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THOREAU AND THE  
TECHNO-NATURAL LANDSCAPE

1. *Techno-Thoreau*

Henry David Thoreau has long been identified as a foundational American environmentalist. This study serves the double purpose of investigating the aesthetic dimensions of Thoreau's environmental philosophy while examining the philosophical and political implications of its capacity to break down the boundaries between the natural and the technological landscape. Deeply rooted in an Emersonian transcendentalist tradition viewing nature as an organized and holistic "whole," Thoreau's ecophilosophy seeks to reconcile the idealistic with the empirical poles in its approach to natural and technological landscapes, objects and situations. Consequently, this book starts by considering Thoreau as a "techno-author" who does not shun from embracing technological change in the Romantic period and proceeds to develop an alternative, proto-ecocritical form of the aesthetic of the sublime. It also calls for a reconsideration of Thoreau's poetics and its legacy against the background of the "toxic sublime," which sheds a new light on the meth-

ods and purposes of ecocriticism as well as on recent trends in environmental (non)fiction.

## 2. *Why Aesthetics?*

From Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature* (2006), to Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature* (2007), environmentalists and philosophers have played a major role in our understanding of dwelling on the earth. McKibben's anthropocentric theory of a "postnatural world"—a world in which nature ended "both as a discrete biophysical entity and as a meaningful concept"—describes the concept of nature as "*unaltered* by man" as being obsolete (Marx 2008, 18; McKibben 1989, 47). Morton went on to engage in the "deconstruction" of the "idea of nature" and developed an aesthetic that would help us better understand the aesthetic and political nature of subjective environmental experiences (Morton 2007, 5-6). According to Morton, "Aesthetic [...] performs a crucial role [in] establishing ways of feeling and perceiving [humans'] place" in the world (*ibid.*, 2). In other words, aesthetics helps foster ecological awareness and responsibility. While largely subscribing to such an approach, this essay suggests that current anthropocentric aesthetics would also benefit from integrating a paradigm that no

longer seeks to constantly separate nature from culture, or technology from nature, but, rather, aims to comprehend the complexity of the relationships that these entities maintain. Bruno Latour's "nature-culture" theory suggests a possible way of understanding our experience of nature or culture as depending on the specific cultural framework in which a given place, situation or object is located (Latour 1997, 140). More recently, Ursula K. Heise developed this argument further by stressing that "the scientific venture of saving endangered species is itself part of a large venture of understanding and remembering cultural frameworks for understanding other species" (Heise 2016, 85). Heise and other recent environmentalist philosophers and critics demonstrate that aesthetics shape our understanding of the environment we inhabit or experience while suggesting that this understanding precedes ecological awareness and therefore any form of environmental action.

The novelty of this essay lies in its attempt to extend such considerations to the critical study of representations of both human and nonhuman landscapes, objects and situations in a specific corpus comprising not only texts that were written or influenced by Thoreau but also other works such as Ron Rash's *Saints at the River*

(2004) that continue to promote a pastoral or idealized understanding of our techno-natural environment. This essay also argues that there is a connection between the self, human senses, and the environment and explains why this relation is essential in many environmental experiences. The corpus consists of fiction and non-fiction works that show close similarities with Thoreau's writings and ecophilosophy and can therefore be categorized and analyzed as "Thoreauvian" literature, as being part of Thoreau's literary and/or philosophical legacy. This essay also analyzes representations of natural landscapes and objects through the lens of the "toxic sublime," a notion to which I will return later in this chapter. Suffice to say at this stage that toxic landscapes can be metaphorical or, literal (waste, pesticides, and other chemicals), technological (as resulting from a process of mechanization or mediation) or ideological (as being caused by idealization or ideologies such as consumerism). Such dangers also compel a reconsideration of the politico-ecological potential of the Anthropocene, one which prompts a reexamination of recent theories revolving around the critique of both capitalism and the Anthropocene, namely the "Capitalocene."

### 3. *The Toxic Sublime and Ecocriticism*

"I define the term 'toxic sublime' as [the sum] tensions that arise from recognizing the toxicity of a place, object or situation, while simultaneously appreciating its mystery, magnificence and ability to inspire awe" (Peeples 2011, 375, 380). The toxic sublime is a necessary oxymoron in ecocriticism. In the current epoch of the Anthropocene, in which "there is no more nature that stands apart from human beings," the Western (or European) conception of nature as separate from human activities is being constantly challenged and debunked (Purdy 2016, 13). What William Cronon described as problematic "sublime wilderness"—an attitude which emphasizes "nature's otherness"—needs to make way for a more ecological form of the sublime that critically interrogates different "inflexions of dwelling," from the transcendentalist view of nature to postmodernist simulation (Hitt 1999, 603; Garrard 2012, 145). However, although the aesthetics of the sublime seems to dominate both the travel industry and nature photography, ecocritics do not seem to be interested in the sublime. Christopher Hitt have deplored this lack of interest in the aesthetics and politics of the sublime, and Lee Rozelle is the only ecocritic who has so far utilized the (eco)sublime as a trope to examine US literature. Rooted

in a Kantian-Lyotardian tradition of the sublime, Rozelle argues that our senses of self and place are fundamental in this respect not only insofar as they determine our behavior and relationship with our environment but also because all types of environments—whether “natural” or “mediated and represented”—should be taken into account in any reflection that seeks to foster environmental awareness and responsibility (Rozelle 2006, 3).

An investigation of the toxic sublime could facilitate such an ecocritical redefinition of the sublime. Susanne Antonetta’s memoir *Body Toxic* (2001), for example, provides a compelling case in favor of using the toxic sublime as a critical concept. Her account of the invisible toxic waste, chemicals, toxins and radiation that invade the beautiful landscape of the Pine Barrens reminds the reader that there is more to the sublime landscape than meets and pleases the eye. Alternately, she describes the water her family drinks as “full of good iron,” and the food they eat as full of chemicals that they “could not taste” (Antonetta 2001, 131-135). Antonetta uses the toxic sublime to critically interrogate this toxic landscape that is embedded in her family’s history and memory insofar as she “would love to be able to cast our minds into that landscape, if not the poisons then

the spirit that lives there” (*ibid.*, 30). The toxic sublime serves the double purpose of identifying the toxicity that altered the sublime place and denouncing the political forces that produced this toxicity, from military waste to the use of pesticides that is not always condemned by US governmental laws.

For ecocritics and writers of nature writing, the toxic sublime can circumvent the deception caused by the practices of “ecomimesis” and “rendering”—a literary device which seeks to “simulate reality itself” and “tear to pieces the aesthetic screen that separates the perceiving subject from the object” (Morton 2007, 33, 35). One implication of this is that any attempt to describe a specific environmental landscape or situation is always already contaminated by its actual or potential toxicity, hence Peeple’s emphasis on “tensions” between toxicity and beauty. To some extent, such a conundrum informed the writings of Thoreau which describe “Nature” as “something savage and awful, though beautiful” and awe-inspiring (Thoreau 2012c, 60). Scott Slovic argues that these “tensions” were already apparent in, for example, Aldo Leopold’s *A Sand County Almanac* (1949) in which Leopold dialectically “juxtapose[s] and blend[s]” the registers of “rhapsody or epistemology” and “jeremiad

or politics” to endeavor to understand the relationship between humans and the natural world while trying to convince readers to become ecologically responsible (Slovic 1996, 84, 100).

Since the toxic sublime goes beyond the practice of “rendering” and engages in broader issues (political, aesthetic and otherwise) than mere descriptions, it also emerges as a more practical and appropriate model for the study of the Anthropocene than other tropes or forms of the sublime often used in ecocriticism. Most writers and critics of pastoral literature (from Raymond Williams to Ken Hiltner) have tended to idealize the realm of nature as a “pristine” realm, separate from human endeavors while systematically condemning urban or industrial growth. In doing so, they still subscribe to what Leo Marx describes as the “popular and sentimental” origins of pastoralism, which are characterized by a brief retreat to “unspoiled” nature for “leisure-time activities” to escape the pressure caused by the city (Marx 2000, 5).

Today, this scenario is changing, and recent models such as Terry Gifford’s “post-pastoral” mode have countered this representation of nature as a “pure” space uncontaminated by technological and cultural changes. Gifford carefully avoids sentimentalism, approaches nature as a cultur-

al phenomenon and addresses the paradox that the craving for solitude and the desire to retreat from society in nature appear as less self-centered since they ultimately serve to “inform [...] our sense of community” (Gifford 1999, 174). Even more recently, Joshua Corey proposed an analysis of “postmodern pastoral poetry” that embraces “the vision of humanity undivided from nature” (Corey 2012, 5). Such approaches are “part of this [...] movement that seeks to define a pastoral that has avoided the traps of idealization [or pastoral sentimentalism] in seeking a discourse that can both celebrate and take some responsibility for nature without false consciousness” (Gifford 1999, 148). Unlike Slovic’s above-discussed blending of the registers of rhapsody and politics, these redefinitions of the pastoral mode are still in line with a problematic *pastoral* understanding of literature and culture which cannot help referring to nature as a nonhuman “isolated”—if not separate—realm that has to be constantly celebrated. Besides, they promote “Cartesian dualism[s]” such as “Nature/Society,” “Individual/Community” or “Human/Nature” which lie at the origin of the Anthropocene crisis.

Toxicity is not always “visible” to the human eye or directly perceptible by the human senses. In this respect, the notion of the toxic sublime allows the

literary or cultural critic to examine abstract toxic objects such as Morton's "hyperobjects"—"things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans," from global warming to "nuclear material"—in order to better apprehend their impact on our environmental experience (Morton 2013, 1). Even though "invisible toxicity" may "exceed [...] human perception," some writers still find ways to represent and symbolize "invisible" toxic places, situations and (hyper)objects through the sensorial perception of narrators or characters and to (in)directly foster ecological awareness and responsibility (Mertens, Craps 2018, 136-137). Bordering on the concept of the "Capitalocene," the toxic sublime brings to the fore the "political problem" of the Anthropocene which forsakes the study of the dangerous "political force" of a technology that is appreciated or praised in specific landscapes and situations (Hartley 2016, 157). While Anthropocene theories tend to blame mankind in general for the current levels of environmental blight, the toxic dangers of landscapes which have caused such situations—from social injustice to environmental destruction—beg for a thorough analysis of the specific socio-historical contexts out of which they emerged.

Instead of promoting binary views and oppositions, the toxic sublime aims at examining the complex

and unstable relationships maintained between human and nonhuman landscapes in order to foster a form of environmental awareness that would be coherent in the cultural frameworks of both the Anthropocene and Capitalocene. Consequently, the toxic sublime avoids considering other "impractical tropes" such as "melancholia" or "nostalgia," the dominant tendency in modern ecology or our alleged "only hope of salvation" (Garrard 2012, 117; Worster 1994, 3). Although these representations of "mourning and melancholy" may have a "politically mobilizing power," they are still usually focused on the idealized "nature that was lost" instead of the natural landscapes and species that can still be preserved (Heise 2016, 35).

The first chapter of this book deconstructs theories of the natural sublime insofar as they foster an idealistic and (pre-)Romantic view of nature which fails to take stock of the full complexities of the Anthropocene. US romantics and transcendentalists (partly) subscribe to this tendency, and the transcendentalist emphasis on self-reliance and self-realization also clouds an alleged holistic-ecological approach to nature. As we will see, transcendentalists like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman ambiguously worship the human self and human accomplishments to such an extent that their aesthetics become questionable

from an aesthetic as well as an ideological point of view, even though such forms of individualism contributed to bestowing a place of prominence upon technological achievements in the natural landscape, which can be seen as a first step toward the technological sublime. I will also show that Thoreau expanded the aesthetic scope by including technology in the “natural” landscape, putting Emersonian transcendentalism in doubt, and presenting the first characteristics of what could become the toxic sublime. Indeed, I will also give special attention to the legacy of Thoreau’s philosophy: *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (1854) will be considered as a foundational matrix for a tradition of non-fiction writing with an interest in reframing the relationship between the natural and the technological landscape, a project which has been prolonged and extended by countless recent non-fiction works over the last half century, from Aldo Leopold’s *A Sand County Almanac* (1949) to Ken Ilgunas’s *Walden on Wheels* (2013).

The subsequent chapters will build on this perspective to consider the core subject of this book: the ecological potential in Thoreauvian literature to consider the effects that modern technologies and toxicity have had on our understanding of anthropocentric cultural frameworks. Since Slovic recognized Aldo Leopold’s *A Sand County Almanac*

as one of the first texts that merged rhapsody with politics, I will propose an in-depth analysis of this Thoreauvian text as initiating “political” criticism on the impact of mechanization on our perception of the environment. I will also refer to Leopold’s multi-sensorial and intuitive approach to nature as a landmark in both US environmental history and the critical discourse on technology.

The publication of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962) launched the actual environmental movement in the USA. I will closely read her literary and fictive achievement *A Fable for Tomorrow* in order to commence considering toxic landscapes and the effects of toxic components and waste on our relationship with the environment. Carson’s analysis of toxic pesticides is an example of the intangible and “invisible” toxicity that compelled us to reconsider technology as a reframing device in their understanding of presumed natural places. Besides, her text sheds light on the human capacity to change and shape the environment, to such an extent that it has created new aesthetic ways of identifying with man-made objects and situations and stimulated the development of other forms of the sublime inasmuch as beauty is always defined “in terms of being more powerful and usually, more threatening” (Ferguson 1984, 6).

Don DeLillo's novel *White Noise* (1985) will be examined in the fifth chapter as an example of a postmodern form of transcendentalism that illustrates how toxic anxiety can be repressed through the act of consuming and wasting. DeLillo's critique is shared by other writers who consider that toxic waste has generated a "risk society that encourages ignorance and denial" (Alaimo 2010, 99). These forms of "slow violence" caused drastic shifts in (US) environmental history that resulted from concerns with toxic waste and the greenhouse effect. One thinks, for example, of the "toxic consciousness"—a self-awareness of the dangers of technological changes in our relationships with our physical environment—that saw the light in the 1980s when humans started to consider themselves as "inhabitants of a culture defined by its waste" (Nixon 2011, 2; Deitering 1996, 197).

In different but related ways, the works examined in this volume exemplify Thoreau's philosophical and literary legacy and invite a reevaluation of the relevance of this legacy to Anthropocene studies. The book concludes with an analysis of recent texts—Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild* (1996), Cheryl Strayed's *Wild: A Journey From Lost to Found* (2013) and Ken Ilgunas's *Walden on Wheels* (2013)—showing the continuing relevance of Thoreauvianism in the context of the aesthetics, ecology and the Capitalocene crisis.

### 1. *The Natural or Burkean Sublime*

"I sat down at my desk to study the photograph more closely. [...] Wolf Cliff Falls dominated the frame, the backdrop all water and rock. Herb Kowlasky stood slightly to the right. No one else was in the photo. My shot angled upward out of the pool, ending not far above Kowlasky's head. Such a perspective usually makes a person seem larger than life, able to dominate a scene. But in this photograph the angle only emphasized Kowlasky's powerlessness, juxtaposed as he was next to the falls that held his daughter" (Rash 2004, 132).

Long before Ron Rash, American travelers and writers described the "wilderness" of the New World as mysterious and awe-inspiring. In his *Travels* (1791), William Bartram defines nature "untrammelled" by man as "divine," "infinite," "incomprehensible" and "perfect" (Bartram 2003, 72). Environmental historian Donald Worster considers such categorization as "[t]he key American environmental idea," which consists in seeing America as "the Garden of Eden restored" and its nature as "a complete, eternal, and morally perfect order" (Worster 1994, 9-10). Such depictions are also reminiscent of a long-standing