

Titled “American Anthropocene Sublimes: Rhetorics and Narrations of Self and Environment in the Contemporary U.S. Ecobiographical Memoir,” this dissertation explores the affordances and limits of the sublime for representing environmental crises and human-nonhuman relationships in contemporary American ecobiographical memoirs.

The sublime is an aesthetic category that was influentially theorized in the eighteenth century by the likes of Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant. In these theories, the sublime is generally produced when observing an impressive landscape such as a high mountain or a vast plain that inspires ideas of the infinite and unknown and causes mixed feelings of awe, overwhelm, and terror. This dissertation, however, defines the sublime as a textual strategy that borrows from aesthetic theory to describe what cannot be fully understood. For example, the sublime could manifest in a passage written by an author who contemplates or climb a high mountain, describes feelings of terror and awe and then reaches a form of epiphany or revelation about himself or, more largely, the world.

Since the sublime is the admiration and terror one can feel when contemplating natural landscapes and other objects such as technology, these natural and technological sublimes have had particular and problematic developments in the United States. In the U.S. context, these natural and technological sublimes were conflated with other notions such as wilderness and frontier, which have fostered the idea that nature in the U.S. was pure, uninhabited, so without any indigenous people, and separate from humans. In our context of environmental crises, these American natural and technological achievements, which can be aesthetically misleading or deceptive, are being questioned through the idea of different sublimes that are considered in this dissertation.

In order to emphasize that these landscapes have been transformed by human activity, this dissertation uses the term ‘Anthropocene.’ The concept of Anthropocene was coined in the 1980s and then promoted in the early twenty-first century as the new geological epoch in which humans have impacted the whole planet and have indisputably influenced its ecosystems. Although the Anthropocene was recently rejected as a geological epoch, it is still a relevant cultural concept to discuss our current context of ecological crisis, so this dissertation uses the term ‘Anthropocene’ to highlight that the texts and the versions of the sublime studied evolve in this context of ecological crisis and are tied to contemporary environmental debates.

While the sublime has been widely studied in philosophy and art, this dissertation studies the sublime in literary texts and, more particularly, memoirs, thus autobiographies about someone’s life or a portion of her life. Even more specifically, this dissertation analyzes ‘ecobiographical memoirs,’ which are memoirs centered on a decisive connection that can be

successful or not between the author’s identity and the environment in which the story unfolds. The ecobiography is a genre that is emblemized by works such as Henry Thoreau’s *Walden*, in which the author constructs his identity while living in a cabin at Walden Pond. Most of the works analyzed in this dissertation might have been influenced by Thoreau’s place-based writing but are, however, a little bit different from the idea of a therapeutic or one-time transformative experience. Indeed, the works considered typically engage in criticism about, for example, imperialism, hunting, intensive agriculture, nuclear technologies, or oil extraction, so in a form of political commitment that goes beyond the text and the experience it depicts.

In terms of methodology, this dissertation defines memoirs as rhetoric, which means that their authors communicate values, beliefs, and knowledge to their readers and want to produce a specific effect on these readers. They do that by means of the sublime as a literary strategy, but also of other narrative materials and techniques such as plot, setting, metaphors, or uses of other media such as photography. This dissertation’s approach is also comparative and ecocritical, which means that it compares the different memoirs and studies how both writing and reading these memoirs can contribute to contemporary environmental debates.

With these concepts, contexts, corpus, and methodology, this dissertation asks the following research questions: first, how do ecobiographical memoirs in the Anthropocene use the sublime to describe human-nonhuman relationships, changing environments and ecological crises? And, second, what are the affordances and limits of Anthropocene sublimes for describing these relationships, environments, and crises? To respond to these questions, it makes the main claim that the sublime is still a productive way to study how literary texts deal with and contribute to solving environmental challenges such as replacing environmental hubris with humility, improving human-animal relationships, and finding clean and ethical energy sources.

To reach this conclusion, this dissertation focuses on specific environments and activities that have been customarily viewed through the sublime or associated with the sublime. It is therefore composed of five chapters, grouped in two parts. The first part is called “Post-Natural and Post-Technological Sublimes” precisely because it tries to find alternatives to the problematic natural and technological sublimes and their variations such as the mountain and agricultural sublimes. As a result, the first one is about mountains and mountaineering, the second about animals and hunting, and the third about animals and agriculture. The second section is titled “Post-Energy Sublimes” and tries to find alternatives to problematic sublimes that are more directly linked to energy sources and their byproducts, namely the nuclear and

petroleum. Therefore, the fourth chapter is about atomic power and nuclear technologies, which include atomic bombs, and the last one about petroleum and oil extraction.

Chapter 1 analyzes Jon Krakauer’s mountaineering memoirs, mainly *Into the Wild* and *Into Thin Air*, but also earlier ones, and Peruvian American author Silvia Vasquez-Lavado’s *In the Shadow of a Mountain*. For *Into the Wild*, this analysis is focused not on Chris McCandless but on two chapters that deal with Krakauer’s ascent of the Stikine Icecap in Alaska. Chapter 1 discusses how these memoirs move away from the distant observation of mountains characteristic of the natural and mountain sublime to a form of physical engagement and multi-sensorial experience, so involving not only sight but also the whole body while climbing. This sublime is called ‘haptic sublime’ borrowing from Alan McNee and, as this chapter argues, favors more contact with environments and therefore a more complicated understanding of these environments. By engaging with the haptic sublime, this chapter also claims that the two authors, and more specifically Vasquez-Lavado, manage to propose a narrative that is not the typical egotistic narrative of heroism, of showing one’s strength and abilities by climbing the highest mountain, Everest in this case, but a form of trauma narrative that emphasizes intimacy and relationality between the authors, other climbers, and the environment when coping with trauma.

Chapter 2 analyzes several hunting memoirs: Steven Rinella’s *American Buffalo* and *Meat Eater*, Mary Stange’s *Woman the Hunter*, and a chapter from Gerald Vizenor’s memoir *Interior Landscapes* called “October 1957: Death Song to a Red Rodent.” It critiques how, for example, Rinella rhetorically uses emotions of guilt and respect for self-exoneration and to make a case for recreational hunting as somehow ethical. Besides, Rinella represents hunting as a cultural phenomenon that is problematically indissociable from American manhood and identity. Rinella’s work is then compared with another memoir, Stange’s, which is less androcentric but makes similar cases for recreational hunting by focusing on hunting as part of women’s biological identity. The last case study, written by a Native American author, Gerald Vizenor, offers a counternarrative in the sense that he ironically plays with the sublime to debunk the idea that any respect can be involved in the act of hunting and killing animals. The most rewarding findings that connect the three case studies are the passages that they write about the animals they did not kill, in the cases of Rinella and Stange, or the squirrel that Vizenor wished he had never killed. For these few instances, this chapter argues that animals have more autonomy, power, and agency when they remain hypothetical prey, animals that are not killed because the weather conditions do not make it a fair chase, or simply because they cannot be found. Besides, the multi-sensorial and physically challenging search for animals evoke the

haptic sublime and the emotions produced might be negative such as disappointment and discouragement, but they remain productive since the activity of hunting does not result in the death of animals and allow for a more nuanced human-animal relationship. In some way, the idea of the hypothetical prey is emblematic of an animal sublime which represents animals as truly respected and not killed and revered for questionable identity politics.

Chapter 3 considers a version of the technological sublime, the agricultural sublime, which gives the illusion that all nature can be fully controlled to produce crops and raise livestock. In the U.S., this sublime evolved along with the logics of productivity and industrial agriculture, so this chapter seeks alternatives to this unecological way of farming in three contemporary memoirs: Kristin Kimball’s *The Dirty Life* and *Good Husbandry*, and Ellyn Gaydos’ *Pig Years*. When these texts do not engage with the modes of pastoral and georgic, namely modes that tend to romantically oppose the city to the countryside, or value the humble rewards of hard work on the farm, they offer alternatives to the agricultural sublime—post-agricultural sublimes—in that, for example, they portray human-animal work as collaboration if not friendship, and emphasize the multiple actors involved in farming through the idea of the ‘sublime of the small.’ The sublime of the small suggests that small entities such as insect or bacteria can produce experiences of the sublime and could disrupt, in the context of agriculture, the cycle of production because they are not controllable.

Chapter 4 focuses on the nuclear sublime, which translates to a fascination with nuclear phenomena and technologies such as atomic explosions. The nuclear sublime raises a lot of environmental and political issues such as invisible radiation and imperialism. Most of these issues have the particularity of not being directly visible and accessible to the naked eye. Consequently, this chapter analyzes two memoirs, Lindsey Freeman’s *This Atom Bomb in Me* and Emily Strasser’s *Half-Life of a Secret* that try to make these issues readable and accessible in a way that would allow them to be critiqued or denounced. These two authors therefore show how the nuclear is problematically entangled both with their family history, since their grandparents contributed to the making of the bomb in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, and American culture more largely. To detach the nuclear from U.S. culture, they focus on their local-sensorial experience of Oak Ridge, where the first atomic bomb was partially designed, of photographs, and of cultural objects. Freeman, for example revisits photographs and cultural artefacts and, Strasser, for her part, uses notional ekphrasis by describing photos that readers cannot see. Together, the two memoirs provide counternarratives to the nuclear sublime, a shift from the dominant narratives of the previous generations of grandfathers who were amazed at nuclear

technologies and did not talk about the danger of atomic bombs to narratives that unearth and criticize the environmental and political implications of these technologies.

Chapter 5 returns to similar issues of representation, but which are, this time, related to petroleum and oil extraction. The petroleum sublime, discussed extensively in this chapter, evokes the awe and fascination that one may experience when contemplating landscapes or objects that have been affected by the oil industry or the petroculture, namely the culture defined by all the objects we use every day and that are made of oil. This chapter also considers issues related to petroculture such as fossil fuel pollution, the toxic masculinity that dominates oil cultures and industries, and the discrimination that this toxic masculinity also generates against ethnic, gender, and sexual minorities. Two memoirs are compared: the first one, Michael Smith’s *The Good Hand*, is highly problematic because it foregrounds a form of ‘toxic haptic sublime’ that strengthens a sense of brotherhood among oil rig workers who commit to their work, but which only results in a toxic form of masculinity. The other one, Taylor Brorby’s *Boys and Oil* envisions ways of countering this toxic masculinity characteristic of oil cultures. Both memoirs are set in North Dakota, a state with a particular history of extraction, and they both cannot fully get rid of their connection with oil, hence the idea of ‘partnering with oil,’ since Smith works on oil patches and Brorby remains intimately connected to the ideologically charged environment of the prairie. Only the latter, however, really becomes political in its approach to the sublime inasmuch as he uses activism to undermine the masculinism of petroculture. The toxic sublime, this chapter finally argues, is a more suitable version of the sublime for dealing with nuclear and oil cultures than the nuclear and petroleum sublimes in that it always tries to highlight the responsibility that humans have to the landscape or object with which they engage.

To conclude, this dissertation claims that the sublime in the Anthropocene must remain, as it has always been the case in the multiple theories that exist, pluralized. It makes a case for several alternatives to the problematic natural and technological sublimes, namely the haptic, toxic, and post-agricultural sublimes, which highlight that the sublime can be more ecological, political, and rewarding than what classical or traditional theories suggest. However, this dissertation also stresses that the sublime can remain tied to problematic ideologies such as imperialism and masculinism. For that reason, it builds on the work of philosophers such as Vinciane Despret and Thibault De Meyer and propose to understand the sublime more as an enigma rather than as a mystery. In this way, the sublime is both a problem and a solution in that it invites the reader to explore and discover environments and situations, which can result in a wider range of narratives and responses to crises and not, as it would the case when ‘solving’

a mystery, in one universal truth. This dissertation has of course its limits because it is focused on a strictly American context, and there is more that could be done such as studies on the sublime in other non-Western-centric cultures, studies on different sublimes such as the digital and apocalyptic sublimes, on how other genres and media such as graphic memoirs use the sublime, on the sublime in climate change memoir, looking at readers’ responses and at how these texts are being used and cited in public discourse and activism, and doing more research on the idea of the ‘sublime of the small’ mentioned in Chapter 3. However, one of the central arguments made in this dissertation is that the sublime is not one coded emotion or theory. In fact, the sublime remains a key notion in how we approach and make sense of invisible and complex crises as well as in how we understand the challenges posed by ecological disruption, not only in literature and culture, but also in our own everyday experiences.