenerational memory and connection to place as additional reasons that people should work to protect the Everglades. In this scene, he states, "I wanted to come here because it reminds me of when my grandpa used to take me to collect the cypress wood for his carvings" before describing the texture of the wood and its usefulness to artisans. Merrill then ties Cypress's memories and Indigenous handicraft to a biblical quote from Proverbs 8:30: "Then I was a craftsman at his side," suggesting that this work is holy, sacred. During her words, the audience sees unknown hands holding wooden carvings: one is a bird common to the Everglades and the other appears to be a vessel, perhaps a canoe. Beyond simply human utilization of the Everglades' natural resources to create works of art and handicrafts, Cypress emphasizes in this scene how place tethers together these carvings and the people who create them, and that this relationship would be negatively impacted if this land is lost to climate change.

Moments later, the audience sees Cypress holding a woven basket and then Cypress removing his mirror-ball earrings and hanging them on a tree branch, a sort of offering that serves, in part, to sustain their relationship (Institute, 2:53). As he engages in these acts, Merrill says off camera, "We're all doing handiwork, whatever handiwork that the good Lord has given us to do, and it's our duty to do it excellently that reflects the glory of the Creator" in the foreground over a background of strings holding one minor chord, then another, a sort of pulse that might remind the listener of a heartbeat. These images, words, and music work together to suggest that the Everglades is a living place made by a knowledgeable and caring Creator and that humans should be knowledgeable and caring stewards of such sacred space rather than lose it to development or rising waters.

Just over halfway through the video poem, the music speeds up significantly and changes from long string chords to a more hurried electronic rhythm, and the themes and descriptions progress from autobiographical to more generalized as the video continues. As the audience appears to be in the bow of a small watercraft cutting through the river, Cypress shares off camera: "My grandparents used to take me for joyrides, from the rez all the way up to Ochopee. That's

the Miccosukee word for 'garden'" before clearly pronouncing the word once more, slowly (Institute, 3:13). Cypress's use of Miccosukee in the poem both ties him to his grandparents, who likely taught him the language, but also works to make him seem "more authentic" for non-Native audiences and thus perhaps more tied to his community. He goes on to highlight another cultural marker among Southeast Indigenous peoples: stickball.[13] Cypress describes "stickball dreams" and how stickball and other Miccosukee traditions "move across genders, move across dimensions" (Institute, 3:38). Through invoking Miccosukee language and cultural markers in addition to discussing Miccosukee handicrafts earlier, Cypress is not only emplacing himself in this community but nodding toward its inherent sovereignty, including sovereignty over the Everglades.

As the tempo continues to speed, hand drums add to the music and the viewer sees Cypress cartwheeling with grasses waving behind them as their voice describes their mother's birth in a garden, "tangled in her umbilical cord" and how the Medicine Man was able to aid in her transition to this realm as he "knew all about the Circle of Life" and "how to stay in harmony with the dance of the universe" (Institute, 4:10–4:23). Whether these lines are autobiographical or not is unclear, as the language earlier became more general and imagistic rather than narrative. However, these final lines suggest that the current state of climate change is due, at least in part, to humans being in disharmony with the planet and larger universe, both on a physical and spiritual level. After this final phrase, the fast drumming of the music remains as an overhead view of the Everglades appears on the screen with the words "what endures…" in black at the skyline before the whole image fades to the words on a white background (Institute, 4:33–4:38) as the credits begin to roll as the music continues. The title that both starts and concludes the video poem suggests that the Everglades endure, but so too do the Miccosukee and their lifeways. While audiences may understand their mutual endurance and resilience as surviving beyond and despite climate change, given the mission of Cypress's Love the Everglades movement and the argument of the video to encourage audience members to join him in saving this beloved place, there seems to be an underlying fear and concern that "what endures" may not endure for much longer.

Thomas Parrie

So far, the places I have covered are currently enduring, if threatened. Now, I want to examine a landscape that survives in the minds and historical memories of those whose relatives and homes are buried beneath its now-watery depths. "The Great Flood," a poem by Thomas Parrie, a citizen of the Choctaw-Apache Tribe of Ebarb in west Louisiana, does not engage climate change directly but instead offers an understanding of flooding and settler colonialism as, in many ways, foundational for the endangerment of Indigenous communities due to cli-

mate change's sea level rise, an example of Whyte's suggestion that climate change is yet another apocalypse.[14]

"The Great Flood" depicts the damming of the Sabine River to form the Toledo Bend Reservoir on the Louisiana-Texas border, a project begun in 1964 and completed in 1969.[15] In order to form this massive body of water, the largest in the South, "tribal members were forced to move out of the river bottom to nearby lands. Many had to sell their land for as little as $25 an acre to the governments of Louisiana and Texas," filmmaker and educator Ava Lowery states. Parrie's poem describes the event in more personal detail: "When the town was flooded and St. Joseph's became a hospice, / our grandfathers packed dugout canoes with dishes and deer hide. / Portraits of Christ floated out from open windows" (49). This juxtaposition of the dugout canoes and deer hide as traditional examples of Choctaw-Apache culture with the contemporary hospice and images of Christ in brass frames already illustrate how they adapted their lifeways while still upholding some traditions, even before the flooding of their homeland. Readers might also consider these juxtapositions of Christ and hospice as entities that steward one's journey from this life to the afterlife with ease and yet these grandfathers are experiencing an end to their lives as they know them with no aid from state, religion, or other sources.

This flooding of the Choctaw-Apache Tribe of Ebarb's homelands is a direct result of settler need for land and electricity with recreation as a welcome added benefit. These needs can be clearly seen as extensions of the Industrial Revolution and settler expansion upon U.S.-claimed lands. While scientists have long linked increased carbon dioxide due to the burning of fossil fuels to both the Industrial Revolution and climate change, scholars have also argued for the "golden spike" of the proposed Anthropocene epoch to be the spread of colonization, specifically settler colonialism, across the globe. One of the reasons the Anthropocene has not (yet) been accepted as an official epoch is that scientists and theorists of varying disciplines do not agree on what "golden spike" should be chosen as the "start" of the Anthropocene (because, of course, the epochs rely on linear, colonial timelines). Several researchers, most notably Todd and Davis, Lewis and Maslin, and Yusoff have penned persuasive arguments that the start of the Anthropocene should be European colonization of the now-Americas. Other scholars suggest that the term "Anthropocene" seems to mistakenly implicate all humans and thus other monikers would be better suited to accurately represent the systems at fault for our current climate crisis. Haraway suggests the term Cthulucene be used, as finding new ways to make (nonbiologic) kin will be necessary for surviving our new circumstances. Other scholars, most notably Jason Moore, argue that because capitalism has wrought this environmental damage, the new epoch might be named "Capitalocene." Still other scholars, including Sophie Sapp Moore, et al., choose to combine capitalism, colonialism, and systemic racism through the use of the term

"Plantationocene." While there are clearly a variety of monikers available, part of the rationale for choosing the start of colonization in the fifteenth century as the geologic marker for our current epoch is not only the rise of fossil fuel industries but also settler land use and land management practices that are, often in hindsight, unsustainable and contribute to increased greenhouse gases and a warming, unstable planet.

While hydroelectric power, such as that provided by the Toledo Bend Reservoir, can help to reduce the reliance on fossil fuel and thus may help slow climate change, how does one weigh the potential loss of Choctaw-Apache and other Indigenous lands and lifeways? Following the project's completion, Parrie's speaker observes, "One generation later and bass boats bob in the channel. / Orange corks dip and jerk. Fish swim toward the sluiceway" before describing how a young "boy fell in and got trapped in the spillway," this tragic turn highlighting how the tragedy of this place did not end with the flooding of houses (49). Parrie writes:

> Helpless, I imagined him pulled into the vacuum, pressing against
> the current. The endless looping, the panic
>
> in his chest. His burning muscles
> forcing him to take breath. (49)

The poem's turn from these potentially happier fishing scenes to the boy's drowning underscores how even the images of the "bass boats" are tragic for those who remember these lands as home, and these tragedies continue to compound.

The title of Parrie's poem, "The Great Flood," transports readers back in time to stories of global floods, which undoubtedly also served as apocalypses for persons and communities who experienced them then. Parrie returns to these notions of repeated apocalypse in the poem's final lines, yet in these lines, too, is hope. Concluding the poem, Parrie writes,

> We listen for oars sloshing back and forth from history.
>
> We hear how houses drown and boys disappear.
>
> The town speaks of what used to be
> and it's in the dry light of warm day
>
> I know we've been dreaming. (49)

These images illustrate how histories and ongoing experiences are palimpsests; they never go away. The displacements, thefts, and dispossessions compound and layer, requiring adaptation after adaptation. This last line, in particular, "I know we've been dreaming" may read at first as though the speaker has dreamt of the drowning boy and the underwater homes, yet a more cohesive reading given the reservoir's murky past suggests that rather than surface-level introspection, this phrase is perhaps instead a celebration of Indigenous resiliency. By paying particular attention to Parrie's use of "dry light" and "warm day" juxtaposed against the likely cold and wet reservoir, these descriptions seem to highlight how the Choctaw-Apache Tribe of Ebarb is still on their land and in communion with their relations despite attempts to drown them out in many ways, including through this manmade instance of water-level rise that precedes and perhaps predicts what might occur to other coastal Indigenous communities.

While each of these coastal Indigenous poets addresses potential and ongoing land and water-based catastrophes, they do so from geographically and tribally-specific experiences and histories, and thus are examples of what Choctaw writer and intellectual LeAnne Howe calls "embodied tribalography" (173). Santos Perez, for instance, highlights the increase in "natural" disasters and the lack of island visibility whereas okpik focuses on the oil and gas industries' roles in climate change given the colonial history of fossil fuel extraction in Alaska. Cypress and Parrie both concern themselves with the preservation of land as their Native Nations are in relationship to these specific spaces and these places hold significant cultural, historical, and spiritual value to their peoples. All four of these poets cannot separate their concerns and observations from the geographical locations and Indigenous communities they inhabit and with which they are in relationship.

Given the histories of U.S. and other imperial powers impacting their lands and lifeways, these poets write from an important perspective regarding the impacts of climate change to their communities. Unlike (predominantly white) settlers who often lack the recent layers of disenfranchisement tied to land and landedness, these poets understand how the effects of climate change are simply one part in a much larger, complicated system and to have any future for *any of us*, these larger systems require collective dismantling.

Notes

[1] I chose the term "anthropocentric" rather than "anthropogenic" for two reasons: 1) As the writers I explore illustrate, the anthropogenic centering of human life, desires, and greed steers us toward climate change rather than a balance between humans and their environments (i.e. humans ourselves are not necessarily the issue; the problem is our anthropocentric worldview, though several scholars suggest overpopulation is also causative) and 2) Not all humans contribute equally to climate change.

Notes

[2] The Tuluun are sometimes also referred to as "Carteret Islanders" and Tuluun is sometimes also spelled "Tulun." For more information on climate-related displacement of the Tuluun, see Pascoe; Boege and Rakova; Connell. For more information on the climate-related displacement of the Taro Islanders, see Albert, et al.; Ereth.

[3] For connections between the climate-related relocation of the IDJC Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw Tribe and larger projects of colonization, see Medaris; Jessee.

[4] Video poems, sometimes written as the single word "videopoetry" began in the late 1970s and have continued to grow in popularity, especially since the late twentieth century. Increasingly, work on videopoetry as pedagogical practice (such as having students create videos for poems they have read or written) is growing in the twenty-first century. For an excellent examples of how Indigenous writers engage in videopoetry, see Jones-Matrona.

[5] The Northwest Alaska Native Association (NANA) Regional Corporation, according to their website, "is a for-profit Alaska Native Corporation, formed as a result of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA), which was passed by Congress in 1971." The corporation "is owned by the more than 15,000 Iñupiaq shareholders, or descendants, who live in or have roots in Northwest Alaska" ("About Us"). Because NANA is a Native-owned entity benefiting Iñupiaq shareholders, the corporation reflects Indigenous self-determination while simultaneously resisting the stereotype of the "ecological Indian" through its engagement in land extraction that financially benefits the Iñupiat (for an overview of this stereotype, see Gilio-Whitaker; for additional discussion of how Iñupiat and other Indigenous persons benefit from Red Dog Mine and other NANA investments, see Berman, et al.; Hensley). The fact that NANA owns land might seem to be a win for the #landback movement, yet because #landback is often tied to environmental sustainability, the use of NANA's landholdings for mining might complicate how (and if) the corporation fits into the #landback movement (for more information on #landback and climate change, see Racehorse and Hogag; Reed and Gobby; Corntassel).

[6] For information about the impact of this fugitive dust, see Kerin and Lin. In 2016, the US Environmental Protection Agency decreed nearby Kotzebue, Alaska as the leading producer of toxic materials in the country due to the Red Dog Mine. For a thorough overview of this issue, see Nobel.

[7] In fact, there is only one coal mining site in Alaska, Usibelli Coal Mine, founded in 1943 near Healy, Alaska. For more information on mining, including coal mining in Alaska, see Keen and Udd.

[8] Russia and America were not the only imperial forces seeking Alaskan soil. Spain also laid early claim to the region and conducted several explorations in the eighteenth century (see Cook; Haycox). Briefly during WWII, Japan invaded the Aleutian Islands of Attu and Kiska as well (see Mitchell, et al.; Coyle).

[9] For information on Yankee whaling near Alaska in the mid-nineteenth century, see Kushner. For discussion of how these crews included African American whalers, see Hartman. Bockstoce offers a thorough history of Alaska's fur trade. Wharton provides a thorough, if somewhat dated, account of the Klondike Gold Rush and Morse offers a unique environmental history of the years-long event.

Notes

[10] For more information on enslavement in Alaska, see Landfield, et al. For examples of twentieth-century enslavement of Indigenous persons in Alaska, see the periodical articles "Girl Slaves in Alaska" from 1903 and "Slaves of the Fur Seal Harvest," published in 2005, though examples are mostly from the mid-1900s.

[11] The Indian Health Service defines "two-spirit" as Indigenous persons who are "male, female, and sometimes intersexed individuals" who engage or traditionally engaged in "activities of both men and women with traits unique to their status as Two-Spirit people. In most tribes, they were considered neither men nor women; they occupied a distinct, alternative gender status." While the INS definition uses some past tense verbs to discuss their role across traditions, two-spirit persons, as Cypress demonstrates, continue to exist. Further, the INS notes, "Though Two-Spirit may now be included in the umbrella of LGBTQI+, the term 'Two-Spirit' does not simply mean someone who is a Native American/Alaska Native and gay."

[12] To learn more about embodied poetics, see Mahani. For discussion of Indigenous-specific embodied poetics, see Goeman. For more information on the relationship between embodiment and affect theory in poetry, see Johnson-Laird and Oatley.

[13] For more information on the Native South, see Byrd; Anderson and Taylor; Squint; Caison; M. Lowery.

[14] For depictions of the reservoir's impact on Choctaw-Apache lifeways and foodways, see A. Lowery.

[15] For information on the building of the reservoir, see Campanella; Bowman.

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Biography

Jessica Cory is a settler scholar and the editor of Appalachian Journal: A Regional Studies Review, published since 1972 at Appalachian State University. She holds a PhD in Native American, African American, and environmental literatures from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and is also editor of Mountains Piled upon Mountains: Appalachian Nature Writing in the Anthropocene (WVU Press, 2019) and the co-editor (with Laura Wright) of Appalachian Ecocriticism and the Paradox of Place (UGA Press, 2023). Her creative and scholarly writings have been published in the North Carolina Literary Review, North Dakota Quarterly, Northern Appalachia Review, and other publications. Originally from southeastern Ohio, she currently lives in western North Carolina.

“The Chance to Love Everything”:
Mary Oliver’s Poetry of Affect

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Abstract

Known as a poet of nature, Mary Oliver’s poetic oeuvre grows out of the literary foundations of Romanticism both in its relative linguistic simplicity and in its sense of wonder at life in all its natural forms and manifestations. The Romantics acknowledged nature’s profound significance for human well-being and viewed nature as a transcendental phenomenon that links humans to God. The notion that nature is divine as it contains all life, and all of it equally worthy, resonates deeply in Oliver’s verses. The paper will focus on selected poems from her 2008 collection *The Truro Bear and Other Adventures* to show that Oliver’s poetry deals with ecological crisis in a singular way. An expression of her view of nature as magnificent, her poetry can stir an emotional response that pushes the reader toward a greater sense of appreciation of and the need for protecting nature. Rather than adopting a typically dystopian approach to twenty-first-century eco-fiction, which hopes to mobilize readers by instilling a sense of fear through its representation of endangered nature, illnesses, and ecological crises, Oliver speaks of nature with awe and love. Relying on the tenets of affect theory, the paper proposes that by representing the beauty and wonder of life, by making her readers see and love what surrounds them, Oliver invites her audience to act positively as appreciation discourages destruction. In a radical change of perspective, people should strive toward what Iris Murdoch terms *unselfing*, and abandon unsustainable anthropocentric views and policies to become a caring human kind, willing to take “the chance to love everything.”

Keywords

Affect; Anthropocene; Love; Mary Oliver; Nature; *The Truro Bear and Other Adventures*.

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Love is the extremely difficult realisation that
something other than oneself is real.
Iris Murdoch

You have to love. You have to feel. It is the reason
you are here on earth.
Louise Erdrich

Fear has long been acknowledged by scholars, scientists, and writers as the strongest emotion, an apparatus for survival, that effectively determines human behavior by turning people into both defensive and violent beings, informing moral judgements and even aesthetic production via, as Howard Phillips Lovecraft suggests, the "weirdly horrible tale" (1). For many, the anthropogenic effects on nature and life represent a major source of fear because humanity depends on nature for survival. The realization that the effects of human activity have ended up being both a source of (technological) progress and a potential cause of humanity's demise creates a schism in the human understanding of themselves, their role in the world, and the chances for survival of both the human and many other species.[1] It is because of this rupture in the belief about (technological, human) progress that the imaginings of the natural world in the wake of industrialism have increasingly become dystopian in their representations of endangered nature, illnesses, and ecological crises, instilling a sense of fear in the readers,[2] with the aim of raising awareness of imminent danger. Timothy Morton refers to this as dark ecology, "ecological awareness, dark-depressing" (5). Fear and depression, however, have a debilitating effect as they create a sense of hopelessness, which is neither constructive nor sustainable. So, Morton urges: "Do not be afraid" (5). This is the path taken by Mary Oliver, "a visionary poet of nature" firmly rooted in the tradition of English Romanticism (McNew 59), and American Transcendentalism.

Instead of representing a bleak ecological reality or imagining a dystopian future, Mary Oliver subscribes to the Romantic aesthetic, which highlights the beauty and necessity of love for the world as the cure for contemporary eco-maladies. Although Oliver acknowledges the power of fear, "I imagined the red eyes, / the broad tongue, the enormous lap. / Would it be friendly too? / Fear defeated me" ("The Chance to Love Everything" lines 18-21), she refuses to let it prevail: "And yet, / not in faith and not in madness / but with the courage I thought / my dream deserved, / I stepped outside" (lines 21-25). Her dream to love everything provides her with the courageousness needed to face the unknown and feared Other, which she even tries to embrace as it escapes (lines 31-35). This type of "love for no reason—unconditional love" marked by sadness, longing, and anxiety (Morton 152) illustrates how *ecognosis* – ecological awareness – is enveloped in a

dreamlike-veil that enshrouds the ever-circulating politics of coexistence (Morton 5-7). Eco-awareness arises from an affective response, from a sense of "wonderment," which is "the basic phenomenological chemical of philosophy" (Morton 31),[3] and Oliver's poetry is steeped in affect: it originates in the poet's affective perception and produces an affective response.

Yet, among the various readings of Oliver's poetry, including ecocritical, ecofeminist, feminist, and theological (see Graham 1994; Davis 2009; Riley 2009; Zona 2011), as well as those elaborating on her Romantic influences (McNew 1989; Burton-Christie 1996; Johnson 2005), the notion of affect, which seems to be central to her verses, remains relatively unexplored. To affect and be affected – as per Benedict Spinoza's *affectus*, the means by which the mind is able to affirm the existence of its body (158) – refers to "a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body's capacity to act" (Deleuze and Guattari xvi). Affect is kinetic by nature: it can mean "physical action in the world, but can equally mean an idea, a change of mood, a reorientation, or a totally imperceptible shift in body-world relations that has yet (or ever) to manifest" (Truran 28). Oliver's poetry *moves* the reader by making them see and feel non-human life as wondrous and therefore also precious. She pays "attention to bodies, worlds, and the forces that move and motivate them into relation and existence" (Truran 26) and explores the ways of being in the world by representing different embodiments of life and their mutual – friendly, compassionate – interactions. Her verses immerse the reader into the minutiae of the natural world so profoundly, not least because she has the remarkable "ability to sustain a voice of joy, of true ecstatic fervor" (Davis 605), that they become physically, sensationally, affected as they are warmed by feelings of love, amazement, and compassion for all living beings, even those that they typically perceive as abject, like whelks, snakes, and toads, or dangerous, like coyotes and bears.

The stimulation of senses is, according to Scott Slovic, at the core of eco-literature as it transforms ecological awareness from an abstract to an embodied concept more likely to motivate action: "Writers in general – and I find this particularly true of so-called environmental writers – serve as extensions of our own nerve endings. They feel for us, they exhort us to feel more intensely, more fully, and they demonstrate the process of sensation in a way that we can then enact more consciously" (62). Oliver's descriptions of touching, but also smelling, hearing, and seeing of nature can (and are supposed to) affect a change in the reader, and in the world: "The poem lies there and it waits for somebody for whom it may be momentous. It needs the right person for its set of words, for what it is saying. And it can change lives. Art can change lives" (Oliver qtd. in Ratiner 61).

To illustrate that Oliver responds to the ecological crisis of the Anthropocene by opening the reader's eye to beauty and heart to feeling, this essay focus-

es on her collection *The Truro Bear and Other Adventures* (2008), containing both previously published and new poems, which can potentially change the reader's view of the environment and their participation in it. As Alex Houen suggests, affective experience is manifold, influenced by multiple things at the same time, and inclusive of both the real and the imaginary experience (2), so even though one reads about Oliver's experiences of the natural world, one can imagine them as their own. Affect (affective reading) defies specific socio-temporal limitations and shows that contextual framework need not be the only epistemological tool in reading literature; even readers unfamiliar with historical, political, and social contexts of a literary text react to it. They experience the text on an aesthetic, affective, and moral level, and are changed in the process. For instance, in her discussion of the "politico-sentimental aesthetic" ("Poor Eliza" 637), Lauren Berlant argues that sentimental literature may have political effects in that it supports the national identification and unification by means of identifying "yourself with someone else's stress, pain, or humiliated identity. The possibility that through the identification with alterity you will never be the same remains the radical threat and the great promise of this affective aesthetic" (648). While Oliver's poetry is distinctly personal, frequently even confessional, and therefore outside of the ostensibly political, the possibility of change through affect is contained in it too. As Hua Hsu explains, the nonlinguistic "affective charge" – moods, feelings, and atmosphere – fashions human life just as much as narratives and reasoning do. The poems in this collection are rooted in affect and express the poetic subject's awe at her various encounters with non-human beings. Through her focus on representations of nature as godly, of friendship, and of death, she establishes an affective (and holistic) poetic world in which the relationships and identities of all living beings interact to form the dynamic beauty of the Earth's ecosystem.

"The Gesture," in which the poetic speaker, always Oliver herself,[4] rescues a young walking stick insect by removing it from her dog's ear and putting it on a tree, illustrates how simple it is to make a change. It correlates to Morton's musings in "Beginning after the End," the prologue to his *Dark Ecology*: "This future is unthinkable. Yet here we are, thinking it. Coexisting, we are thinking future coexistence. Predicting it and more: keeping the unpredictable one open" (1). The act of saving the tiny insect, "scarcely sprung / from the pod of the nest" (Oliver, lines 3-4), by returning it to nature takes on a momentous, life-saving importance:

> I could not imagine it could live
> in the brisk world, or where it would live, or how. But
> I took it
> outside and held it up to the red oak. (lines 7-10)

By this small gesture, the poet takes an imaginative leap of faith into the future in which she can offset the negative effects of the insect's chance entrapment in the

dog's ear hair. Even though it is nobody's fault, there is room to remedy a potentially deadly situation. It is up to the poetic subject to make a choice about the insect's life or death, which empowers the reader to believe they could make the same kind of gesture when the occasion arises. The poet's act becomes a gesture as it is invested by profound meaning, but the poem suggests that the insect is also the one who gestured by accepting help, by embracing life:

> . . . it lifted its forward-most
> pair of arms
> with what in anything worth thinking about would have seemed
> a graceful and glad gesture; it caught
> onto the bark, it hung on; it rested; it began to climb. (lines 11-15)

Both the poet and the insect are "thinking future coexistence." The implied sense of fearful awe at witnessing the fragility and resilience of life, the softness of the contours separating life and death, and the shockingly small effort needed from an individual to sustain (another's) life moves the reader profoundly, "[b]ecause it is real, yet beyond concept. Because it is weird. Art is thought from the future [...] If we want thought different from the present, then thought must veer toward art" (Morton 1). Oliver imagines a positive future for the insect and acts compassionately, which in turn creates that positive future as well as affirms the connection between the insect and herself. At the same time, the reader's affective response to the poem helps implicate them into the network of coexistence, showcasing their own responsibility toward everyone in that network.

The aspect of change through feeling, that is, being moved, is particularly pronounced in Oliver's poems, whether one reads them from the point of view of ecological or moral crisis. On the one hand, Oliver describes nature as the divine source of life and wonder, a precious fountain of beauty to be drunk from and filled with a sense of love and admiration. She highlights the potential for redemption and represents what is salvageable, what is worth saving, rather than what is (being) destroyed. The reader is immersed in the aesthetic of the beautiful and wondrous in which "[l]ove is the emancipating vehicle" (Berlant, "Poor Eliza" 660) that may contribute to a "construction of a revolutionary transformation of world and personal history. The text wants to make vital, sensual experience out of the linkage between the person and the world" (661). In particular, the effect of Oliver's poems about the beauty of nature and those about the detrimental effect of human influence, enable "the utopian and the practical to meet intimately" (Berlant, "Poor Eliza" 648). On the other hand, her poems seamlessly couple affect with judgement, and serve as a reminder that, as Iris Murdoch remarks, "[a]rt and morals are [...] one. Their essence is the same. The essence of both of them is love. Love is the perception of individuals. Love is the extremely difficult realisation that something

other than oneself is real. Love, and so art and morals, is the discovery of reality" ("The Sublime and the Good" 51). Oliver does not "moralize" or attempt to be didactic in any way; rather, her poetry carries the affect's micropolitical potential to, as Brian Massumi understands it, change the individual (a body) within any given culture, rather than cause a major disruption within the culture's discourse (1). In Morton's terms, the peripeteia of the eco-noir narrative is the moment when the narrator (human) realizes that they are the tragic criminal – it is the moment of ecological awareness (9). It is also a view of responsibility as guilt. In Oliver's case, the peripeteia occurs when the reader realizes that they are the potential hero, so responsibility is taken to mean potential, the opportunity to do good.

That the moment of individual enlightenment through the awareness of one's implication in the world and one's responsibility for and in it is also a moment of empowerment can be seen in "Porcupine":

> I think, what love does to us
> is a Gordian knot,
> it's that complicated.
>
> I hug the dogs
> and their good luck,
> and put on their leashes. (lines 22–27)

The entanglement into the web of love sometimes implies a willingness to be tied by our loved one's "leash" rather than a form of detached freedom. To *coexist* means to be implicated in the totality of life: "I'm a person. I'm also part of an entity that is now *a geophysical force on a planetary scale*" (Morton 9). Every "entity" partakes in *multiplicity*, which is our ontological reality. In it "each element ceaselessly varies and alters its distance in relation to the others" (Deleuze and Guattari 30) but is never detached. The poetry of multiplicity, of coexistence is necessarily also a poetry of affect, which exhibits embodied interconnectedness: "To 'affect and be affected' means that our capacity is changed in some way by the impact of an encounter with something: a body, an object, an idea, or an emotion" (Truran 28). Oliver's understanding of animals and all forms of life as fellow-creatures and friends, who, although they are her silent interlocutors, partake in life as her equals,[5] echoes her Romantic influences who, frequently in the form of autoreferential poems, called for personal and social transformation and emancipation either through revolution or contact with the divinity and sublimity of nature.

Because Romantic poetry traces "the manner in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement" (Wordsworth, Preface 235-36), the identity of the

Romantic poet is frequently merged with the lyrical speaker, and poetry takes on a confessional, subjective tone, like in the case of Oliver. Her poetry is and wants to be unmediated; simple and direct language and the motifs of nature are combined[6] to form poetic images expressing the inherent beauty of the ordinary, as well as the poet's affective reaction to it. The pronounced autoreferentiality of Romantic poetry imbues it with a sense of love for oneself and for the Other (the desired object), correlating it, according to Morton, to the mechanics of consumerism, which flickers "between autoaffection and heteroaffection" (122). Thanks to the linguistic accessibility of Oliver's poetry, the reader feels invited to explore the nature of these reciprocal affects. They feel addressed by the poet thanks to the implied apostrophe that can be sensed in her verses. Through this, albeit implicit, "phenomenologically vitalizing movement of rhetorical animation that permits subjects to suspend themselves in the optimism of a potential occupation of the same psychic space of others, the objects of desire who make you possible" (Berlant, Cruel Optimism 26), Oliver subtly summons the reader to partake in the shared experience, acknowledging the mutual connection. For instance, in "Toad" she talks to the immovable animal, "About this cup / we call a life," from her five-feet-tall perspective and wonders "how it seemed / to him, down there, intimate with the dust" (lines 6-7, 13-14).

Through poetic constructions of the world in which everyone and everything plays a part in the grand scheme of things, Oliver's poems also exhibit a Romantic reverence for nature "both as a physical space in which humans live and as a metaphysical category – a source of the divine, of inspiration, and of artistic creation [...][making] a connection between the realm of nature and that of the spirit" (Matek 30).[7] Percy B. Shelley, Oliver's "beloved poet" ("Percy (One)" line 1), for example, muses about the human mind, acknowledging its "unremitting interchange / With the clear universe of things around" ("Mont Blanc" lines 39-40). The focus here is less on the metaphysical and more on the connectedness as it enables ecognosis. The mysteriousness and magic of things (and nature) stands, according to object-oriented ontology, as a consequence of indirect causality, which is "aesthetic" and as such corresponds well with eco-politics that demands "the reenchantment of the world" (Morton 16-17). Shelley is positively entranced with the sublime Mont Blanc, just as Oliver is with the "Beauty of fox, lemur, panther, / aardvark, thunder-worm, condor, // the quagga, the puffer, the kudu, / and this: the opossum" ("The Opossum" lines 1-4). Everything, great or small, contributes to the unity of things, which is a view that challenges the anthropocentric understanding of the world. Similar notions can also be found in American Transcendentalism of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau.

In "Nature" (1836), Emerson espouses unity between nature, God, and humans by suggesting that "Nature is made to conspire with spirit to emancipate us" (28), and the well-known metaphor of the transparent eyeball corresponds to

the notion of artistic genius championed by the European Romantics:[8] "Standing on the bare ground – my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space-all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God" (Emerson 6). The artist is able to view nature as transcendental and yet not formless – the forms of the godly are traceable through the forms of nature: "The visible creation is the terminus or the circumference of the invisible world" (Emerson 19). Similarly, finding traces of the divine in the visible, Oliver speaks of "a hundred white-sided dolphins [...] each one, as God himself" lifting her "into the world's / unspeakable kindness [...] into the moon-eye of God [...] with everything / that ever was, or ever will be" ("One Hundred White-sided Dolphins" lines 13, 15, 36-37, 41, 42-44). The poetic subject's complete immersion into the imagined reality of being a dolphin results in her temporary *vanishing*: "It is my sixty-third summer on earth / and, for a moment, I have almost vanished / into the body of the dolphin" (lines 38-40). As she merges with the dolphin, she becomes one with "everything," with the universe (lines 41-44), she vanishes and becomes *transparent*. By the momentary obliteration of the poetic subject, the poem acknowledges that, as Morton explains, things exist even outside of the epistemological screen onto which the human subject projects their discursive correlations (14); the dolphin exists even if the narrator temporarily does not. This unsettles the anthropocentric envisioning of life marked by materialist desires that place everything into the coordinate system of utility,[9] and so the true *nature* of life escapes it. Yet, consumerism and ecognosis are somehow interrelated, as Morton argues, because "there reside within consumerism some chemicals that are vital for catalyzing ecological awareness" (121). The two are interrelated, and so ecognosis must embrace its spectre, consumerism (125), which is why the two often coexist in eco-discourse.

For example, Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) highlights the beauty of simple life rid of materialist desires, echoing Wordsworth's "The World Is Too Much with Us," where Wordsworth laments the fact that humans are detached from nature and consumed by desires of the material goods: "Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers; – / Little we see in Nature that is ours; / We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!" (lines 2-4). For the Romantics, the humans' detachment from nature as well as rapid industrialization and urbanization represented an extreme form of crisis since the detachment from nature equalled a detachment from God, and, by the same logic, the destruction of nature a blasphemy. Oliver *feels* the same way, yet she abstains from preaching about pollution or materialism, inviting change and empathy in readers simply by describing what she sees, like in her prose poem "At Herring Cove," where the debris – natural, like animal skulls, and artificial, like a "set of car keys" (Oliver 20) – determines the cove's timeless character just as much as it represents an instance of a pol-

luted beach. Observing a dead moth and contemplating on its life, she "[thinks] of Thoreau's description" ("At Herring Cove" 20) of one from the Concord woods, and ponders about nature's unending cycles and life's transformations; the moth was once a "green worm. Then it flew [...] And now it is the bright trash of the past, its emptiness perfect, and terrible" ("At Herring Cove" 20). By imagining the moth's life – its impulses and significations – in a temporal and literary continuum, Oliver both acknowledges her literary roots and highlights the sublimity and profundity of natural life without any need for proselytization.

Thoreau, like Wordsworth, openly argues that people are unnecessarily anxious when it comes to material things, since "primitive and frontier life" (10) is advantageous for humans. Contrary to that, "[m]ost of the luxuries, and many of the so-called comforts, of life are not only not indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind" (Thoreau 13). Still, humanity cannot resist the call of the material dispatched by capitalism. Evoking Louis Althusser's notion of interpellation, which elucidates how individuals accept ideology through social interactions, thus becoming its subjects (167-68), Berlant defines this condition as *cruel optimism*. People feel compelled "to inhabit and to track the affective attachment to what we call 'the good life,'" although it is a "bad life that wears out the subjects who nonetheless, and at the same time, find their conditions of possibility within it" (Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* 27). It is a condition of dependency on a system that destroys both nature and life as it turns both into commodities: "shocking wealth changes the terms of the meaning of life, of the reproduction of life, and of exchange itself" (40). So, the crucial development must be a radical change of perspective, in which people will abdicate from their position of supreme rulers and exploiters of nature, transforming themselves into a caring human kind that appreciates life over material wealth.

In *The Particulars of Rapture* (2003), Charles Altieri suggests that an aesthetics of the affects may help in expounding on the fact that there are "profoundly incommensurable perspectives on values" necessary for the realization of "various aspects of our human potential," even if philosophy or theory lack apparatuses to deal with them (5). Indeed, it seems that rationalist thought, which, in its attempt to educate and enlighten humans, gave birth to science, utilitarianism, and capitalism, dulled humanity's ability for compassion and humility. It also contributed to the construction of an artificial and unhealthy hierarchy according to which reason precedes emotion, causing a disbalance in scientific and political discourse as well as in values, which ultimately results in destructive and exaggerated eruptions of collectively suppressed emotions. The need to suppress natural affect was channelled toward commodification and consumption, wherein buying and owning function as a substitute for feeling. The process of industrial production relies on the merciless exploitation of natural resources and is followed by the accumulation of waste, both of which pollute and destroy nature. Like Word-

sworth, Emerson, and Thoreau, Oliver rejects commodified existence, and invites a return to a life of affect and a life in nature, but her expression is subtler and she approaches the same subject from a different angle. Consumerism as the spectre of ecology is accepted and implied, but rarely vocalized because it is unsettling, so she opts for feeling that expresses the "correlationism" of consumerism in terms of correlation of feeling. If one feels for what surrounds them, they will be compelled to question the materiality of the surroundings and wonder about its essence:

> When thinking becomes ecological, the beings it encounters cannot be established in advance as living or nonliving, sentient or nonsentient, real or epiphenomenal. What we encounter instead are spectral beings whose ontological status is uncertain precisely to the extent that we know them in detail as never before. And our experience of these spectral beings is itself spectral. (Morton 126)

Although she may occasionally hint at the issues of pollution and consumption, like in "At Herring Cove," Oliver typically provides the reader with loving and compassionate depictions of life in its many forms. She invites an affective (*I love, I feel*) rather than a rational (*I need to own to survive*) response to contemporary life, offering the reader "a chance to love everything." She counteracts the materiality of things, which in a market economy always has a monetary value, with their spectrality embodied in the emotions they carry. The schism within the modern individual, as Jürgen Habermas sees it, is caused precisely by the split between the public, bourgeois identity of a person determined by the market and their private identity rooted in emotion. Everyone is the same in terms of their economic success, but the point of distinction is the ability to be a part of a loving group, a group of people who choose to be with one another (30-50). The affective side of the modern individual caught up in the compulsion and pleasure of consumption is the redeeming one; ultimately, "ecological awareness is deeply about pleasure" (Morton 129), which is spectral, unlike exploitation, which is material and monetary.

As Oliver dreams of pastoral idylls, "in the fragrant grass / in the wild domains / of the prairie spring" ("Ghosts" lines 61-63), the reader smells and sees nature's beauty, and is emotionally transported to a state of calm, as if they were at the very meadow the poet describes. In "Toad," Oliver describes talking to a toad "about summer, and about time. The / pleasures of eating, the terrors of the night. About this cup / we call a life. About happiness. And how good it feels, the / heat of the sun between the shoulder blades" ("Toad" lines 5-8). The toad does not react to her presence or her speech, "which didn't necessarily mean he was either afraid or asleep. I felt his energy" (line 10). He is at peace, immovable and

silent, but fully present, which invites a sense of apotheosis and a comparison with Buddha (line 15). In his theological reading of Oliver's poetry, Todd Davis asserts that the Earth is Oliver's "sacred home" (605), but it may also be that the Earth is her – that she is one with the Earth, rather than one inhabiting it. The toad, and the poet in all her poems, meditate on the transcendental beauty of the natural world with which they are one.

The sense of nature as godly and marked by mutuality can also be seen in her poem "The Summer Day." In it, Oliver echoes William Blake's pair of origin poems, "The Lamb" and "The Tyger," which question the varied nature of divine and human creation respectively. Whereas God creates a pastoral, idyllic nature and life as represented in "The Lamb," humans create a powerful, yet menacing and destructive world of colonialism and industrialism in "The Tyger" (Blake 8, 42). Blake opposes nature and civilization, giving precedence to the first. Oliver echoes Blake's form of questioning the origin of natural life: "Who made the world? / Who made the swan, and the black bear? / Who made the grasshopper?" (lines 1-3), and expands it by suggesting that the proper way to revere natural life is for an individual to immerse themselves into it, to become one with it:

> I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
> I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
> into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
> how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
> which is what I have been doing all day. (lines 11-15)

This type of communion with nature is a substitute for prayers, which are a product of human civilization (culture, religion) and as such inferior to feeling and living, which are organic. Oliver expands Blake's ontological inquiries by adding a teleological one:

> Tell me, what else should I have done?
> Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
> Tell me, what is it you plan to do
> with your one wild and precious life? (lines 16-19)

Whereas "The Lamb" offers a definite answer to the question of creation by suggesting that God created all life, "The Tyger" does not provide answers to the questions about the origins of civilization, industry and wars; the humans' role in this is implied. Oliver shifts the attention from such questions since the source of life's creation seems to be irrelevant in comparison to life's purpose. There is sense to be made out of the ontological certainty of life: one *is*, but what should one do? The reader is left to contemplate on this, while simultaneously feeling the poetic sub-

ject's exhilaration at finding her purpose in merging with nature as her ultimate good. She is a transparent eyeball, looking at everything the grasshopper does, appreciating the minute, the ordinary as supreme:

> the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
> the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
> who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down—
> who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
> Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
> Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away. ("The Summer Day" lines 5-10)

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick suggests that the mind is one with the body because "a particular intimacy seems to subsist between textures and emotions," evident even in the colloquial language and "the dubious epithet 'touchy-feely,' with its implication that even to talk about affect virtually amounts to cutaneous contact" (17). The looking at and the touching of the grasshopper who eats out of the poet's hand converge into a meditative experience pointing to a realization that existence is both in the mind and in the body of the grasshopper and that of the poet. Their encounter is a communion through which they merge into one. The human is a being in process that transcends its own limits as it contributes to a kind of grand mutuality: the mind affects the body and vice versa, and human existence affects the non-human world, and vice versa.

In the same vein, Lisa Blackman rejects the body's singularity as a closed, independent biological system suggesting that "bodies are open, participating in the flow or passage of affect, characterized more by reciprocity and co-participation than boundary and constraint" (2). In addition to the interaction between all bodies and minds, there is a constant communication with the material and immaterial as "the affective body either is in part immaterial, or is beyond the threshold of 'life itself'" (Timár 199). This, ultimately, is resonant with Murdoch's scrutiny of the establishment of the modern individual on the assumptions of anthropocentric hard science, and her transmaterial view of the individual, which counters the former.

According to Murdoch, the postulation that our existence is determined exclusively by material reality has suppressed the necessity to perceive the human "against a background of values, of realities, which transcend him. We picture man as a brave naked will surrounded by an easily comprehended empirical world" ("Against Dryness" 18). Ann Culley explains that, in Murdoch's view, the modern person has lost their moral referents, being "overawed by logical positivism, determinism, behaviorism, and utilitarianism" (335). The notion of life as organized by immutable, common standards and moral principles established by

means of positivist and utilitarian approaches[10] results, as Murdoch argues, in (the literature of) a "lonely self-contained individual" ("Against Dryness" 19). Contrary to that, both Murdoch and Oliver uncover the hidden depths of a transmaterial person who, to paraphrase Whitman, "contains multitudes." Indeed, the mottos framing Oliver's *The Truro Bear and Other Adventures* collection – Fabre's "Truth is always veiled in a certain mystery" (369), and "On thy wondrous works I will meditate" (*The Bible*, *Revised Standard Version*, Ps. 145.5) – testify to her rejection of the positivist "dryness," as Murdoch would put it, and affirm Oliver's view of life as mysterious and divine, and of living beings as connected by invisible strands of mutuality.

Such a totality of connection is seen in most of Oliver's poems that, in addition to promoting the view of nature as an all-encompassing metaphysical phenomenon, contain ideas of friendship and death that further advance the ideas of mutual dependence and the need for appreciation of all life. To illustrate, "The Chance to Love Everything," highlights a sense of connectedness and espouses friendship as the principle of mutual life: "All summer I made friends / with the creatures nearby–" (lines 1-2). To truly live together, people must transcend the limit of self-involvement, or as Murdoch would put it, one must *unself*, and the way to do it is through love and literature. Love entails the "exercise of overcoming one's self" (Murdoch, "The Sublime and the Good" 52), but literature also stands as a means of overcoming one's self since the reader becomes immersed in imagined lives and experiences various affects as a consequence.[11] Because people have an "indefinitely extended capacity to imagine the being of others," literature and love seem to be intertwined in this "imaginative understanding [...] Love is the imaginative recognition of, that is respect for, this otherness" (Murdoch, "The Sublime and the Good" 52). In foregrounding love for the ubiquitous and a sense of non-anthropocentric equality among the living, as well as in alluding to the metaphysical qualities of the physical world, Oliver provides a continuation of the Romantic tradition, which this collection aptly shows.

The collection's eponymous Truro bear whom she wants to see is not a rapacious animal but one "who will not steal the honey, / who will not rifle the knapsack" ("This Is the One" lines 11-12). He is spiritual, "sings to himself / the secret song / no one has ever heard–" (lines 17-19), and "royal" (line 8). This is a bear that could be a friend, an admirable being, if only he understood that he could fill himself with berries (lines 4-5) rather than food he steals or kills for. But her imagining is in no way marked by what Berlant would refer to as impossible or toxic attachment to an object of desire (*Cruel Optimism* 24). The creature she both fears and is drawn to stands for the elusiveness and mystery of nature, and symbolizes beauty, defiance, and freedom: "disdainful and free / as anything on earth / could ever be" ("This Is the One" lines 28-30). Oliver rejects selfish attachment, which would provoke a sense of anxiety, and revels in freedom of

life, liberating and empowering the reader to love unselfishly too. She imagines a world of mutual acceptance in which ontological relations are rhizomatic and fluid, rather than hierarchical. Life is a rhizome, a network that connects "any point to any other point" (Deleuze and Guattari 21), and symbolizes the interconnectedness and mutualism of life, which allows Oliver to view all creatures, big and small, with wonder and appreciation because they all contribute to the fluid totality that we are.

In "One Hundred White-sided Dolphins on a Summer Day," Oliver depicts this vividly by representing subjects immersed in water: dolphins of all ages, "grandmothers and grandfathers" (line 9), swim with the boat and invite unity, even if for a brief moment, with the poetic voice. The freedom to be together and be apart is a mark of true friendship, which includes respect and acceptance, as well as the right to solitude (though not loneliness). The pod of dolphins "galloping in the pitch / of the waves" (lines 3-4), slick, playful, always smiling, always moving, may easily stand for the "ontology of affect [which] means that affect must be understood in its transitions, as movement, as an always unfolding event rather than a thing" (Truran 28). Each dolphin "as God himself" (line 15) extends grace to the poetic speaker by looking "with the moon of his eye / into my heart" (lines 23-24), for which she feels gratitude as she becomes one with the dolphin:

> and, for a moment, I have almost vanished
> into the body of the dolphin,
>
> into the moon-eye of God,
> into the white fan that lies at the bottom of the sea
> with everything
> that ever was, or ever will be (lines 39-44)

The experience of unity with nature is transcendent and majestic. It resembles divine intervention, as the dolphin's look transforms her into it – and into everything. The moment of oneness with nature is rid of hierarchies, and as she briefly senses the absolute, the reader is symbolically transported into the vastness of the ocean and sky, feeling that everything is connected through love, and feeling the love that connects everything. In the act of reading and feeling, the poet's and the poem's multiplicities become connected to the readers, forming an assemblage, a *plateau*, that is, "any multiplicity connected to other multiplicities by superficial underground stems in such a way as to form or extend a rhizome" (Deleuze and Guattari 22). After a brief communion, the dolphin and poet move on their separate ways, but are never fully separate, since they are joined by the rhizomatic relation inherent to the ontology of being and forever changed by their interaction: "Then, in our little boat, the dolphins suddenly gone, / we

sailed on through the brisk, cheerful day" (lines 47-48). Timár explains how "the immaterial aspect of porous, plural bodies in movement yields a fuller understanding of their life [...] through figures of thriving democratic action: reciprocity and co-participation" (199) in the creation of multiple lived realities. Thus, the relationship of mutuality between the poetic speaker and the dolphin(s) stands as a model or possibility for actual relationships in the reader's life: a warm mutuality that connects them to everything and everyone.

In addition to the representations of the divinity of nature and multiplicity of being that resembles friendship, which confirm the claims of "Oliver's repeated affirmation of the natural world and the processes that sustain life, both human and non-human alike" (Riley 93), Oliver's poems also exhibit a strong inclination toward contemplating death. She approaches this topic from the point of view of mutuality too. Invoking Derrida's "organicist totalisation," which refers to the fact that whatever is created, body or meaning, decomposes, passing "into other forms, other figures [...] circulating anonymously within the great organic body of culture" (Derrida 816), Oliver insists on continuities, or, as Janet McNew puts it, "all-enveloping movement of natural cycles" (71). In "Ghosts," a poem reflecting on the senseless slaughter and extinction of buffalo herds, Oliver ascertains that "*nothing can die*" (line 26) and ends it with a dream of the birth of a calf. McNew ponders on "[t]his vision of a natural immortality" as being symbolic of Oliver's lack of belief in the soul's supernatural afterlife, but nevertheless comforting in the realization that the soul "travels with [the body] in a cycle of change that affects other parts of nature through the agency of a physical transmigration" (72). Although Oliver seems to move away from a Christian interpretation of the afterlife, she does not espouse a rationalist, atheist idea of death as the final end either. As Vicki Graham explains, "for Oliver, immersion in nature is not death: language is not destroyed and the writer is not silenced. To merge with the non-human is to acknowledge the self's mutability and multiplicity, not to lose subjectivity" (352).

In another poem, "The Kitten," Oliver repeats both the idea that death is not the end and that everything comes out of and back into the earth. The stillborn kitten is not a source of grief or abjection, but of "amazement" to the poet. She takes it from the "house cat's bed" and buries it in a private ritual celebrating life:

> [I] put it back
> saying, it was real,
> saying, life is infinitely inventive,
> saying, what other amazements
> lie in the dark seed of the earth. (lines 15-19)

The ritualistic "giving back" of the cyclopean kitten and the humble appreciation of both its stillbirth and deformity as life's wonders, instead of making a spectacle

of it by giving the kitten to a museum or calling the newspaper (lines 9-12), illustrate the idea that scientific examination or cultural analysis of life and death is far less important than an affectionate treatment, an affective response in the form of love and wonder. The kitten is a representative of the multiplicity of life, because, although stillborn, it is a part of the earth to which it returns and from which it will sustain new life. Like the massacred buffalos in "Ghosts," the kitten will also serve as "a kind of fertilizer for other plants and animals" (McNew 72), as well as an inspiration for the poem. Oliver ponders on this life born in death with dignity and joy, with awe and respect because she knows it will circulate in other ways, so she "quietly and gracefully prods the reader toward an attentiveness that all things melt into one another at some level of existence or consciousness" (Davis 615). Thus, the giving birth to a stillborn kitten resembles a situation when "our cats bring small, wounded animals into the house" (Kosofsky Sedgwick 153), which is essentially a teaching moment, although people often react with shock and disgust. The poet is not disgusted or caught up in the abjectness of the moment, nor does she feel melancholia, all of which would serve as entrapment in fate; rather, she seems to understand that "within the melancholia is an unconditional sadness. And within the sadness is beauty. And within the beauty is longing. And within the longing is a plasma field of joy" (Morton 119).[12] The kitten teaches the poet how to wonder and appreciate the complexity of life. The poet, the cat, the kitten and earth are one. They exist and are bound by love, so the reaction to every action is seamless and kind. Good teaching "thrives on personality and intimate emotional relation" (Kosofsky Sedgwick 160), which places affect at the centre of all relationships. The feeling one has when they are with another shapes their relationship just as much, if not more, than the words they exchange.

This message comes across quite explicitly in her short poem "I Ask Percy How I Should Live My Life (Ten)." Her pet dog named after Percy B. Shelley provides a short answer that highlights love, sensations, and trust as the foundations of a happy life:

> Love, love, love, says Percy.
> And hurry as fast as you can
> along the shining beach, or the rubble, or the dust.
>
> Then, go to sleep.
> Give up your body heat, your beating heart.
> Then, trust.

Even if the material form disappears as life ends, and even if one does not know what this transsubstantive process is like, one must make the most of the time they have by charging it with love, feeling, with faith that all will be well. The simplicity

of Percy's advice echoes the poetics of Romanticism and Murdoch's view of the individual self. It also aligns with Berlant's argument "for moving away from the discourse of trauma" (*Cruel Optimism* 9) because life goes on despite its incoherence and perilous attacks on it (10). For Berlant, the optimism that helps people go on is cruel, as she imagines the mutual relations in terms of "the circulation of capital, state liberalism, and the heterofamilial, upwardly mobile good-life fantasy" (*Cruel Optimism* 11), but there is also optimism outside capitalism, and that is the brand of optimism promoted by Oliver in which nature is central; it is the "object of optimism" which "promises to guarantee the endurance of something, the survival of something, the flourishing of something" (*Cruel Optimism* 48). Oliver envisions good life as organic and detached from the capitalist framework; good life is rooted in nature and love. Materialist desires make us weak and anxious; they entrap us in the web of exploitative relations, and to be free, we must become more selfless; we must *unself*. Our embodied reality should be fuelled by love and sustained by multiple sensations received from nature. Under these circumstances, when our time comes, we can die peacefully as we can be sure that our atoms will survive in a different material form. Everything that surrounds us consists of what was before, all a unity, a multiplicity. Those focused on consuming and owning "have given [their] hearts away, a sordid boon!" (Wordsworth, "The World is Too Much with Us" line 4). Their energy is wasted on unimportant things when it should be invested into oneness: "The reason why the world lacks unity, and lies broken and in heaps, is because man is disunited with himself. He cannot be a naturalist until he satisfies all the demands of the spirit. Love is as much its demand as perception. Indeed, neither can be perfect without the other" (Emerson 41).

In conclusion, it can be established that Oliver's poetry captures intimate moments of immersion in and communication with the natural environment *moving* the reader toward the possibility of change as a result of the sensory and emotional experience of nature mediated through her poetry of affect. The reader feels invited, addressed by the poet to mimic her amazement, and to feel a part of the life she describes. The raising of eco-awareness on an individual level may affect a global change through the soft, rippling effects of affective experience. Indeed, as Benjamin Morgan explains, different affective reactions to life contribute to the development of individuality (733), and, by extension, the same affective reactions inform change in a broader sense. The necessity of consumption exists in Oliver's poetry as an invisible entity: there but not there. In rejecting the expression of the abject – "We can't unknow where our toilet waste goes" (Morton 133) – her poems rely on the pleasurable to express correlation. They create a sense of mutuality and awe, awakening the reader's appreciation of nature and all it contains, due to which the reader may sustain "vicarious experience—wondering what it would be like" (Morton 124) to feel as she feels, a form of *unselfing*. Participation in Deleuzian plateaus of multiplicity ensures that everyone and everything is enmeshed in the

network of mutuality. The readers' wholesome feeling of being a part of the magnificent web of relationships that arises from reading Oliver's poems provides a sort of therapeutic effect and gives rise to hopes of endurance: that one would cherish rather than destroy one's home by giving in to irrational fears.

Indeed, the experience of the divinity of nature, universal friendship, and the continuity between life and death aids acceptance and empowers the reader to open themselves to love. Thus, affect – rather than reason – establishes itself as the pivotal aspect of Oliver's poetry that enables a fundamental change of both perspective and values. In prompting the reader "to love everything," Oliver's poems establish nature and all life as divine, and foreground love as the prerequisite for (human) survival as appreciation may work toward avoiding destruction. The reader's experience of poetry creates a complex nexus of affect, fiction, and morals where the opposites of reality and fiction, feeling and meaning are spontaneously merged.

Notes

[1] These concerns affect the way people read and understand literature as evidenced by ecocriticism and the notion of the Anthropocene, which have become central in the writings of academics such as Cheryll Glotfelty, Timothy Clark, Timothy Morton, and Claire Colebrook, to mention just a few.

[2] In addition to Steinbeck's classic *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), consider, for instance, the works of J. G. Ballard, Amitav Ghosh, Ursula K. Le Guin, Richard Powers's *The Overstory* (2018) and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006).

[3] Morton's *Dark Ecology* (2016) is imbued with affect as he elaborates on the concept of ecognosis with the help of affective terms such as the abject, joy, sadness, melancholy, and so on.

[4] Oliver's poetry is known to come from her own experiences: Kristin Hotelling Zona asserts that her poetics relies on "bridging of self and other, poet and world" (126-27), and this is not unlike the Romantics' lyrical poetry, such as Wordsworth's, where the speaker is in fact the author (Matek 30). Other critics, such as McNew, recognize that Oliver "tremble[s] over boundaries between herself and nature" (66), although she claims that she tries to write the speaker in such a way as to make them genderless so that "any reader can enter her work" (Oliver qtd. in Johnson 79). Further highlighting Oliver's autobiographical slant, Doty explains that Oliver "watches herself watch the world" (266), confirming that the experiences in the poems are Oliver's.

[5] The resemblance to Robert Burns's "To a Mouse" (1785) where the poet sees himself as the mouse's "poor, earth-born companion, / An' fellow-mortal!" (lines 11-12), is both hard to miss and not surprising. Namely, poetry's affective turn in the late eighteenth-century and its "willingness and ability to respond to others" (Meyer Spacks 249) is a legacy from which arises Oliver's own poetic sensibility. In "Carrying the Snake to the Garden," Oliver expresses sadness for frightening the snake (lines 19-20) just like Burns does with reference to the mouse.

Notes

[6] To capture emotions in their purest form, Wordsworth advises focusing on incidents from "low and rustic" life, uncorrupted by the pretences of "social vanity," and directly connected with nature. Wordsworth, like Oliver, advocates for and uses an authentic language "arising out of repeated experience and regular feelings" (Preface 236), unspoiled by the pretence of social convention, "because in that situation our elementary feelings exist in a state of greater simplicity and consequently may be more accurately contemplated and more forcibly communicated [...] because in that situation the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature" (Preface 236).

[7] Ironically, the Romantics' – in particular Wordsworthian – views of nature have come to be considered problematic by some critics for their alleged anthropomorphizing identification of the human and the natural (see Zona 127-28), but most Romantics viewed the contact with nature either as therapeutic (Wordsworth in particular) or inspiring precisely because of its sublimity and its metaphysical, divine qualities – that is, its Otherness, a position currently viewed as acceptable. Gyorgi Voros, for instance, talks about "Nature's integrity as Other" (235). In the context of the Anthropocene, however, it can even be argued that Nature's long-standing role of the Other is far more problematic, given the humans' tendency to control, exploit, and erase, rather than accept, the Other, and that a Romantic sense of appreciation of Nature remains a far healthier approach. The politics of literary and ecological discourse frequently overshadows the affective nature of poetry and the fact that – for most (that is, for non-professional) readers – it is the affective aspect of poetry that actually matters.

[8] Shelley's "Mont Blanc" describes the interaction between the poet's mind and nature, as the view of a magnificent ravine entrances the poet, who becomes a disembodied mind: "Thou art pervaded with that ceaseless motion, / Thou art the path of that unresting sound– / Dizzy Ravine! and when I gaze on thee / I seem as in a trance sublime and strange / To muse on my own separate fantasy" (lines 32-36).

[9] Morton suggests that "you can't look at a duck and see what it's 'for' in some obviously human-flavored way. Ducks aren't for anything. Teleology has evaporated, hierarchies have collapsed; but there are still ducks and humans and Earth, and sentience and lifeforms as opposed to salt crystals" (32).

[10] Perhaps surprisingly, even the Golden Rule – doing unto others as you would be done by (Luke 6:31; Matt. 7:12; Mill 32) – in fact seems to restrict human relationships as its application implies subscribing to the inherent flaw of utilitarian thinking: that what is good for one (or many) is good for everyone. The presumption that people share identical values, desires, and needs negates individual freedom as well as the acceptance of the other.

[11] See: Clare 2022.

[12] Such an evocation of the sublime – the pleasurable coalescing of beauty and pain or fear – is also a Romantic idea most evident in works with a Gothic quality, such as E. A. Poe's.

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Towards Multisensory Aesthetics:

Mundane Materiality in Richard Powers' *Plowing the Dark* and *The Overstory*

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Abstract This paper explores the multisensory aesthetics and mundane materiality in Richard Powers' *Plowing the Dark* and *The Overstory*, emphasizing their role in challenging anthropocentric and ocularcentric cultural narratives. It examines how Powers' novels employ synesthetic descriptions to critique Cartesian dualism and technoliberalism, presenting the body as inseparable from its material and nonhuman environment. By intertwining virtual realities with ecological consciousness, the analysis highlights Powers' critique of the transcendence of physicality and his focus on embodied vulnerability. The study further investigates how *Plowing the Dark* contrasts technological escapism with the corporeality of human experience, while *The Overstory* employs magical realism to emphasize ecological interconnectedness and humility toward the natural world. Through these multisensory strategies, Powers reframes literature's potential to foster embodied awareness and posthuman creativity, offering new perspectives on environmental and technological debates.

Keywords Synesthetic Aesthetic; Post-Anthropocentrism; Multispecies Justice; Alien Phenomenology; Nonhuman Agency; Virtual Reality; Environmental Literature.

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Beyond Vision: Introducing the "Corporeal Bounds of Our Flesh"

> Our societies are obsessed with our bodies.
> (Grace 9)

Contemporary Western society views the body as a source of data, constantly monitored and optimized. This perspective stems from an epistemology that privileges sight over other senses, perpetuating ocularcentrism. Such a focus not only marginalizes other sensory experiences but also reinforces cultural prejudices, including those against femininity (cf. Devorah 305) and the nonhuman. This paper explores how anthropocentrism, the data-driven body, and visual dominance in Western culture necessitate a multisensory aesthetics. Anglo-American aesthetics have only recently started paying attention to "everyday aesthetics," as seen in the late twentieth-century (Saito). Despite this recent interest, Western culture continues to prioritize visual aesthetics. Vision remains the "noblest of the senses" (Jay 21), especially in a society increasingly governed by digital culture.

Beneath this veneer lies a deeper narrative—one that perpetuates Cartesian dualism and reinforces the supremacy of human reason over embodied experience. This Cartesian worldview posits the human self as detached and superior, capable of observing and controlling the body from a position of transcendence. Yet, such a perspective overlooks the agency and autonomy inherent in corporeal existence, reducing bodies to mere objects of manipulation. The belief that bodies are transparent, readable, and customizable also sustains ageism, ableism, and other forms of discrimination by promoting an ideal of the body as perfectible: healthy, young, and beautiful. The Cartesian worldview upholds an anthropocentric view where human creativity and technology dominate and shape the body, rather than recognizing the inherent agency and unpredictability of embodied existence.

Technoliberalism perpetuates precisely this perspective through popular media, such as TED talks. A central assumption that underlies this discourse is the concept of "sensation without mediation" (Pfister 190), as Damien Pfister illustrates in his analysis of Sergey Brin's "Why Google Glass?" This vision relies on ideals of transparency, the primacy of sight, and a telepathic form of communication that neglects other senses. It dismisses the materiality and complexity of bodies, where mediation occurs on multiple levels. Literary synesthesia, as a technique that blends the senses, challenges this vision by highlighting how bodies are dynamic, networked entities intertwined with their environment—both technological and natural. Mediation, then, is inescapable.

Technoliberalism is marked by its "largely celebratory rhetoric attached to Big Data, algorithms, and artificial intelligence" (Pfister and Yang 251). Closely tied to the rise of digital technologies, it fosters utopian aspirations of transcending the "flesh" by enhancing the body. However, an analysis of Richard Powers' contemporary fiction reveals that literary discourse resists this narrative. It does not

advocate for cybernetic spaces or the transcendence of physicality by isolating "consciousness" as a separate entity. Instead, the act of reading shifts the focus to the lived experiences of embodiment, mortality, and vulnerability, grounding narratives in the materiality of (non-)human existence.

Even technologies such as virtual reality are deeply grounded in materiality. Richard *Powers' Plowing the Dark* (2000) provides a compelling lens for examining the development of immersive digital worlds and their implications. While the novel predates contemporary artificial intelligence, its exploration of virtual reality enriches our understanding of current technological debates. Discussions around AI, for example, often emphasize questions of consciousness—such as weak versus strong AI, the Turing Test, or Searle's Chinese Room—while neglecting the materiality of bodies and their interaction with technology. Revisiting *Plowing the Dark* allows us to draw connections between earlier visions of technological immersion and today's ongoing discussions, underscoring the need to foreground materiality in these debates.

Furthermore, Powers' fiction has evolved to adopt more ecological perspectives, emphasizing nature in his recent novels such as *The Overstory* (2018) and *Bewilderment* (2021). This development may not be incidental, as even his early work in *Plowing the Dark* explored and questioned the boundaries between technology and nature. His writing plays with these binaries, a quality that becomes especially evident in the multisensory descriptions and the focus on mundane materiality.

By analyzing how Powers' fiction incorporates synesthetic descriptions, this paper aims to demonstrate the necessity of multisensory aesthetics. Such an approach enriches our engagement with literature and offers an alternative venue to critique anthropocentrism by returning attention to the nonhuman. Synesthesia "is a figure of speech in which linguistic expressions referring to different sensory modalities are combined" (Strik-Lievers). In Anglo-American context, it is usually associated with the 'art for art's sake movement' of mid-to-late Victorian Britain (Poueymirou 1).

However, the synesthetic aesthetic is not just some 'apolitical' literary gesture, as it extends beyond the privileged sense of sight. In this way, it challenges dominant cultural narratives that often privilege human exceptionalism and mastery over the natural world. This can also have implications for how we approach both environmental and technological issues, as it shifts the focus from an exclusively anthropocentric perspective to one that recognizes the significance and inseparability of (non)human life.

Literary Synesthesia in *Plowing the Dark*

Contemporary novels by authors like Richard Powers challenge the metaphor of the transparent body propagated by technoliberalism and reveal spaces of agency

within the monitored landscape. They employ the literary device of synesthesia as a narrative experiment that decenters the human by placing it in a rich environment. Despite appearing counterintuitive, they use synesthesia to provide access to the nonhuman, rather than to celebrate human genius.[1] Synesthesia acts as a form of relationality that displays contiguity between the human and the external world of objects, animals, and plants. Rather than focusing on the inner workings of the human mind, synesthetic descriptions are replete with sensory observations that shift the focus from a psychological view of the world to the body and its vulnerability.

The synesthetic aesthetic is an overlooked element in literary studies but holds great critical potential. Synesthesia is not just a trait of subjectivity, but also works as a method of connection, including the human and nonhuman realms. While Ian Bogost's notion of "alien phenomenology" emphasizes how human perception is shaped by encounters with the nonhuman, this paper extends that idea to argue that synesthesia reveals the ways in which human experience is fundamentally intertwined with the nonhuman. Rather than suggesting a hierarchical division of the senses, synesthetic blending demonstrates sensitivities and experiences that connect us to the nonhuman world. This perspective moves us beyond attempts to "comprehend" or "capture" the nonhuman in human terms, redirecting attention toward feeling with it—an embodied and relational awareness. Ursula Heise's concept of "multispecies justice" aligns with this shift, advocating for ethical frameworks that do not depend solely on human empathy but instead recognize our inherent entanglements with the nonhuman. In this sense, synesthesia offers an alternative to the ventriloquist impulse of representing nonhuman perspectives and instead fosters a shared, multisensory engagement with the world.

In *Plowing the Dark*, Richard Powers offers a compelling critique of the technoliberal rhetoric. The thematic investigation of Cartesian dualism resonates throughout the narrative, particularly in its portrayal of the division between hardware and software. This dichotomy, present both philosophically and materially, is ingeniously structured within the narrative framework, resembling a double helix. The narrative unfolds through "twin narratives" that complement each other (Harris 120). These storylines are further connected by eleven short chapters, forming what some critics describe as "weak bonds" (Kley 424).

One narrative thread follows virtual reality researchers striving to create demonstration rooms aimed at "defeat[ing] matter" (Powers 125). Meanwhile, the other introduces a half-Iranian English teacher who becomes a hostage of Islamic militants. These intertwined storylines, often described as "contrapuntal" (Ickstadt 13; Dewey 11), share not only a quest for a "great escape" (Powers 122) but also a focus on "world-making" (Löffler 92). While typically associated with the boundless creativity of the mind envisioning "infinite possibilities" (Ickstadt

32), this notion of "world-making" perpetuates an anthropocentric worldview the novel simultaneously interrogates.[2]

Cartesian dualism traditionally delineates between the immaterial mind (software) and the physical body (hardware), a schism that manifests in the novel's portrayal of the RL (*Realization Lab*) and the Cavern. Here, the RL appears to symbolize the tangible, corporeal realm, characterized by its industrial infrastructure and sensory richness, akin to the body in Cartesian philosophy. Conversely, the Cavern seems to embody the ethereal, virtual space of software, where consciousness seemingly transcends physical limitations, mirroring the realm of the mind. Yet, Powers also challenges "the absolute hierarchy of information/materiality" (Szadziewicz 101). A closer analysis of the novel reveals a complex interplay between the physical and the digital, inviting readers to contemplate the ways in which they are not separate.

While most critical readings focus on the Cavern (Dewey; Harris; Kley; Meier; Szadziewicz) and the "magic" of virtual technologies, scant attention is paid to the computer laboratory of the *Realization Lab*. This is understandable, considering the space the novel itself offers for exploration of the Cavern, while the lab receives relatively less attention. Whether deliberate or not, this narrative choice echoes the contemporary societal focus on visual aesthetics. The novel creates a visual matrix incorporating art from Vincent van Gogh, the architecture of Hagia Sophia, and virtual technologies. The machines in the RL are named after famous painters like Da Vinci, Claude, Hsie Ho, Rembrandt, or Picasso, evoking associations with human creativity and innovation. Art and technology are married in this visual matrix, emphasizing the interplay between human imagination and technological development.

This emphasis on art also serves to subvert the prevailing notion of transparency in technoliberal rhetoric, which often promotes concepts like visibility, clarity, and transcendence. The chiaroscuro technique not only underscores the importance of darkness but also makes light more tangible, acting like a fabric. While the dome symbolizes celestial or divine realms and evokes a sense of vastness and illumination, the cavern represents a stark contrast as a dark, enclosed space. However, by simulating Hagia Sophia in the Cavern, the novel appears to collide these two images, emphasizing the materiality of vision itself. This connects to the notion that vision does not ensure transparency and is inseparable from the other senses, underscoring the need for a multisensory approach.

The Cavern's simulation process underscores this complexity. As Jackdaw explains to Adie: "We do it all with liquid crystal back projection. One Electrolamp Luminox projector throwing alternating double-buffered images onto each of the five walls. We cast the floor onto a refracting mirror, through a hole in the ceiling" (Powers 26). This detailed description not only highlights the technological intricacy involved but also blurs the line between light as an ethereal

phenomenon and its tangible, structured manifestation. The juxtaposition of Hagia Sophia's divine illumination with the Cavern's darkness embodies this tension, underscoring the material complexities of digital simulations and challenging the idealized notions of transparency and transcendence.

Architecture helps reinforce this materiality: "buildings were art's skin" and a temple's "texture and light changed with the season, the hour, the thousand-and-one viewing angle. *Frozen music*, yes. But also thawed paint" (Powers 138). In this synesthetic description, it becomes obvious that vision is not separate from other senses. The notion that even transparency has its own materiality becomes evident in another scene, where a bird slams into the picture window, "a feathered fist bouncing off the plate glass with a smack. At the sickening pop, Adie's body ruptured" (143). The bird eventually awakens and flies away as if nothing happened, unsettling Adie's colleagues. Here, nonhuman life is acknowledged not just visually but audibly, suggesting that the "acknowledgment" of other species typically occurs on a multisensory level. Furthermore, the scene challenges the notion of transparency, as even what appears to be transparent material (a glass window) is revealed to be solid and unyielding. It also ruptures the human from within, serving as a reminder of their own mortality and vulnerability.

Characters in the novel appear to "look for something better than this body" (Powers 321), only to find themselves gravitating back towards it. As scholars have noted, "In der Suche nach der ultimativen Kopie zeigt sich ein uraltes Verlangen nach Transzendenz, nach einer Befreiung von den körperlichen Begrenzungen der Welt und der Wille zur Macht" ("In the search for the ultimate copy, an ancient desire for transcendence reveals itself—a yearning for liberation from the physical limitations of the world and the will to power," Kley 431). The Cavern presumably represents "humanity's final victory over the tyranny of matter," until it does not (Powers 267). This becomes obvious in Adie's observation that "All she lacked was dirt under her fingernails" (Powers 56). This yearning to transcend materiality goes hand in hand with a fascination for the power of the mind: the Joint Chiefs of the lab seek what art promises, "to break the bonds of matter and make the mind real" (Powers 396).

However, this pursuit initiates a paradoxical return to the very thing one seeks to escape. As articulated in the text, the problem with the virtual room is that "nothing bleeds. Nothing rots. Nothing breaks" (Powers 144), as it seems to lack the physicality it aims to evade. Additionally, there is a need for "color, texture, and motion laid on top of the traditional height, width, and depth" (Powers 79-80). The fantasy of escaping the constraints of the body ironically leads to a desire to materialize ideas, encapsulated in the notion of "the word made flesh" (Powers 215). The more the researchers work towards "the final escape from brute matter" (Powers 62), the more they begin to acknowledge the materiality of information.

According to scholars such as Philipp Löffler, Taimur presumably "exceeds the confines of the body and the empirical world that he is so hopelessly caught up in" (98). Yet, the novel also resists this interpretation; Taimur's plotline also suggests that one needs "to break the terror of existence by depicting it" (Powers 228), so those confines cannot be exceeded. Taimur is not allowed to look, and "the crib where they've dumped you is too dark to see. Inch by inch, your fingertips cover its surface [...] It stinks of soot and vegetables" (69). When he manages to crack the seam of his gag, a "gush of fresh air knifes into you. You shove your nose into the stream. It tastes like God in your nostrils" (72). Later on, his body gives in to an infection and a "steel chill spreads" from his extremities (151), recalling the steel of the cavern. He also keeps hearing the background hum of traffic (98), which creates another connection to the perpetual hum of the lab. His routine includes scooping "cold water" over his head, armpits, and groin (100), so all of these visceral descriptions stand in contrast to the "color washes" (168) of the VR. As Benny Pock also suggests, Taimur actually "discovers the quintessential role of his body in defining his existence" (125) which also becomes more obvious in his effort to "summon the sensual and material basis of reading" (127).

In the novel, both reading and virtuality share this desire to "make worlds" and escape the present one. "Reading serves as the process by which both the Cavern's inventors and Taimur negotiate the differences between their physical circumstances and their alternative realities" (Szadziewicz 95). In this context, reading becomes a hideout from the real world, a place of comfort where the self withdraws: "simulated spaces of aesthetic refuge, traditionally books and museums but lately movie theaters, computers and other virtual geographies, theme parks, and television" (Dewey 11). In this anthropocentric world, books become perfect for getting lost in, but can also be easily replaced with virtual worlds and other forms of withdrawal. This also recalls Rosi Braidotti's concept of "becoming-imperceptible": "What we humans truly yearn for is to disappear by merging into this generative flow of becoming, the precondition for which is the loss, disappearance, and disruption of the atomised, individual self" (Braidotti 136).

Yet, Powers challenges precisely this form of virtual disembodiment and escapism associated with reading practices, suggesting that the power of literature resides precisely in the opposite: to make the body more present. Even more, it suggests that "becoming-imperceptible" requires the body, rather than escaping it. As Szadziewicz notes, in this process, "the body takes on an unusual role of being both absent and present" (95). In this context, she quotes the passage in which "a floating finger moved upon this list, a disembodied digit that tracked the waves of Spider's wand" (Powers 14). She adds: "The 'floating' and 'disembodied' representation created by the programmer's 'wand' suggests at once a kind of *magic* as it simultaneously emphasizes the transformation and dissolution of the body. Signifi-

cantly, however, the body stays present: The 'floating finger' remains, as does the human operator" (Szadziewicz 95).

At the same time, there is another "magic room" depicted by the novel, which is not the Cavern, but the graphic engine room, the "*Cavern's cavern*" (Powers 31).

> She made her way back up the mountain, to the Realization Lab and its magic room in question. […]
>
> Inside the RL, the redwood and river rock gave way to long olive corridors and linen-lined cubicle partitions that teemed with the same jittery bee-loud buzz that had seduced her out here in the first place. (Powers 25)

The phrase "jittery bee-loud buzz" blends auditory, kinetic, and visual sensations. The description not only conveys the sound of the buzzing but also evokes a visual image of bees and their restless movement, effectively merging sound and sight into a single, vivid sensory experience. This synesthetic description immerses the reader in the environment of the RL, while also blurring the lines between nature and technology, bees and machines, humans and nonhumans. This is further reinforced later on in the novel when "thoughts flit about you like bees" (389).

The Cavern becomes the epitome of anthropocentrism, embodying the Platonist dream to "make our interior visions more real than *mundane materiality* ever lets them be" (Blume). Yet, Powers' synesthetic descriptions redirect attention precisely to that "mundane materiality." This mundane materiality even veers into the monstrous, precisely because it is either ignored, repelled, or mocked. The novel reveals how the silicon bodies of technology are not only ignored, but they become monstrous entities that need to be manipulated. This occurs when Jackdaw takes Adie to take a look at the "monsters" for the first time:

> These *shaggy dungeon creatures* had managed to turn their airy park ranger's roost into a *subterranean wonderland*. […] Even the copious indoor plantings could not entirely *soften the feel of chrome*, steel circuit-card cages, and CRT screens. Here and there, *squares of acoustical ceiling tile* fell jimmied open, spilling out *the snakes' nest of cabling* they hid. Hardest of all on her, the place *whirred*. A *perpetual low-grade hum hung in the air*, the spin of disk drives, the clack of keys, the *high-pitched metal ping of blocks* of data being manipulated. (Powers 25; emphasis added)

These excerpts offer a vivid portrayal of the physical environment within the RL, highlighting its industrial and mechanical character. Descriptions like "shaggy dungeon creature" and "subterranean wonderland" conjure images of a tangible,

tactile landscape much like a Cavern, though here it is one dominated by hardware infrastructure. These evocative phrases immerse readers in the sensory richness of the RL, emphasizing its materiality and corporeal presence. It adds a new layer of meaning to the "other," virtual Cavern, too.

Technological bodies are portrayed as both invisible and monstrous, reflecting societal trends that prioritize abstract, software-driven conceptions of virtual reality and artificial intelligence. While earlier representations of AI emphasized its physicality—consider Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* in the nineteenth century or Isaac Asimov's *I, Robot* in the twentieth century—modern depictions often reimagine AI as abstract entities residing in servers and virtual spaces. This shift is exemplified in the cyberpunk genre and works like William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) and Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash* (1992). Such transformations parallel broader societal trends, wherein the tangibility of AI gives way to a more digital, software-centric culture.

However, even these cyberpunk texts reveal a paradoxical tension between the transcendence of the flesh and a continued reliance on visceral imagery. AI bodies, though frequently presented as abstract, are briefly rendered perceptible through multisensory cues. For instance, in *Neuromancer*, Gibson describes the digital landscape as a pulsating, immersive experience, with Case perceiving the AI's presence through the hum of data streams. Similarly, in *Snow Crash*, auditory imagery conveys the dissonance of the virtual world, with the virus manifesting as a relentless, discordant hum. These moments of sensory engagement challenge the dominant narrative of AI as purely algorithmic. However, the critique in cyberpunk remains largely tied to its dystopian tone, warning against the alienation and dehumanization that accompany efforts to escape the material world.

By contrast, Richard Powers' *Plowing the Dark* critiques transcendence by shifting the focus toward mundane materiality, as well as the inseparability of technology and nature. The depiction of the RL's machinery as "ugly and septic" (30) roots virtual environments in their physical and ecological contexts, emphasizing the labor and material resources required to sustain digital experiences. Powers reframes technology not as a space for disembodied escape but as a tangible extension of human and natural systems.

The "feel of chrome," the "squares of acoustical ceiling tile," and the "perpetual low-grade hum" paint a synesthetic experience of the Realization Lab. This does not merely deepen the immersion into its physicality, imbuing the lab with a palpable presence, but it also blurs the boundaries between the physical and the digital. The juxtaposition of these sensory elements serves to engage readers with the RL as a multisensory space where the materiality of the digital realm is keenly felt, rather than hidden or transcended. This is further reinforced by the image of the "snakes' nest of cabling," which once again couples nature and technology, this time through the mention of snakes rather than bees. The image also evokes his-

torical and moral associations; in the biblical story, the snake symbolizes evil. However, by situating this image in the mundane setting of an engine room, the novel gestures toward a renewed understanding of bodies, challenging their demonization by recontextualizing them in an everyday environment.

Similarly, transcendence and paradise are usually envisioned as flight, the soul's elevation towards the skies. The novel's mystical encounter between Adie and Taimur can be interpreted in light of this tradition. Towards the end of the novel, Adie enters the Cavern and experiences a sensory overload and a heightened sense of awareness, feeling as though her body is both grounded and lifted at once. She encounters Taimur, whose presence seems also ethereal, and they share a connection that seems to challenge the boundaries of the physical world. One of the most controversial scenes of the novel, this episode has been read as a "vague utopia of compassion and communion between people by means of the imagination, which is completely independent of physical media and conditions" (Meier 166). Harris views this encounter as an inevitable intrusion: a "supernatural event" that has "intruded into the rationality and materiality of an otherwise realistic text" (121). Löffler interprets it as a moment of "structural closure" (103), while Johanna Heil reads it as an "intrusion of the Real [that] discloses a deconstruction of both the Symbolic and the Imaginary [...and] reveals ruptures and paradoxes that consciousness usually smooths out" (170).

However, this controversial scene also illuminates the novel's deeper interrogation of escapism and world-making. The juxtaposition of the researchers' efforts to achieve a "matter transporter" (Powers 308) with Taimur's captivity reveals a nuanced perspective on the concept of freedom. The researchers' quest to transcend physical limitations through virtual reality mirrors Taimur's literal imprisonment, suggesting that their pursuit of erasing time, space, and bodily constraints is not actual freedom, but rather another form of imprisonment. In both plotlines, there is a paradoxical relationship between the desire for flight and the feeling of captivity. This desire is fueled by a shared restlessness that underscores a profound existential burden, wherein mere existence becomes intolerable, prompting a desperate search for an escape.

Yet, what these characters have to confront is precisely that deeper entanglement in their existential constraints. So, the yearning for transcendence becomes a double-edged sword. The novel complicates the notion of flight, suggesting that in their pursuit of freedom, the characters inadvertently construct their own prisons. This is additionally captured in the line, "In captivity, every inference is the freest flight" (Powers 185). The researchers' and Taimur's experiences highlight how attempts to escape existence lead them back to its undeniable, mundane materiality, indicating that they cannot merely "transform the ordinary" (165). This convergence of the ordinary and extraordinary challenges the notion of par-

adise as an escape, suggesting instead that freedom lies in recognizing the burden of existence itself.

As such, freedom comes when these characters recognize their inseparability from the nonhuman realm, including their own bodies and nonhuman life, whether nature or technology. This connects the novel to other environmental works by Powers, such as *The Overstory* or *Bewilderment*. Adie's epiphany that "her body was the sound and light" (168) and Taimur's interaction with the plant in his cell, realizing "the world goes simple, finally. Air, water, light, heat" (385), underscore this interconnectedness. Their moments of liberation are tied to acknowledging the agency of the nonhuman and their integration with it. In the mundane acts of life, such as patting bedcovers or tending to plants, humans can find a deeper sense of existence. As the novel illustrates, "Water wanted to pour. Shirts wanted wearing; picture frames, straightening" (225), highlighting the agency of the nonhuman in these interactions.

Moreover, Taimur's literal act of slamming his forehead into the wall before his mystical encounter underscores the necessity of escaping the tyranny of anthropocentrism, rather than matter. Thus, the novel suggests that freedom and a sense of belonging arise not from escaping the material world but from embracing and interacting with it, including the bugs and spiders in one's room. This shift from seeking transcendence to acknowledging the interconnectedness of all life forms and the inherent agency within the nonhuman realm throws a new light on the final encounter between Adie and Taimur. Their individual selves became "imperceptible," so they can become light and air.

In the end, Adie's winged feet above the trees recall an observation she made at the beginning of the novel. Before she became part of the team, Adie imagined the RL as populated by people wearing "open-toe sandals made out of silicon" (9). This imagery symbolically connects humans to the nonhuman silicon bodies prevalent within the lab's environment. Adie's vision of the lab juxtaposes everyday human elements like sandals with the artificial materiality of silicon, suggesting a blurring of boundaries between organic and synthetic, human and nonhuman. This is another example of mundane materiality that shifts the attention back to a "kinship of posthumanity" (Filip 270) that underscores the contiguity between the human and nonhuman realms.

Plowing the Dark seems to replicate, but ultimately challenges the Western emphasis on visual aesthetics through its portrayal of digital reality, screens, vision, images, and virtual reality. The novel's focus on art, architecture, and digital landscapes aligns with traditional notions of beauty and aesthetic pleasure associated with visual representations. However, Powers simultaneously challenges this focus by shifting the narrative towards themes of monstrosity and vulnerability, particularly evident in his depiction of the hardware. The hardware, here portrayed

as "shaggy dungeon creatures" and "subterranean wonders," disrupts conventional notions of beauty, emphasizing the raw, industrial nature of technology.

Moreover, Powers explores the multifaceted nature of light, presenting it not only as a visual phenomenon but also as something tangible, with materiality and structure. The title itself, *Plowing the Dark*, suggests a material quality to darkness, further blurring the boundaries between the visual and the tactile. Additionally, the novel gradually shifts its focus towards mundane materiality, highlighting the everyday aspects of technology and the human experience. This juxtaposition of visual aesthetics with themes of the monstrous, vulnerability, and mundane materiality challenges traditional perceptions of beauty and invites readers to reconsider their relationship with technology and the world around them. To further illustrate Powers' exploration of the nonhuman environment, I will now briefly focus on *The Overstory*.

Literary Synesthesia in *The Overstory*

The Overstory explores the theme of mundane materiality through a multisensory aesthetic that immerses readers in what I call "tree experiences." The novel positions trees and nature as vital, living entities with agency, rather than mere background elements in human lives. From the novel's opening pages, sensory details bring the nonhuman world to life: "[The pine's] needles *scent* the air, and a force *hums* in the heart of the wood. Her ears tune down to the lowest frequencies. The tree is saying things, in words before words" (Powers, *The Overstory* 3; emphasis added). Here, smell and sound evoke an intimate interaction with trees, and this sensory richness recurs throughout the novel, reinforcing the interconnectedness of humans and the natural world. The recurring hum amplifies this multisensory immersion.

Patricia Westerford, a dendrologist, marvels at the process of photosynthesis, describing it to her students as:

> A miracle, she tells her students, photosynthesis: a feat of chemical engineering underpinning creation's entire cathedral. All the razzmatazz of life on Earth is a free-rider on that mind-boggling magic act. The secret of life: *plants eat light and air and water*, and the stored energy goes on to make and do all things. She leads her charges into the inner sanctum of the mystery: Hundreds of chlorophyll molecules assemble into antennae complexes. Countless such antennae arrays form up into thylakoid discs. Stacks of these discs align in a single chloroplast. Up to a hundred such solar power factories power a single plant cell. Millions of cells may shape a single leaf. A million leaves rustle in a single glorious ginkgo. (Powers, *The Overstory* 124)

This passage not only captures a sense of wonder at the mathematical sublime and the intricate design and order of life, but also reaffirms the novel's commitment to emphasizing the often-overlooked materiality of plants.

Neelay Mehta, another central character, bridges the realms of technology and ecological awareness through his work as a game developer. At one point, he reflects on the interplay of the organic and the technological, marveling at the microprocessor: "That's a microprocessor? It's like a bug with square legs" (92). His ambition to create immersive digital worlds is fueled by his profound connection to nature. Neelay's fascination with computers begins in a life-altering moment when he climbs an oak tree and falls, leaving him paralyzed from the waist down. He wonders whether "the branches jerked" (102), and as he lies on the ground, time seems to stop. Gazing upward, he has a vision:

> Bark disintegrates; wood clarifies. The trunk turns into stacks of spreading metropolis, networks of conjoined cells *pulsing* with energy and *liquid sun*, water rising through long thin reeds, rings of them banded together into pipes that draw dissolved minerals up through the narrowing tunnels of transparent twig and out through their waving tips while sun-made sustenance drops down in tubes just inside them. A colossal, rising, reaching, stretching space elevator of a billion independent parts, shuttling the air into the sky and storing the sky deep underground, sorting possibility from out of nothing: the most perfect piece of self-writing code that his eyes could hope to see. Then his eyes close in shock and Neelay shuts down. (102)

The passage echoes Patricia Westerford's description of photosynthesis while expanding it with vivid multisensory imagery and a depiction of capillary action, where a liquid defies gravity to ascend. The phrase "liquid sun" introduces an oxymoronic quality, as it contrasts with the more familiar image of water, which is typically cool and blue, whereas sunlight is hot and intangible. Here, sunlight acquires a tactile dimension, suggesting both the flow of liquid gold and an embodied experience of light. This juxtaposition imbues the ordinary processes of nature with a magical quality, reminiscent of the enchantment found in magical realism.

The paragraph concludes with Neelay "shutting down" like a computer, a moment that emphasizes his profound integration of human and technological experiences. Later, Neelay has another vision while visiting Stanford's campus, rolling through its tree-lined inner court. He moves "from planter to planter, touching the beings, smelling them, listening to their rustles. […] He touches their bark and feels, just beneath their skin, the teeming assemblies of cells, like whole-planetary civilizations, pulse and hum" (110). This scene recalls not only the hum introduced at the beginning of the novel but also the hum of the virtual reality lab in *Plowing*

the Dark, linking sensory immersion with both natural and technological environments.

Through the imagery of pulsing energy and liquid sun, *The Overstory* gives sunlight a tactile quality and blurs the boundaries between human and nonhuman experience (in this case, a tree). It suggests that what might seem "alien phenomenology" is already present within human perception, even if not consciously recognized. Neelay's body itself becomes increasingly intertwined with nonhuman imagery: his cheeks "shift like continental plates," "black wires" sprout from his privates, and his hair "flows in thick vines that fall all around his elongated face" (105). This transformation resists anthropomorphism, where human traits are imposed on nonhuman entities.[3] Instead, the novel suggests that the human is already partly nonhuman, a reality rooted in deep ecological interconnectedness. As Patricia quotes Thoreau, "Am I not partly leaves and vegetable mould myself?" (129).

The magic of mundane materiality is further exemplified in Dorothy's description of trees making "sugar and wood from nothing, from air, and sun, and rain" (168), which echoes Taimur and Adie's realization that they, too, are composed of light and air. This approach cultivates a sense of humility distinct from the awe inspired by extraordinary nature and sublime landscapes in Romantic literature. Instead, the novel criticizes the exploitation of Earth's resources and the utopian idealism that can drive destructive radicalism, both rooted in an anthropocentrism marked by exceptionalism. The novel suggests that the path forward requires humility and an acknowledgment that humans are not the center of the universe.[4] As such, one does not need grand landscapes to appreciate nature; it is already present and "hovering above our heads": "something in the air's *scent* commands the woman: *Close your eyes* and think of willow … What floats over your head right now?" (3).

The novel deepens this concept with the line, "That's the problem with people, their root problem. Life runs alongside them, unseen. Right here, right next. Creating the soil. Cycling water. Trading in nutrients. Making weather. Building atmosphere. Feeding and curing and sheltering more kinds of creatures than people know how to count" (4). By drawing attention to overlooked elements like soil, water, and atmosphere, Powers highlights the unnoticed processes that sustain life. These hidden dynamics challenge anthropocentrism and underscore the mundane materiality of existence, where profound ecological processes unfold constantly, unseen but indispensable.

Powers juxtaposes the enchantment of magical realism with precise scientific detail to inspire humility toward nature. For example, he describes the process of transpiration with meticulous care:

> In summer, water rises through the xylem and disperses out of the million tiny mouths on the underside of leaves, a hundred gallons a day evaporating

> from the tree's airy crown into the humid Iowa air [...] In winter, bare branches *click* and *hum* above the drifts, their blunt resting buds almost sinister with waiting. (15)

By blending scientific precision with a sense of wonder, Powers encourages readers to find magic in the mundane, recognizing the extraordinary in everyday natural phenomena. Even more, these vital clicks keep recurring. Branches "*click* in the breeze as if this moment, too, so insignificant, so transitory, will be written into its rings," and they also "wave their semaphores against the bluest of midwestern winter skies" (23). The sound of these clicks connects this imagery to the technological realm and the clicks of the keyboard, where touch and sound merge. Once more, the acknowledgment of the nonhuman emerges in subtle sounds and vibrations, inseparable from other senses.

This idea is reinforced in Adam's experience of climbing his maple tree, where he feels "how much better life is above ground level" and observes the palmate leaves waving "in the gentle breeze, a crowd of five-fingered hands," accompanied by "a *sound* like *light rain*, the shower of thousands of tiny bud scales" (52). The scene's magical realism arises from its multisensory aesthetic, intertwining touch, sound, and vision. Light has weight and tactility; and language itself acts like a sensory fabric. The very act of writing demands pressure, whether that of a pen on paper or that of a finger on a keyboard. These physical gestures of creation suggest the interconnection of human expression and the material world, where even the act of writing embodies a tactile engagement with matter. Literature, then, becomes a means through which this mundane materiality is both practiced and recognized.

Powers employs a multisensory aesthetic to reveal the deep, often unnoticed connections between humans and the nonhuman world, encompassing both nature and technology. In *Plowing the Dark*, this aesthetic aligns with the monstrous to represent marginalized technological bodies while evoking human mortality and vulnerability. In *The Overstory*, it merges with magical realism to cultivate sensory attunement with the natural world, fostering a sense of humility and aliveness. These dimensions complement each other, forming two facets of the same idea that humans are inseparable from their environment.

Conclusion: The Relevance of Literature

Literature has long been celebrated for its visionary capacity to imagine new worlds. Yet, this vision often remains tethered to anthropocentric and humanist perspectives that overlook literature's ability to cultivate embodied awareness. Richard Powers seeks to "close the gap between people and other living things" (Hamner), illustrating how the power of literature lies in its capacity to challenge the dream of transparency and human exceptionalism. Instead of striving to control

bodies, literature invites us to feel with them, embracing vulnerability and granting access to the ineffable world of the senses. Through the act of reading, literature fosters connections—not through telepathic streams of data between brains, as envisioned by technoliberalism, but by creating a space where the human and nonhuman interact on a multisensory level.

While storytelling is often associated with individualism, Powers offers a different approach. Storytelling need not center exclusively on human subjectivity; instead, it can reimagine creativity beyond anthropocentric terms. Creativity, rather than being a product of the isolated mind "hovering above," emerges from a reciprocal engagement with the world. This reorientation of creativity intervenes in contemporary debates on artificial intelligence, particularly the fear of AI replacing human creativity. Such concerns appear misplaced when viewed through this lens, as each entity—human, nonhuman, or technological—engages with the world in unique ways.

By rethinking creativity and storytelling as interconnected processes, literature can help us reevaluate our relationship with the environment, often perceived as external and separate from ourselves. Through the use of synesthesia, writers blur the boundaries between human and nonhuman experiences, crafting more inclusive and ecologically conscious narratives. Synesthesia allows for the emergence of an immersive and embodied aesthetic experience, inviting readers to engage with texts on a multisensory level. This kind of writing fosters a deeper connection to the environment, emphasizing the interdependence of all living and nonliving entities and encouraging a more profound awareness of the world's intricate materiality.

Notes

[1] For a more in-depth analysis of literary synesthesia and its manifestations in other contemporary literary works, see also my monograph *Self-Help in the Digital Age* (2024), which has an entire chapter dedicated to literary synesthesia, while also exploring other works like Gary Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story*, Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy, and Richard Powers' *Generosity: An Enhancement*. See also my article on Margaret Atwood's *Old Babes in the Wood* (MAS, 2024) or my paper on contemporary postcolonial fiction (2024) for further examples.

[2] Don DeLillo's *Zero K* (2016) similarly explores humanity's desire to transcend the limitations of mortality through technology. Besides their thematic affinities, the tone and style of the novels differ: Powers' work is more descriptive, while DeLillo's is more minimalist. The impact of these stylistic choices on their message and reception warrants further exploration.

[3] Powers brings the nonhuman to the forefront by using magical realist elements rather than ventriloquism. In an interview with Everett Hamner, Powers admits, "If I could have managed it, I would have tried to write a novel where all the main char-

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acters were trees! But such an act of identification was beyond my power as a novelist, and it probably would have been beyond the imaginative power of identification of most readers". Instead, he emphasizes the importance of attuning ourselves to the frequencies where we can hear and listen to the trees—an act of acknowledgment and "response-ability" (Jennings 29). As Dunja Mohr notes, "not (directly) representing but acknowledging other lifeforms' views, avoiding the ventriloquist's pitfall, is in fact an honest and post-anthropocentric narratological stance" (58).

[4] See also my upcoming article on "Ecological Affects," which further explores ecological feelings such as humility and aliveness.

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Biography

Loredana Filip earned her PhD in American literature and cultural studies from Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich, where she was a fellow at the Collaborative Research Centre "Cultures of Vigilance." She holds an MA in North American Studies from Friedrich-Alexander University of Erlangen-Nürnberg, where she also taught and supported international students. Her research blends literary studies, environmental humanities, and affect theory, exploring how everyday reading shapes ecological aesthetics, multisensory engagement, and human–nonhuman relations. She is the author of *Self-Help in the Digital Age: TED Talks, Speculative Fiction, and the Role of Reading* (De Gruyter, 2024), and her work has appeared in *COPAS, Medical Humanities*, and several edited collections. In addition to her academic writing, she publishes creative nonfiction, literary fiction, and children's books under the pen name Laurel Dunn.

The Vulnerable Body in Extraction Literature:

Eco-Sickness in Caridad Svich's *The Way of Water* and Jennifer Haigh's *Heat and Light*

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Abstract

Contemporary American literature that addresses the social and cultural anxieties about the impending climate crisis, by focusing on the environmental threats caused by fossil fuel extraction, can be understood as breaking a long silence fostered by dominant discourses of prosperity that these energy regimes promised. While climate change speculative literature tends to concentrate on their long-term nefarious consequences in imagined dystopic futures, contemporary petro- and hydro-fracking narratives focused on the present, frequently represent the damage caused by fossil fuel extraction not only to the environment but to also the equally vulnerable human body. This article, using insights from energy humanities and ecocriticism, discusses how this dissolution of the nature/body boundary is represented in two texts, Caridad Svich's play *The Way of Water* (2012) and Jennifer Haigh's novel *Heat and Light* (2016), which directly address oil production and shale gas extraction. It will examine how their narrative strategies invest in the trope of eco-sickness developed by Heather Houser (2016), to render visible and intimate the frequently hidden costs of fossil fuel energy systems, signaling how human corporality is inseparable from the environment.

Keywords

Eco-Sickness; Energy Regimes; Fracking Fiction; Petrofiction; Trans-Corporeality.

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Introduction: Literature and Fossil Fuel Extraction

As studies in Energy and Environmental Humanities have convincingly argued, human concepts of social and economic progress have, since the first industrial revolution, been grounded on a variety of extractive practices of underground resources that, hidden in plain view, have mapped narratives of present growth and projections of prosperous futures. If it is evident that "we are all citizens and subjects of fossil fuels" and that "without these forms of energy we would never have been modern" (Szeman and Boyer 1), it is equally clear that most cultural discourses of extraction-dependent progress have, for a long time, obscured a number of enmeshed imbrications that unravel its apparent simplicities. The most unequivocal fallacy that can no longer be ignored is the trope of an inexhaustible Earth, immune to the double threats of resource depletion and environmental damage, a myth that the impending global warming crisis has irrefutably exposed. Other implications of fossil dominance also problematize the idea of a global energy-based growth, ranging from the economic distribution of its benefits within national communities, to the geopolitical consequences of processes of extractivism[1] whereby the raw materials hauled out of under-industrialized and economically fragile geographies contribute mostly to the wealth of distant and more prosperous societies.

Literature has responded to the many layered impacts of these energy regimes, reflecting the diverse sociocultural discourses that surround particular extraction practices, as Frederick Buell discusses in "A Short History of Oil Cultures: Or, the Marriage of Catastrophe and Exuberance." These approaches, as he argues, have shifted from a celebration of exuberant growth associated with the possibilities provided by new underground resources (be they coal, oil, uranium-fuelled nuclear power or natural gas), to a sense of impending catastrophe, based both on resource anxiety, which debunks what Szeman calls "fictions of surplus" (Szeman 334), and on the awareness of irreversible environmental damage they cause.

The impact of coal, which signaled the first break with biologically-based energy sources such as wood, wax, tallow or sperm whale oil[2] and established the era of fossil fuel,[3] is a case in point. While it created a hitherto unimaginable commodified vision of what geologist Bruce Braun has called a "vertical nature" (40), giving rise to a new "sinister cultural geography of depths" (Buell 279), it also generated a cultural and literary discourse that celebrated the liberation of human society from "nature," promising unimaginable progress and social changes. As Heidi Scott discusses in *Fuel: An Ecocritical History*, after the synergy between coal and mechanical sciences produced the steam engine, not only were natural resources able to be exploited on a much larger scale, but concepts of being in the world and of connectivity were radically changed. As she points out, once transportation "was no longer guided by natural conditions like seasons and weather," the concept of distance and of being of one place changed, and "older social networks based on

local production, neighbor support and barter exchange" began to lose their foundations (Scott 122).

The fact that these new possibilities had other visible negative implications created a tension with the cultural discourse of unstoppable progress heralded by fuel energy. As Buell observes, coal extraction "ended up creating a variety of machine-made organic nightmares" (279). These nefarious environmental implications were amplified by the labor intensive and highly hazardous practices that sustained coal capitalism, fostering, as Elizabeth Miller discusses in *Extraction Ecologies and the Literature of the Long Exhaustion*, a wave of literature that did more than passively register the impacts of industrial extraction, becoming a discursive site where this transformation was mediated (Miller 14).

In the United States, this trend, which according to Stephanie Elise Booth can be read as reflecting an evolution of attitudes associated with different time periods,[4] focused mainly on the representations of the labor of coal miners and of their communities. Health hazards like the black lung disease, the body-breaking working conditions, and labor struggles shaped most American coal fiction of the First Industrial Revolution (LeMenager 5). Two early twenty century novels, Arthur Newell's A *Knight of the Toilers* (1905) and Upton Sinclair´s *King Coal* (1917) illustrate this literary approach that paid little attention to the extended environmental effects of the use of coal, concentrating instead on the social practices associated with its extraction.[5] While the first imagines the great success of a fictional miners' strike, Sinclair's classic, perhaps the first attempt to describe realistically the working and living conditions of American coal miners, fictionalizes a real labor conflict (the Colorado Coal Strikes of 1913-1914).

Early oil extraction cultural discourses following Edwin Drake's drilling of the first oil well in 1859, in Titusville Pennsylvania, embraced more visibly the imagery of exuberance identified by Buell. One of the early oil tropes heralded the new energy source as introducing a different relation between humans and the treasures hidden beneath their feet, positing that the new fossil fuel was easy on the body, no longer requiring the hazardous work associated with coal mining. This is the position defended by John McLaurin, one of oil´s most prominent defenders. In *Sketches in Crude Oil* (1896), he argued that the discovery of oil signaled that "after sixty centuries the game of 'hide-and-seek' between Mother Earth and her children has terminated in favor of the latter" and that by having "pierced nature's internal laboratories, tapping the huge oil-tanks wherein the products of her quiet chemistry had accumulated 'in bond', humans had liberated 'the modern angel of light'" (McLaurin 1-2). This free-flowing "blessing to humanity" (McLaurin 372) that would require barely any physical effort was also initially perceived as creating new opportunities for enterprising individuals. Now, without the backing of big industrial structures, individuals with only a small crew could strike it rich on their own. This myth of a self-reliant open-

to-all capitalist prosperity, based on daring initiative, shapes Paul Giddens' *The Birth of the Oil Industry* (1938), an account of the first ten years of the American oil extraction experience. The consolidation of corporations into vertically integrated monopolies and the savage competition and corruption that Ida Tarbell documented in *The History of the Standard Oil Company* (1905) would eventually replace that early narrative with one of greed, ruthless industrial empire-building and associated political corruption[6] fictionalized by Upton Sinclair in *Oil!* (1927),[7] set during the California oil boom in the first two decades of the twentieth century.[8]

It could be argued that in the United States, this early attention was replaced by a long silence, and that the age of acceleration that followed WWII created a literary representational paradox as the social and cultural consequences of oil extraction – middle class prosperity, suburbanization, car culture and youth rebellion – were all predicated on an unquestioned energy dependency that was never fictionally scrutinized.

This deficit of attention was identified by Amitav Gosh in his influential 1992 essay "Petrofiction: The Oil Encounter and the Novel," which discusses why, during those post- WWII decades "the oil encounter had produced scarcely a single work of note" (29). For Americans, he suggested, that "muteness" is understandable as for many of them "oil smells bad. It reeks of unavoidable overseas entanglements, a worrisome foreign dependency and expensive military enterprises; of thousands of dead civilians and children and all the troublesome questions that lie in their graves," covered by "regimes of strict corporate secrecy" (Gosh 30). Assuming that these conditions explain why it was "inconceivable" to "imagine a great American writer taking on the Oil Encounter"[9] (30), Gosh also questioned the absence of literary renditions of these transnational unequal extraction experiences, finding them only in Saudi author Abdelrahman Munif´s novel *Cities of Salt* (1984).[10] Since Gosh's diagnosis, a significant number of post-colonial novels have focused on the entanglements of this oil encounter.[11] American literature, responding to the challenges identified by Rob Nixon as the "twinned calamities of squandered time" namely "oil's receding tides and the advancing tides of climate change" (102) began to break what Stacey Balkan and Swaralipi Nandi identified, quoting Frederic Jameson, as "the 'present absence' of oil in the American imagination" (2).

An analysis of the diverse approaches that have shaped this awakening identifies two major trends – an investment in the imagination of extrapolative futures created by global warming and destroyed eco-systems, and a representation of contemporary scenarios of risk and already existing environmental damage. Speculative fiction has been addressing openly or indirectly the destructive impacts of fossil fuel energy regimes, depicting the results of contemporary inaction to replace them. In many climate dystopias that portray specific consequences of global warming, be it sea level rising as Kim Stanley Robinson's *New York 2140* (2017) or extreme regional draught as Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Water Knife* (2015), the

harm caused by fossil fuel energy regimes stands in the background of the narrative, as an implied cause. In parallel, a significant number of novels engage the peak-oil trope[12] that predicts the dwindling and eventual world-wide exhaustion of this resource before alternative energy systems are established. This eco-dystopian construction of imaginary societal collapse is at the center of James Howard Kunster's *World Made by Hand* (2008) and Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl* (2009), but also emerges as an unmentioned but essential factor in the construction of the "post- apocalyptic wasteland" of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, where the absence of references to the no-longer available oil can be read as "contributing to the novel's delineation of American culture as created, maintained and ultimately destroyed by petro-capitalism" (Donnelly 158).

Alongside these projections of possible environmentally damaged tomorrows, other works of fiction have concentrated their gaze on the present, reflecting existing concerns about the destruction already caused by fossil fuel extraction. The discussion that follows focuses on two texts that engage with highly recognizable American contemporary debates about oil drilling and tshale gas extraction by hydraulic fracturing: the play *The Way of Water* (2016) by Caridad Svich, which revisits the Deepwater Horizon BP oil spilling accident, and Jennifer Haigh's novel *Heat and Light* (2016), which depicts the aftermath of a small former mining town's acceptance of a shale gas hydraulic fracturing project. Focusing on the narrative strategies used in both texts to make visible the environmental damage caused by these extraction regimes, the analysis will examine how they expand the concept of a wounded eco-sphere to include scenarios of human vulnerability, mobilizing the trope of sickness to signify the interdependency between the natural world and the human body affected by the same toxic threats.

Toxic Extraction and the Vulnerable Body

In her 2016 study *Ecosickness in Contemporary U.S. Fiction: Environment and Affect*, Heather Houser identifies an emergent literary mode that "joins ecological and somatic damage though narrative affect," highlighting the interdependence of earth and the body "to bring readers to environmental consciousness" (2). By representing human bodies enmeshed in their environments and foregrounding "the conceptual and material dissolution of the body-environment boundary" (Houser 3), these eco-sickness narratives offer emotionally vivid senses of risk likely to "involve readers ethically in our collective body and environmental futures" (3). And because the imagination of disease in these texts is grounded on material, measurable realities, this mode of ecofiction can also be seen to contribute to a dialogue between scientific discourses and affect, promoting, as Houser argues, "alternative epistemologies of emotion and narration" (7).

This encounter between a damaged Earth and a sick body, between the planetary dimensions of climate crisis and the most private of experiential spheres,

can be traced back to Rachel Carson's decision to preface her scientific study *Silent Spring* (1962) with a fictional text, "A Fable for Tomorrow," where animal and human bodies are presented as barometers of ecological toxicity, in this case caused by DDT and other poisonous pesticides.

If Carson's scientific study, which launched the twentieth century American Environmentalist movement, establishes a direct cause-effect logic between toxic pesticides and "the shadow of death" that affects animals and humans (22), nor all ecosickness fiction draws such direct causal links between the injured body and the injured Earth.[13] As Houser argues, the creative imagination does not always "connect the dots" and literature's great contribution to its dialogue with science "comes through most compellingly when it brackets causes and the empirical approaches that isolate them" (6). In the two texts selected for analysis, that causality appears to be more explicitly suggested, and their discussion will attempt to clarify the different processes used to invite the reader to see how the embodied self is enmeshed in processes of environmental destruction caused by fossil fuel extraction even when that link is not scientifically confirmed.

The Way of Water, a 2012 play by Caridad Svich, which was the recipient of an OBIE Award,[14] revisits the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill, the worst marine drilling disaster in history, which killed 11 workers and gushed nearly five million gallons of crude oil into the Gulf of Mexico,[15] devastating hundreds of miles of fragile wetlands. The disaster was given an unprecedented high visibility, created by the constant public viewing of the footage provided by the "spill cam[16] that streamed out the gushing oil in real time" (Atkinson 214) and by the filmic narratives that followed it[17] creating the idea of a known experience shaped by a public discourse of risk and grief.[18]

The dramatic strategy of the play exposes the limitations of the collective media-dependent short-term memory, opting to tell the story of greed and negligence of both an extraction powerhouse and of a government incapable of imposing appropriate security standards through the lenses of the local and the private. This strategy turns the disaster into an intimate story focused on its effects on a group of four friends who had known each other since they were children – Jimmy and Yuki, two fishermen, and their wives, Rosalie and Neva, who struggle to survive its aftermath. This choice is facilitated by the uniqueness of the public and embodied performative context of theater, where a space and time are shared by two sets of physical presences (the performers and the members of the audience), a condition uniquely suited to foster the kind of encounters that encourage the involvement in the personal experience of unknown others.

In *The Way of Water*, audiences are invited to share the perspective of those who two years later, in a small coastal town of Louisiana, have both their livelihood and their bodies irrevocably disrupted, a perspective that encourages audiences to

associate the local with the global and to establish how malpractices of multinational industries have an impact on individual bodies, that most private of spheres.

This link is suggested at the very beginning of the play, when Jim and Yuki,[19] who are fishing, as they have done all their lives, find their catch affected by the Corexit dispersant (banned in most countries) used in the months after the spill to clean the waters as cheaply as possible. As on many previous occasions, they have to discard the diseased yellowfish[20] that cannot be eaten, and Jimmy reflects on how the "rotten stinker" has killed their business by contaminating every stretch of water and the animal life that used to flourish in it, on the impunity of those who are responsible, and on the ephemerality of the public attention that vanishes as soon as the mediascapes are taken over by another cycle of concerns:

> Jimmy: Pretty soon, we'll have nothin' left… Don't know how those oil pigs do it. First in Valdez way back when… My daddy said "This time for sure somebody's gonna take them to task."…Big news for a while then faded away; Like everythin' else.
> Yuki: The way it all goes.
> Jimmy: Goes as it goes as it goes. Memories like sieves in this country.
> (Svich 22)

If the world has forgotten the accident, those who are vulnerable have not and are increasingly able to look back critically on other industrial disasters that damaged the environment and destroyed illusions of economic stability. Still musing over the poisoned fish and the foul water, Jimmy recalls another accident in Waxahachie[21] during which his cousin "got himself all burned up" when the chemical plant "makin' some kind of ammonia they use in products and things" was the scene of an explosion, which "sent thick plumes of smoke up into the sky for hours" (23-24).

This implicit indictment against industrial practices that extends beyond the negligence of Big Pig (Jimmy´s angry translation of the initials of British Petroleum) establishes a network of social criticism that later in the play will expand to wider targets. The plot soon moves from the motif of the toxic threat to the fishermen´s livelihood – both men refuse to abandon their profession since, as Jimmy states, he is a fisherman, has no other life, knows the water like it´s his flesh and blood (42) and "can't sit behind some desk" (35) – to the vulnerable body. Jimmy´s fainting spells and nausea, which appear briefly in the first scene when they can still be casually dismissed, cannot be disconnected from that water he once knew so well after he learns of the death of a local teenager, 16-year-old Louie Medina, the "Gas Station Kid," who "died from just swimming" (44):

Yuki: […] They say his esophagus disintegrated, and his heart ballooned up.
Jimmy: From swimmin'?
Yuki: Chemical. In the water…Y' know the kind they used to disperse the
spill…
Jimmy: Corexit?
Yuki: All over everythin'. (44)

This death transforms the intimate connection that the community and the two fishermen had with the water on which they had always depended, and which now no longer symbolizes life but the threat of death. It also leads to community protests that at first are only attended by Yuki: "Pretty fierce. Didn't want to leave. We were all chantin' n wavin', holdin' up signs. Felt good to feel like I was doin' sometin' for a change" (63).

The impulse to act is not initially shared by Jimmy; his worsening physical condition has led him to see the problem he and the community face as irreversible, without cure. Feeling the crisis as being already part of his body, he argues that he would have protested if the spill had any resemblance with the consequences of fire that hit his cousin's chemical factory because that was "a solvable problem. A containable problem" (64), while in their case "I just don't see what's good's it gonna do now to shout n make signs…" (65).This perception that the "water is already poisoned" (67) and is already part of him haunts his dreams, which he reveals to the audience as a poetic gothic vision:[22]

Jimmy (towards revelation): I see it. I fucking see…
A dream of water
Hot
Burnin'
Lettin' itself throu me
Floatin'
Through the sludge of sticky crude on cane
Down, down the way of no life. (69)

It is that "no life" that ultimately unites humans and other equally vulnerable species, as the poetic "revelation" suggests, weaving a kinship between human and more-than- human bodies destroyed by the same toxicity:

N' the bodies of the dead baby dolphins
Wash up along the shore,
Silver, blue, black n torn,
Sweet howlin' babies
Claimed by no one
Like us, we'll say

Just like us,
As we look at each other's vacant eyes
N take each other by the hand
N lie down next to the dolphins. (70)

As Jimmy's condition worsens, he is eventually diagnosed with cancer, hospitalized, and given "a month, a week, or he could go on dyin' a little bit" (76). As "everything inside him is corroded" (76), his material conditions reach a point of no return. Even if his wife does her best to keep them afloat, unpaid medical bills and debts pile up and they lose their house. This pushes the two fishermen's wives to attend the protests demanding proper health insurance, compensation for their loss of livelihood, and accountability. When Jimmy returns from the hospital to a home he no longer has, he finally joins them, having realized that what is killing him is not only the oil spill but poverty, since he now understands that the decisions taken by BP to clean up the spill as cheaply as possible had to do with the economic and social invisibility of those most affected. "Why" he asks his friends "do you think they sprayed the fuckin' chemical all over? You think if we were rich here, they´d been so careless with that thing?" (66).

Caridad Svich explained in an interview with theater director Daniella Topol that *The Way of Water* was motivated by a combination of heartbreak, outrage, and sadness, and grew out of a series of poems that attempted to tell a side of the story that is rarely heard. She spent a significant amount of time conducting research on the communities involved (as well as following scientific reports), but she maintains that *The Way of Water* should not be confused with theater of testimony or docudrama. It should, she suggests, be interpreted as a "poetic transformation based on real events," merging "my own take on the situation in the Gulf region and the impact the disaster had on men and women who had been tenders of the waterways all their lives," as a "love story between people and their environment" (Svich, Interview). In the same interview, while admitting to having frequently questioned the notion of efficacy of art, since it always deals with the long-term, even when the subject is the now, she defines *The Way of Water* as her offering towards a dialogue between the humanities and the sciences about fossil fuel and the damage to the entangled living ecosystems its extraction entails.

If writing about a toxic disaster like the Deepwater Horizon oil spill may be seen as weaving a circumstantial causality, dependent on the exceptionality of circumstances that define the concept of accident, representations of hydraulic fracking are spared that kind of equivocation, since its risk lies in everyday routines.[23] This extractive practice, introduced in the United States at the end of the twentieth century in the Marcellus Shale, a broad region of gas reserves that stretches through Pennsylvania, Ohio, and New York, consists of drilling into the earth and directing horizontally a high pressure fluid mixture of water, sand, and

chemicals at a rock layer until it fractures apart and releases the shale gas inside. The fact that natural gas drilling in the US is exempted from the Safe Drinking Water Act means that companies use this exemption to refuse to reveal the composition of the mixture of chemicals used in this highly contaminated flowback fluid which is supposed to be disposed in water treatment sites. Evidence of systemic failures of that "clean-up" and the presence of harmful components implies that the water that flows back into farming wells and domestic pipes is frequently highly unsafe for consumption. To make matters worse, unlike traditional oil extraction, which, at least in the United States, tends to be operated offshore or in "oil boom towns" in low-density populated areas, fracking operations are frequently imposed on already urbanized landscapes, introducing a nefarious presence in structured communities.

That much is evident in the ethnographic study *Fracking the Neighbourhood: Reluctant Activists and Natural Gas Drilling* published by Jessica Smartt Gullion in 2015, which is centered on the ecological devastation brought about by the fracking operations in the Barnett Shale of North Texas, and where that intrusion is described as follows:

> A 200-foot-tall drill appears one day behind backyard fences, squeezed into green spaces behind the homes. Hundreds of diesel trucks travel back and forth along a narrow two-lane residential road that was never designed to maintain the continued stress. Pipes are laid across the back side of a soccer field. A parent notices her children are having a lot of bloody noses. Her neighbor observes the same in her own children. They look at the rig behind their fences and wonder if that is the cause. They talk to other neighbors and soon the community is presented with a question: Is this a threat to our health? (23)

The timing of the emergence of hydraulic fracking[24] coinciding with a heightened awareness of the toxicity of fossil fuel, probably explains why the practice has always been associated with risk to both the environment and human health. The documentary *Gasland*, directed by Josh Fox and released in 2011, where the chemical contamination of water resources occupies center stage, has been identified as the most impactful cultural artifact to shape public perceptions about hydraulic fracking and to mobilize public opinion and community activism. A study published in the *American Sociological Review*, which stresses the discursive opportunities of this type of visual cultural text, identifies "the extraordinary potential for raising awareness of the environmental danger associated with hydraulic fracking" of the unforgettable scenes in which residents living near shale gas extraction sites light their methane-contaminated tap water on fire (Vasi 937). The impact of these images and of the documentary as a whole can be measured by the wave

of novels published after its release, addressing its nefarious implications, such as Michael J. Fitzgerald's *The Fracking War* (2013) and James Browning´s *The Fracking King* (2014).

Heat and Light (2017) by Jennifer Haigh, which Jason Molesky considers as perhaps "the first big social novel of contemporary American hydrocarbon extraction" since Upton Sinclair´s *Oil!* (Molesky 66), establishes a connection between different fossil fuel regimes. It takes place in Bakerton, the same fictional "small nothing town" (Haigh, *Heat* 3) in Pennsylvania that had been the site of her previous novel *Baker Towers* (2005). In its first life, set in the post WWII decades, Bakerton depended almost exclusively on the mining industry as well as on the company after which the town was named, the only employer and the only source of its ambiguous illusion of working-class prosperity.

When *Heat and Light* begins, the closure of the mines had replaced that promise of affluence with a reality of emptiness: "waves of FOR SALE signs decked the streets, storefronts went dark, the miners died of black lung or heart attacks or simply old age," and "children and grandchildren moved away, forgot everything" (Haigh, *Heat* 11). That scenario of decay is shaken by the discovery that under the house cellars, roads, and small farms of Bakerton lies a hidden bounty. As an agent for the Texas-based Dark Elephant Energy Company explains as he knocks on door after door in a well-rehearsed 2-minute spiel:

> The shale lies a mile underground, has lain there since before there was a Pennsylvania, before a human being walked the earth. Older than coal, older than the mountains. It has an imperial name, the Marcellus. Deep in the bedrock of Saxon County, a sea of riches is waiting to be tapped. (10)

This "Nature's safe deposit box" that had kept "its treasures docked away like insurance for the future" can now be opened, he tells the town dwellers, because "American ingenuity had found the key" (10). All it takes is for the owners to lease their land, which they are promised they can keep on farming, while the company drills for miles under their property. In exchange they will "get a bonus up front" (10). So begins the story of a community´s decision to embrace, out of necessity, the promise of return to a long-forgotten economic prosperity in exchange for a radical disruption they could never have imagined when they leased their small plots to the Dark Elephant agents.

In contrast to the individualized perspective of *The Way of Water*, where a story of environmental degradation is translated into the intimate experience of four characters, the narrative perspective of *Heat and Light* spreads wider than the 'here and now' of the town, weaving together different time frames and events.[25] The novel draws a complex map of personal stories that reveal the interconnectivity of many constituencies involved with and affected by the extraction processes,

including, besides the town locals, the drill workers, groups of environment activists, and company managers. But at the center of the narrative are the parallel themes of the destruction of the environment and of its effects on the human body.

The novel presents the toxic threat to the environment associated with fracking as an accepted concept, in circulation beyond the small town. Even before the deterioration of water resources becomes evident, farmers who refused to lease their land are not immune to the perception of toxicity that now surrounds their products. That is the case with Rene and Mack, the owners of the organic farm Friend-Lea Acres, who find out that the restaurants in Pittsburg that used to be their clients are no longer willing to buy their milk and do not believe their assurances that their land is clean. When the owner of a "Farm to Table" establishment explains to Rena that their customers "read the newspapers" and "know what is going on in your part of the world" (81), and asks if the couple can "guarantee that none of these chemicals are leaching into the water your animals are drinking," she knows that these are assurances they cannot give, and that their dream of living in a healthy ecological island is being destroyed (82).

For the other farmers who eagerly signed up to "the first glimmer of hope" their dying town has had for thirty years (249), the unpleasant consequences of that decision becomes visible from the very beginning. The town, as its dwellers complain, "is being changed permanently" (129), disrupted by the constant heavy traffic of trucks and lorries with Texas license plates and by the presence of drilling crews working for subcontractors which are replaced every two weeks. No new jobs are created, contrary to expectations, as no locals are ever hired to join the workforce. For those who now live surrounded by drilling operations, the nightmare is constant and inescapable. For Rich Devlin, who had so eagerly waited for the activation of his lease contract, and never expected to have "a rig two hundred yards away, lit day and night with klieg lights," the disruption goes beyond the need to live with drawn curtains or wear earplugs at home to protect against the constant "mechanized roar like a tropical storm" (215). It is imprinted in the scars he sees from his window:

> He looks out over his back yard, what's left of it. With the forest gone, the property looks smaller than sixty acres, stripped and shrunken like a dog in the bath. Beyond the house, the crew left a single patch of glass, twenty foot scare. Beyond it lies a vast expanse of bare earth, dry and cocoa-colored, enclosed with chain-link fence. […] Over the hill, mercifully out of view, sit the containment pond and concrete drill pad – surrounded, depending on the day, by a dozen or more trucks (216).

What he still does not understand is that the bleak bare landscape, once covered by a vibrant forest, hides a gothic toxic threat protected by a policy of nondisclosure

(Molesky 54) – the highly contaminated water that spreads through pipes and wells, invading and contaminating the human soma.

The narrative strategy used in the novel to represent the vulnerability of the human body to the toxicity associated with shale gas extraction deliberately suggests lines of continuity between different systems of energy production, represented by two stories of sickness. One goes back to the past, to the Three Mile Island nuclear platform disaster in 1979, and is told by the voice of Wesley, the now-dead former Bakerton pastor who lived near the accident as a young boy, while the other is set in the present, embodied by Olivia Devlin, a seven-year-old child..

Wesley's story is reconstructed through his ghost-like voice in a dedicated book chapter with the ironic title "Normal Accidents" and travels back to the days when he was one of the fifteen thousand people who lived a mile from the nuclear plant where "the thing" that the company Handbook said "cannot happen" actually happened (Haigh, *Heat* 140). After the explosion, they were told that only a small amount of radioactive iodine had been found in the ground, that the forty thousand gallons of radioactive water released posed no danger to public health, that there was no need to be evacuated, that children should just stay indoors until midnight. When Wesley, at thirty-three, looks at his dying body, plagued by thyroid cancer, he clearly sees that seven-year-old boy who was not evacuated, though he could make out the contaminated fumes from his backyard. Convinced he can trace back the cause of his announced death to those poisonous spills, he tries to find evidence, engages in frantic research, and becomes "a corpse in possession of abundant information" (306) that has no destination but himself, trapped between a certainty that no one else shares and the irony of trying to delay death by having his cancer caused by radiation treated by radiation (305).

In the case of Olivia, a similar pattern of causal uncertainty occurs. Her vomiting, stomach pains, and headaches are initially dismissed as a result of her food allergies, not the consequence of the contaminated water coming out of her house taps. Her father initially convinces himself that Olivia's mother is overreacting hysterically to her deteriorating health. After all he remembers running in the abandoned strip mining fields with his childhood friends and coming home "black with coal dirt" and not being allowed into the house before he cleaned himself up in the basement (198). If that coal did not harm them then, that's evidence that "kids aren't that fragile" (198). So he finds it easy to dismiss Olivia's health problems: "Pollution gives her migraines. Food additives. Power lines, you name it. She needs her own fucking planet" (199). In an attempt to convince himself that he did not make the wrong decision when he signed the drilling lease, he also dismisses his brother's information about the toxicity of the undisclosed

two hundred different chemicals in the fracking fluid: "Everything is made of chemicals. If you eat an apple. If it´s in the periodic table, it's a chemical" (200).

And in an almost transactional reflection on his country´s energy history, he asks his brother to think of Olivia´s discomfort as a price to pay for the way they live: "What are, after all, the alternatives? [...] Send more kids to the Gulf like I got sent? Or we could build more nuclear" (202). When his brother suggests "wind, solar, hydroelectric" his skepticism is transparent: "Yes, fine, renewables. Let's build a few windmills and sit around in the dark" (202).

If Olivia's father's reticence to publicly consider that his decision may be responsible for his daughter's symptoms of illness appears to be grounded on some psychologically silenced sense of guilt, Rena, the organic farmer who is also a nurse, is mobilized to help the child, based on what she believes to be a highly probable causal link between her symptoms and the chemicals in the water in her home's pipes. After getting engaged in the anti-fracking campaign organized by environmentalist groups that take up the cause of the town, and having done her own research, she makes sure that the little girl is seen by a series of doctors, who never find an undisputed and clear relation between the toxicity that surrounds her and her ailments. This formal uncertainty, complicated by rumors that Olivia's mother may be responsible for her daughter's illness, a suspicion that is never confirmed and that the community dismisses, invites readers, as Houser argues, to an exercise of "connecting the dots" (6) even when what can be inferred cannot always be proven.

By the end of the novel, once the hydro-fracking extraction operations in Bakertown are suspended,[26] the residents are left with only one certainty – that the sickness of their land, unlike that carried by some of their bodies, cannot be refuted or ignored:

> The land looks sicker in the harsh light, backfilled acres that were supposed to recover. They haven't recovered. What's left is a treeless expanse, empty as a Russian steppe, the dry summer grass lit blond in the morning sun. The grass looks plausibly healthy, but what lies beneath is altered forever. It will never be the way it was. (Haigh, *Heat* 358-59)

Although most characters in the novel rarely express their love for what is now lost, it seems palpable that the grief they now feel for the missing trees and for the poisoned soil may be read as a new emotional recognition of their need for what they had always taken for granted, a first step towards a consciousness of their dependence on the more-than-human ecosystem they had unconsciously help destroy.

Conclusion

The aim of this discussion was to analyze how contemporary American literature has been responding to the awareness of the environmental damage caused by fossil fuel energy systems in narratives that have those practices at their center. Its objective was to scrutinize the ways in which the selected texts reflect a reconfigured perception of what Stacy Alaimo characterizes as "the interconnections, interchanges and transits between human bodies and non-human natures," making evident the "extent to which the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from the 'environment'" (2). It also intended to reflect on Houser's proposition that eco-sickness fiction that brings "body and earth together through narrative affect" is likely to "illuminate how emotion rather than empiricism alone [...] conducts "individuals from information, to awareness and ethics" (7).

The analysis of both texts identifies how the reworking of the logic of human and natural boundaries, replaced by what Delia Byrnes calls a logic of "entanglements and assemblage" (246) shapes their narrative construction, extending, in the case of *The Way of Water*, the vision of kinship between humans and nature to the more-than-human life injured by the same poisoned waters.

Whether this is a strategy that enhances the effectiveness of aesthetic discourses related to the environmental damage caused by fossil fuel is a more contentious proposition, since it depends on predicted readers' responses, an area of uncertainty that matches the ambiguity that surrounds the debates about whether fear or hope is a more effective mobilizer of environmentalist consciousness. David Wallace-Wells, attempting to assess which were more conducive to environmental awareness, cites a number of scientific and academic studies that concluded that there is no single way to "best tell the story of climate change, no single rhetorical approach likely to work on a given audience, and none too dangerous to try" (157).

This assessment does not invalidate the communicational hypothesis put forward by Houser, but it seems plausible to argue that both in the play *The Way of Water* and the novel *Heat and Light* the use of the eco-sickness trope, anchored in a number of narrative and aesthetic choices, may not necessarily be based on a deliberate strategy of encouraging readers' responses through affect, but rather on the assertion of an ecocritical awareness of what Serpil Oppermann describes as "material 'traffic' between the body and the environment" (412). It can also be argued that the two texts, both set in economically vulnerable communities, expose how far from simple and uneven that traffic is, and how entanglements with conditions of social frailty turn the human body into an intersectional "sociopolitical palimpsest that gets culturally inscribed," serving as a "site for cultural critique of its material connections with the more-than-hu-

man world" (Oppermann 415) and a translator of a frail, environmentally damaged Earth on which it depends.

Notes

[1] Szeman and Wenzel define extractivism (as distinguished from extraction) as a process that involves a mode of economic production in which natural resources are taken from a periphery to be used as inputs to industrial processes elsewhere, as "feedstock for the manufacture of a 'modernity' to which the periphery is supposed to catch up" (506). The term, originally used in the political and ecological discourse in Latin America (Parks 353) would also describe practices in other continents, extending and actualizing the predatory plunder of colonialism.

[2] Tallow, animal fat that could be processed and stored, provided light through combustion and was cheaper than wax, though malodorous. It would be replaced in the United States at the end of the eighteenth century by whale oil, which, according to John Adams, created "the clearest and most beautiful flame of any substance that is known in nature" (qtd. in Shannon 311).

[3] The idea of cycles, such as "the age of wood" or "the age of coal" should be understood in terms of dominance and not totality, since the emergence of a new energy system does not imply a global shift, and old sources continue to be used alongside the new.

[4] In her analysis of the literature produced between the years 1876 and 1981, Booth distinguishes five distinct time periods: "the rise of industrialization, 1895-1910; the ascendance of the United Mine Workers of America, 1895-1910; the era of opulence versus poverty, 1910-1929; the Great Depression and World War II, 1930-1945; and the postwar era, 1945-1981" (125).

[5] Recent fiction that addresses the same tropes tends to focus on the wider economic and social landscapes of the practice, namely on the local organizational function of the industry in communities where it becomes the dominant economical force. This is the case, for example, in *Baker Towers* by Jennifer Haigh (2013), which draws a complex portrait of a small Pennsylvanian town after WWII, dominated by a mining company that is the sole employer of unskilled immigrant workers.

[6] The impact of her pioneering investigative journalism would lead to a court-ordered break-up of the company, which was found to have violated America's first anti-trust law, the Sherman Act of 1890.

[7] In the novel, the attempt to influence the presidential election of 1920 in favor of Senator Warren Harding in exchange for the rights to drill on government oil reserves appears to be inspired by the infamous Teapot Dome Scandal, a corruption case involving the bribery of officials of the Harding administration in return for drilling rights in public oil reserves.

[8] In those decades, before the discovery of oil in Saudi Arabia in 1938, the now-exhausted Californian oil resources constituted 22% of the world's production (Walonen 61).

Notes

[9] This assertion is questioned by Peter Hitchcock's reply to Gosh's article, where he suggests that he misses the possibility of a representative "logic of oil that puts it in the shade" (81) and offers Sinclair's classic as evidence that "the Great American Oil Novel is contemporaneous with the emergence of oil in American history" (90).

[10] The novel depicts the transformation of a pristine landscape (the Wadi al Uyoun oasis) and its inhabitants by the arrival of an American oil company, which imposes the disruptive rhythms of oil extraction on this never-changing harmony .

[11] See Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* (2010), which explores the drastic environmental destruction and human disease and death caused by leaking crude oil that poisons nature, bodies, and illusions of prosperity in the Niger Delta, or the 2021 novel *How Beautiful We Were* by the Cameroonian writer Imbolo Mbue, which explores scenarios of nature's depletion and embodied frailty caused by an American company's mismanagement of oil spills in an unnamed African country.

[12] Peak-oil theory, developed in the 1950s by geologist M. King Hubert, identifies timelines for the decline of oil availability after a peak of extraction, which was originally predicted to occur in the 2020s.

[13] That is the case for most of the corpus discussed by Houser, which includes, among others, Richard Powers's *The Echo Maker*, David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996) and Leslie Marmo Silko's *Almanach of the Dead* (1991).

[14] The play was developed in a series of writer retreats at the Lark Play Development Center, New York City, between 2011 and 2012. Under the sponsorship of the NoPassport theater alliance, it had a number of international public readings, including in South Africa, Australia, Germany, Brazil, and Great Britain (Svich 11).

[15] The spill on the Macondo Prospect, off the coast of Louisiana, lasted for five months (from 20 April to 19 September 2010). Before it, the biggest spill in US waters had been the 1989 *Exxon Valdez* accident when a tanker bound for California ran aground and spilt its cargo into the sea.

[61] BP was pressed by lawmakers to make available the live footage of the leak site, filmed by a video camera placed 1.524 m below water, which the public could access three weeks after the explosion that caused the spill, exposing its equivocations about the dimensions of the disaster (Hargreaves). The company would plead guilty in November 2012 to eleven counts of manslaughter, two misdemeanors and a felony count of lying to the United States Congress, in a settlement that forced it to pay $4.525 billion in fines (Rushe).

[17] The best example of this might be the film *Deepwater Horizon* from 2016, directed by Peter Berg, which reconstructs the events from the point of view of those who worked on the operation and died as a result of the explosion, as well as the mismanagement that led to it.

[18] The names of the eleven dead workers are listed and honored, for example, in the dedication of the Report to the President by the National Commission on the BP Deepwater Horizon Spill (National Commission).

[19] Jimmy Robichaux and Yuki Gonxalo Skow (described in the introductory notes as being mixed race) are in their 30s and have lived all their lives in a small town

Notes

in coastal, southwestern Louisiana, in Plaquemines Parish, along the Gulf of Mexico. They have known each other since they were children, and attended the same school. All the lines of the four characters reproduce the speech patterns common in their geo-social location.

[20] A number of studies reported that two years after the spill birds, dolphins, and other marine life continued to die and that a number of species had developed mutations (such as shrimps with no eyes) and deformities of the heart and other organs that would be expected to be fatal (National Commission 174-95).

[21] This is likely to be a reference to the massive chemical accident in a fertilizer plant in Waxahachie, Texas, in 2011 that killed fifteen people and injured hundreds and forced the evacuation of schoolchildren and residents to avoid possible exposure to dangerous gases (Henry).

[22] As Caridad Svich explained in an interview with Daniella Topol, before she wrote the play, she started to write poems related to the many health and environmental issues the disaster effected, some of which were later integrated in the play, in moments that interrupt the realist mode of the text and performance (Svich, Interview).

[23] The practice of hydraulic fracturing (fracking) is banned in most European countries as well as in Australia, Brazil, and Argentina.

[24] Although this method of extracting natural gas was already used, in limited ways, in the 1940s, it is in the late twentieth century and early 2000s that drilling companies developed methods to harvest natural gas trapped in shale rock which involve horizontal wells, a process that requires a much bigger quantity of water mixed with sand and chemicals (Vasi 937).

[25] The narrative visits, for example, the geopolitical implications of fossil fuel dependency, by recalling the Iran hostage crisis of 1979, when President Carter´s embargo on Iranian oil drove up prices, a predicament that, though bad for consumers, was good for business, a lesson learned as a young student by Kip Oliphant, the future CEO of Dark Elephant Energy.

[26] This suspension is more related to shareholders issues with the running of Dark Elephant Company than to local protests or environmental activism.

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Biography

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The Polymodernity of Planetary Domesticity:

Polycrisis, Life, and Form in T.C. Boyle's *A Friend of the Earth* and Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God*

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Abstract This article explores the difficulties that conventional narrative form has with rendering the non-human temporalities of planetary history, with a particular focus on the domestic. By drawing from several critical threads, including Donna Haraway's Chthulucene concept, I aim to explore how fiction interrupts static historical narratives. My position is that writing against anthropocentric thinking can act as a literary disruptor, and. as experimental narrative forms of the domestic are emerging, new imaginaries and conceptual frameworks are put forward for reconstructing ideas between human and non-human life forms in a world coming to terms with multiple cascading crises. This paper also explains how contemporary science fiction reconfigures domestic fiction acting as a mode of cultural repair at a time when the everyday and local are disrupted by the global polycrisis. By examining uncertainty, in both theme and form, we discover how contemporary authors are exploring the idea that another world is not only urgently needed but is also possible. In Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God* and T.C. Boyle's *A Friend of the Earth* readers encounter planetary catastrophe from the perspective of everyday spatialities and displaced futurity in domestic spaces. Each narrative provokes an attempt to wrangle with the institutional conditions of Western modernity by (re)claiming these domestic spaces and inserting human/non-human entanglements into the literary mode. This produces an ecocentric introspection against the backdrop of an apocalyptic climate on the global scale to revive a collective consciousness of uncertainty with the potential to rethink a future.

Keywords Anthropocene; Domesticity; Ecocriticism; Ecology; Planetary; Polycrisis; Polymodernity.

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Introduction: Rendering the Human/Non-Human Temporalities of Planetary History

Since the turn of the third millennium, a growing sense of uncertainty has come to punctuate the twenty-first century. This has been brought about by what could be seen as the catastrophic collapse of the global system marked by the climate crisis, ecological destruction, economic instability, terrorism and warfare, pandemics, and ongoing humanitarian crises. Historian Adam Tooze uses the term *polycrisis* as a way to map the "cognitive shock" of the interlocking crises of the present (Tooze CB 262).[1] Therefore, when confronted with the cognitive shock of today's polycrisis, humans are exposed to temporal disturbances – "heterochronies" – that threaten to disrupt the current social order by impeding sociality, i.e. the forming of social groups, as it "prevents or at least aggravates synchronized action and the future-oriented cultivation of new solidarities across different collectivities" (Baumbach and Neumann 4).[2] Heterochronies can be understood as the coexistence of multiple, conflicting temporalities that reveal the power structures dictating whose time and histories are prioritized or marginalized. Accordingly, the cognitive shock of the polycrisis accentuates the disruptions between different social groups while amplifying the influence of hierarchal power.

In her 2017 novel, *The Future Home Of the Living God*, Louise Erdrich presents a web of multiple crises as climate change has accelerated the melting of permafrost, evolution is spinning backwards, viral toxins are being unleashed on the global population, and an oppressive US government is stripping away the birthrights of mothers. It is this final point that serves as the novel's focus and places it in relation to other reproduction-based dystopias (see also Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* & P.D. James ' *Children of Men*), weaving together interlocking personal and national domestic crises. Furthermore, in T.C. Boyle's *A Friend of the Earth*, published over two decades ago, he similarly traces the impact of multiple cascading crises – climate change, loss of biodiversity, overpopulation, habitat loss, food scarcity – which when viewed in relation to the shifts in reader subjectivity bridges current discussions on climate change, the domestic, and Anthropocene thinking.[3] Both novels leverage the modes of science fiction and dystopian fiction in a framework of domestic fiction to demonstrate how the natural world has been dispossessed through the logic(s) of current stage late-capitalism, where everything – not just material resources and products but also immaterial dimensions – becomes commodified and consumable. Furthermore, Kristin J. Jacobson argues, "American domestic fiction often, if not always, exploits a family-nation correlation: the fictional family offers a picture of America in microcosm" (Jacobson 3). This bridging of Anthropocene thinking and concepts of the domestic shows how the Anthropocene is not "a planetary outside" (Hegglund 186) but rather, it invites the reader to contemplate the entanglement of the

domestic, cultural, social, symbolic, and biological to present literary narratives as sites of cultural repair for thinking through the polycrisis.

Thus, I will first develop an understanding of what I call planetary domesticity, in which various relationalities and entanglements between the human and non-human play out even when the disruptive forces of polycrisis loom large. The term planetary domesticity evokes the etymological link between ecology and the home, as ecology derives from the Greek word oikos [house]. This highlights the idea of how human and non-human beings relate to their surrounding environments and see nature, by extension, as home. With this understanding, I will then argue that while conventional domestic narrative has had difficulties "with rendering the non-human temporalities of planetary history" (Hegglund 187), new narrative forms of the domestic are emerging, which open up a new conceptual framework for reconstructing ideas between human and non-human life forms in a world coming to terms with multiple cascading crises. From this point, I will also argue that both Erdrich and Boyle present narratives of uncertainty to liberate the future from colonial and capitalist driven epistemologies while pitting ideas of regression and evolution against one another. And finally, how these works revive a new kind of collective consciousness: in itself, consciousness as a life-form with the potential to rethink a future . This approach invites the reader to contemplate the entanglement of the cultural, domestic, social, and symbolic with the biological and natural world to present literary narratives as sites of cultural repair for a new way of thinking through the current planetary crises. Furthermore, by drawing from Donna Haraway's call for a new way of thinking about current planetary crises to interrupt static historical narratives we discover that contemporary authors, including Erdrich and Boyle, are exploring the idea that another world is not only urgently needed, but is also possible, "but not if we are ensorcelled in despair, cynicism, or optimism, and the belief/disbelief discourse of Progress" (Haraway). That is to say, for Haraway, it is vital that we do not restrict agency towards pragmatic action by succumbing to the emotional trappings and polarized narratives that denounce or proclaim progress. Instead, there needs to be an active space for an imaginative shift beyond merely seeing progress as linear or teleological, toward a more inclusive, diverse vision of improvement and coexistence to work towards a new way of being.

Planetary Domesticity: Narratives of Uncertainty

Tooze's popularization of the term "polycrisis" at the World Economic Forum in 2023 shed some light on the contemporary moment, but the term itself can be traced back to the 1990s when complexity theorists Edgar Morin and Anne Brigitte Kern coined polycrisis to argue it being "the complex intersolidarity of problems, antagonisms, crises, uncontrollable processes, and the general crisis

of the planet" (Morin and Kern in Lawrence et al. 6). While Lawrence et al. have argued that current usage of this term may lack substantiative content, risking being reduced to a buzzword, they do see how it carries the potential to better understand the linkages between contemporary crises.[4] However, while polycrisis may serve as useful concept for grappling with multiple cascading crises, as a term it still invites skepticism as it obfuscates the various mechanisms of capitalism from which the crises are borne. Several critics contend that the term prevents direct action and focusing on individual crises, and to some extent, erasing the responsibility or experience of what causes and who suffers most (Kluth; Subramanian). This skepticism comes from representing the crises as chaotic and overlapping; polycrisis risks presenting them as something inevitable, even natural by diagnosing what is happening, but not why it is happening. Moreover, it can be argued that the current state of polycrisis systemically reinforces a politics of power on a global scale with often developing countries and marginalized people suffering the most – this power imbalance also creates an Otherness that pits one group against the other.[5] In fact, to reinvoke Rancière, the term cedes ground and only names the competing temporalities of a fragmented society to which it refers rather than reframing the present moment. Furthermore, in relation to *Future Home of the Living God* Emily McAvan argues, "Erdrich's novel suggests that the theologies of domination that underpin capitalism begin to fall apart in the age of climate change" (105). Yet, this suggestion implied by McAvan, evident in the novel, does not offer any concrete solutions but instead centers uncertainty as a potential way to negotiate the crises and liberate from dominant modes of colonial and capitalist practices. Thus, Erdrich leverages the mode of speculative fiction and inserts Indigenous futures as a way to reconfigure the narrativization of space as well as time in the face of the anthropogenic climate change and that polycrisis it contains.[6] Erdrich's characters inhabit a world on the brink of apocalypse , yet, by showing this world through indigenous perspectives the novel engages in proleptic mourning – grieving for our fate – in an effort to decolonize the future which renders the novel as a powerful political practice (Siepak 63).

Published in 2017, but started in 2000, Erdrich was responding to the US presidential elections won by George W. Bush in 2000 and Donald J. Trump in 2016. In conversation with Margaret Atwood, Erdrich openly discusses her concerns regarding women's rights and the environment in relation to Trump's 2016 election (Atwood and Erdrich 2017). Thus, it becomes clear that literature, including the novel and other forms of fiction, can act as vehicles for knowledge-building and philosophizing in relation to situated experiences because of the gaze it provides, both onto the characters' existence but also back toward the reader, both over time and in each moment (See also Murdoch 326).[7]

Society in Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God* is on the brink as evolution seems to be in regress, which in turn invites the reader to consider what may

happen when humans give birth to offspring that are considered to be more animal than human. This speculative biology immediately undermines preconceived notions of the neat linear evolutionary march of progress and presents a much more uncertain idea of evolution. In the novel, Cedar laments how "some paleontologist" declares, "We do not have a true fossil record of evolution [...] what we have are bits and pieces [...] that's playing 52 pickup with one deck of cards flung across the entire planet and expecting to come up with a full orderly deck" (Erdrich 69). While this chaotic evolutionary process can be read as a Darwinian dystopia, due to its regress acting as threat to coherent human-based progress, its conventional dystopian qualities reside in the backdrop of the other ongoing crises including climate change, a tyrannical government, and the erosion of women's reproductive rights which, when combined, allow Erdrich to create a narrative space to think through "a new alterity" (Siepak 59). Erdrich inserts an ontological uncertainty that speaks of unknown potentialities for the future by disrupting the orderly narrative of evolution. McAvan argues Erdrich is "suggesting that we need to see humanity as the product of a wild and complicated history. The apparent stability of evolution [...] is a myth that flatters humanity as its apparent apex [...] a story that Erdrich contests vigorously" (96). By opening up such spaces, Erdrich is positioning the human-animal dichotomy into new proximities of human subjectivity and evolutionary biology as if answering Derrida's call: "We have to envisage the existence of 'living creatures,' whose plurality cannot be assembled within the single figure of an animality that is simply opposed to humanity" (Derrida 47).

Yet, the characters within the novel also hint that capitalist profiteering may offer a way through the crisis as major biopharmaceutical companies may now seek to profit from the crisis: "We should invest in one of those genetics companies. They'll try to turn this thing around with gene manipulation. It will be big", says Cedar's adoptive father, Glen (Erdrich 68). Erdrich also connects this idea of corporate capitalism cashing in on crisis when Cedar Hawk Songmaker, the novel's protagonist, tracks down her biological Ojibwe family who own a Superpumper gas station franchise marking her ancestorial roots as "bourgeois" (Erdrich 6). Cedar connects this franchise to "the colonization of this region" (Erdrich 6), indicating that ancestral, geological, and colonial/capitalist histories are intertwined. McAvan highlights that Marxist environmental historian Jason W. Moore has made the argument that "'the economy' and 'the environment' are not independent of each other. Capitalism is not an economic system; it is not a social system; it is a way of organizing nature" (Moore in McAvan 100). For Moore and McAvan, then, "Dominion is therefore about the way that capitalism organizes nature, including the nonhuman animals" (McAvan 101).

Similarly, in Boyle's A *Friend of the Earth*, human subjectivities are also called into question and pitted against larger albeit mostly invisible institutional

forces – the policies of corporations and government that have ravaged the Earth with pollution, plunder, and global warming – while trying to reconfigure human/non-human relationalities that are imposing on the human body itself. The ecological dystopia reveals that human bodies are exposed to conditions of extreme "wet" and "quiet stink," and "darkness" compared to but not likened to hyenas and other animals (Boyle 11). Descriptions such as this litter Boyle's novel which highlight the concept of the relational self in flux (i.e. the self that shifts in relation to others), as Sylvia Mayer argues is , "the human as being a part of nature , as body and mind […] both nonhuman and human nature – as concretized in the body – have reasserted themselves" (Mayer 225). Mayer contends that this shifting subjectivity has been brought about by the hostile conditions the novel's protagonists experience living in the years 2025-26, years marred by the climate breakdown, overpopulation, and loss of biodiversity. In the novel's prologue, narrator and protagonist Ty O'Shaughnessy Tierwater proclaims,

> I'm an animal man […] I manage the man's private menagerie, the last surviving one in this part of the world, and it's an important – scratch that, vital – reservoir for zoo–cloning and the distribution of what's left of the major mammalian species. (Boyle 6)

The novel presents notions of human intervention in biological sciences tied up with new subjectivities that reposition spaces of alterity through speculation. Thus, there is the idea that narrative fiction, in times of polycrisis, can perhaps mediate and also help readers navigate these multiple cascading crises, bridging various epistemological experiences from one to (an)Other. In fact, we may argue that one of the ideas speculative science fiction often presents – in dystopias – is the idea that humanity must relinquish its *par excellence* status and become animal in order to conceive of new narratives that can inspire fresh creative, critical, and also political practices.

This concept aligns with Donna Haraway's call to rethink the Anthropocene question; how do the entanglements of particular forms of life (cultural, domestic, social, symbolic) and life forms (biological, climatological, planetary), productively engage with the complexities of those interactions and in turn repair humankind's relationship with the natural world and as such produce a life of form for the future? That is to say, as planetary disruptions become increasingly difficult to represent as paradigms shift, literature must acknowledge its limitations and attempt to find new ways to adapt. Haraway coins her own term, the *Chthulucene*, for navigating the current paradigmatic shifting geological age, and while finding a solution may be beyond the possibility of literature alone, the mode of speculative forms of fiction that lean on order to deepen our understanding of a "life of form" for the future, and work toward a reconsideration of the institutional conditions

that brought us here in the first place are reconfigured . As Sibylle Baumbach and Birgit Neumann argue, literature may even play an active role in "construing temporalities of and in crises" by turning a possibly enduring, structural condition into a seemingly sudden, exceptional, and "intensified situation" we construct a genre of crisis (Baumbach and Neumann 7; Berlant 7). Therefore, while some scholars ask how form in literature, or a life of form, can be leveraged to present an adequate response to the future – connecting the present and past – "beyond the impasse of adjustment," we might instead want to consider what uncertainty has to offer (Baumbach and Neumann 7-8). Furthermore, given the potential and scale for change that anthropocentric futures, including narratives of climate change, suggest as well as the Anthropocene's impact on social change and society, the usual rhythms, patterns, and scales of the novel and narrative are disrupted.

Narratives of not-knowing or uncertainty could in fact help liberate the present moment from certain institutional hegemonies and give way to alternative epistemologies. This comes at a time when Earth's species and assemblages are facing an "event already under way called the Sixth Great Extinction" (Haraway). Both Boyle and Erdrich are realigning human-subjectivity to think beyond its limitations in the wake of extinction in action, which is a compelling position to consider a *planetary domesticity* generated by their narrative. As previously discussed, I use the term planetary domesticity to call upon the etymological link between ecology and the home. Considering much of the current ecological discourse is concerned with relationalities and the planetary, the term planetary domesticity becomes a useful carrier to dismantle previous conceptions of human/non-human relations as we all share the same planetary fate. Thus, planetary domesticity constitutes a space for reconstructing ways of being at home that can support sensemaking and agency in times of polycrisis. In Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God*, and Boyle's A *Friend of the Earth* discussed herein, both writers leverage the domestic mode to question what the role of home on a planet is that itself is becoming increasingly difficult to inhabit. Furthermore, both authors reject or subvert traditional dichotomies and dualisms of narrative realism by inviting readers to reconsider what it means to be natural and/or civilized while simultaneously confronting our limitations as a species that places itself at the top of a so-called natural order through capitalist driven hierarchies.[8]

(Re)constructing the Domestic Life/Form

Before extrapolating further how both Erdrich and Boyle reconstruct the domestic form, and realist fiction, it is worth taking into account that during the 21st century, so far, there has been an accelerated number of environmental disasters. The Ecological Threat Register (ETR) of 2020 recorded a tenfold increase in natural disasters since 1960, which some scholars argue can be attributed to the

nature of neoliberal capitalism as a driving force for climate change (Barkdull and Harris 14; Pollock 2020; Park 189). While the ETR says causes can vary, there is a growing consensus that changes in climate conditions, specifically the rising global temperatures, raise the likelihood of weather-related natural disasters. During the twenty-first century, on the US mainland alone, NOAA reported that up to and including 2024 the loss of life and economic costs related to such disasters total around 10,000 and over 1 trillion dollars respectively.[9]

While data provides the numbers, much of the immediate insight into the devastation today comes from rolling news and social media feeds which place a direct lens on the precarious nature of home for those victims of weather-related natural disasters; as Jon R. Hegglund states, "These images eloquently testify that the Anthropocene is not a planetary 'outside' to an intimate sense of home as refuge or retreat from the world at large" (Hegglund 186). Home in this form is not a safe haven to retreat to but rather a place that becomes entangled in the anthropocentric planetary, as Hegglund articulates, "The Anthropocene posits a new view of the planet in which systems cannot be disentangled according to disciplinary purview" (Hegglund 186). Thus, Hegglund exposes the idea that the traditionally dominant dualism of man and nature becomes redundant and that they are no longer sufficient for dealing with our current reality. This is achieved by recognizing the interconnectedness, not the separation, of nature and culture, human and inhuman, geological and biological, and even domestic and public spheres: fictions where the boundaries between the human world and the natural world are dissolved and invite new potentialities and even new futures.

Following Hegglund's argument, the idea that the form of the novel shares a direct affinity with the domestic and domestic spaces and also shows how modes of domestic fiction, particularly those affiliated with women's writing, can be read as protest literature that offers new strategies of resistance.[10] However, the kind of protest and resistance that is often presented in domestic fiction is one dependent on a kind of "anthropomorphic hook" and calls to individual subjectivities , as conventional narrative form tends to expose the lives of its human characters (Hegglund 189). This reinscribes the human/non-human dualism, therefore, in relation to broader concepts (i.e. reconstructing relationalities between human and non-human life forms in a world coming to terms with the polycrisis against the backdrop of the Anthropocene), new ways to break this so-called anthropomorphic hook are required. Moreover, a realist mode of fiction does not suffice to break this deadlock, especially where notions of time and temporality are concerned in relation to climatological time , a time that is decoupled from human experience.[11] Accordingly, climatological time connects the present moment with the future in a chronological sense while reaching back into the past and weaves together human/non-human relationalities in a way that "we—the human reader—could imagine the historicity of the human species within the geological,

deep-historical register of time announced by the Anthropocene" (Hegglund 189). Therefore, traditional modes of domestic fiction, that are often associated with a certain bourgeois realism, would come up short in attempting to negotiate entanglements between human/non-human or reconstruct life/form temporalities.

Therefore, what I have previously termed planetary domesticity , could potentially break this anthropomorphic hook and invites a reading that inserts questions of uncertainty into domestic spaces as a way to protest and resist the dominant forces of contemporary colonial and capitalist practices by reconfiguring perceptions of time. In Erdrich and Boyle's novels, the fragmented and fractured nature of time while making overt references to planetary and evolutionary time offers various temporal registers that reconfigure the human/non-human dichotomy. Yet, while the narrative perspective still foregrounds individual human subjectivity, through the speculative mode of dystopian science-fiction, both authors are able to position these subjectivities alongside other forms of life and inter-species relationalities. Furthermore, Erdrich uses the epistolary form to connect the novel's protagonist, Cedar Hawk Songmaker, with her unborn child and her own personal history and intradiegetic storytelling. In *A Friend of the Earth*, T.C. Boyle uses a temporal disjunction by presenting Ty as both the autodiegetic and heterodiegetic narrator straddling two time periods – 2025-26 and the years 1989 to 1997 respectively. These shifts in narrative perspective point towards concerns of subjectivity and identity formation in relation to temporal disruption on a planetary scale as well as inter-species relationalities.

The opening page of Erdrich's novel is marked with the claim that "our world is running backward. Or forward. Or maybe sideways" (3). This statement is inscribed in a letter Cedar writes to her unborn child and foreshadows the novel's central premise that various species on the planet, including humanity, are undergoing the process of devolution. This sentiment is later echoed by the anonymous paleontologist , who states, "[...] we might not see the orderly backward progression of human types that evolutionary charts are so fond of presenting. Life might skip forward, or sideways" (Erdrich 69). This statement is beamed into the Songmaker family home via a TV-news broadcast, which causes the family to speculate on the future. While Cedar's father, Glen, an environmental lawyer, seeks for a positive outlook on the claims saying, "cave art was exquisite" (Erdrich 70), he is quickly reprimanded by Cedar's adoptive mother, Sera, who cries, "I can't believe you, Glen! You're PC even about the foraging apes our species may become in a few generations" (Erdrich 70). In this exchange, the Songmaker family is trying to make sense of an extinction level event where the biological classification and meaning of the human is destabilized and called into question, illustrating how the forces of history, culture, and human nature intertwine. The friction between Glen and Sera invites readers to reconsider ideas of what is natural or civilized, human or less-than-human. Later in the novel, Cedar ponders,

> I understand why so many people did not believe in evolution before last month, and still don't, and never will. It means that perfect physical harmony, grace, and in Darwin's phrase, endless forms most beautiful, resulted slowly as the result of agonizing failures. In their eyes, evolution makes life on earth a scenario of bloody, ham-handed, ruthless, tooth-and-nail struggle. (Erdrich 117)

In this section, Cedar connects evolutionary time with lived human experience, as well as invoking a metaphysical possibility through a disbelief in Darwinian evolution. Moreover, just as the anonymous paleontologist, who appeared as a talking head on TV earlier in the novel, discusses de-evolution, there is a deconstruction of the linear progression of evolution. Instead, Cedar ruminates that regression and failure – backs and sideways movements – are just as crucial to the development of the human form. In writing these thoughts to be read by her unborn child, who could be a devolved form of human, Cedar produces a text that challenges the consecutive progression of time. Louise Faison makes the exemplary argument that "As a pregnant epistolary writer, Cedar produces the next generation and the literary text. Erdrich depicts the baby—an assemblage of salvaged traits—as allegorizing this collaged aesthetic, tying the future of the (non)human to the future of the literary" (361).

Each of these scenes takes place within the confines of the home, thus further extending the relationship between different temporalities and histories. Epistolary writing can also be seen as a mode that connects the domestic with outside spheres. In Boyle's novel, the main protagonist and narrator Ty Tierwater recalls his life before ecological disaster had set in:

> […] for the better part of my life I was a criminal. Just like you. I lived in the suburbs in a three–thousand-square–foot house with redwood siding and oak floors and an oil burner the size of Texas, drove a classic 1966 Mustang for sport and a Jeep Laredo (red, black leather interior) to take me up to the Adirondacks … I guess I was dimly aware – way out there on the periphery of my consciousness – of what I was doing to the poor abused corpus of old mother earth […]. (Boyle 47)

Ty, in an admonishment of the conventional domestic lifestyle that follows a certain routine that traces the path of the American Dream, recognizes his own complicity in pushing earth's climate past its tipping point. Later in the novel, Ty claims "I wanted to live like Thoreau" (Boyle 270), recalling America's Romantic transcendentalist and "the Patron Saint of American environmental writing" (Buell 28).

Towards the end of the novel, Ty's Thoreauvian turn comes as he reunites with his ex-wife and flees to a dilapidated, abandoned cabin in the Sierra Nevada mountains owned by the environmental activist group Earth Forever! Up in the Sierra Nevada mountains, "It's hot [...] downed trees, splintered telephone poles, potholes and craters everywhere" (Boyle 281), which is in stark contrast to Thoreau's idyll at Walden Lake. Ty and Andrea have already occupied this holiday cabin, now turned home, with Ty's daughter Sierra while he was evading the authorities. Ty and Andrea end the novel setting up housekeeping "to measure out the remainder of their young-old lives" in 2026 (Boyle 276). Their reconfigured family at the novel's conclusion includes Petunia, a Patagonian fox rescued from a flooded sanctuary, and the most prevalent animals in sight are mutant jays, although the sounds of owls and coyotes begin to perforate at the edges of the returning forest. This shift in family structure often mirrors the shifts in the national character, "in both a positive and negative sense"; contained therein are ideas of progression and regression but most notably change (Jacobson 7). Nothing is certain for Ty and Andrea anymore, they have found a haven in the Sierra Nevada region scarred by the years of environmental collapse, but the "woods – these woods, our woods – are coming back" (Boyle 281). The home immediately extends outwards to the surrounding environment, forming a link between the domestic and the environment, further compounded by the fact Petunia, the Patagonian fox, has now been successfully domesticated "we don't need the muzzle anymore, or a cage [...]" (Boyle 281). This shift towards domestication is still contingent on Ty acknowledging that "Petunia is not a Dog" suggesting a mutual adaptation as Ty must accommodate this distinction as something that "will be vitally important" (Boyle 272). Here, human-animal companionship is reconstructed to accommodate empathy and coexistence, acknowledging a wild animal as an agent of uncertainty rather than the certainty of dominance associated with traditional pet ownership. Consequently, this newfound relationality with another species offers the reader a sense of quiet optimism as A *Friend of the Earth*'s epilogue provides grounds for hope amidst a world shrouded in uncertainty. Boyle seems to be suggesting that if anthropogenic climate change leads to an experience of mass extinction and polycrisis, nature will adapt even if we do not, as Jacobson argues, "[t]his radical vision asks readers to shift from an anthropocentric worldview to an ecocentric perspective."

The Future of Uncertainty

In the final pages of Erdrich's novel, Cedar writes her way back into the past, to a memory of playing in the snow with her adoptive parents. This retreat into memory is one that offers Cedar a temporal escape to resist subjugation[12] and to some extent resist the carceral state in which she is detained waiting for her next (forced) pregnancy. However, the final lines, "where will you be, my darling, the

last time it snows on earth?" (Erdrich 337), offers a glimpse through time. This sudden shift in tense thrusts the reader forward in time to the uncertain future. In this speculative inquiry, Cedar connects the future with the past and repurposes the present through narrative uncertainty in an attempt to liberate the future from her captors as a written act of resistance: "Cedar's journal that she continues to write even though it is banned by the institution, emerges as the last sign of protest. The narrative becomes a means of contention against the suppression of the female voice" (Siepak 66). Yet, unlike Boyle's quiet optimism, Cedar seems to concede to the idea that there will be no return to the way things were. However, this concession should not be read as a defeat, as the address to her child connects the future to something comprehensible and human, which positions the child as an analogy for the aesthetics of an uncertain future. Faison argues that "Erdrich ties the future of the (non)human to the future of the literary, offering writing as one technology for producing altered—and notably nonwhite, anticapitalistic—forms of futurity" (361).

Hegemonic ideas of progress, including evolution and the march of modernity, dominate much of Western culture imposed on a global scale through waves of colonialism and capitalist expansion. In the introduction to their book, Ian Scoones and Andy Sterling advocate for an "appreciation of uncertainty" that resists a colonization of the future by a Western framed globalizing modernity (Scoons and Sterling 7). Uncertainty becomes more than a perceived lack or absence of knowledge but rather an active form of the "conditions of knowledge – how we understand, frame and construct potential futures […]" (Scoones and Sterling 8). It is here that we can see how uncertainty liberates itself from hegemonic structures and becomes a useful tool with which to imagine what Haraway calls "still possible pasts, presents, and futures." Haraway's Chthulucene presents an alternative lens that can be used to navigate the current paradigmatic epoch shifting age of the Anthropocene and polycrisis.

In fact, like other terms that stand in as an apropos for the Anthropocene, such as capitalocene, plasticocene, (M)anthropocene, misanthropocene, urbanocene, and even Americocene[13], there is still the element of uncertainty about how to label or name the present moment but the need to do so anyway. Yet, each one offers a potential way of understanding the present moment in relation to the past as well as the future. Furthermore, these terms afford a critical distance from the hegemonic ideas of globalized modernity and can help form critical responses to the multiple cascading crises in the world today against the tide of anthropogenic climate change. Haraway proposes the Chthulucene as "one of the big-enough stories in the netbag for staying with the trouble of our ongoing epoch". By combining the theoretical with the need for narrative storytelling to make sense of these shifting times, "Chthulucene is made up of ongoing multispecies stories and practices of becoming-with in times that remain at stake, in precarious times, in

which the world is not finished, and the sky has not fallen—yet" (Haraway). This anticipatory "yet" highlights an urgent temporality and underscores the precariousness and uncertainty of the current times.

This urgency is compounded by the idea that the natural world may be vulnerable and close to exhaustion brought on by the enterprises of capitalism (and colonialism) through incremental acts of environmental violence, or the processes of "slow violence" (Nixon 2) . Furthermore, Rob Nixon notes the asymmetry in the slow violence that climate change enacts on the planet, which he calls "an attritional violence [...]", and how there is a disproportionate impact on the poor and marginalized who bear the brunt of the negative effects of environmental destruction (Nixon 2). Building on Nixon's argument, McAvan insists, "In Erdrich's work, therefore, we can see the way that a slow violence which began against Native Americans with colonialism has come home to roost for the white culture of the Americas in general with the destruction of the climate" (101). This is echoed in Erdrich's novel when Cedar's father states, "Mother Earth has a clear sense of justice. You fuck me up, I fuck you up" (Erdrich 68). Yet, the idea that such violence is slow can be challenged by the reality that for displaced people, and people on the move, affected by climate-related disaster, the violence is not attritional, but in fact precipitated by the crises associated with environmental destruction.

Therefore, planetary domesticity could also imply a kind of radical homemaking (See also Jacobson) in this current epoch. While Boyle's novel closes with a certain white domesticity. Erdrich's novel weaves together a multicultural or transnational family, yet, Ursula K. Heise is somewhat skeptical of such narrative representations that are simply presented as "an ecological family romance" as such representations potentially limit their "socially transformative power" (Heise 394).[14] Yet, both novels resist hegemonic or simplistic romanticized possibilities by instead choosing uncertainty:

> [...] uncertainties can be generative of diverse, imagined alternatives. By opening up spaces to re- imagine futures, to dream and to construct alternatives, uncertainties can be confronted in positive ways: not as threats or sources of fear, but as sources of hope and possibility. (Scoones and Sterling 21)

Therefore, these narratives weave in the multicultural and transnational family unit with positive uncertainties which then "function as narrative solutions to environmental problems" as the domestic sphere intersects with broader ecological systems.

Conclusion: Contemplate the Entanglements

Tracing back through the critical threads often afforded to writers of dystopian science fiction , Erdrich and Boyle present works of fiction that (re)claim domestic spaces and insert human/non-human entanglements in the literary mode by playing with forms of domestic fiction through various narrative modalities as discussed. In these works, the gathering of collective introspection against the backdrop of an apocalyptic climate on the global scale revives a new kind of collective consciousness: a life form with the potential to rethink the future of uncertainty. Both authors revitalize the domestic form which acts as a mode of cultural repair at a time when the local seems to be overwhelmed by the disruption of climate crisis and other catastrophes (see also Faison).

Just like attempts to reconfigure the Anthropocene by giving rise to other useful terms that allow us to think with, through, and against the current epoch, polycrisis has provoked further thoughts about what such a term could actually mean. In her recent (re)publication of her work *Metamodernity*, Lene Rachel Andersen has *retitled the work Polymodernity: Meaning and Hope in a Complex World.* Her decision was provoked by the fact that her theory was being aligned too closely with metamodernism, a movement which aims to bring together contemporary culture through the combined gaze of the modern and postmodern, rather than what Andersen is reaching for: "[…] to see the globe as a connected whole consisting of many cultures each with their explanatory power. A polymodern epistemology must be able to provide this" (Andersen 9). It could also be posited that by creating new forms of knowledge by thinking with terms such as Anthropocene, polymodernity, and even polycrisis, we could construct new ways of dealing with the systemic risks that present themselves in the contemporary moment.

While Andersen makes a compelling case, weaving through both academic and non-academic modes of thought, the work tries to insert a certain way of doing things in the face of the polycrisis (with certainty). One of Andersen's claims is that polymodernity provides us with a framework for "understanding ourselves and our societies in a more complex way," yet this set up seems more concerned with naming this condition and setting up a hierarchy of increasing societal complexity that ranges from indigenous to polymodern via modern and postmodern (Andersen 9). Such hierarchies risk oversimplifying complex societal structures similar to the oversimplification of naming current, multiple cascading events through the application of clever neologisms such as polycrisis, which does not consider the combined and uneven nature of interlocking crises.[15] As such, polymodernity could be further critiqued as only offering a way to navigate the polycrisis by serving a neoliberal, utopian agenda as it shifts its focus to free-market economics and the commodification of social bonds.[16] Even as Andersen expresses an openness towards different kinds of realities, and acknowledges oversimplification, her text calls for "a need to [quantify]" all too often, which closes the door on spaces of uncertainty

and necessary skepticism (Andersen 10).[17] By thinking through the current epoch with planetary domesticity in mind, the various relationalities and entanglements between the human and non-human are able to play out through uncertainty, even when the disruptive forces of polycrisis loom large. Through these uncertainties, we may be able to shift the focus beyond the restrictions of human-centered hegemonies, to more ecocentric ones, and leverage a narrative medium to explore the various temporal and spatial dimensions (and disturbances) of the past, present, and future in relation to planetary ecology. In both Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God* and Boyle's A *Friend of the Earth*, form and convention are leveraged and disrupted as readers are invited to contemplate entanglements of the cultural, domestic, social, and symbolic with the biological across shifting temporalities, breathing a new life into literary form. Thus, Erdrich and Boyle present us with the idea that literary narratives can act as sites of cultural repair by confronting the inadequacy of conventional modes of expression for a new way of thinking through the current planetary crises and resist falling into despair, cynicism, or unwarranted optimism, and the belief/disbelief discourse of progress.

Notes

[1] Adam Tooze argues, "the polycrisis idea has always been first and foremost about mapping a cognitive shock" and bout how each social group views itself in relation to the ongoing crises. Tooze also posits that "In the polycrisis the shocks are disparate, but they interact so that the whole is even more overwhelming than the sum of the parts."

[2] Citing Foucault by way of Rancière, Sibylle Baumbach and Birgit Neumann claim that heterochronies of the present "dismantle the sense of community that the term 'contemporary' implies and give way to fragmented, highly atomized, and competing temporalities" (4).

[3] Amy Kaplan states that domestic spheres can be thought of as extending to the nation as a domestic space: "The domestic in intimate opposition to the foreign. In this context domestic has a double meaning that not only links the familial household to the nation but also imagines both in opposition to everything outside the geographic and conceptual border of the home" (581). This, by extension, situates the domestic space of home in a broader environmental context.

[4] Michael Lawrence argues that the term can be thought of as "the causal entanglement of crises in multiple global systems in ways that significantly degrade humanity's prospects" (2).

[5] E. Anthony Muhammad makes a compelling argument for deterritorializing the development of concepts of Otherness and alterity from the hegemonic White political structures from which they emerge and reshape the philosophical borderlands around these notions.

Notes

[6] For a more complete argument how this idea relates to the Indigenous decolonial project, Julia Siepak argues that Indigenous writers present, then, the social critique of extractive economies and environmentally irresponsible politics. Founding their fiction on Indigenous perspectives, they attempt to re-imagine and re-narrativize the poetics of the apocalyptic future to include Native peoples, inherently engaging in decolonial efforts.

[7] Iris Murdoch claims, in her seminal work *Existentialists and Mystics*, that "literature is a way to picture and understand moral situation" while positing language and perception in narrative ethics extends the philosophical boundary (386).

[8] Here I want to draw attention to Louise Faison's exemplary scholarship on Erdrich's novel which contextualizes the reading from a feminist perspective and incorporates indigenous history to formally mimic the biological recycling she thematizes, positing "altered forms of disorderly, literary beauty for a nonhuman (and notably nonwhite, anticapitalistic) future" (357).

[9] While the US has endured over 400 weather related disasters since 1980, NOAA's "Billion-Dollar Weather and Climate Disasters" data reveals that the number and cost of disasters between the years 2000-2024 exceeds the previous two decades (1980-1999) combined.

[10] For a fuller account of this argument, see Birgit Christ's monograph, *Modern Domestic Fiction*. Christ builds upon the framework of Nina Baym's *Women's Fiction* (1978) as a study of how domestic fiction took a central role in promulgating popular feminist ideas, creating a mass magazine market geared to women, and shaping new middle-class identity.

[11] See also Markley, R. "Literature, Climate, and Time: Between History and Story" in *Climate and Literature* in which Markley argues, "Beginning around 1800, however, work in geology, planetary astronomy, and paleontology transformed conceptions of climate by decoupling planetary history from human experience, memory, and myth."

[12] Frida Buhre and Collin Bjork argue for emphasizing temporality in Indigenous rhetoric by examining how indigenous activists are informed by "temporal topoi" to resist subjugation.

[13] The term Americocene can be attributed to Jared Hickman's essay "The Apocalypse of Settler Colonialism and the Case for the Americocene" in which he states "the intellectual territory of apocalypse in American literature and culture rightfully belongs to indigenous peoples." An argument that can help elevate a reading of Erdrich's text through the lens of indigenous studies (19).

[14] I refer here to Heise's argument: "The multicultural or transnational family is recuperated as an agent of social resistance and as a synecdoche for a more ecologically sustainable social order even as the insistently domestic framing of such cultural encounters contains and limits their socially transformative power" (394). Yet, Heise offers a way out for such representations when there is an understanding of ecosystems and human social systems as analogous in their structure and as subject to the same ethical imperatives (396)

[15] The Nordic Bildung website offers downloadable slides that show these hierarchies of increasing societal complexity that are focused on "being human", which also takes an anthropocentric position rather than an ecocentric.

Notes

[16] Andersen's work in progress article, "Polymodern Economics" offers useful ways to rethink current economic models but at times offers simple binaries and aims to quantify thinks like "how many favors did you do yesterday [...] how much did you talk to your neighbor?" to produce data for municipal investments thus potentially straying into indirect of commodification of building social and emotional bonds (2024).

[17] Here, I would even draw attention to an argument of fictionalism presented by John Gibson based on a philosophy of skepticism. While skepticism has often been the crux of many debates around Western Philosophy, it still offers a useful doubt that resists unwarranted optimism while warding off overt cynicism. Gibson argues, "A fictionalist stance is required when we have come see that a region of discourse is indispensable to our cultural practices but that we have lost grounds for believing in the commitments evidently demanded by that discourse" (112). Which, in light of the argument, provides us with useful sites of cultural repair.

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Biography

David J. Cross is a Doctoral Candidate and Lecturer at the University of Stuttgart in American Literature and Culture. Having received his BA (Hons) and MA from Goldsmiths, University of London, he completed a fully funded two-year MFA research program at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie's prestigious Sandberg Instituut (NL), exploring the role of utopia and the commons with a focus on social interaction and equal opportunities over financial growth and profit via an analysis and working practice with sound and video. His current research concerns apocalyptic tradition, alienation, and catastrophe in American Fiction. David is also a working artist and has contributed to exhibitions in Rotterdam, Vienna, and Bologna.

Coming of Age in Crisis:
The Bildungsroman and Resilience in Climate Fiction

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Abstract This paper analyzes elements of the *Bildungsroman* in climate fiction (cli-fi) and shows how these contribute to the depiction of children's resilience in the texts. The article provides the theoretical background for linking the Bildungsroman to climate fiction and definitions of resilience, and then uses this as a starting point to consider Lily Brooks-Dalton's *The Light Pirate* (2022) and passages from Jessie Greengrass' *The High House* (2021). My analysis shows that *The Light Pirate* suggests a utopian co-evolution of humans and nature, while *The High House* implies a continued struggle in the face of climate disaster. Both novels alter the nature-to-culture paradigm of the Bildungsroman of the past—the same paradigm that served to naturalize the acculturation of the individual into the cultural order of capitalism—while *The Light Pirate* also includes the nonhuman into the idea of culture by imagining how culture can exist within nature. In this process, depicting children's agency and resilience models a way to navigate the environmental transformations that are to come. The aim of this paper is to show the Bildungsroman's renewed relevance regarding the portrayal of agency and resilience of children in the climate crisis, since the genre is uniquely positioned to criticize the representation of the process of a movement from nature to culture that has defined its own literary history.

Keywords Anthropocene; Bildungsroman; Cli-Fi; Climate Crisis; Resilience.

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Climate fiction (cli-fi) contains combinations of different genres, including but not limited to science fiction, historical fiction, magical realism, and the Bildungsroman. This multiplicity of genres in cli-fi is an "integral part of the way it narratively conjures the future" (Evans 95). This paper focuses on the last genre in particular, arguing that an updated and future-oriented version of the Bildungsroman can endow depictions of young people with agency through their display of resilience in times of the climate crisis. In climate discourse, children and adolescents are often portrayed as powerless, in order to elicit empathy for the next generation and motivate readers to change their behavior for the benefit of their own descendants. These predominantly vulnerable depictions can undermine the agency of younger people in facing the climate crisis (Caracciolo 146). This paper aims to critique the depiction of younger people as helpless by tracing instances of children's resilience in cli-fi texts, where elements of the Bildungsroman prove decisive in problematizing the process of social becoming that has always formed the core of the genre.

One of these texts is *The Light Pirate* (2022) by Lily Brooks-Dalton. While the novel focuses on the development of an individual, it situates the protagonist within a larger generational context of family and community, as well as the natural environment. Through the incorporation of an element of magical realism that represents resilience of the individual and the community, the novel adapts the Bildungsroman genre to allow for a less individualistic perspective. My second primary text, Jessie Greengrass' *The High House* (2021), offers a variation of the depiction of children's resilience and provides an alternative understanding of how the Bildungsroman format functions within cli-fi. As cli-fi Bildungsroman novels, both texts engage with resilience. Susie O'Brien argues that resilience can be an effective concept to process the threat of an uncertain future because it implies the possibility of thriving due to adverse conditions, not in spite of them (45). The texts discussed in this paper align with this assumption to varying degrees. Although both novels underline the agency of their young protagonists, *The Light Pirate* takes the utopian route, while *The High House* represents a more disheartening vision of resilience and survival in the climate crisis. To provide the necessary interpretive context for examining these novels, I will first assemble the theoretical framework for linking the Bildungsroman to climate fiction and definitions of resilience, as well as providing useful background information on the cli-fi genre and conceptions of childhood as intertwined with nature.

The Bildungsroman and Ecocriticism

For thinking about the Bildungsroman as a historical literary form deeply entwined with capitalist crises like climate change, there are few better starting points than Georg Lukács, who outlines some of the genre's typical themes and conventions in *The Theory of The Novel.* The first and most important of these is

the "reconciliation between interiority and reality," meaning the individual's ideals and aspirations and the conventions and conditions of society (Lukács 132). This reconciliation, while difficult, becomes possible through a series of "hard struggles and dangerous adventures" (132). In a traditional Bildungsroman of the eighteenth century, outer conditions such as economic disadvantage or social class remain relatively stable, whereas cli-fi novels which contain Bildungsroman elements additionally depict the outer limitations caused by the changing climate as constantly in flux. With the interruption of ecological patterns, the depiction of childhood and the process of maturing are shifting as well.

Ecocriticism and the Bildungsroman have already been connected by Helena Feder who points out that, "while explicitly the story of the origin and development of the individual, the Bildungsroman is also culture's own origin story, the humanist myth of its separation from and opposition to nature" (18). Feder exposes the inner contradictions of the Bildungsroman by problematizing the nature-culture binary as a myth, for the concept of nature must be contained in the idea of culture. Therefore, Feder argues, the narrative of the formation or acculturation of an individual must also contain the story of nature, which is to say, a narrative of nonhuman agency or subjectivity as well as the animality of the human (19). Feder identifies a movement from nature into culture parallel to the expulsion from childhood into adulthood as a common paradigm in the Bildungsroman (26). The cli-fi Bildungsroman reconceptualizes notions of nature and culture by imagining the falling-apart of our familiar contemporary culture—and its reformulation in a climate changed world.

In the cli-fi novels this paper investigates, the protagonists' development does not follow a linear movement from nature to culture. Rather, the texts show a transition from a nature which has been altered by human impact to a culture which is redefined as not standing in opposition to nature. The novels thereby significantly alter the nature-to-culture paradigm of the Bildungsroman of the past. Beyond this, *The Light Pirate* includes the nonhuman in the idea of culture by depicting how culture can exist within nature. This updated and future-oriented version of the Bildungsroman can endow young people with agency by depicting how they display resilience in overcoming adversities in times of climate crises. Attempts to merely *dissolve* the concept of the nature-culture boundary in fiction can lead to a simplification of the complex socio-political causes for ecological devastation and thereby downplay the significant political changes needed to stop the climate crisis. However, *redefining* the nature-culture paradigm in cli-fi can articulate the necessary cultural shifts towards a deeper environmental consciousness that the climate crisis necessitates.

The debate surrounding the role of realist conventions and human agency in cli-fi highlights tensions between traditional narrative forms, like the Bildungsroman, and the urgent need for new storytelling frameworks that capture

the complexities of ecological interdependence and the Anthropocene. Sylvia Mayer identifies two main directions in cli-fi, the first type of novel is set in the distant future and heavily influenced by conventions and techniques of science fiction, while the second category includes stories set in the near future and follows conventional narrative strategies of world-building (21). The latter have become predominant in contemporary cli-fi and use a realist technique (Johns-Putra 38). This presents a problem for theorists like Timothy Clark, who argues that adhering to realist conventions reinforces old paradigms such as the anthropocentric perspective and the focus on the individual – the very patterns cli-fi seeks to overcome (36). Clark maintains that conventional methods of plot, characterization, and setting expose an "anthropocentric delusion," which is to say, a sense of self-importance or control (164-65). This anthropocentric delusion manifests perhaps most powerfully in the realist subgenre of the Bildungsroman, with its primary goal of portraying the progress of the individual. From Clark's perspective, it would seem reasonable to conclude that the Bildungsroman is not suitable for depicting the complexity of ecological changes and the interdependence of humans and nature.

Similar to Clark's "anthropocentric delusion," Bruno Latour proposes that the idea of the Anthropocene is flattering to humans since it signals that they have gained "power over the planet" (44). Yet, he argues that this "power to influence may well have already been lost" (44), alluding to ongoing planetary changes, such as the continued effects of the greenhouse gasses already in the atmosphere, which cannot be stopped by humans, even if we were to cease the burning of carbon immediately. Latour concludes that being a subject in the Anthropocene requires "sharing agency with other subjects that have also lost their autonomy" (62). This is to say that Anthropocene narratives can also produce conceptions of the limits of the power humans collectively hold over the environment, specifically the power to mitigate the climatic shifts that are already underway. The cli-fi Bildungsroman not only redefines the nature-culture binary of past iterations in the genre but also highlights how the vulnerability to the effects of climate change extends beyond the individual.

Because of its historical identification with the development of the individual, a category which only exists because it is created and recognized by the collective, the cli-fi Bildungsroman possesses this capacity to represent collective vulnerability. The German term *Bildungsroman* emerged at the height of humanism, with Goethe's novel *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795-96) widely considered the prototype of the genre (Jeffers 49). A common thread in most definitions of the Bildungsroman is that it "follows the development of the hero or heroine from childhood or adolescence into adulthood, through a troubled quest for identity" (Baldick 27). The word *Bildung* refers to both education as well as formation, in this case the formation of body and mind. This narrative of the individual coming into culture depicts the psychological and moral growth of the protagonist and how

they "find responses to the innermost demands of [their] soul in the structures of society" (Lukács 133). From an initial state of loneliness due to the misalignment of their desires and ideals with those of society, the protagonist resigns themself to society as the "crowning of a process of education, a maturity attained by struggle and effort" (Lukács 133). In this way, the focus on the development of the individual also foregrounds how the individual finds their place within the capitalist system. As Franco Moretti proposes, the Bildungsroman is "the 'symbolic form' of modernity" (5) and emerged during the rise of early capitalism (25-27). Thus, the genre itself is implicated in the climate crisis, as capitalist accumulation and the need for endless growth has led to the irreparable damage of the environment. This places the Bildungsroman in a unique position from which to criticize the depictions of the transition from nature to culture by confronting its own literary history.

Since the Bildungsroman depends upon and produces a "movement from innocence to knowledge," that is, as Feder has shown, already permeated by nature, the genre is especially relevant in connection to children's agency and environmental violence because children's innocence has historically been associated with nature (Quinn 53). In the Romantic period, the definition of childhood was characterized by "naturalness and proximity to nature, innocence, and sanctity" (Baader 3). Jean-Jacque Rousseau shaped the image of the child as inherently innocent, arguing that children's education ought to be nature-centered and shelter children from being treated equal to adults (Vitorino et al. 9). This highlights the lack of agency awarded to children and adolescents at the time. Following Rousseau's ideas, Romantic poets such as Wordsworth popularized the figure of the "innocent child of nature" in English literature (Austin 75). A similar depiction of childhood innocence was adapted by American Romantic writers, such as Emerson in his work *Nature*. During the twentieth century, a shift in the portrayal of childhood occurred where the focus is no longer on the protection of innocence but the loss thereof (Goldstone 796). As Bette Goldstone puts it, more contemporary children's literature "no longer shelters children in a world of fantasy. It clearly teaches them about reality" (796). This is particularly noticeable in popular young adult fiction of the 1950s and 60s such as *Catcher in the Rye* (1951), *Lord of the Flies* (1954), *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), and *A Kestrel for a Knave* (1968). This development mirrors changing societal conceptions of childhood. Rather than being viewed merely as objects of protection, children are considered subjects who are entitled to make their own choices and therefore "must be aware of the problems and complexities of the modern world" (Goldstone 797). This loss of innocence through early confrontation with reality becomes more prevalent in cli-fi, with climate change producing an accelerated childhood. In the novels that will be discussed in this article, children are portrayed as capable and resilient, maintaining the close connection to nature that was idealized in

the Romantic period, while also experiencing a process of education shaped by contact with both society and nature that makes them more capable—and more resilient.

(Climate) Resilience

Resilience as a term has shifted from the delimitation of systems to individuals. The origin of the word 'resilience,' John Leary notes, refers to the persistence of ecological systems throughout an experience of disturbance (150). Crucially, the resilient biological system does not return to its original state but "simply persists in an altered but basically intact state," as the system nonetheless sustains damage and does not fully recover (Leary 152). In this context, resilience describes a process of transformation rather than adaptation. In contrast, the current predominant conception of resilience, Ben Anderson suggests, is the responsibility of the individual subject to "adapt to, or bounce back from, inevitable shocks in an unstable world" (61). Other definitions also reflect this connection of resilience and individuality. According to Zatura et al., resilience can be understood as "an individual trait", a "dynamic developmental process" or the "outcome of successful adaptation to adversity" (4). In their view, it can be determined by two factors: First, how well an individual is able to recover from facing opposition and, second, how sustainably they can maintain their well-being in an environment of adversity (4).

Some scholars have criticized how current definitions of resilience, specifically when understood as successful adaptation, reflect an emphasis on individual adaptation that becomes problematic in the climate change discourse. O'Brien suggests that narratives of resilience, both fictional and nonfictional, are a conventional way to picture the future because "the idea of resilience compels us as the foundation of a belief in a survivable future" (45). However, in the context of climate change and natural disasters, "ecological conceptions of resilience" become a problematic topic (45). As O'Brien explains,"[i]n this domain in particular, resilience has a strongly normative flavor; more than a measurable characteristic of systems or communities, it is a value to be aspired to" (45). The concept of resilience presupposes that one must develop one's ability to adapt or bounce back from adversity while operating within a system. Striving for resilience does not encourage challenging the system within which adversity is faced or the questioning of the status quo. Promoting climate resilience as aspirational displaces responsibility for managing natural disasters from the state and industry to the individual, the voter, or the consumer.

Political philosophers Brad Evans and Julian Reid observe that resilience has become increasingly politicized within the domain of sustainable development (34). They voice their disapproval of the fact that the concept of resilience has become "a property within human populations that now need[s] promoting,"

which defers responsibility to the economically disadvantaged subject (Evans and Reid 33). They suggest that "the resilient subject is [the] embodiment of neoliberal thinking" and this conception of resilience takes away agency from endangered populations (37). In addition, O'Brien argues that resilience should not mean continuing practices that are harmful to the environment and preserving the current way of life in the face of ecological disaster (49). Rather, as Evans and Reid suggest, to be resilient can be to embrace a radical transformation and "welcome this inevitable event as the process of passage to a new world and new life" (163). It is this kind of resilience that *The Light Pirate* and *The High House* seek to model and produce.

The Light Pirate and Resilience as Restructuration

While a traditional Bildungsroman often follows the protagonist's journey of leaving home to travel in pursuit of knowledge or acquiring a trade, Wanda, the main character in *The Light Pirate*, remains in her hometown in South Florida while it evolves from a rural town into a flooded swampland. Her story contains the classic elements of a Bildungsroman outlined by Lukács: She is a lonely child who does not fit into society, she receives an education, experiences a period of struggle and loss, and finally finds her place in the world. However, the moments where the plot deviates from the Bildungsroman formula highlight not only Wanda's resilience and agency but also her unwillingness to conform or resign herself to a society desperately struggling to keep the influences of nature at bay. Instead, she helps to create a society in which there is space for her, a society within nature. The extraordinariness of her powers of resilience is underlined but not undermined by the magical powers she develops during her coming-of-age process. Through both adherence to and adaptation of the abovenamed Bildungsroman features, *The Light Pirate* models an alternative to resigning to societal norms and upholding capitalist infrastructures by depicting a transformation of society in response to climate change.

From its early pages, the novel creates the sense that Wanda has no place in the world in its current state. Because she feels uneasy and out of place at school, she acts shy and reserved and tries to avoid asking too many questions in class, keeping a low profile although she is actually a curious student (Brooks-Dalton 121). Due to sharing her birthday with the anniversary of a hurricane, she is disliked by her peers and blamed for the destruction caused by her namesake storm (102). Additionally, wearing used men's clothes with holes in them makes her stand out visually as an outsider (102). As her power reveals itself for the first time when she encounters opposition in the form of a bullying incident, it can be read as analogous to resilience. At an encroaching waterfront nicknamed the Edge to which she is forbidden to go, a group of older kids approach her and push her into the ocean. As they hold her head under water, suddenly "[t]he struggling

shadow that is Wanda's flailing, submerged body brightens. The light spreads, consuming the waves in streaks, until it looks like the water has swallowed a swirling, living galaxy" (105). Befuddled by this spectacle, the bullies scurry away, scared by this light which appeared out of nowhere. In this context, the Edge symbolizes the boundary between civilization and wilderness. By crossing this boundary, Wanda takes a first step towards her coming of age and coming into herself as a character. Her brother takes note of this beginning change in Wanda when she returns from the Edge: "She looks different somehow. Older. What surprises him is this extra layer she's brought home with her, clinging to her. Another skin" (108). Lucas' comment highlights that she immediately looks more mature after the incident. The figurative thicker skin she acquired through this experience signifies her quick recovery, a determining factor of resilience (Zatura et al. 4). Wanda herself acknowledges that facing adversity has permanently changed her, "she feels different, like something inside her that used to be closed is now open," which suggests a psychological or spiritual growth (106).

Wanda's growth does not lead her down the traditional Bildungsroman's path of "enriching resignation" to the given societal conditions and structures (Lukács 133). This becomes obvious when comparing her attitude towards infrastructure in particular with her family's. Born into a world of increasingly concerning weather phenomena, Wanda witnesses climate destruction accelerate as the landscape around her is drastically altered during her early childhood. A utility worker, Wanda's father clings to the life to which he is accustomed, struggling to repair the infrastructure of their town despite the slow but steady shutdown of government institutions such as schools and public transport (Brooks-Dalton 117). Wanda's older brother Lucas wants to leave their town and study engineering so he can change the way in which their infrastructure is built from the inside (115). Infrastructure, in this context, represents upholding the status quo and attempting to fend off developments that can no longer be stopped. Despite the predominant opinions in her family that the climate crisis can and should be contained, Wanda herself is accustomed to an environment that is constantly changing and accepts transformation as a fact of life:

> She has been watching the town empty, the water rise, the storms pummel, as far back as she can remember. This is the rhythm she was born to. [Her father] is old enough to remember arguments about whether climate change was real. Lucas is old enough to remember when tourists still came. But to Wanda, these things are only stories, so distant they might as well be fiction. (99)

Children like Wanda, born during or after a fictional catastrophe, did not experience the 'normal' world, "the Before", and therefore do not hold on to outdat-

ed ideas and structures which no longer apply to their post-catastrophic reality (102). She is attuned to the rhythms of the world in its current state and has trouble imagining what things were like for the previous generation or even older members of her own generation. Through years of ongoing transformation, Wanda has gained the flexibility to adjust to her environment, embodying the neoliberal resilient subject of Reid and Evans' critique.

And yet, rather than accepting the status quo of reparative measures, Wanda undergoes an alternative education that prepares her to live outside of society. Her neighbor Phyllis, a retired biology teacher, acts as Wanda's mentor and helps the young girl facilitate personal growth. This is also where sustainability, the second resilience factor, enters Wanda's developmental process. From her interactions with a more benevolent teacher, Wanda begins to develop a curiosity for natural sciences and phenomena in nature. She asks Phyllis many questions and is surprised by the results, since she "is not used to her questions being taken so seriously or answered with such patience" (126). Wanda also remarks that her "anxiety about learning indoors is gone – there are no bullies who snicker when she raises her hand" (126). In a different learning environment, free from the constricting surroundings of the classroom, she wants to learn about the creatures that live around her and how their environment is changing. This is pertinent to reading *The Light Pirate* as a Bildungsroman, since *Bildung*, in this instance, refers to education. As opposed to a traditional Bildungsroman, where the protagonist acquires a trade or formal education, Wanda receives a more hands-on education which is immediately relevant to her outside of school. As opposed to her father and her brother, she learns not to work against nature or find reactionary solutions that try to contain events like floods and storms. Instead, Phyllis teaches her survival skills such as fishing and self-defense which Wanda will come to rely on when their hometown is flooded. In other words, she is not taught to maintain the status quo of capitalist society under changing environmental conditions by attempting to maintain its infrastructure, but rather she learns how to navigate the volatile situation in which infrastructure becomes untenable due to environmental shifts.

The practical application of her education is tested by the "hard struggles and dangerous adventures" of the Bildungsroman which far outweigh what a young person of her position in society would have to face (Lukács 132). The novel makes it clear that this is due to the drastic environmental changes and their fallout, as scenes of trauma and hardship occur during or right after extreme weather events. Wanda goes through a series of hardships after she loses her father in a flash flood, making Phyllis her default guardian. A pivotal moment occurs when Wanda has to defend Phyllis and herself from intruders who are planning to ransack their house after yet another flood (Brooks-Dalton 257). The scene is focalized by Phyllis who points out how Wanda, still an adolescent, is

already "taller than her, stronger than her, quicker than her" (257). Wanda's physical strength and capability underline her prematurity required by the extreme conditions in which she is growing up and foreshadows further escalation. Phyllis tries to fend off the burglars with a gun but loses her weapon and sustains a head injury (258). In an act of self-defense, Wanda shoots both intruders before they can cause further harm (258). Later, Wanda describes this event as "[t]he night she left the vestiges of childhood behind" (268). The incident, reminiscent of the abovementioned departure from innocence in twentieth-century children's literature, shows how the escalation of the climate crisis forces children to grow up faster and make decisions which that are well above their level of maturity, often decisions nobody should ever have to make. This becomes clearest when considering how the novel uses the Bildungsroman genre to contrast Wanda's struggles with those of a traditional Bildungsroman heroine like Jane Eyre who may have to make a difficult decision or stand up to an aggressor in more mundane and indirect ways than what *The Light Pirate* depicts.

The way in which Wanda's mental flexibility and the practical education she received from Phyllis prepare her to act quickly and protect herself and others portrays her as an extraordinary character. Her survival skills develop even further after she is separated from Phyllis and has to adapt to the harsh environmental conditions by herself. After the heat becomes unbearable and dangerous during the daytime, she switches her daily rhythm to nocturnal. She procures her own food and maintains her own shelter, a platform on a small island in the swamp – all extraordinary achievements for an adolescent child. Crucially, her resilience is not determined by her supernatural abilities. Resilience and magic have a historical connection, with Ann S. Masten describing resilience as "ordinary magic" (227). While early research on resiliency was prone to argue for the extraordinariness of resilience in children, suggesting that they were somehow special or unique in their abilities to resist adversity, Masten concludes that "resilience is made of ordinary rather than extraordinary processes" (227).

The Light Pirate literalizes the oxymoron of *ordinary magic* through Wanda's abilities. The light she can conjure in the water can be read as an element of magical realism, but the novel alternatively offers more rational or ordinary explanations. Phyllis theorizes that bioluminescence of a type of plankton or a reaction of certain bacteria which causes light reflections in the water could be responsible for Wanda's ability (Brooks-Dalton 150, 220). When the biologist takes a water sample from the lagoon and attempts to analyze it under a microscope, "[s]he sees something she's never seen before–organisms that are awake and shimmering and moving in the kind of intricate pattern such simple creatures should not be capable of. Yet they are" (152). Despite the scientific approach, there remains something unexplainable about the luminescence. Wanda herself is "thrilled by the hunt for an explanation, but she doesn't require one. To

her, these organisms are a magic she doesn't need to name" (159). Thus, the light remains ambiguous, both magical and ordinary, which foregrounds Wanda's agency and resilience. Wanda's magical abilities that connect her to natural forces carry an element of magic without presenting a solution or reversal of the climate disturbance which occurs in the narrative. There are hints that the light has a restorative power, since the area around Wanda's small platform in the swamp appears to be cleaner and animals start to return to the area (275). And yet, the magical realist element in the novel does not explain away Wanda's capacity for resilience and thus does not undermine her agency. The light cannot solve Wanda's problems for her. It cannot reverse the flooding of her hometown or bring back Phyllis or her family. It is merely a presence which accompanies Wanda on her journey. The light only enhances the portrayal of Wanda as a resilient child and young woman and emphasizes her ability to embrace environmental transformation.

While the final stage of a Bildungsroman depicts a resignation to societal conventions and the satisfaction of their ideals in existing societal structures, the heroine of *The Light Pirate* gains the knowledge that the project of keeping nature away from society, as her father and brother attempted, is only a futile solution. Instead, she uses her powers to create a society in which both she and the environmental forces to which she feels connected have space to grow. Wanda puts this insight into practice when she connects with a young non-binary person, and they establish a small community which operates within environmental structures. Together, they build tree houses by carefully integrating structures into the natural growing patterns of the trees themselves. In this process, "the trees were their architects, showing them where they could build and where they couldn't. How high. How heavy. And the ruined town gave them the materials. Their nest among the boughs made sense in a way the homes in [her town] never had. It belonged here" (280-81). The scene emphasizes the agency of the nonhuman not only through anthropomorphism but also by placing the foliage into the role of the guide and the human entities in the roles of the followers. Later in the scene, Wanda also mentions that the houses are built without doors, which highlights the absence of physical boundaries between human and nature or culture and wilderness and presents a stark contrast to the Edge at the beginning of the novel (300).

The Light Pirate adopts certain conventions of the Bildungsroman but adapts them to portray the process of coming of age in the Anthropocene. Wanda's education is not only a practical preparation for the times to come; it also brings her closer to nature, instead of further away from it. Rather than resigning herself to a society that caused environmental destruction, she contributes to building a different kind of culture which is not defined by a juxtaposition to nature but by the inclusion thereof. The element of magical realism in the novel serves to connect the protagonist to nature and the nonhuman without undermining her resilient capability. Through Wanda's powers and her ultimate project of realizing

a new social infrastructure, the novel works towards including the nonhuman in the idea of culture by depicting how culture can exist within nature and thereby transgresses the nature-culture binary of the traditional Bildungsroman. *The Light Pirate* thus transforms the Bildungsroman – the genre of resignation to the social relations of capitalism that have caused climate change –into an allegory for deconstructing the binary opposition of nature and culture that has underwritten capitalist exploitation and destruction of the environment. In doing so, this novel confronts the literary historical tradition from which it emerges, negating that tradition's ideological project of resilience as repair of infrastructure, and instead endeavoring to anticipate utopian possibilities by building a home among the trees, producing a theory and practice of resilience as restructuration.

The High House: Resilience as Obligation

Where *The Light Pirate* takes the utopian route, *The High House* presents a disheartening vision of resilience and survival in the climate crisis by depicting multiple instances where resilience is not a trait or a choice, but an obligation. It is important to keep in mind that the younger generations in these novels did not contribute to the condition of the destroyed climate in which they find themselves. Rather, these novels draw attention to the fact that the climate crisis has been produced by previous generations and their contributions to a capitalist society, which demands resilient behavior of the younger generation as an obligation. This first occurs at the very beginning of the narrative, where eighteen-year-old Caro is tasked with taking her half-brother Pauly to the titular high house, a remote safe house Pauly's mother has prepared for them in the event of a climate emergency (Greengrass 45). Their parents, both climate scientists, call Caro from a conference overseas and instruct her to bring her younger brother to safety (45). Before they arrive, the house is tended to by a local man, Grandy, and his granddaughter Sally. On the arduous journey there, Caro receives news that their parents have died in a fatal storm. Caro continues on foot, despite their heavy luggage and Pauly's growing weariness (53-54). When the child starts to cry out of exhaustion, Caro leaves their bags behind and carries her little brother in their stead (55). In Caro's situation, giving up is not an option, as she ponders "how I would go on – but what else can I do?" (55). The rhetorical question highlights that there is no viable alternative to moving on – both towards the literal safety of the high house and from the literal and figurative dangers represented by the news of the death of their parents.

This foreshadows later situations in the book, where survival and resilience are not presented as a choice, since there is no alternative. When the nearby village is flooded and Caro and Sally narrowly escape drowning, they both feel joyous at first, before realizing that this will not be the end of their struggle (266, 269). As Caro explains: "We had been waiting for the end, and it had come […].

This was the afterwards. We had survived – but *must*, somehow, continue to do so" (269, emphasis added). The two young women feel compelled to survive in order to care for Grandy and Pauly, and the responsibility is what keeps them going (266-69). While Sally dutifully accepts her obligation, Caro is filled with dread. She begins having nightmares and developing a fear of the rising water and how it could take Pauly away from her (269). Even though Caro and Sally display resilience in their endurance of hardship, Pauly seems to struggle less with tolerating adversity and coping with loss. After having spent some time away from their childhood home, Caro anticipates that Pauly would ask her uncomfortable questions: "I waited for him to ask me when we would be going home, but although his questions were endless, they were not about the things which we had left behind. Instead, they were about the names of birds or of flowers, or whether the leafy, cabbage-looking plants which grew between the dunes were edible" (184). Pauly is less attached to the past in general, concerning himself more with his immediate environment and practical issues. He is able to bounce back and move on quickly since his life thus far has been governed by constant change and adjustment. The young boy also has an easier time enduring their limited circumstances, because he cannot remember it being any other way. Not only does he hardly recall their time before the high house; he also does not remember what it was like to have a normal childhood.

What is normal for Pauly is still a constant struggle for Sally and Caro. While Caro and Sally recount things they miss from the time before the house, such as warmth and physical comfort or luxuries like soap and butter, Pauly has little to no connection to the time before the 'end of the world' (193-95). As he explains: "I have some idea of what it must have been like to be inside a bus, a truck, a boat with more than sails. […] I was only a child and, besides, what difference would it make? Those things are gone, or they are ruined, and we can't rebuild them" (192). This mindset enables the young boy to accept the reality of the present conditions. These things belong to a different time and a different version of himself, both of which are no longer accessible to him. The way in which he speaks of his childhood in the past tense shows Pauly's perceived maturity, that he no longer thinks of himself as a child. Pauly does not display any more nostalgia or sentimentality over the supposed loss of his childhood than he does about irretrievable objects or unreachable places like his prior home. Caro and Sally are suffering comparatively more since they fondly remember the "routine absence of hunger and worry" at a time when their lives were less arduous and physically demanding (193-195). This is to say that Pauly's basic level of resilience is portrayed as much higher than that of Sally and Caro. His coming of age takes place during a time of limited choices, and he therefore is more adaptable to the scarcity of their post-flood life. The narrative shows that with each generation, the concept of normalcy becomes more abstract as the weather phenomena grow increasingly more extreme and the world becomes less livable for humans. Alongside this development, a resignation

to accept their continuously more limiting circumstances settles in. While the parents attempted to inform about the climate crisis and planned ahead for their children's survival, Sally and Caro cannot plan further ahead than the next crisis and are occupied by dealing with the symptoms of the fallout while reminiscing about a better but unattainable past. Pauly's comparative lack of suffering suggests that when circumstances become dire, it is easier to resign oneself to the powers that be instead of yearning for the return of a vague idea of better times. Through this intergenerational trajectory, the novel feeds into the doom and gloom narratives of our time by proposing that it is too late to make any meaningful changes, and it is time to accept our fate and surrender to the consequences of the climate crisis. As opposed to Wanda in *The Light Pirate*, Pauly may not flourish in a time of crisis, but he sustainably endures. However, his resilience only prolongs a period of struggle and suffering.

The End (?)

The final section of this paper will compare the endings of *The Light Pirate* and *The High House* with regard to further differences in their depictions of resilience. At the end of the narrative, Pauly's maturity consists less of the accumulation of wisdom and experience and more of his resilient endurance and acceptance of the present circumstances, including the prospect of an early death. As the Bildungsroman hero, his "maturity [is] attained by struggle and effort" (Lukács 133). Here, *The High House* takes a darker turn when reading the novel as a Bildungsroman, considering the likelihood that, as opposed to Wanda, Pauly may not even reach adulthood. With the trajectory of increasingly more extreme weather phenomena from which not even the high house will be able to protect them, to the possibility of the failure of their electric generator, to their already dwindling resources, Pauly's future does not look particularly promising (Greengrass 223). The novel ends on a somber note: On the final page, shortly after the burial of Sally's grandfather, Pauly ponders the grim reality of their situation: One of them will not be buried outside, the high house will become their grave (277). By implying the continued survival of the three central characters, the last few pages adopt an oppressive mood, suggesting that they will not stay alive for long. As Caro points out, "[w]e aren't really saved. We are only the last ones, waiting" (276). The novel's conclusion thus aligns itself with the proposed resignation of the generational trajectory in the narrative.

By contrast, the last chapter of *The Light Pirate* opens with Wanda as an old woman, which lends the novel a sense of narrative closure. The classic Bildungsroman tends to conclude with the protagonist finding their place in society, or, as Franco Moretti puts it, the "definitive stabilization of the individual and of [their] relationship with the world" (27). In this aspect, the ending of *The Light Pirate* can be considered a classic Bildungsroman ending, especially since Wanda has found a physical place to settle. However, as Moretti criticizes, the idea of happiness and

reconciliation envisioned by the Bildungsroman is rather static (8-9). *The Light Pirate* subverts this notion of finality through the implication of a persistence of the community, which can be read as a synecdoche for humanity, while also insinuating that a continued struggle against adversity lies ahead. At the end of Wanda's personal journey, when she has established the settlement, she hands over her powers to a young fisherwoman in the next generation (Brooks-Dalton 304). This gesture symbolizes the hope for the continuation of her resilient characteristics and the flourishing of the settlement in adverse conditions. Wanda's partner remarks that the young woman reminds them of Wanda, which alludes to her being a strong and resilient person who has also had to face many obstacles throughout her life (303). As the young woman touches the glowing water, "an introduction is made," suggesting that this is the beginning of a new personal journey, albeit not an easy one (304). This is highlighted by the description of how "[t]he water-bound lights spin and brighten, asking the young woman if she is willing to do this work" (304). Overlooking her settlement, Wanda anticipates that "this place will go on changing long after she is gone," thereby insinuating an ongoing transformation of the landscape beyond the scale of her individual lifetime (301). With its emphasis on the persistence of the community, this ending situates the individual within a larger generational structure. *The Light Pirate* thereby produces a version of resilience which is not entirely reliant on the individual's ability to bounce back from experiences of adversity. Instead, the novel imagines a sustainable ongoing persistence of the communal society achieved through the transference of Wanda's power. The novel imagines a hopeful vision of the future through its depiction of individual and communal resilience. By following and deviating from the traditional Bildungsroman, *The Light Pirate* dissolves the nature-culture binary of the genre and presents the reconfiguration of the relation between nature and culture as the key to achieving climate resilience.

Conclusion

Despite being one of the oldest subgenres of realism, the Bildungsroman thus remains a vital and powerful form for contemporary and futuristic stories about coming of age in times of climate crises. This is because, historically, the Bildungsroman is the genre most associated with the process of introduction to a cultural order. To confront the climate crisis and work towards changing the status quo of the previous cultural order, it is necessary to critically engage with this process and point to its flaws. What is especially useful about the Bildungsroman genre in this context is that previous iterations of it have functioned to naturalize the cultural order which has produced the climate crisis. In this way, the genre is implicated in the climate crisis. Therefore, the Bildungsroman is uniquely positioned to criticize the representation of the process of a movement from nature

to culture and to confront the literary history of the genre itself. Moreover, the tensions created between the inner aspirations of the protagonist and the outer limitations imposed by the climate crisis form an ideal situation for exploring the resilience and agency of children and young adults. For these novels, such resiliency and agency still depend on an introduction into culture but a culture which has been redefined as not standing in opposition to nature. The result is a process of acculturation redefined by the orientation of subjects away from capitalist notions of individual success and towards ecological responsibility.

In *The Light Pirate*, resilience manifests itself in and through an individual trait Wanda is endowed with since birth, a "dynamic developmental process" that takes place during her childhood and adolescence as well as "an outcome of successful adaptation to adversity" which she faces throughout her life (Zatura et al. 4). Her magical abilities draw attention to her capacity for resilience instead of undermining it. The luminous consciousness which visualizes resilience in the novel has a more logical explanation as well as one that moves into the realm of the supernatural. Similarly, Wanda's capacity to overcome adversity can be considered ordinary but also extraordinary under the circumstances. *The Light Pirate* depicts how the narrative maturation of the main character can extend beyond the story of the individual by situating the protagonist within nature and community. As a Bildungsroman of the times to come, this novel follows the developmental stages of the protagonist which occur alongside environmental changes. Through this, the novel models an evolving resilience needed to overcome adversity in a changing environment and to adapt to as well as embrace this environmental transformation.

Although *The High House* includes the abovenamed connotations of resilient adaptation, the novel argues, above all, that endurance will be the only option to persist in the climate-changed future. This future, however, is not portrayed as desirable or livable. As the older characters Sally and Caro have trouble adjusting to their limited lifestyles during a climate catastrophe, Pauly seems to have an easier time living in these conditions. While the young boy appears to be naturally more resilient than his older sister, this is not emphasized as an outstanding quality but as arising from a sheer lack of comparison. The novel therefore does not suggest that Pauly is only more resilient because he is a child but that he can withstand adversity because he does not know a life without it. Placing him as the last link in a generational chain puts forth a defeatist notion of surrendering to the climate crisis and thus aligns the novel with the Bildungsroman tradition of "enriching resignation" (Lukács 133). With Pauly as a protagonist, *The High House* reveals a fundamental truth of the climate crisis: The environment cannot return to its previous state, wherefore reminiscing about a better past obstructs the way forward.

While cli-fi novels that foreground children's resilience risk romanticizing young people as symbols of hope in the climate crisis, novels like those discussed in this article show how children's resilience enables them to adapt to ongoing changes and redefine their relationship with the natural environment. Stressing agency and competence of the young protagonists in unprecedented circumstances, these narratives portray environmental changes and having to adjust to them as an ongoing process, with *The Light Pirate* depicting a utopian co-evolution of humans and nature, while *The High House* implies an ongoing struggle in the face of climate disaster. While there remains more to be explored in this connection between the Bildungsroman and cli-fi, as well as depictions of children's resilience in these and other works in this genre, this study has revealed how adapting elements of the Bildungsroman tradition in cli-fi can model resilience as embracing environmental transformation. What both novels fundamentally understand is this: Since the environment cannot and will not return to what it once was, our lives will have to change, and we will have to adjust to a new reality either way, so we should do everything we can to change and rethink societal structures so that we can live in the utopia of *The Light Pirate*, instead of the dystopia of *The High House*. The fact that the resilient protagonists are children proposes that it is not too late to make this change.

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Biography

Karoline Huber completed her master's degree at the University of Stuttgart, Germany. Her MA thesis was concerned with narratological innovation in a range of British, North American, and Australian climate fiction. She is currently working as a PhD candidate for the English department at the Ruhr-University of Bochum. Her dissertation investigates generational tensions in the Anglophone climate fiction Bildungsroman.

“Learning to Fight in a World on Fire”: Imagining Political Violence in the Anthropocene

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Abstract This article takes Andreas Malm’s 2020 manifesto *How to Blow Up a Pipeline* as a starting point to examine the representation of strategically used political violence in recent fiction and film. Political violence – as Malm envisions it for the future climate movement – has been a part of the radical environmental movement (in the U.S.) at least since the 1970s, very often, however, accompanied by accusations of terrorism from political interest groups and government agencies. In the immediate post-9/11 context, government rhetoric about “eco-terrorism” and new laws targeting different forms of expressing dissent as domestic terrorism were also accompanied by fictional representations portraying activists as dangerous terrorists (e.g. Michael Crichton’s *State of Fear*). Briefly tracing the so-called Green Scare in fiction and film from the post-9/11 era, I argue that a new awareness of the climate emergency has also led to a (literary) re-evaluation of strategically employed violence in protest movements. Analyzing Kim Stanley Robinson’s *Ministry for the Future* (2020), David Klass’ thriller *Out of Time* (2020), and the eponymous film to Malm’s manifesto, this article aims to show that recent novels envision political violence as an adequate means to inspire societal and political change in the face of the climate crisis.

Keywords Climate Activism; Political Violence; Radicalization; Fiction; Cultural Imaginary.

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Introduction

With the intensification of the climate crisis, climate justice movements and protests in reaction to slow political processes of change are growing around the globe. States find themselves increasingly confronted with public protests by citizens demanding swifter climate action and the implementation of measures to mitigate climate change. In addition to public demonstrations of moderate activist groups, protestors increasingly commit acts of civil disobedience (the most prominent tactic being the blocking of car traffic) to raise awareness within the broader public or to hold governments accountable to their own laws and promises to ameliorate the effects of anthropogenic climate change. While these acts of civil disobedience, popularized again by Extinction Rebellion, Just Stop Oil, or Letzte Generation[1], already mark a change in the tactical repertoire of climate activists, the Swedish human ecologist Andreas Malm argues for a further radicalization of the climate justice movement – and the use of strategically employed violence. Such violence, in the form of property damage and sabotage, has been part of the tactical repertoire of environmental activists before – most prominently in the US, by Earth First! and the Earth Liberation Front. However, specifically in the post-9/11 US, the rhetorical association of radical environmental activism with terrorism ('eco-terrorism') was increasingly supported by legal changes and a reinforced security apparatus. While this so-called Green Scare of the early 2000s – an analogy to the Red Scare – was underpinned by fictional narratives that cast eco-activists as misguided criminals threatening national security, recent examples from fiction and film imagine an increasingly different scenario and represent a shift in the cultural imaginary of radical environmentalism. With the climate crisis looming large and a growing awareness of what scholars have termed the Anthropocene, the perpetrators of political violence represented in these works (the 'radical flanks' of climate activism) are often depicted as rational actors, who are given no other avenue of effecting necessary change. After a brief discussion of Andreas Malm's manifesto *How to Blow Up a Pipeline: Learning to Fight in a World on Fire* (2020) and Herbert Haines' theory of radical flank effects, short close readings of David Klass' *Out of Time*, Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future*, and the eponymous film based on Malm's book will examine the representation of political violence as well as the negotiation of its role in the mitigation of climate change.

The Climate Justice Movement and "Radical Flank Effects"

In his 2020 monograph *Wie man eine Pipeline in die Luft jagt* (published in English in 2021 as *How to Blow Up a Pipeline*), Malm wonders about the fact that so far climate activists have meticulously avoided violence – despite a series of unsuccessful non-violent protest cycles (in the US, for instance, the protests against the Keystone XL pipeline project) and the imminence of the climate emergency.[2]

> To say that the signs have fallen on the deaf ears of the ruling classes of this world would be an understatement. If these classes ever had any senses, they have lost them all. They are not perturbed by the smell from the blazing trees. They do not worry at the sight of islands sinking; they do not run from the roar of the approaching hurricanes; their fingers never need to touch the stalks from withered harvests; their mouths do not become sticky and dry after a day with nothing to drink. To appeal to their reason and common sense would evidently be futile. […] And so we are still here. We erect our camps of sustainable solutions. We cook our vegan food and hold our assemblies. We march, we block, we stage theatres, we hand over lists of demands to ministers, we chain ourselves, we march the next day too. We are still perfectly, immaculately peaceful. There are more of us now, by orders of magnitude. There is another pitch of desperation in our voices; we talk of extinction and no future. And still business continues very much as usual. At what point do we escalate? When do we conclude that the time has come to also try something different? When do we start physically attacking the things that consume our planet and destroy them with our own hands? Is there a good reason we have waited this long? (Malm, *Pipeline* 8-9)

Implicating himself in the activist efforts of the climate movement, Malm recounts a history of the movement that – despite its large numbers of adherents – has achieved little success with regard to climate change mitigation, compared to the immense consequences of a climate-changed world. He locates the obstacle to political and ecological change in the deep entrenchment of business-as-usual and the fossil fuel industry, or what he calls "fossil capital" in his 2016 monograph of the same title (*Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming*). The passage above also shows that Malm, among others, does not view climate change as an equalizer of human experience, as the concept of the Anthropocene, implicating humanity as a whole, may suggest. Rather, he describes the fight for climate justice in terms of class differences and power asymmetries, as a fight of the relatively powerless against powerful representatives of the oppressive systems of fossil capital – who will not be affected in the same way. In a similar vein, he writes in an essay with Alf Hornborg: "For the foreseeable future – indeed, as long as there are human societies on Earth – there will be lifeboats for the rich and privileged" (Malm and Hornborg 66).

Having framed the climate crisis as a struggle of the powerless against the "ruling classes," he also asks why, thus far, the movement has remained so staunchly peaceful. The reluctance to even imagine a social movement that does not eschew the use of (strategic) violence, is, according to Malm, a consequence

of the deep entrenchment of (fossil) capital and a result of on-going delegitimizations of movements that have made use of political violence. He writes:

> The insistence on sweeping militancy under the rug of civility – now dominant not only in the climate movement, but in most Anglo-American thinking and theorising about social movements – is itself a symptom of one of the deepest gaps between the present and all that happened from the Haitian Revolution to the poll tax riots: the demise of revolutionary politics. […] [S]ince the 1980s it has been defamed, antiquated, unlearned and turned unreal. With the consequent deskilling of movements comes the reluctance to recognise revolutionary violence as an integral component. This is the impasse in which the climate movement finds itself: the historical victory of capital and the ruination of the planet are one and the same thing. (61-62)

Again, the framing of climate justice activism as a fight against an unjust, oppressive system also allows Malm to view this movement as part of a longer history of resistance movements. The Civil Rights Movement, the abolitionist movement, the Suffragettes, or the fight against Apartheid in South Africa, he further argues, are remembered in a fragmentary way that obscures the role of violence in the processes of change these movements inspired (38-50).[3] The (false) memorialization of non-violent protest as the only successful path to change – what Malm calls "selective memory" (51) – is thus structuring what is deemed acceptable protest today and, as a consequence, also limits the climate movements' imagination of what is possible and how change can be achieved.

The argument that less moderate forms of activism have been swept "under the rug of civility" and that other approaches have been "defamed" since the end of the twentieth century can also be connected to a recent, ecologically-oriented movement: the radical environmental movement in the US. From the 1980s onward, radical environmentalism has been met with a backlash from corporations and the political right that has resulted in a firmly established discourse about 'ecoterrorism' (Sorenson; Pellow; Grubbs; Arnold).

Examining what came to be known as the Green Scare (Potter), anthropologist Jennifer Grubbs points to a constructed dichotomy between "the good protestor" and "the bad protestor," which helps to not only establish a wedge between moderates and radicals but also criminalize those deemed "bad protestors." The good protestor, according to Grubbs' analysis, believes in democratic participation as a way of expressing dissent, as well as in the idea of consumer choice-activism and green capitalism (49). The bad protestor, on the other hand, engages in direct action environmentalism and property destruction (Grubbs 49). Colin Salter moreover argues that corporations and governments challenged by protesters often aim to demarcate dissent they deem un-threatening from more radical, disruptive

expressions of dissent, creating what he calls "a false dualism" between so-called moderates and radicals that are part of one and the same movement (214). With regard to the climate movement this dynamic is especially evident in the fact that groups and even political parties that are considered moderate are expected to distance themselves from the more radical factions of the green movement – even if radicalism, at this point, means merely incorporating civil disobedience into the tactical repertoire of climate protest.

This complicated relationship between moderate and radical parts of a social movement has been theorized by sociologist Herbert Haines in his study on the influence of so-called radicals on the successes of the Civil Rights Movement. He argues that the relationship between moderates and radicals is ever-shifting, not least because the perceptions of what is moderate or radical are constantly subject to re-negotiation and change:

> Moderation and radicalism are troublesome, relative terms; they mean different things to different people. […] In other words, the positions of a particular spokesperson or movement organization may *seem* to be truly radical until a more radical spokesperson or organization appears. At that point, an intersubjective shift may occur on the part of audiences, and those activists previously thought to be extreme or outlandish become redefined as relatively reasonable and tame. (Haines 7; italics in original)

However, he also critically discusses that the success of so-called moderates, who are usually more widely accepted by society and the political establishment, is shaped and influenced by factions of the same movement that purport ideas which are considered more radical. He refers to the ways in which radicals influence the path of moderates as "radical flank effects" (Haines 2). These effects can be either positive or negative: "radical flank effects are patterns of gains or losses, successes or failures experienced by moderate organizations which can be directly attributed to the activities of more radical organizations or groups" (10). In other words, radical factions of a movement can critically influence whether moderates are successful in achieving their goals or not.

Malm's criticism of the climate movement thus runs counter to a well-known argument, which seems to be prevalent not only in activist circles:

> It has been suggested by activists and scholars alike that the emergence of radical activists and organizations in a social movement can undermine the position of moderates (and sometimes that of the movement as a whole) by discrediting movement activities and goals, by threatening the ability of moderates to take advantage of resources supplied by supportive parties. (Haines 3)

A radical flank of the climate movement, so the argument goes, would result in negative radical flank effects – alienating the public and losing the support of politicians in favor of the movement's ideas. Malm writes, "the commitment to absolute non-violence appears to have stiffened over the cycles, the internalisation of its ethos universal, the discipline remarkable" (*Pipeline* 22) and poses the question if "absolute non-violence" will "be the only way, forever the sole admissible tactic in the struggle to abolish fossil fuels?" (24).[4]

Citing author John Lanchester, who has asked a similar question in a 2007 essay titled "Warmer, Warmer," Malm refers to the reluctance of climate activists to strategically employ violence as "'Lanchester's paradox'" (Malm, *Pipeline* 13). "It is strange and striking," Lanchester wrote in said essay,

> that climate change activists have not committed any acts of terrorism. After all, terrorism is for the individual by far the modern world's most effective form of political action, and climate change is an issue about which people feel just as strongly as about, say, animal rights. This is especially noticeable when you bear in mind the ease of things like blowing up petrol stations, or vandalising SUVs.

Lanchester's question may be powerful, his assessment, however, is problematic in two ways: On the one hand, and similar to Malm, he partly omits the US American history of radical environmentalism that precedes the climate justice movement, during which SUVs were vandalized and pipelines sabotaged – albeit maybe not embedded in a climate justice framework.[5] [6] On the other hand, he seems to subscribe to a definition of terrorism that includes property damage and has been criticized for its possible impediment to the expression of civil liberties – even if it may be in line with the FBI's definition of domestic terrorism.

Terrorism is of course a notoriously contested term with a complicated history. Even when understood within a critical terrorism studies framework, there is considerable debate about the term's normativity and the power asymmetry inherent in labelling something or someone as 'terrorist.' While some scholars in critical terrorism studies have argued for a completely constructivist approach to terrorism (see Stump and Dixit, "Toward a Completely Constructivist Critical Terrorism Studies"), others have pointed to the importance of differentiating between acts of "'true' terrorism" (White 318) and those mislabeled as such (for example property damage). More specifically, the equation of the loss of human life with property damage has been viewed as problematic and offensive (White; Miller et al.).[7] In the wake of the Green Scare criminalization of radical environmentalism as terrorism a number of studies have tried to recuperate the acts of, for example, the Earth Liberation Front by relying on the argument that so far the group had not harmed human beings (Loadenthal "Eco-Terrorism?"; Sumner and

Weidman; Miller et al.) and thus, their deeds should be differentiated from acts of terrorism, often using 9/11 as a point of reference.

While such an approach runs the risk of "ontological gerrymandering" (Stump and Dixit, "Toward a Completely Constructivist Critical Terrorism Studies" 205), which relies on a definition of "terrorism" based on varying characteristics, in anticipation of a radicalization of the climate movement, it seems, states are radicalizing their responses to the now popular means of protest, mainly the blocking of traffic through sit-ins.

In the UK, the Public Order Act was adapted in 2023 to outlaw the blocking of traffic and the act of gluing oneself to objects – tactics that are first and foremost part of the repertoire attributed to climate activists. In Germany, a state government has been wiretapping phone lines of the group Letzte Generation and activists' homes have been searched in an attempt to establish the group as part of organized crime, which would give law enforcement and the state greater power in the prosecution of climate activists. Accompanying these forms of state repression, specifically in Germany, is a public discourse about "Klimaterroristen" (climate terrorists) inspired by politicians and popularized and further disseminated via social media and other internet platforms. Branding parts of the climate justice movement as terrorist cells and delegitimizing civil disobedience via terrorism – discursively creating "bad protesters" – serves the purpose of discrediting the actual cause of the movement and by extension works to stabilize a status quo based on the extraction and burning of fossil fuels and other natural resources.

The Green Scare and the Cultural Imaginary of Radical Environmentalism

In the United States, a similar phenomenon can already be observed towards the end of the twentieth century. Starting in the early 1980s, when Ron Arnold, then-vice president of the Center for the Defense of Free Enterprise allegedly coined the term 'ecoterrorism,' radical environmentalism was accompanied by a discursive criminalization of activism.[8] In the post-9/11 US, then, activists were facing the Green Scare – an interconnected mesh of discourses about (eco)terrorism, movement-infiltration, new laws to target radical environmentalism, and a wave of incarcerations in the early 2000s (cf. Pellow 167; Loadenthal "Deconstructing Eco-Terrorism" 93; Potter).

Several arrested adherents to the Earth Liberation Front and others were sentenced with terrorism enhancements, resulting in prison sentences of up to 22 years (see en5) for arson or vandalism. Said terrorism enhancements were created in response to the Oklahoma City Bombing and the first attack on the World Trade Center and repurposed in the post-9/11 moment in several trials against environmental activists (Bruggeman; Johl 478). As previously mentioned, 9/11 featured prominently in texts about radical environmentalism at the turn of the century – both scholarly and fictional[9] – as a point of comparison, to make the case

for a careful differentiation between terrorist violence and property damage, or sabotage.[10] The attacks of September 2001 and the ensuing War on Terrorism, however, also shaped narratives about radical activists, which portrayed them as dangerous, irrational terrorists – a label that the attacks of 9/11 had re-defined in the cultural imaginary and the public arena. "Describing someone as a 'terrorist'," wrote Steve Vanderheiden in a 2005 essay on 'ecoterrorism,'

> serves an explicitly rhetorical purpose in contemporary discourse, though the very language and imagery the term conjures obscure its rational analysis: it implies a moral claim for their aggressive pursuit and prosecution unconstrained by the conventional limits set upon military or law enforcement action. A 'terrorist' refuses to observe any moral or legal limits against harming others, and thus a 'war on terror' ought likewise to be freed from any such limits (or so the argument goes). (425-426)

Apart from news and other media reports that quickly adopted the label of 'ecoterrorism' for property damage and sabotage (see Wagner; Joosse; Sumner and Weidman), fictional works also participated in the Green Scare criminalization of radical environmentalism. In Michael Crichton's 2004 novel *State of Fear*, for instance, a dangerous group of eco-radicals named Environmental Liberation Front – which shortens to ELF just like Earth Liberation Front – sparks lethal "natural" disasters in order to raise awareness of climate change. Climate change, or global warming, as the novel refers to it, is however debunked as a hoax, as a global conspiracy of environmentalists that seek to keep the population in a "state of fear." In line with a post-9/11 cultural (re-)turn to hardboiled masculinity (see Faludi), the novel's protagonist is not part of ELF – the perpetrators are given no narrative space – but rather a counter-terrorist agent of a secret government agency, who enacts a frontier-like form of justice.[11] Less blatantly anti-environmentalist, but portraying the radicalism of their characters as dangerous (and lethal), are two movies from 2013: Kelly Reichardt's *Night Moves* and Zal Batmanglij's *The East*. *Night Moves* portrays a scenario well-known from Edward Abbey's classic 1975 novel on radical environmentalism, *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, but transported to a contemporary setting: Three young activists blow up a hydroelectric dam, an act that results in the accidental death of a camper and the murder of the only female activist at the hands of her co-conspirator. *The East*, on the other hand, has a protagonist who works as a counter-terrorist agent and who infiltrates an "ecoterrorist" cell for a private intelligence firm. The eponymous group The East is mostly engaging in revenge-plots against corporations they have a personal connection to, and while their actions do not result in the death of their victims (but in physical injury), one of their own, again a young woman, dies a violent death. The deaths of Deena (in *Night Moves*), and Izzy, in

The East, can be read as a metaphor for the detrimental, or negative, effects of (environmental) radicalism the films try to convey. Potential martyrdom is thus precluded in both cases – the deaths within activist circles can rather be read as punishment for their turn to radicalism – and the message is in line with the notion of radical activism as "unpatriotic" and "un-American" domestic terrorism (Rana 241) prevalent in the immediate post-9/11 years.

The majority of fictional texts about environmentalists published in this time period can be said to speculatively spin further the development of radical environmentalist groups in the United States, without reverting to historical precedent. ELF and other groups had never killed or severely injured a human being (Loadenthal "Eco-Terrorism?") – which, for many observers, was also an argument against the terrorism-label. Texts such as Crichton's novel or Reichardt's film, however, portrayed environmentalists as perpetrators of lethal violence, contributing to a criminalization of eco-activism in the cultural imaginary. A form of (fictional) speculation that is in line with Michael C. Frank's assessment that the post-9/11 security apparatus "also depended on ingenuity in the imagination of possible present and future events" and had to "work speculatively through possibilities, to think in the subjunctive" (488).

Negotiating Political Violence in Anthropocene Fiction

Since the 2010s, the US has seen some of the worst and most costly natural disasters in its history: out-of-control wildfires, intensifying droughts, and severe storms and flooding, all of them arguably exacerbated by climate change (Smith). With a growing awareness of climate change and its effects that can be felt in people's own backyards, it seems that there has also been a re-evaluation of environmental activism in the cultural imaginary.[12] Recent fictional accounts of (climate) activism even explore the possibility of further radicalization of tactics and imagine radical flanks to moderate organizations that attack fossil fuel infrastructure (*How to Blow Up a Pipeline*; *Out of Time*) or corporate representatives and politicians responsible for detrimental political decisions (*The Ministry for the Future*; Stephen Markley's novel *The Deluge*).

These narratives of Anthropocene fiction, defined by Adam Trexler as based on the premise that "climate change is upon us" (Trexler 5), represent a shift in the cultural negotiation of radical eco-activism compared to the immediate post-9/11 years, and can be said to represent a broader trend. I use this periodization both to express the aforementioned shift in a US context, and because it adds the element of human responsibility (see Trexler 4-5), as opposed to 'cli-fi' or climate fiction. In the following, I will briefly discuss David Klass' novel *Out of Time*, Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future*, and the 2023 feature film based on Malm's manifesto, *How to Blow Up a Pipeline*, and show how their

representation of political violence in the struggle for climate justice departs from previous portrayals.

Out of Time (2020)

David Klass' 2020 novel is a crime thriller – supposedly set during the Trump presidency – with an unusual negotiation of the genre's formulaic standard elements (cf. Cawelti). Protagonist Tom Smith is a data analyst working for the FBI who becomes part of a task force that seeks to catch the United States' most dangerous domestic terrorist, a perpetrator the public has quickly dubbed "Green Man," due to the choice of his targets: luxurious yachts, gas facilities, and oil fields, and thus symbols of 'business-as-usual' in the face of the climate emergency. The title, *Out of Time*, stands for both a temporal element often found in crime fiction – the perpetrator has to be caught before a spectacular, often final, deed – and the novel's "doomsday clock," an initiative by a Swedish activist collective that shows that time for successful climate action is running out, and according to which Green Man times his attacks. Among the targets for his bombings are hydroelectric dams, wealthy politicians' yachts, and waste-water tanks of oil and gas companies engaging in fracking. The attacks on these targets are carefully planned to not harm the atmosphere even further (i.e., release more carbon dioxide), expressing Green Man's deep concern over climate change. Breaking with the conventions of formulaic crime plots, the perpetrator is not only a family man, who plans his actions according to reason rather than madness, and has numerous fans among the public, but his own adversary – FBI agent Tom Smith – is also not quite sure if he wants to stop the "terrorist" at all. *Out of Time* thus also represents a shift with regard to the narration of terrorist violence and reasoning. Rather than presenting "a clear pathologization of terrorist psychology" (Ziser 212) – as well-known from post-9/11 texts – Green Man's motivation is not only given narrative space, but is also validated through the perspectives of other characters, among them his persecutor.

The novel opens with Green Man's attack on a dam in Idaho, which points to the issue of species extinction but also alludes to Edward Abbey's fictional *Monkey Wrench Gang* and the playful and performative enactment of this novel's central conspiracy to blow up Glen Canyon Dam by the early Earth First![13] It also immediately places Green Man's violent attacks in a genealogy of terrorism: the FBI's "Green Man Task Force," readers learn, "now numbered more than three hundred dedicated federal agents, twice the number who had pursued the Unabomber" (Klass 2). Moreover, Green Man's bombing of the dam takes technical inspiration from 9/11: "The attacks on the World Trade Center had demonstrated with terrifying clarity that it was not necessary for a blast to instantly demolish its target – it need only do sufficient structural damage for weight, pressure, and gravity to finish the destruction" (Klass 5). While these references to the Unabomber and 9/11 may be unsurprising in a novel about 'eco-terrorism,' in the same passages Green

Man is also portrayed as a reluctant terrorist, who feels deeply for his victims ("he was not a sociopath; he was in fact highly empathic, and killing brought him no joy," 3; "he took no pleasure in destruction and death," 5) and is haunted by the collateral damage resulting from his deeds, but is given no other choice.

Over the course of the novel, it is revealed that Green Man relies on friends from his past, for example Ellen, the director of an NGO called "The Green Center," with whom he unknowingly has a daughter. Ellen and Green Man, then called Paul Sayers, were part of several radical environmentalist organizations together – among them Earth First! and Earth Liberation Front – before Paul allegedly died in an attack on a "gas facility" (Klass 286). Paul's personal history can also be read as a representation of the development of radical environmentalism in the US, from Earth First!'s civil disobedience and tree spiking, to ELF's property damage, to Green Man's political violence in the present.

While there are debates about activist strategy and tactical repertoire – through Ellen's perspective on her work at the Green Center – it seems that radical environmentalism is resuscitated or revived with Green Man, or Paul Sayers, who previously died a metaphorical death alongside green radicalism. Ellen is secretly disseminating Green Man's writings to the press, but at the same time, she also strongly advocates for non-violence in her NGO (at first):

> we are in a desperate war to save our planet. We've lost some major battles, but we have science on our side. We have the youth on our side. But most importantly, we own the moral high ground. And that's why we'll win, just the way Gandhi won and Martin Luther King won. But we can't give up the high ground. Violence is always wrong. Bombs and bullets are not the way to effect change. Killing innocent people is murder, and it's absolutely unjustifiable. […] And it's immoral for us, as an organization, to profit from them [Green Man] by tacitly approving and remaining silent […] We're going to be one of the first environmental organizations to responsibly speak out against Green Man. (Klass 43)

While her stance changes towards the end of the novel, her insistence on non-violence in the passage above is a reflection of the strategic pacifism Malm views as an obstacle to successful climate action. In order to keep "the high ground," Ellen decides to distance her organization from radicalism, thereby reinforcing the good protester/bad protestor dichotomy – even though Green Man is said to have support among the general public.

Among the people who do not want law enforcement to catch Green Man, and thus condone his use of violence, are Ellen's daughter Julie as well as Tom's sister Tracy ("But don't you dare catch that man […] he's really the only hope we have and deep down you know that as much as I do," Tracy tells her brother; Klass

78). Tom himself became an FBI agent to make his distant father proud, arguing that he had turned down a well-paid Silicon Valley tech job because "catching bad guys" was "the family business" (Klass 220). Tom's father Warren, however, is not a larger-than-life paternal hero figure but an unhappy, emotionally distant former Marine and FBI agent, who has an alcohol problem, uses the term "liberal media" derogatorily, considers his son "a tree hugger" (Klass 11), and complains about his son's longer hair. In contrast to his father, Tom "admires [Green Man's] goals" (Klass 11) and finds "his loyalties divided in an almost painful way" (185). After having read Green Man's "manifesto," in which the perpetrator explains his strategic use of violence, he even wonders about his other colleagues, who "were committed law enforcement agents but not dumb people. How could they not be affected by this powerfully argued warning that all the rules had to be broken?" (Klass 185-86). Breaking with readers' expectations and formulaic conventions of the crime novel, Tom refuses to follow in his father's footsteps – despite a brief period of seeming assimilation to his father's ideals, during which he also gets a buzz cut.

His relationship with his father can be said to represent a conflict between generations as well as questions of intergenerational justice that inspire not only Green Man's actions, but also Ellen's and Julie's activism as well as Tom's reluctance. Tom does find out who Green Man is, figures out his plan for a final attack on a fracking facility, and confronts the "terrorist" in the end – he does, however, not "catch the bad guy." In the final stand-off in the midst of a burning oil field, Paul Sayers, lethally wounded by a gunshot, could shoot Tom but tells him to escape: "'One of us has a chance to get out. And it can't be me' […] 'What's the point? It's doomsday. In Sweden and here and everywhere.' Green Man replied haltingly, in tremendous pain. 'I would like to think that the people in Sweden… and God himself…built in just a little extra time, if we use it wisely'" (Klass 362-63). Tom gives in to his divided loyalties, films Green Man's final moments amidst the burning fossil fuel infrastructure, and disseminates a final pre-recorded message the "terrorist" recorded for his followers. Instead of eliminating the threat, Tom contributes to a form of martyrdom that represents a sharp digression from post-9/11 terrorism discourse. Thus, while Green Man may die, *Out of Time* does not suggest an end to radicalism, but rather a beginning. In the final pages of the novel, Ellen sketches a new path for her employees at the Green Center:

> 'Don't you understand? […] Green Man's death and the publicity it's generated is a game changer. Our struggle has now entered a critical phase. We're in a pitched battle to save the planet, and it's not a distance race anymore – it's a sprint. Sprinters can't worry about strategy – they just have to run as fast as they fucking can for ten seconds. […] We have to throw out the rulebook and not be bound by what we've said or done before.' (370)

In *Out of Time*, thus, moderate activists exemplified by Ellen's NGO decide to follow in the footsteps of radical activist Paul Sayers, which, with regard to Haines' study, represents not so much a positive radical flank effect but rather a growth of the radical flank alongside a re-definition of what is considered moderate: "Radicals may thus provide a militant foil against which moderate strategies and demands can be redefined and normalized, i.e., responded to as 'reasonable'" (Haines 3-4).

The Ministry for the Future (2020)

Kim Stanley Robinson's novels are most often referred to as science fiction, a label that has also been attached to his latest work, *The Ministry for the Future*, and that also shines through in the cover art of the first edition published by Orbit. The fact that climate change fiction has often been relegated to the sci-fi category has been criticized most prominently by Indian author Amitav Ghosh, as part of a failure of the imagination ("It is as though in the literary imagination climate change were somehow akin to extraterrestrials or interplanetary travel," 7). With Robinson's latest novel, a formally innovative narrative about international efforts of climate mitigation, there seems to be a scholarly trend to consider *Ministry* as a work of realism, rather than sci-fi. Pierre-Louis Patoine, for example, refers to Robinson as a "'realist of a larger reality'" (143), alluding to a speech by Ursula K. LeGuin, and Jerome F.A. Bump decries that *Ministry* "has not received the attention it deserves" as Robinson "has been typecast as a socialist science fiction writer," and declares the novel "a simulation of the future" (140). *Ministry* represents collective and successful climate action as a trial-and-error process of different initiatives and efforts, prominently among them science (and geo-engineering), global and local politics, and finance, but also radical activism and political violence.

Contrary to other climate fictions that have focused on relating and exploring the effects of climate change through one main protagonist or a limited set of focalizers (for example Boyle's *A Friend of the Earth*, Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior*, or even Robinson's own *Forty Signs of Rain*), *Ministry* uses "planetary polyphony [...] to achieve a portrait [...] of the struggle against climate change in the central decades of the twenty-first century" (Patoine 146). A narrative strategy apt at depicting the complexity of climate change and action, this polyphonic narrative includes human and more-than-human narrators, personal narration, we-narration, and "third-person objective narration" (Patoine 146), with many narrators only present for one or two chapters. As Patoine shows in a graph on the book's chapter distribution, "the novel is [...] largely dominated by collective and/or anonymous voices [...] leaving comparatively little room for the everyday life or heroic actions of individuals [...] that have occupied a large part of the modern novel" (147). While there are two prominent recurring characters – the

head of the newly founded ministry for the future, set to represent the interests of future generations and non-human nature, Mary Murphy, and aid worker-turned climate radical Frank May – the formal innovation stems from the collage of perspectives presented over the course of the novel's almost six hundred pages.

Mary and Frank are "conceived in [...] dialectical opposition to each other – the optimist and the pessimist, the meliorist and the radical, the idealist and the pragmatist" (Christman 87). As the head of the international ministry for the future Mary seeks change within official diplomatic channels through "lawsuits, and sanctions, and publicity campaigns" (Robinson 99). Frank, on the other hand, has experienced a lethal heat wave in India firsthand – the novel opens with this horrendous event – and was one of few survivors of this mass death event. As an aid worker from the Global North and a survivor of the deadly heat wave, Frank symbolizes the uneven distribution of risk and responsibility in a climate changed world. Suffering from PTSD and survivor's guilt, Frank holds Mary at gunpoint in her own home upon his return from India, demanding to know what she and her organization are doing to avoid other heat waves to come. Upset with her statement that "[w]e're doing all we can with what we've got" (Robinson 97), Frank implies that stopping short of violence was a mistake, alluding to the Children of Kali – an Indian group that has formed after the heat wave.

> "[...] Children of Kali, you've heard of them?" "Yes. But they're a terrorist group." He shook his head, staring at her all the while. "No. You have to stop thinking with your old burgeois values. That time has passed. The stakes are too high for you to hide behind them anymore. They're killing the world. People, animals, everything. We're in a mass extinction event, and there are people trying to do something about it. You call them terrorists, but it's the people you work for who are the terrorists. How can you not see that?" (Robinson 97)

In this passage, Frank attempts to turn the terrorist label against those perpetuating a system – based on fossil capital – that bears responsibility for anthropogenic climate change and its consequences. Not only does this reference previous attempts by activists to label those in power as terrorists, but it also highlights the power asymmetry inherent in labelling someone or something "terrorist."

Whereas Mary is skeptical in the beginning, seeking to "sweep militancy under the rug of civility" (Malm, *Pipeline* 61), over the course of the novel she changes her mind, installing a radical "black wing" – while keeping the public-facing part of her ministry moderate. When Mary suggests the establishment of a non-violent black wing to her employee Badim, who similarly to Frank tells her "[w]hat we're doing with this ministry. I'm telling you, it isn't enough" (Robinson 33), she finds out that he had already started a secret section of the ministry "scar[ing people] away from burning carbon" (113). Admitting to Badim the effect that Frank

has had on her, Mary finally also agrees to the use of violence: "But…Well, we have to do something. Something more than we've been doing" (Robinson 115).

What results from, among other phenomena, "the struggle between the two" (Christman 87) – Mary and Frank –, is related to readers via chapters of "speculative world history" that provide "a retrospective look at a planetary history that appears as already constituted" (Patoine 149). Through this perspective, questions about the efficiency of radicalism and political violence in the face of climate change are foreclosed, as these chapters present a state of affairs after the fact. Reflecting on the 2030s, one such chapter, related in "third-person objective narration" (Patoine 146), describes how the opening event of the novel – the heat wave Frank survived in India and that "was now said to have killed 20 million" (Robinson 227) – has set in motion as series of violent events.

> Everyone alive knew that not enough was being done, and everyone kept doing too little. […] So it was not really a surprise when a day came that sixty passenger jets crashed in a matter of hours. […] One message was fairly obvious: stop flying. And indeed many people stopped. […] The War for the Earth is often said to have begun on Crash Day. (Robinson 227-29)

This retrospective on the events of the 2030s and later decades ("indeed in the forties and ever after, less beef got eaten," 229), halfway through the novel, suggests not only that the efforts at climate mitigation were successful – emission free air travel, overseas transport abstaining from the burning of fossil fuels, and a declining meat industry seem to have been achieved – but also that they were in part brought about by political violence helped along by Badim's black wing of the Ministry for the Future ("The War for the Earth had lasted years, his hands were bloody to the elbows," 391).

Alongside many other avenues of climate mitigation, *Ministry* thus gives a prominent role to politically motivated violence and critically interrogates previous decades' discourse on terrorism:

> to Frank it seemed different than it had when he was a child, when terrorists were universally abhorred. Now it felt different. Many attacks now were on carbon burners, especially those rich enough to burn it conspicuously. Car races and private jets. Yachts and container ships. So now the terrorists involved were perhaps saboteurs, or even resistance warriors, fighting for the Earth itself. Gaia's Shock Troops, Children of Kali, Defenders of Mother Earth, Earth First, and so on. (368)

Moreover, Frank and Mary's developing friendship suggests a reconciliation of moderate and radical positions, a friendly co-existence of the two. The specu-

lative historical account of "The War for the Earth" but also Badim's promotion to director of the Ministry for the Future as Mary's successor, suggest a positive radical flank effect impossible without a radicalization of the moderate middle. In *Ministry*'s polyphonic narrative, thus, change is a polymorphic phenomenon, which also includes disruptive forms of activism and politically motivated violence.

How to Blow Up a Pipeline (2023)

Daniel Goldhaber's 2023 movie is a fictional adaptation of Malm's manifesto that depicts what taking the central critique in *How to Blow Up a Pipeline* to heart would mean for the climate movement. A diverse group of eight young activists sets out to "to make oil unviable in the marketplace" and bombs a pipeline in western Texas. More than twenty years after 9/11, the film presents an activist group well aware of the semantic weight of terrorism, but deviates significantly from previous cultural negotiations of political violence: "If the American Empire calls us terrorists, then we're doing something right," says Michael, Native American resident of a Dakota reservation and the group's bomb builder. Goldhaber's film thus takes an openly radical stance that not only carries through the film itself but also through the promotional material. On the official website one can not only get Malm's book as a free ebook but also consult a map of the pipeline infrastructure spanning the US with additional information on oil and gas industry-related spills as well as injuries and fatalities resulting from them. Above the map one reads: "Act outside of the system. The pathway to a livable future on this planet is rapidly narrowing. The US is the world's top producer of oil and gas, and home to the largest network of pipelines on Earth" ("Take Action"). The data on fossil fuel infrastructure displayed through an interactive map serves to rationalize the call to action "outside of the system" and calls into question understandings of violence that exclude injuries and death resulting from the extraction and burning of fossil fuels.

Similarly, the film itself rationalizes the group's bombing of a Texas pipeline – rather than "pathologizing" their actions – and humanizes the perpetrators through the interspersed backstories of its protagonists: Xochitl has lost her mother to a heat wave exacerbated by climate change, and has subsequently, and without success, tried other avenues of activism (for example in a moderate, public-facing group called "Divest"); her childhood friend Theo, who also resides in Long Beach, California, a city that struggles with pollution from oil extraction and is known for its bad air quality, is diagnosed with terminal cancer, probably a consequence of life-long exposure to air and water pollution; Dwayne, a native Texan, lost his home due to the government invoking eminent domain in order to build a new section of pipeline; Shawn, a former member of Divest and an aspiring documentary filmmaker, is shown struggling with focusing on his studies due to climate emergency "doom scrolling" and appears fed up with the insig-

nificant impact relating environmental sob stories via documentary film has on audiences; Michael, a young Native American, who lives on a Dakota reservation riddled with oil pumps and "mancamps," and who seeks to resist the oil industries exploitation and destruction of Indigenous land and culture; Rowan, who got arrested on domestic terrorism charges for a protest in Portland, Oregon, became an FBI informant set to infiltrate the group, but decides to trick the state; Theo's girlfriend Alisha, who does volunteer work for a local church group, at first firmly advocates for non-violence, but has to come to terms with Theo's terminal illness and the fact that climate change will impact different social classes to varying degrees. The flashbacks informing the audience about the protagonists' motivation shows the "gap" between audience and activists "to not be so wide at all, as underneath each we see a clearly humanist desire that we can easily empathise with" (Ellis). Through these individuals' encounters with fossil capital, *Pipeline* also places their political violence firmly in an anti-capitalist, decolonial, climate justice framework that casts the fight against climate change – similar to Malm's manifesto – as a fight against oppression and inequality.

While Malm's book is an academic treatise, Goldhaber's movie is a thriller that runs on "planting questions and making us itch for answers" (Baker). "What makes [it] so interesting," Peter C. Baker writes in a review for the *New York Times*, "is the way it intertwines plot questions (will the explosives work?) with the uncertainty inherent in judging your actions by the standards of the future." References to previous "terrorists" or violent organizations are often featured in fictionalizations of radical environmentalism (see *Out of Time or The Overstory*, for example; en13) and can serve as a reminder for the fluidity of the concept. In *Pipeline*, picking up on Malm's argument, the protagonists debate the Civil Rights Movement in the context of terrorism but also name the Boston Tea Party ("they were terrorists of their day") to seemingly convince themselves – and the audience – of the righteousness of their plan on the eve of their attack. At the same time, the scene serves to contextualize the memorialization and judgment of political violence from a historical perspective, suggesting that future generations may exonerate them from accusations of "terrorism."

Contrary to previous texts about radical environmentalism, *Pipeline* is not set in beautiful green landscapes populated by sympathetic poster-animals. Rather, the film is set in seemingly barren, rocky desert landscapes, dotted with pumpjacks and transected by pipelines. Next to the backstories, thus, the visuals also center (human) survival rather than a nostalgic display of natural beauty and the wish to preserve 'nature' for nature's sake. Moreover, although sabotage and property destruction in environmental contexts are usually thought of as taking place in secrecy – Earth First!'s Judi Bari once referred to sabotage as "night work" (8) – the attack on the pipeline is carried out in the glaring Texas sunlight with some of the characters even wondering why access to the vulnerable infra-

structure of the fossil fuel industry is so easy. In contrast, the moment when law enforcement finally catches up to the group is set in a gloomy darkness, with Theo and Xochitl standing in front of the burning shack the group had built the bombs in.

As a collective, the eight activists decided to have the two young women, who grew up in the shadow of an oil refinery, claim responsibility for their communal action. Reminiscent of Jessica Reznicek and Ruby Montoya (see en4), Xochitl and Theo – one orphaned by climate change, the other terminally ill due to pollution – are set to serve as figures of identification for a broader movement. Through Rowan, the group sends out a video in which Xochitl explains their actions as self-defense:

> My name is Xochitl Fuentes. If you're seeing this, then I've just blown up a section of JDIA oil pipeline. Destroying this property was a last resort. If we want to survive, we must damage and dismantle CO2-emitting devices, demolish them, burn them, blow them up. Let those who profit from mass death know their properties will be trashed. They will defame us and claim this was violence or vandalism, but this was justified. This was an act of self-defense.

In his manifesto, Malm claimed that "Greta Thunberg might well be the climate equivalent of Rosa Parks [...]. But she is not (yet) an Angela Davis or a Stokely Carmichael" (*Pipeline* 51). The fictional version of *Pipeline*, however, envisions the iconization of radical figures rather than moderates – and a form of martyrdom for its "terrorists" previously thought impossible.

Conclusion

Contrary to fictional accounts of radical environmental activism from the post-9/11 decade, the three works analyzed in the previous pages offer a more nuanced examination of political violence. Texts shaped by the so-called Green Scare tended to represent the use of strategic violence by non-state actors as threatening not only to themselves, and the environmental movement, but by extension also to the nation (for instance, Crichton's *State of Fear*), outlawing certain viewpoints and concerns. As a consequence, in-depth examinations of the portrayed activists' motivations and reasons for radicalization remained largely absent from these narratives that were shaped by the politico-historical climate of the War on Terrorism.

The works of Anthropocene fiction analyzed in this article, on the other hand, represent a shift in the cultural imaginary with regard to the representation of radical activism. Published under the impression of an intensifying climate crisis and the implications of the Anthropocene, they portray "terrorism" or political violence as "an expression of democratic politics" (Schwarzmantel 89) that arises

when "working through the established institutions of democratic politics, ha[s] failed to address specific issues" (Schwarzmantel 88). While earlier texts, such as *Night Moves*, *The East*, or *State of Fear*, have portrayed radicalism as a phenomenon that needs to be fought both by the state and the environmental movement itself, *Out of Time*, *How to Blow Up a Pipeline*, and *The Ministry for the Future*, seem to have heeded Malm's call to imagine a radicalization of the climate movement.

With an interest in the interplay between moderate and radical factions of activists, the three texts represent activism within the official democratic channels of participation as partly failed: campaigns for the divestment from fossil fuels (Goldhaber's *Pipeline*), the efforts of Ellen's Green Center in *Out of Time*, and Mary's institutional lobbying on behalf of future generations in *Ministry*. Fossil capital's grip on political power, it is suggested, is too strong and well-established for a swift institutional response to a worsening climate crisis. Thus, it is not the moderate factions, but the radical factions of climate activism that inspire political and ecological change. Especially in Klass' *Out of Time*, the complicated relationship between moderate and radical is examined, with a 'positive radical flank effect' for climate activism: from moderates having to distance themselves from radicals, to a re-definition of formerly radical positions "as relatively reasonable" (Haines 7).

Echoing Malm's view on climate activism as a struggle of the comparably powerless against an oppressive system seeking to safeguard the status quo (*Pipeline* 8-9), the three texts also legitimize the use of violence they represent through the experiences of their radical protagonists. To varying degrees, all three examine how the climate crisis shapes or will shape the lives of the 'powerless' – through Frank's experience of a mass death event in India that represents differing vulnerabilities in the face of climate change (*Ministry*), Green Man's concern for the future of his children in a climate changed world (*Out of Time*), and the ways in which the fossil fuel industry influences and endangers the lives of *Pipeline*'s protagonists. With the portrayal of moderate activism as partly failed, the texts seem to pose strategically employed violence as part of the puzzle to achieve the "global and structural" "changes that are needed" (Lanchester) to fight climate change – at least in the cultural imaginary.

Notes

[1] There are several chapters of this group in different countries that can have translated versions of this name.

[2] As a US example, Malm mentions the protests against the Keystone XL pipeline project, which was ultimately cancelled by President Joe Biden in 2021. At the time

Notes

of Malm's writing, however, the pipeline project, which had been cancelled by President Obama after a series of protests from 2011 to 2015, had gained momentum again with the election of Donald Trump. It is probably due to these political fluctuations and the consequences for environmental regulation that Malm describes the pipeline protests as unsuccessful.

[3] Regarding the fragmentary remembrance of the Civil Rights Movement, see Gilmore, "The Good Protest." Moreover, Herbert Haines has similarly argued that the success of the CRM was in part also due to positive radical flank effects: "Even now the most common interpretation of that decade of black protest maintains that black militants impeded progress by spawning backlash. It is undeniable that many whites turned against the cause of civil rights in the midst of the struggle. That a decrease in white sympathy for civil rights was at least partially a response to racial violence and 'black power' is also beyond debate. This book, however, presents evidence that such an understanding of the years of black protest is one-sided and inadequate: the turmoil which the militants created was indispensable to black progress, and indeed, black radicalization had the net effect of enhancing the bargaining position of mainstream civil rights groups and hastening the attainment of their goals." (2)

[4] While strategically employed violence is not a widespread tactic of the climate movement, there are examples of activists who have made use of this tactic and sabotaged pipelines. During the protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline in 2016, climate activist and member of the Catholic Workers' Movement Jessica Reznicek and her fellow protestor Ruby Montoya committed several arson attacks on construction equipment as well as sections of the pipeline. In 2021, Reznicek was sentenced to "eight years in federal prison" due to terrorism enhancements that were applied ("Sentencing guidelines recommended up to 20 years in prison due to Reznicek's criminal history, which included convictions for things like trespassing during her activism," Joens). Ruby Montoya was sentenced to six years in prison in 2022, also with terrorism enhancements (Bruggeman).

[5] Activist Jeffrey "Free" Luers, for example, was sentenced to more than 22 years in prison for an arson attack on a car dealership in Eugene, Oregon (he served about half of his sentence in the end). Luers' severe punishment for property damage is an often-cited case in studies that critically debate the criminalization of radical environmentalism during the so-called Green Scare of the early 2000s (Taylor 4; Pellow 187).

[6] Malm argues that the underlying ideology of groups such as Earth Liberation Front (ELF) and Animal Liberation Front (ALF), "deep ecology and animal liberation" have "lost their street cred since then" (153) and claims that the climate movement has drawn larger numbers because of a disconnect to these earlier activist organizations.

[7] For White, there is a difference between what he refers to as "true terrorism" and other forms of violence labelled as terrorism: "The need to urgently revisit dominant narratives of terrorism is also a moral imperative in a society that is being traumatised by deliberate human on human acts of violence, in other words 'true' terrorism. Any definition, or application, of terrorism that equates 'people and property' needs to be called out for the sham it is." (318)

[8] Arnold defined "ecoterrorism" as any crime committed "to save nature" (103). In his book *Ecoterror*, he provides a list of acts he considers ecoterrorism in a chap-

Notes

ter titled "Terrorists"; said list is a mixed bag ranging from the publication of Edward Abbey's comical novel *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, acts of civil disobedience committed by Earth First! activists, and the bomb attacks of Ted Kaczynski, the Unabomber.

[9] The lethal attacks of September 11, 2001, were also used in political rhetoric, serving to delegitimize and criminalize ELF's acts of property destruction and arson. One prominent example is a speech by Republican Representative Greg Walden of Oregon (see Potter 58).

[10] Cultural productions that pick up 9/11 as a reference point are, for example, Richard Powers' 2018 novel *The Overstory*, or Marshall Curry's documentary film *If a Tree Falls: A Story of the Earth Liberation Front* from 2011.

[11] Michael Ziser has identified a shift in narrative point-of-view from the pre- to the post-9/11 era. After the attacks of September 2001, he writes, narrating the point of view of the terrorist "is rarely attempted in the current terror-novel tradition without a clear pathologization of terrorist psychology" (212).

[12] Richard Powers' 2018 novel *The Overstory*, for example, is re-negotiating the history of radical environmentalism in the US in the context of the climate crisis. The paths of his activist protagonists Olivia, Adam, Doug, Mimi, and Nick represent the radicalization of the movement from Earth First! to Earth Liberation Front, from tree-sitting and civil disobedience to arson and sabotage. Rather than contributing to the criminalization of radicalism, the novel is also critically interrogating the labelling of the group's deeds as terrorism, and asks, through the ruminations of protagonist Adam, who ends up a convicted terrorist, if history will one day justify the means (see Marak 2021).

[13] In 1981 the newly established group Earth First! acted out what Abbey had envisioned in the pages of *The Monkey Wrench Gang* – in non-violent, symbolic fashion. As Daniel J. Philippon recalls "four men and one woman [...] unfurled a three-hundred-foot wedge of black plastic sheeting over the edge of the dam to simulate a long, narrow 'crack' in the dam's face" (162). Long a thorn in the flesh of environmentalists in the US West, Glen Canyon Dam was both a logical and visually spectacular target for this 'attack' that not only put Earth First! on the map, but also highlighted the entanglement of (literary) fiction with radical US environmentalism.

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Biography

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