

Anthropocene Sublimes. An Introduction

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Introduction

The audiences that walked into the Sydney Opera House during the 16th Biennale in 2008 found themselves in a forest. The interior of the opera building—including the seating, the aisles, the stage, and the balconies—was overtaken by a thousand trees clouded in mist. Only cryptic lyrics of an unfamiliar song—unfamiliar, because written especially for the occasion—provided even the suggestion of orientation. Visitors were equipped with headlamps and invited to roam and linger in a defamiliarized space. What appeared to be an enclave of high culture, sealed off from the natural world, is reimagined as the site where the natural environment reasserts its agency by—literally—taking up space we might have considered to be quintessentially a realm of culture.

French artist Pierre Huyghe’s “A Forest of Lines”—the exhibition that occupied the Opera House for 24 hours, or for the duration a single rotation of the Earth—is an avowedly speculative work; Huyghe himself notes in an interview with Amelia Douglas that it is “a science fiction experiment in a way” (2). The experiment suspends customary ways an audience might inhabit the space of the opera house (“the spatial and social protocol usually associated with this space is gone”) and it extends an invitation to recalibrate our relation, attunement, our listening to the nonhuman world—which here appears as a forest, “a multitude, heterogeneous and complex [thing] that keeps changing” (2). In that way, it affirms the power of art to help us come to terms with the reality of the Anthropocene—a reality that radically redraws the lines between the human and the nonhuman, and which calls on humans to find

more sustainable strategies for planetary cohabitation. While photographs of the exhibition eerily resonate with what Greg Garrard has called “disanthropic” images of a lush nature reclaiming a planet liberated from human life, the *experience* of the exhibition decidedly leaves room for human life: audiences are invited to use the forest as a park, even as a picnic place (Douglas 2). Crucially, the exhibition does not sell the fantasy of an illusory immersion in nature at a (not so) blissful remove from technology and civilization: as Huyghe emphasizes, the architecture and “the memory of the space if you have been there before” are an integral part of the experience (Douglas 2). The exhibition’s Anthropocene aesthetics, then, amounts to an invitation to reimagine the complex interrelations between nature, culture, and technology.

This special issue contends that the affordances and, as we will see, the limitations of Anthropocene aesthetics in a work like “A Forest of Lines,” are made legible in the relation between the Anthropocene and the time-tested aesthetic category of the sublime. On the one hand, the affinity between the Anthropocene and the sublime is almost too obvious: both center experiences of disorientation and overwhelm, and both bring into play the mastery and/or impotence of human life (Fressoz). On the other, the sublime *in* the Anthropocene seems not only time-tested but also time-worn: in the Anthropocene’s “world of wounds” (Emmett and Nye 93), sublime exaltation no longer adequately captures our affective disposition to the worlds—especially as postures of human superiority over a fungible natural environment (at times explicitly fostered through the sublime) have so destructively contributed to current environmental crises. This informs a sobering awareness that today, in Marco Caracciolo’s words, “[g]rief, distress, and guilt complicate and enrich the sublime” (303). Given both the genealogical implication of the sublime in the history of the Anthropocene, and the tension between the obvious affinity and awkward mismatch between the Anthropocene and the sublime, this special issue interrogates and, as our title has it, *pluralizes* that relation so as to enrich discussion over the ethics, politics, and aesthetics of the current environmental crisis.

Returning to “A Forest of Lines,” it is striking how faithfully it sets up a sublime scenario—a scenario in which, in Immanuel Kant’s classic account, the human mind is confronted with its inability to represent an overwhelming reality, and yet recuperates that moment of failure by its superior insight in the impossibility of representation. In an interview, Huyghe emphasizes that he chose the Opera House as it serves as “a place of representation”: “When you enter inside the Opera House you encounter an image. You are standing at the top of the space; you are looking down at a canopy covered with mist where the light is like dawn. You are above a valley obscured by clouds” (2). So far so *Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer* (Caspar David Friedrich’s 1818 painting is a staple of the artistic and romantic sublimes). Yet at this point, the audience is invited to abandon its safe contemplative position and to enter into an *embodied* relation with the forest: “As you come down the paths, through the maze of trees, you enter the mist and you start to get lost in the forest that seems to have grown over night and still growing [...]” (2). This activates an embodied and material dimension of the sublime that is quite foreign to Kant’s more idealistic

account but that has itself a venerable pedigree—not least in Edmund Burke’s classic account (Caracciolo 299). Indeed, Huyghe’s Anthropocene update of the sublime joins recent theoretical interventions on the notion of the sublime—under the rubrics of the “haptic” (McNee) and the “toxic” (Peeples) sublimes, on which we will elaborate in the next section—in centering the kinesthetic relations between human subjects and their environments. In “A Forest of Lines,” this embodied dimension does not cancel the promise of freedom encoded in the Kantian sublime—even if the freedom at stake is a decidedly more grounded one: “you can walk in any kind of direction, choose the path that you want to take through the image” (2).

“A Forest of Lines” seems to demonstrate the affordances of deploying the flexible lens of a pluralized notion of the sublime to make sense of Anthropocene aesthetics; it shows how an updated version of the sublime underwrites “an encounter with a sentient milieu that generates new possibilities of co-dependence between events or elements that unfold” (“Pierre Huyghe”). At the same time, this lens also allows for a more critical perspective. As an exhibition mounted by a white European artist in a settler colonial nation, “A Forest of Lines” displays an awareness of racist and imperialist legacies in which, as several authors in this issue also argue, the aesthetics of the sublime is deeply imbricated. The song that provides orientation is modeled on the Aboriginal notion of the songline: songs that correspond to walking tracks across the land. The lyrics refer to “trees [that] swallow whole men,” a line that refers to a passage in James Cook’s diary that chronicles his erroneous interpretation of hollow trees in which Aboriginal peoples had deposited dead bodies as people-eating organisms (Douglas 4). Yet it is not sure that such an encrypted reference to Cook’s diary sufficiently critiques the legacy of the sublime. For one thing, the audience, equipped with headlamps, is still invited to adopt the position of a conquering explorer enjoying self-evident access to the forest; nor is the exclusionary, elitist nature of the institution of the opera acknowledged. And indeed, the very title of the exhibition still points to the ratiocinative capacity to abstract (“lines”) from material reality (“forest”).

In the following section, we lay out how recent theoretical engagements with the sublime have in various ways attempted to reassess and update the notion for an age of environmental derangement. Many of these theoretical updates inform the contributions to this special issue, as we lay out in the third and final section of this introduction. While the different contributions cumulatively showcase the richness and variety of these many twenty-first-century sublimes, many of them also register more fundamental reservations with the viability of the concept of the sublime (a line of thinking we also introduce in the next section). This special issue as a whole, then, maintains that, in light of the conflicted genealogies of the sublime, an Anthropocene update of the notion would be incomplete without a more radical critique of the notion. If this special issue proposes to *pluralize* the sublime, it also opens up a critical space for such radical critique—critique that holds that not even pluralization will make the sublime a viable tool for the present. If pluralization means we can no longer see the forest for the trees, it might be necessary to sacrifice the trees to save the

forest—to burn it all down, Opera House included. But not before we have tried to save them.

Discourses, Trajectories, and Destinies of the Sublime

The past two decades have seen a reemergence of the sublime in the environmental humanities as a key notion for making sense of contemporary ecological crises and the reality proposed by the concept of Anthropocene. We identify three primary categories of discourses that have associated the sublime with the Anthropocene: those which continue to see in classical notions of the sublime potential for explicating global environmental and technological changes; those which remain skeptical about such capacity and advocate for abandoning the sublime altogether; and those which have attempted to revise the notion to make it more environment-oriented, attuned to human-nonhuman relationality, and/or suitable for underlining humans' role in various forms of ecological disruption.

In the work of scholars such as Ursula K. Heise (*Sense of Place and Sense of Planet* 20–41), Timothy Morton (“Here Comes Everything”; “Sublime Objects”), Gene Ray, and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, the sublime has served to describe the *incomprehensible scale* of air pollution and climate change as well as the far-reaching ramifications of infrastructures and technologies (e.g., radiation and satellite imagery). Such scholarship builds on the obvious connections between, on the one hand, the sublime's traditional ideas of greatness and vastness and the related affects of terror and of being overwhelmed, and, on the other, the shifts in global environmental awareness urged by the Anthropocene. According to Fressoz, the Anthropocene depends on updated conceptualizations of humanity and capitalism best emblemized by the sublime (288–89). The Anthropocene sublime, for Fressoz, is therefore multifaceted: it is at once a “geological sublime” that transforms mankind into a “geological superman”; a mutating “technological sublime” that has evolved in parallel with economic and technological progress (from capitalism's early days through the space race); a “scientific sublime” that misinterprets the Anthropocene as a twentieth-century global environmental “awakening” (which underestimates previous generations' insights in environmental destruction); and, lastly, a “sublime of collapse” predicting planetary meltdown (288–96).

The technological and scientific sublimes, Fressoz acknowledges, are not new.¹ The technological sublime, when opposed to the natural sublime more specifically, sheds light on how the sublime developed differently according to national contexts and linguistic traditions: while German philosophers and the Romantics fantasized about landscapes like the Alps (which most of them never visited), the American natural sublime romanticized a settler-colonial myth of a pure and uninhabited wilderness. The American technological sublime shifts from the natural sublime's fascination with the country's spectacular wilderness to the worship of its

¹ For the technological sublime see Marx, and Nye, *American Technological Sublime*, and for the scientific sublime, see Hoffmann and Whyte, and Gross.

technological achievements as a means of reinforcing the nation's sense of exceptionalism (Nye, *Seven Sublimes* 1–3). In both cases, the American sublime is hardly separable from the contiguous notion of frontier. Exploration 'beyond the frontier' has led the technological sublime to be constantly reconceptualized to better account for the awe and satisfaction felt with dizzy and destructive innovations. To name a few of these incarnations of the technological sublime: there is the "nuclear" or "atomic sublime" for nuclear technologies and atomic explosion, the "agricultural sublime" for industrial farming, and the "petroleum," "petrochemical" or "oil sublime" for oil fields and rigs as well as petrochemicals.² Like Nye, Fressoz is among those scholars who still refer to notions such as the technological, scientific, or Anthropocene sublime *not* to celebrate human exploits and progress but as a means of accounting for and/or critiquing the roles humans and technology have played in global crises.

Other ecocritics and scholars in the environmental humanities, ranging from Patrick D. Murphy ("An Ecological Feminist Revisioning of the Masculinist Sublime"; "Sublime") and Jeffrey Bilbro to Louise Economides and Bruno Latour, have instead foregrounded the *impossibility* of sublime encounters in the Anthropocene and encouraged a shift in focus from the sublime to other affects and aesthetic categories. Murphy subscribes to the long-lasting critique of the sublime's numerous masculinist, racial, and gender biases and argues that the sublime should be abandoned if a more "participatory" or "integrational" version cannot be articulated (80–91).³ Bilbro, for his part, warns that sticking with the sublime is only bound to repeat the Kantian fetishism for reason and the consequential human yearning for mastery over the physical environment (134). He thus returns to the beautiful, traditionally opposed to the sublime, as a more viable replacement for the sublime since, he argues, it can more suitably foster a sense of place in our complex world (139). Similarly, Louise Economides, in her attempt to propose the alternative of "wonder," goes as far as claiming that the sublime "is a primary cause of, not the solution to, our environmental crisis" (20). No one was ever as clear as Bruno Latour, however, in his "Farewell to the Sublime," which maintains that sublime encounters cannot be possible in the Anthropocene since "the world is no longer a spectacle to be enjoyed from a secured place" (170).

In spite of abundant criticism (or perhaps as an unintended result of it), the sublime continues to thrive as a driving concept in the environmental humanities. In the late 1990s, William Cronon and Christopher Hitt called for a *more ecologically attuned* sublime. They argue that the natural sublime had contributed to widening the gap between nature and culture, civilization and wilderness, and to reestablishing humanity's control over the natural world (Cronon 17; Hitt 605–09). Hitt draws on the Kantian ideal of transcendence, which also resonated with Lee Rozelle in his

² See Ferguson, Wilson, Hales, Lovatt, Masco, and Lombard, "Rewriting the Unthinkable" for the nuclear or atomic sublime; see Pollan, and Lynch and Norris for the agricultural sublime; and see Hatherley, Schuster, and Banita for oil en related sublimes.

³ See Gilroy, Armstrong, Freeman, and Shapiro for related critiques.

conceptualization of an “ecosublime”; for Rozelle, traditional templates of awe and terror can still result in a responsible engagement with the environment (1). Along the lines of Hitt and Rozelle, there have been other attempts to salvage not the natural but the Romantic sublime, which generally does acknowledge the limits of reason and understanding (Shaw 98). John G. Pipkin, for instance, suggests that “the material sublime” of women Romantic poets such as Mary Tighe and Dorothy Wordsworth “transforms fear and anxiety into feelings of commiseration or identification with the material world, resulting in a moment of personal defiance, empowerment, or self-realization” (600–601). In the same fashion, Paul Outka proposes the “organic sublime,” which consists of “episodes when an individual experienced and recorded an often profoundly disconcerting awareness of the radical material identity between his or her embodied self and the natural world” (31). Following such recuperations more concerned with materiality and the physical world, the sublime has gradually become more essentially environment-oriented in recent scholarship.

More recently, Emily Brady has explicitly redefined the natural sublime as an “environmental” or “humbling sublime” that tries to showcase “a material experience” instead of anthropocentrism (195). Brady’s environmental sublime is ultimately “relational” in its attempt to promote “self-knowledge” through engagements with non-human materiality and agency (197–99). Similarly, David Nye’s environmental sublime “renews intimacy with the tangible world,” being devoted to finding interest in while fearing for the complex biodiversity of our world (116–30). In Nye’s account, the environmental sublime specifically becomes the antithesis of the technological sublime insofar as it does not endeavor to master nature through rational thought and technology but instead focuses on its ineffability in the forms of “obscure skein of symbiotic relations” (116). In such efforts to connect the sublime to environmental concerns, the concept acquires a different potential: it moves away from the human achievements praised by avatars of the technological sublime to celebrate—or at least acknowledge—non-human agencies. Such potential can be seen in the animal sublime, for example, which has been referred to as a discourse or rhetorical strategy aimed at highlighting the ecological and aesthetic values, emotional behaviors, cognitive faculties, and sense of agency of non-human/animal species.⁴

What is as yet largely missing from the many Anthropocene updates of the sublime is a sublime that more actively engages with the plethora of posthumanist trends that have been attempting, for the last few decades, to refocus the humanities and social sciences on non-human agency and materiality: from actor-network theory and material ecocriticism to new materialism. While the notion of the Anthropocene inescapably emphasizes the role of the human, these trends center the nonhuman. This could, of course, result in a “flattening of ontologies” and in humans absolving themselves of responsibility for ecological destruction (Heise, “Introduction” 4–5). But the sublime, which has customarily been theorized as a human-centered notion involving a subjective experience and limited emotions and affects, could profit from

⁴ See Bhogal, Duggan, and Litsardopoulou.

a more forthright recognition and elaboration of the tensions between humans and nonhumans.

That is not to say that this tension cannot result in productive encounters. Alan McNee's "haptic sublime," for example, challenges the ocular-centrism of classical theories to engage in a multi-sensorial, "embodied," and "direct physical experience" of material landscapes (4). The haptic sublime does not salvage the natural or Romantic sublime, but more radically reimagines their parameters: nature is no longer a spectacle to be enjoyed from a safe distance (Burke; Kant), but is now engaged with in embodied ways that can enrich the limited affective reach of the sublime (Caracciolo 329) and result in a variety of constructive encounters with the nonhuman. The toxic sublime, theorized first by Jennifer Peeples in 2011 and subsequently explored by several other scholars, for its part, circumvents the possible "capacity for naiveté" in Jane Bennett's "vital materialism" (Vermeulen 89; Bennett 18), which to a (too) large extent brackets the threatening power of materiality.⁵ Instead, the toxic sublime echoes Stacy Alaimo's notion of "trans-corporeality" in that it recognizes the toxicity of awe-inspiring phenomena, and thus the harmful potential of non-human and chemical/technological agents and the responsibility of humans in creating them (Alaimo 2; Peeples 375).

Several contributions of this special focus section continue the trajectories opened up by the animal, haptic, and toxic sublimes (the third key discourse around the sublime we have surveyed) and present other conceptually updated and ecologically upgraded versions of the sublime: they develop notions such as the "cosmic" (Cazajous-Augé), "Gaian" (Fecteau), "creaturely" or "stolastalgic" (Wennerscheid), and "whale" (Ng) sublimes and the "sublime of the ordinary" (Girardin), which all in their own way open onto new conceptions of human-nonhuman-environment relationality. The essays on the cosmic and the Gaian sublime join Thomas Storey's ecological update of Alexander Galloway's concept of the "juridico-geometric sublime" in interrogating the mobilization of the sublime to capture the incomprehensible vastness of the current polycrisis (the first contemporary discourse we presented in this section). Several other essays (most notably Peters, Klestil, and Shabangu) invest most of their critical force in a sustained interrogation of the problematic legacies of the sublime and remain less convinced by the viability of the notion for confronting the challenges of the Anthropocene.

In This Issue

The essays collected here were selected by the guest editors from a large number of submissions to an open call and reflect a wide range of methodological approaches and diverse archives that reassess the sublime in relation to the Anthropocene. Unsurprisingly, while most contributions hinge on a crucial critique of the historically white, racist, and anti-Black category of the sublime from Burke on,

⁵ For the toxic sublime, see Sarah J. Ray, Bissonette, Kane, Lombard, "Toward a Speculative-Pragmatic Sublime," and Bergmann and Briwa.

some also locate alternative histories in the development of the sublime made visible in the Anthropocene, while others argue for varied ways in which the sublime must be transformed in this looming geological epoch. Tacuma Peters' essay, the first of this issue, opens with the simple pronouncement that "[a]s a concept, the sublime has shown the ability to endure." This issue takes up the forms and modes of that endurance, the structures of power and racial capital that make possible its ability to endure, and the various interruptions and forms of resistance to sublimity that its endurance still necessitates.

Peters' essay, "Querying the Ecological Sublime: Colonial Aesthetics, Anticolonial Thought, and the 'Double Fracture,'" traces the sublime aesthetics historically tied up with settler colonialism and enslavement in the US, starting with Burke's well-known treatise—unsurprisingly cited throughout this issue—and its influence on Kant. Beyond a critique of the white settler logics that undergird the sublime, Peters' essay details the ways in which the category is already taken up by Native Presbyterian cleric Samson Occom (1723-1792) to *contest* the devastating logics and effects of settler colonialism. This resituating of the sublime as a historical category through Black and Indigenous thought is further supported by Peters' reading of Ottobah Cugoana's (1757-1791) *Jeremiad* as "provid[ing] a thoroughgoing critique of colonialism while also attacking one of the presuppositions of Edmund Burke's aesthetics: that darkness was sublime, not beautiful" (Peters). Indigenous and Black critiques of Burke's sublime, Peters shows, are not only a contemporary phenomenon but were already present in the work of Burke's contemporaries in ways that complicate recent celebrations of the ecological sublime that too often remain oblivious of these countertraditions.

Matthias Klestil's contribution similarly takes up the fact that "the racial biases found in classical theories of the sublime have often been met by thought-provoking resistance and counter-discourses in the African American tradition" (Klestil). His essay, "Blackness and the Anthropocene Sublime in Jesmyn Ward's Fiction" details the ways in which race and specifically blackness remain foundational to Anthropocene aesthetics and the Anthropocene sublime. Focusing his readings on forms of collapse that animate Ward's fiction, especially temporal collapse, Klestil argues that Ward's work pushes against the singularity of environmental crisis, revealing instead how "practices of slavery and segregation have shaped the conditions of collapse in the present." If Latour claimed that the world is no longer a place to be observed from a secure place, Klestil asks about those who may never have rested securely in place, ungrounding sublimity through Black studies and the field of African American literature.

Charlie Ng's contribution, "The Whale Sublime in Doreen Cunningham's *Soundings* and Rebecca Giggs's *Fathoms*" examines a literary lineage of what Ng names as "cetacean texts" from Melville's *Moby-Dick* and 19th century commercial whaling. Tracing how whales in literature often stand in for "exploitative relationships between humans and nature in capitalist modernity," Ng reimagines "the whale sublime" in two contemporary "nature writing" or "animal writing" texts in which she locates an

“inquisitive, feminine sensibility that focuses on wonder, resilience, and relationality.” Ng’s essay is invested in an “inclusive sense of responsibility for the nonhuman entities that share our world,” developing the concept of the whale sublime as “mediat[ing] the ‘response-ability’ and ‘responsibility’ that Haraway calls for in her theorization of entanglement (12-13).” But she also crucially hinges entanglement on forms of disconnection and disappointment that the texts offer, wherein “the agency of the whales is foregrounded.” Highlighting modes of frustration and disappointment present in the texts by Cunningham and Giggs, Ng argues that cetacean literature does not “undermine the human-nonhuman entanglement [...] rather, [it] add[s] complexity to it.”

Catherine Girardin’s essay takes us to fairly uncharted territory in studies of the sublime: a dance performance. In “Un sublime de l’ordinaire dans le spectacle *Weathering* (2023) de Faye Driscoll,” Girardin’s original case study (Driscoll’s *Weathering*) illustrates how the classical sublime can be imaginatively reinvigorated when ‘lower’ senses (touch, smell, and hearing) are mobilized. In this way, echoing McNee’s “haptic sublime,” Girardin outlines a “material sublime” relying primarily on intimacy and interdependence. Beyond ocular-centrism and inertia, Girardin explores how *Weathering*’s intercorporeality (some, following Alaimo, might say ‘trans-corporeality’) and its use of various sensory systems evoke the slowness and movement necessary to counter the overwhelm and acceleration of a neoliberal Anthropocene. The outcome of Girardin’s move is a “sublime of the ordinary,” one that sensitizes audiences to the “ordinary strangeness” of our world.

In “The Anthropocene Cosmic Sublime: Viewing the Earth from Space in Samantha Harvey’s *Orbital*,” Claire Cazajous-Augé shifts our understanding from the terrestrial (or oceanic) sublime into the realms of outer space in a reading of Samantha Harvey’s recent Booker Prize-winning novel *Orbital* (2024). Developing what she calls the “Anthropocene cosmic sublime,” Cazajous-Augé argues that the space industry and space exploration, including their significant contribution to waste and pollution (on Earth and in orbit) mark an important shift in Anthropocene aesthetics unbound by terrestrial limitations. While technological innovations make visible the universe and even enable views from space, these do not automatically inspire feelings of a shared planet and of a shared responsibilities to it; too often, exploitative technologies reimagine humanity with a sense of domination and power. To counter this, the Anthropocene cosmic sublime that Cazajous-Augé locates in Harvey’s novel “transforms the exclusive experience of space exploration into a collective call for respectful coexistence with both terrestrial and extraterrestrial environments, emphasizing shared responsibility and humility over individual transcendence.”

Thomas Storey’s essay, “Romantic Cybernetics: Jorie Graham, Trevor Paglen, and the Sublime Contradictions of the Anthropocene,” develops some of the broader contradictions of sublimity in the Anthropocene specifically through (and beyond) Alexander Galloway’s concept of the “juridico-geometric sublime.” Galloway’s concept, Storey contends, names a form of “digital unrepresentability, as expressed in

the suggestion that interfaces are not workable; they do not provide the transparency they purport to facilitate.” What Galloway’s elaboration of the concept does not factor in, and what this essay contributes to it, is the properly environmental dimension of the contemporary sublime. This contemporary sublime, for Storey, emerges at the crossroads of “the freedom of the play impulse in Romanticism” and the drive for control in cybernetics, which is a key part of the genealogy of the digital present. It is “the friction that arises from the Romantic-cybernetic synthesis” that makes up “the incommensurability of a contemporaneity saturated by the digital and threatened by ecological collapse.” His essay examines works by poet Jorie Graham and the artist Trevor Paglen, the latter whose work is featured on the issue’s cover. Graham and Paglen help Storey to develop a theory of the Anthropocene sublime as “an aesthetic form that highlights the unrepresentable way in which everyday life is complexly woven into systems of extraction, domination, and exploitation that take the environment as their object and that are enmeshed within broader structures of state and extra-state power that remain largely invisible.” This form of the sublime is as totalizing as it is self-contradictory.

Mohammad Shabangu’s essay “*Zombies*, Attention and the Sublime in the Digital Anthropocene” similarly confronts the role of the digital in warping the Anthropocene sublime as it takes up attention as a central economy of the digital Anthropocene. Shabangu analyzes Congolese artist Baloji’s short film *Zombies* which, he writes, “asks us to seize opportunities to turn away from the seductions of psychotechnology and to instead turn toward the unfurling present.” Shabangu reads the film as a critique of, among other things, the ubiquity of the mobile device in Kinshasa, the capital and largest city of the Democratic Republic of Congo. He asks, “What are the prospects of the sublime in an era of generalized attention deficiency?” His insistence on the practice of attention as a means of resistance to digital capitalism is developed in his reading of the film’s Afrobeat urban soundtrack, its “sonic textures” and “visual language,” which he considers as an extended music video—itself an aesthetic challenge, as in Girardin’s analysis of Driscoll’s *Weathering*, to “the ocular-centrism of prevailing concepts of the sublime.”

The final two essays in the collection scale the Anthropocene sublime differently—not in terms of the vast if self-contradictory totalities of the cosmic, the digital, or the juridico-geometric, but in response to more minimally scaled interspecies encounters. Sophie Wenerscheid’s “Vom kreatürlich Erhabenen zum solastalgisch Erhabenen in Kerstin Ekmans Roman *Wolfslichter*” shows how the formal and thematic choices in a recent Swedish novel revise the customary association of hunting with the sublime. Paying particular attention to the novel’s evocations of the relations between humans and wolves, she coins the notions of the “creaturely” and the “solastalgic” sublimes to capture less human-centric kinds of sublime experience: attuned to a bodily vulnerability shared across species lines (in the case of the creaturely), and interpellated by a guilt-laden experience of environmental destruction and loss (in the case of the solastalgic). The persistence of the (deeply transformed) sublime across these variations ultimately points to a less

toxic mode of masculinity (called here “eco-masculinity”) that more productively and sustainably bridges species barriers.

In Maxime Fecteau’s “‘A Tough Bitch’: Lynn Margulis and the Gaian Sublime,” the scale is further narrowed to the microbial agency and symbiosis that almost imperceptibly makes up planetary life. Fecteau unearths a notion of the “Gaian sublime” in Lynn Margulis’s scientific nonfiction. This notion gives short shrift to the aspirations of human transcendence and geological spectacle in traditional notions of the sublime. Against the violence perpetrated by and in name of the traditional sublime, Margulis’ work put forward Earth’s smallest inhabitants as its most profound transformers. It is the recognition of life’s collaborative creativity across spatial and historical dimensions, Fecteau argues, that a more ecologically attuned sublime experience can take shape. As humans, we don’t just attend to this creative process as distant spectators, but as attuned participants. It is a participatory process from which this special issue can ultimately not pretend to be excluded.

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Querying the Ecological Sublime: Colonial Aesthetics, Anticolonial Thought, and the "Double Fracture"

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Abstract

This article examines the ecological sublime in its relationship to the history of colonial aesthetics, anticolonial thought, and contemporary colonialism. It argues that, while Edmund Burke utilized the sublime in support of colonialism (including settler colonialism) in North America and colonial slavery, Samson Occom and Ottobah Cugoano developed versions of the sublime to contest British colonialism in the Americas. The history of this aesthetic contestation has not been represented in scholarship on the ecological sublime, which, this article shows, has a vexed relationship with historical and contemporary colonialism. The article argues that the ecological sublime exhibits the "double fracture" of modernity in its inadequate handling of the history of colonialism and environmentalism. It concludes by evaluating the potential of the ecological sublime for anticolonial uses by Indigenous and Black thinkers.

Keywords: Anticolonial thought, Black, ecological thought, Indigenous, sublime.

Resumen

Este artículo examina lo sublime ecológico en su relación con la historia de la estética colonial, el pensamiento anticolonial y el colonialismo contemporáneo. Sostiene que, mientras que Edmund Burke utilizó lo sublime en apoyo del colonialismo (incluido el de los primeros colonos) en América del Norte y la esclavitud colonial, Samson Occom y Ottobah Cugoano utilizaron versiones de lo sublime para impugnar el colonialismo británico en América. La historia de esta contestación estética no ha sido representada en los estudios sobre lo sublime ecológico, los que, como muestra este artículo, tienen una relación conflictiva con el colonialismo histórico y contemporáneo. El artículo sostiene que lo sublime ecológico exhibe la "doble fractura" de la modernidad en su manejo inadecuado de la historia del colonialismo y el ambientalismo. Concluye evaluando el potencial de lo sublime ecológico para usos anticoloniales por parte de pensadores indígenas y afrodescendientes.

Palabras clave: Pensamiento anticolonial, Afrodescendiente, pensamiento ecológico, indígena, sublime.

As a concept, the sublime has shown the ability to endure (Brady; Costelloe). This article traces contestation over the sublime in the eighteenth century to evaluate the potential of the ecological sublime today. The ecological sublime, as this article understands it, is an experience of the natural world that interrupts the normal sense of self and rationality and fosters a reappraisal of a person's relationship to the environment. Scholarship on the ecological sublime has flourished, but without

adequately addressing historical and contemporary forms of colonialism.¹ This status quo, I argue, represents an example of “modernity’s colonial double fracture” which “separates the colonial history of the world from its environmental history” (Ferdinand 3). The following analysis examines the ecological sublime from the positionality of Indigenous and Black anticolonial thought and queries its potential for Indigenous and Black nations who have always faced colonial domination alongside ecological devastation.

This article brings Indigenous and Black anticolonial thought into relation in order to provide a hemispheric view of eighteenth-century anticolonial thought in the Americas. As such it aims to elucidate the pervasiveness of the critique of colonialism from a site (i.e., the Americas) that has been historically dismissed by Eurocentric notions of philosophy and politics.² Scholars of colonialism have excavated how Indigenous and Black writers were shaped by intimate contact with each other through religious, economic, social, political, and literary practices.³ Similarly, scholarship on relationality has shown the usefulness of relational models and ethics in challenging colonial knowledge production.⁴ This article builds on the scholarship on intimacy and relationality through an emphasis on decentering European thought and privileging texts that emerge from the “underside of modernity” (Maldonado-Torres, “Against”). Although it examines Indigenous and Black anticolonial thought primarily as parallel traditions, it acknowledges that they often interact and overlap.

The following analysis focuses on colonialism in the Americas, which includes settler colonialism in British North America. Settler colonialism defines itself through its attempt to “eliminate and replace Indigenous peoples by force and assimilation rather than extracting resources and revenue on behalf of a distant colonial metropole” (Goldstein 61).⁵ Similarly, slavery as a mode of governance was pervasive in the Americas, and in many locales (especially the Caribbean, North America, and Brazil), it was one of the primary engines of capital accumulation. The abolition of slavery did not lead to the dismantling of racial subjugation, but instead its continuation in reconstituted forms.⁶ Likewise, settler colonialism continues throughout the Americas as settlers attempt to “transform Indigenous homelands into settler homelands” (Whyte, “Settler” 135). Unsurprisingly, then, Indigenous and Black resistance to colonialism continues.⁷

The article begins with an analysis of Edmund Burke’s use of the sublime in support of colonialism in the Americas. Burke has remained central for discussions of

¹ See Armstrong, Lloyd, Roelofs, and Hoffman for interrogations of the racial underpinnings of Kant’s and Burke’s aesthetics; see Eze, “Color” for a critical appraisal of the effects of Kant’s anthropology on his philosophical thought.

² For Indigenous philosophy and political thought, see Waters and Alfred. For Black philosophical and political thought, see Eze, “African,” and Rogers.

³ For the intimacy of Indigenous and African peoples in the Americas, see Lowe, Miles, and Restall.

⁴ See Figueroa-Vasquez, Koshy et al., and King et al.

⁵ See also Barker “Territory,” Byrd, L. Simpson, and A. Simpson.

⁶ See Hartman “Venus,” Du Bois, and Césaire.

⁷ For contemporary Indigenous anticolonial thought see Coulthard and Estes. For contemporary Black anticolonial thought see Alexander and Smith.

the sublime for his own unique contributions as well as his influence on later thinkers including Immanuel Kant. It examines the relationship between his aesthetic treatise, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* and his lifelong advocacy for settler colonialism and colonial slavery. It argues that Burke's aesthetics was intimately tied to his support for colonial dominance through portraying Indigenous and Black people as savage, irrational, and threatening. The article then turns to Samson Occom's sermons and petitions, including his "Sermon for Moses Paul," to trace how he utilized the sublime in his contestations of the devastating logics and effects of settler colonialism. It argues that Occom drew upon the sublime to contest the figures of Indigenous sublimity, inferiority, and lack of sovereignty that were explicit in Burke's work. Afterwards, the article explores Ottobah Cugoano's *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery* and his uses of the sublime in highlighting the illegitimate violence of colonial slavery and colonialism.⁸ It contends that Cugoano employed the structure of the jeremiad to provide a thoroughgoing critique of colonialism while also attacking one of the presuppositions of Edmund Burke's aesthetics: that darkness was sublime, not beautiful. The article draws upon work often not considered part of the history of aesthetics in order to provide a more expansive picture of aesthetic concepts and their centrality in eighteenth-century political contestations over empire. These historical intellectual and political arguments inform the second half of the article. The subsequent section examines how prominent advocates of the ecological sublime (including Christopher Hitt, Lee Rozelle, and Paul Outka) address the history of contestation surrounding the colonial sublime as well as present-day colonialism. On the strength of my discussions of Occom and Cugoano, it argues that these advocates do not adequately address colonialism and instead often fall into the trap of "modernity's colonial double fracture" (Ferdinand 3), which makes colonial history and anticolonial politics subordinate to environmental history and environmentalism. The article concludes by reflecting on the potential usefulness of the ecological sublime for anticolonial thought in the Americas. It argues that a turn to the ecological sublime would likely reinscribe existing colonial relations.

Edmund Burke and Colonial Aesthetics

Edmund Burke is often considered the father of British conservatism. Born in Ireland in 1729, Burke graduated from Trinity College in Dublin and eventually rose to international prominence, spending almost three decades as an MP in the House of Commons. His aesthetics has been recognized as an essential part of his political thought. *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime*

⁸ I have previously examined Ottobah Cugoano's anticolonialism (Peters, "Anti-Imperialism") and also the relationship between Edmund Burke's aesthetics of slavery and Cugoano's abolitionist aesthetics (Peters, "On the Sublime"). Exploring Cugoano's aesthetics from an anticolonial lens, as I do in this article, provides a different point of departure in thinking about anticolonialism, the sublime, and ecology.

and Beautiful (1757) intervened into debates about sentiment, rationality, and art through an examination of the concepts of the sublime and the beautiful. Similarly, his *Account of European Settlements in America* (1757), written with William Burke, attempted to educate the public about the nature of European colonialism during Britain's Seven Years' War with France. Burke sought to convince readers that to compete with France's growing wealth and power, "Britain should do more to foster the development and prosperity of its colonies" (Lock, *Edmund* 131). The cross-fertilization of ideas between these texts has been extensively studied due to Burke's aesthetically inflected response to the French Revolution.⁹ However, the connections between his aesthetics and political commitments in British colonial America have only recently received the attention that they deserve.¹⁰ Eighteenth-century British aesthetics was necessarily connected to its colonies in the Americas, conquests in Asia, "exploration" of the Pacific, and slave trade with Africa. Embedded in the ideas of the sublime and beautiful were philosophical notions of human difference that also fostered British colonialism. These aesthetic categories racialized difference and "barred from access to civility and humanity" whole continents (Lloyd 68).

For Burke, the sublime and the beautiful were the primary tools for tracing human passions to their natural sources. In *A Philosophical Enquiry*, he argued that the sublime was a property of things; he also contended that the experience of the sublime occurred when a person encountered something terrifying that did not threaten their safety. This produced a response that was neither pleasurable nor painful but "a delightful horror, a sort of tranquility tinged with terror" (136). For Burke, all sublime phenomena could be traced back to some form of terror (57). He drew upon established associations of the sublime with divinity, power, and majesty (Schechter). In addition, Burke represented existence as the result of Biblical creation that produced a well-ordered rational world (1, 50). As P.F. Lock notes: "The world of the *Enquiry* is upon the whole an agreeable place, created by a beneficent Providence for our benefit" ("Politics" 137). For Burke, where there was evil, this would be addressed by human beings rather than an interventionist God.

Burke's sublime was rooted in the belief that non-whiteness, and especially darkness, was naturally terrifying. In *A Philosophical Enquiry*, he wrote that a child "saw a black object, it gave him some great uneasiness; and that some time after, upon accidentally seeing a negro woman, he was struck with great horror" (144). His example conformed to the racial logics of eighteenth-century British society due to Black women being historically represented as monstrous, grotesque, and unfeminine in European travel literature.¹¹ Burke associated the sublime's counterpart, the beautiful, with whiteness: "Beautiful bodies must not be dusky or muddy, but clean and fair" (144). Such statements, positing certain bodies as inherently beautiful or sublime, were likely intended as a rejoinder to those (like

⁹ See O'Neill and Zerilli.

¹⁰ See Kohn and Pitts.

¹¹ For the racial logics of British society see Armstrong; for the history of Black women in travel literature see Morgan.

William Hogarth and Joseph Spence) who maintained that reactions to phenotype were not natural but rather learned (Dabydeen 41). Burke's aesthetics positioned all of humanity somewhere between sublime and beautiful. This reflected the way Europeans utilized historical schemas of savagery, barbarism, and civilization to explain human diversity (Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion: Volume 4* 157-202). Just as Indigenous people and those on the Indian subcontinent were accorded different civilizational statuses, they also had distinct locations on Burke's human mapping of the beautiful and sublime (Kohn and O'Neill 197).

Edmund Burke was a lifelong supporter of the slave trade and of plantation slavery. In 1757, he supported the slave trade because it provided laborers to the British Caribbean and North American colonies (Burke and Burke, *Account* 2:126). Although he decried the horror of slavery, he advocated for the slow and gradual abolition of both the slave trade and slavery rather than immediate abolition ("Sketch"). Crucially, his opposition to immediate abolition often involved deploying the sublime. He represented Black people as naturally sublime and used fictional narratives of slave rebellions to portray emancipation as antithetical to civilization. For example, he claimed that Dunmore's Proclamation during the American Revolution incited enslaved people to "murders, rapes, and enormities of all kinds" ("Address to the King" 359). Later, he evoked marronage in the middle of his discussion of French revolutionary historical consciousness (*Reflections* 32). Burke, then, consistently upheld the enslavement of Africans as a means for ensuring the continuation of British colonialism in North America and the Caribbean.

Similarly, he supported the erasure of Indigenous people and the transformation of Indigenous land into settler lands. His support for settler colonialism often involved representing North America as a wild empty land and Indigenous people as the "picture of the most distant antiquity" (Burke and Burke, *An Account* 1 208). For example, he argued that the British should not restrict settlers from lands west of the Appalachian Mountains. He labelled this land "a lair of wild beast," and argued for British settlement because colonists were fulfilling Biblical commandments to cultivate the earth and "increase and multiply" ("Conciliation with America" 132). The Royal Proclamation that prevented settlement west of the Appalachian Mountains was issued because of Pontiac's War, which brought together a multitude of Indigenous nations in opposition to British claims to Indigenous lands and loyalty (Dowd). Burke's support for colonization, then, directly opposed Indigenous nations' desire to stop colonists and colonial authorities from occupying their lands. His advocacy for the occupation of Indigenous lands and the subjugation of Indigenous nations displays his deep commitment to settler colonialism (Burke and Burke, *An Account* 2:278).

Because of explicit references to Indigenous people in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* scholars have traced the figure of sublime French revolutionaries to Burke's earlier writings on Indigenous people.¹² His descriptions of Indigenous

¹² See Gibbons and O'Neill.

fighters “exercising the most shocking barbarities” has remained essential for interpreting Burke’s take on democracy, gender, and colonialism (Burke and Burke, *An Account* 1: 212). However, it is rarely remarked how the vengeful, violent, and “implacable” sublime Indigenous fighter had a peaceful corollary in both *An Account* and *A Philosophical Enquiry* in the guise of the Indigenous orator. Overshadowed by the more sensational figure of the Indigenous fighter, the Indigenous orator is equally “savage” and inferior in relation to his European counterparts. Burke wrote in *An Account* that

The chief skill of these orators consists in giving an artful turn to affairs, and in expressing their thoughts in a bold figurative manner, much stronger than we could bear in this part of the world, and with gestures equally violent, but often extremely natural and expressive. (1: 172)

The equation of “natural” and “expressive” with “violent” gestures places Indigenous orators outside of the European norms of civility and oration. The eloquence of Indigenous speakers was a longstanding trope in British travel writing (Gustafon); both the Indigenous fighter and orator were understood to be positioned at the beginning of human history and lacking civilization.

In the 1759 second edition of *A Philosophical Enquiry*, Burke again invoked natural oratory, this time in response to critics of his theory of language and passions. He argued that European languages were more civilized than Asian ones by reworking the description of Indigenous oratory in *An Account*. Words had a special place in Burke’s thought because they could “excite the passions directly” while being detached from clear ideas (Lock, *Edmund* 104). Burke wrote that

the oriental tongues, and in general the languages of most unpolished people, have a great force and energy of expression; and this is but natural. Uncultivated people are but ordinary observers of things, and not critical in distinguishing them; but, for that reason, they admire more, and are more affected with what they see, and therefore express themselves in a warmer and more passionate manner. If the affection be well conveyed, it will work its effect without any clear idea; often without any idea at all of the thing which has originally given rise to it. (175)

Language embodied reason—or the lack of it. Therefore, differences in languages were differences in rationality. The distinction between naked and polished languages conformed to the civilizational hierarchy in which Indigenous people were unpolished and natural, while Europeans were polished and civil. Burke’s Indigenous orator in *An Account* can be glossed as passionate, uncritical, without clear ideas, and inferior in reason. When Indigenous orators speak, they are exciting passions, but do not know what they are talking about.

This figure of the Indigenous orator reflects the approach of European settlers who sought to elide and disbelieve the content, veracity, and ontological weight of diplomats protecting Indigenous lands. In *An Account*, Burke spent pages portraying the savage passions of Indigenous fighters, and then explicates Indigenous and British diplomacy with no more than a single sentence: “Here it is [Albany] that the treaties and other transactions between us and the Iroquois Indians are negotiated” (2: 192). Neither here nor in other discussions (including those of William Penn) does Burke

provide a robust picture of Indigenous sovereignty or the importance of treaties in constituting settler sovereignty.

Throughout his career Edmund Burke denied Indigenous nations sovereignty. His views on civilization shaped his views on sovereignty. As Lenape theorist Joanne Barker argues, lacking proof of civilization including “reason, social contract, agriculture, property, technology, Christianity, monogamy, and/or the structures and operations of statehood” justified the denial of sovereignty (Barker, “For Whom” 4). The denial of sovereign status to Indigenous nations meant that British diplomacy with Indigenous nations was seen as less important in comparison to European nation states (Pocock, *The Enlightenment* 7). It also meant that the British often attempted to dictate the obedience of Indigenous nations and ownership of their lands with European diplomats without the presence of Indigenous diplomats (Sleeper-Smith 130). The denial of sovereignty was essential to perpetuating larger narratives of Indigenous people as savage and inferior.

Burke’s representation of Indigenous oratory was damaging because it provided a settler colonial gloss to the political relationships of European and Indigenous nations. The supposed irrationality of Indigenous diplomats (as orators) meant that they did not have clear ideas about reality, which fostered the dismissal of Indigenous political claims. For Burke, absence of literacy was a marker of savagery, thus the Indigenous oratory was both savage and inferior to its civilized literate British counterpart. Given that the legal framework that undergirds Anglo settler colonialism is premised on forced incorporation into the British nation, the paternalism inherent in Burke’s distinction between “uncultivated” and “polished” mirrors distinctions between savage and civilized and, equally importantly, between those lacking and those enjoying sovereignty (Stark). The analyses of languages and oratory in *An Account* and *A Philosophical Enquiry* supported settler colonial logics of Indigenous political subjugation and elimination.

Various scholars have claimed that Burke was an anti-imperial thinker.¹³ However, Burke’s anti-imperial thought was premised on a civilizational hierarchy that prioritized those he considered civilized, while it remained unconcerned with those considered savage. Although he never proposed the end of British rule in India, the Americas, or Ireland, he did advocate for various reforms. But overall, he supported colonialism and utilized his political power to make it more manageable and less visibly horrific, especially when it concerned the destruction of nobility or aristocracy whom he perceived as worthy of sympathy.¹⁴ Edmund Burke’s consistent portrayal of Indigenous and Black people as sublime and the antithesis of European civilization shows clearly that whatever his anti-imperial credentials, they did not extend to the Americas.

¹³ See Agnani, Mehta, and Pitts.

¹⁴ O’Neill’s argument of the logic of Burke’s conservative support for empire, especially as it relates to Indigenous dispossession, chattel slavery, and the East India Company, is the most compelling interpretation of the complexity of Burke’s anti-imperialism.

Examining Edmund Burke's aesthetics through the responses of his white British and European contemporaries, as most scholarship does, avoids accounting for the reception of his ideas by those most affected by British aesthetic thought. Therefore, the next section examines Samson Occom's (Mohegan) and Ottobah Cugoano's uses of the sublime in their criticisms of U.S. and British colonialism. Whereas Burke's concept of the sublime combines a view of a "beneficent Providence" with strands of existing European thought that viewed non-Europeans (especially Africans, but also Indigenous populations in the Americas) as monstrous, ugly, and terrifying, both Occom and Cugoano drew upon explicitly Christian notions of the sublime that highlighted God's divinity, power, and willingness to punish injustice (Lock, "Politics," 137). I contend that these versions of the sublime were anticolonial in their orientation and contested arguments implicit in Burke's use of the sublime to support colonialism.

Occom and Cugoano have more in common than just publishing works critical of British colonialism. They were contributors to bodies of literature produced through the Atlantic crossings and forced cultural contacts of colonial violence.¹⁵ They were both active members of larger transnational political communities that were committed to self-determination for those most affected by colonialism—Occom through his petition writing and preaching amongst New England Indigenous communities and Cugoano through his activism and his co-authored letters with other Afro-British abolitionists in London. Of great import, they were deeply familiar with the colonial world of London, including British art and aesthetics. Both were represented in paintings while in London, Occom in 1768 and Cugoano in 1784.¹⁶

Samson Occom, Settler Colonialism, and the Sublime

Samson Occom (Mohegan) was arguably the most famous Indigenous writer (of English) during the eighteenth century. Born in 1723, he was raised within the Mohegan kinship networks of western Connecticut and was educated in English, Greek, and Latin by Eleazar Wheelock. Occom became an ordained minister and preacher who sought to constitute Indigenous survival through Indigenous Christian institutions and political self-determination. Upon his death, he left behind a hefty literary legacy, the separatist Indigenous Christian community of Brotherton, and a lasting influence on Indigenous politics in New England. Moreover, he has been hailed as a key contributor to the American Indian Intellectual tradition and a contributor to early Indigenous literature.¹⁷

Occom was educated during a period when Indigenous literacies in Massachusetts and English had made significant strides.¹⁸ Despite his education, he

¹⁵ See Gilroy and Weaver on the Black and Red Atlantics.

¹⁶ For the portrait of Occom see Zuck; for the painting in which Cugoano was represented as a servant see Hartman, *Lose*.

¹⁷ See Martinez and Warrior.

¹⁸ See Brooks and Bross.

and other Indigenous writers were caught between two unflattering representations “of being simultaneously noble and ‘republican’ in their traditional oratory, but essentially ‘unlettered’ and anti-intellectual in their grasp of alphabetic literacy” (Round 48). Whereas the Indigenous oratory tradition was seen as inferior to European literacy due to its orality, Indigenous writing was seen as inferior in its execution. Indeed, neither oratory nor literature escaped the colonial apparatus that sought to subordinate and forcibly incorporate Indigenous people within British and later U.S. sovereignty. In December of 1765, he boarded a ship to London to raise money for Eleazar Wheelock’s “Moor’s Indian Charity School,” which Occom thought would be a great benefit to Indigenous youth throughout New England. Unfortunately, although successful in raising funds, the ideas of colonial aesthetics and Indigenous inferiority preceded him.

When Occom arrived in the United Kingdom in 1766, he entered a space in which Indigenous people were seen as savage and lacking humanity. He noted that most Britons saw him through the lens of sublimity, whether that was fear, darkness, ugliness, or novelty. In his sermon “Saying What Think Ye of Christ,” he wrote: “I think I am ready to stand before you all, if it is only as a spectral and gazing stock” (175). Given that the beautiful in Burke was associated with whiteness and delicacy, the spectacle of Occom was not pursued through a desire for the beautiful. Likewise, Occom was aware that his British audience would assume that he was inferior in reason. Thus, he began the same sermon by stating that “it looks to me some like a daring presumption, that I shou’d stand before you this day as a teacher” (174). His presence in the pulpit was an inversion of dominant narratives and colonial desires that sought Indigenous subordination to the British. The novelty of an Indian preacher was seized upon by those who had for over a century represented and hosted Indigenous diplomats while inscribing colonial difference into theatrical experiences; hence, as Rochelle Raineri Zuck notes, Occom was mocked in the English theater within six months of his arrival (555). The sublimity of Occom as spectacle fits the colonial aesthetics and commitments of Burke in *A Philosophical Enquiry* and *An Account*, as Burke’s aesthetics, as I showed, represented Indigenous people as lacking clear and precise ideas and that ascribed sublimity to those who were “dusky or muddy” (*A Philosophical Enquiry* 144).

A few years after his sojourn to the United Kingdom, Occom utilized the jeremiad tradition to preach a sermon with an explicitly anticolonial argument. The jeremiad (named after the Biblical prophet Jeremiah) harnessed the threat of divine retribution to support social reform (Bosco 164). The sermon was preached for Moses Paul (Wampanoag), who had been condemned to hang for the murder of a white tavern patron. The spectacle of an Indian preacher heightened anticipation of the execution due to white colonists’ long fascination with “the meaning of Indian death” (Schorb 149). Both Paul and Occom understood that Occom’s prominence as an Indigenous preacher would lead to a large white and Indigenous audience to hear of the circumstances that led to the execution (Chamberlain 444). He addressed how European colonialism was responsible for great ills, including alcoholism, the

mistreatment of Indigenous people, and a prejudiced legal system. He highlighted his kinship with Paul: "You are the bone of my bone, and flesh of my flesh. You are an Indian, a despised creature" ("A Sermon" 188). The sermon explicitly condemned the animosity of white settlers towards Indigenous peoples and nations. Occom met the audience's expectations of the execution narrative—a public which had become "increasingly concerned with the sociology of crime"—and made clear that societal injustice was a contributing factor to the events leading up to the execution (Schrob 155).

Samson Occom melded anticolonial thought to the sublime by drawing on the long association of terror with divinity and the all-powerful deity of the Old Testament. Throughout the sermon he consistently rendered death, torture, and vengeance as sublime. He also linked justice to terror when he said that "the day of death is now come; the king of terrors is at hands ... the holy law of Jehovah, call aloud for the destruction of your mortal life" (188). Occom described the punishment that awaits Moses Paul in hell, "where everlasting wo and horror reigns; the place is filled with doleful shrieks, howls and groans" (188). These images conform to the definition of the sublime Burke provides when he argued its relation to terror, danger, and pain (*A Philosophical Enquiry* 39). However, whereas Occom employed the sublime to provoke the necessary transformation of the listeners' spiritual and social lives, Burke's concern for Christianity in his aesthetic writings and his writings on colonial America were meant to show how religions always have an element of the sublime (as power, pain, and terror) (70). He argued that Christianity could improve colonialism by making enslaved Africans and Indigenous peoples more respectful and docile (Burke and Burke, *An Account* 1:241, 2:128). This demonstrates the contrast between Edmund Burke's use of the Biblical sublime in the Americas for the benefit of settler colonialism and slavery and Samson Occom's use of the sublime as a tool of critique of colonialism.

Occom wrote numerous petitions to colonial legislatures that emphasized the sublime's association with divinity. These petitions used narratives of Indigenous sovereignty, colonial history, and Biblical interpretation to affirm the rights and political power of Indigenous nations. In the petitions, "Occom expresses Native determination to survive as nations" within Indigenous communities constructed amid colonial violence (Wigginton 25). He argued that God-as-creator had confirmed the sovereignty of Indigenous nations; North America, he contended, was a central site in Biblical creation while its unique place in creation helped explain differences between European and Indigenous peoples: "The most Great, the Good and the Supream [sic] Spirit above Saw fit to Creat This World, and all Creatures and all things therein" ("Brotherton" 149). The Christian cosmology of the petitions represented North America as a "religiously chosen land" (Wigginton 47). The central images of fences and planting—as in "he fenced this great Continent by the Mighty Waters, all around, and it pleased him, to Plant our fore Fathers here first, and he gave them this Boundless Continent" (149)—are significant because both were essential to how British law conceptualized ownership: to fence and to plant were meant as acts of

sovereignty and property (Seed 19). For Ocom, God as the great governor provides a political and an ontological frame for Indigenous claims of sovereignty and property on the continent. Contrasted with Edmund Burke's advocacy for the intensification of colonization based on the supposed Biblical commandment "to cultivate the earth and 'Encrease [sic] and Multiply" ("Conciliation with America" 132), Ocom's supreme sovereign was cut from a different cloth.

Ocom claimed in numerous 1780s petitions that the British took advantage of, defrauded, and stole Indigenous lands using a variety of tactics. In the Montaukett petition, for instance, he claimed the English made deals in bad faith and often resorted to outright theft: "some they bought almost for nothing, and we suppose they took a great deal without purchase" (151). He also highlighted how the British used alcohol as a weapon against Indigenous diplomats and leaders, "[d]rowned with Hott Waters before they made these Shameful agreements" (151). This history of acquisition of Indigenous land through fraud, theft, and guile contradicts Edmund Burke's figure of the unreliable Indigenous orator (as diplomat). By illuminating the nefarious actions of colonial officials, it narrates British duplicity and injustice as decisive in treaty negotiations. Ocom and the signatories of the petition make explicit that these practices persisted after American independence. He named the citizens of Connecticut "our English Neighbors," which equated American citizens with the oppressors they had just recently thrown off ("Montaukett" 151). Overall, Ocom's anticolonial use of the sublime centered on arguing for the Biblical legitimacy of Indigenous sovereignty and lands and utilizing the jeremiad as a critique of settler colonial violence against Indigenous nations. Moreover, his awareness of how Indigenous speakers were perceived as lacking rationality and understood as sublime in the American and British public imaginations attests to how Burke's colonial sublime was both context for and target in Ocom's political, literary, and religious works. He wielded English literacy against colonialism in a political context in which such literacy was most often used to exploit Indigenous diplomats in their interactions with colonial agents. Explicitly criticizing the status quo in the same colonial language that was used to disadvantage nations (e.g., all treaties were written in English; Murray 21) was a powerful attempt at self-determination.

Ottobah Cugoano, the Sublime, and Global Colonial Critique

Ottobah Cugoano was a free Afro-British abolitionists who was born in 1757 and enslaved as a young boy in Ghana. He spent almost a year laboring on a plantation in Grenada before he was brought to London and became a servant to the painters Richard and Maria Cosway. His *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery* published in 1787 was one of the most radical statements against chattel slavery during the eighteenth century; it argued for the immediate abolition of the slave trade and the rapid emancipation of enslaved people in the British colonies. Written in the form of a jeremiad, *Thoughts and Sentiments* presented readers with a sublime

connected to an omnipotent Christian deity.¹⁹ It was a part of a larger body of abolitionist jeremiads published after the Seven Years' War (C. Brown 297). Although he is recognized as a contributor to the London abolitionist movement and leading voice on numerous subjects (including rights, liberty, poverty, crime, and reparations), few scholars have analyzed Cugoano's contributions to anticolonial aesthetic thought.

Ottobah Cugoano's anticolonial thought connected European colonization of Indigenous nations in the Caribbean, South America, and North America to the slave trade and plantation slavery. In *Thoughts and Sentiments*, European colonialism precedes and provides the framework for understanding the development and continuation of slavery. Interpreting the violence unleashed on Indigenous nations in the late fifteenth century, he argued that only the "most brutish" of people "could have [...] treated the various Indian nations, in the manner that the barbarous inhuman Europeans have done" (61). Likewise, his global analysis of colonialism contended that all European colonies were created and were maintained through "murders and devastations" and that the essence of European colonialism was legible in the Spanish policies of "rapine, injustice, treachery, and murder" in the Caribbean, North America, and South America (62, 72). An example of this injustice and murder was British rule in India, which he portrayed as a parallel criminal enterprise to plantation slavery in the Caribbean (70). For Cugoano, the treatment of Indigenous people throughout the Americas was paradigmatic for understanding colonialism globally as well as slavery.

In *Thoughts and Sentiments*, Cugoano linked the sublime to the Christian god's capacity for divine retribution. He argued that slavery so contravened divine law that it would result in retribution against its perpetrators. He stated:

For if the blood of one man unjustly shed cries with so loud a voice for Divine vengeance, how shall the cries and groans of a hundred of thousand men annually murdered ascend the celestial mansion, and bring down that punishment such enormities deserve? (76)

Given the magnitude of the crimes of enslavement, Cugoano contends that the punishment would be catastrophic. This would not be exceptional for a God who had historically authored "severe retaliations, revolutions and dreadful overthrows" (60) in delivering the oppressed. Cugoano prophesized divine vengeance unless there was a reformation of British morality and politics that ended the slave trade and plantation slavery. Like many of his contemporaries, he believed that devastating events reflected God's judgment of human affairs (Rublack 7). *Thoughts and Sentiments* advocated for a radical change in British behavior and the nation's relationship with God, whose clearest manifestation would be abolition. His terrifying vision of great punishments and revolutions drew upon the long association of the sublime with power and divinity.

Cugoano contested Burke's connection of the sublime with blackness and the idea that such blackness must be contained (i.e., *enslaved*) by representing the

¹⁹ See Carretta, Sandiford, and Bogues.

violence of slavery as illegitimate. Although Cugoano did not use the exact vocabulary of the sublime (i.e., terror, awe, astonishment), he deployed closely related terminology. On his enslavement in Africa, he narrated the “dread” of capture and articulated the process of enslavement as being “conveyed to a state of horror” (15). In describing the kidnapping of Africans, he wrote that “no description can give adequate idea of horror of their feelings, and the dreadful calamities they undergo” (74). The horror and dread were not incidental, but primary aspects of slavery and its attempt to control enslaved people (V. Brown). The pervasive violence that accompanied and structured chattel slavery was intended to terrorize, provoke reverence, and command obedience. Cugoano wrote of the quotidian violence of slavery as “dreadful scenes of misery and cruelty, and seeing my miserable companions often cruelly lashed, and as it were cut to pieces, for the most trifling faults” (72). In contrast to Burke’s example of the torture and public execution of the regicide Damien (*A Philosophical Enquiry* 39), Cugoano’s witnessing of the pain and violence of his companions did not result in “a delightful horror” (136). Instead, it revealed the illegitimacy of the institution and its pervasive violence.

A key anticolonial dimension of Cugoano’s engagement with British aesthetics was his deployment of blackness as beautiful. In *Thoughts and Sentiments*, he used an example of Biblical blackness to counter prevalent ideas of Black sin, sublimity, and ugliness: “Noah was an olive black in colour” (123). This has been recognized as a profound challenge to the discursive underpinnings of the slave trade and slavery but has not been interpreted more broadly to include a critique of territorial expansion (Wheeler 34). Cugoano obviously sought to challenge how Black figures were positioned in British visual culture as slaves, servants, and oddities and how this visual representation sought to strengthen white dominance of African descendants (Dabydeen). However, scholarly privileging of abolitionist arguments in the text has led to a lack of attention to how Cugoano’s work also challenges colonial aesthetics. In *Thoughts and Sentiments* slavery and colonialism are conceptualized and historicized as co-constitutive not only in the Americas, but also in sacred history (47). In this way, Cugoano’s gloss of Noah’s skin color as “olive black” should be seen as reverberating throughout the late-eighteenth-century global British empire. Overall, his use of the sublime contributed to his thoroughgoing critique of slavery and colonialism within the jeremiad tradition; he deployed the sublime to argue that slavery was a crime that would be punished through divine retribution and to highlight the illegitimacy of the quotidian violence of slavery. Furthermore, Cugoano’s awareness of the racial aesthetics that attached negative connotations to darkness resulted in his attack on the connections between darkness, sublimity, and European colonial violence. Thus, his deployment of a non-fair, “black,” “olive” Noah and its anticolonial significance.

The Ecological Sublime and Colonialism

Examining Edmund Burke's sublime and its colonial entanglements alongside the anticolonial thought of Cugoano and Occom provides a robust eighteenth-century perspective on the contestations over aesthetics, settler colonialism, slavery, and global empire. Both Occom and Cugoano displayed an awareness of the colonial consequences of prevailing notions of human difference and of Edmund Burke's sublime. They employed explicitly Christian associations of the sublime with the power of God and divinity to challenge colonialism. Absent from this analysis is the Kantian sublime, its colonial contexts, and differences from Burke's sublime. Nonetheless, I would argue that Cugoano's and Occom's interventions are not irrelevant for an assessment of the legacy of the Kantian sublime: both Burke and Kant use philosophical anthropologies that positioned Europeans as civilized and rational in contrast to the rest of the world; these hierarchies were intertwined and embedded in their constructions of aesthetic theory. From the perspective of eighteenth-century Black and Indigenous people, it would not matter whether the sublime was explicated by Burke or Kant, as neither conferred them full humanity. While this history of colonial aesthetics may seem distant from the contemporary ecological concerns that are central to this special issue, the coeval construction of aesthetics and colonialism remains critical as the scholarship on the ecological sublime continues to develop. The ecological sublime as expounded by contemporary scholars has a vexed relationship to the connected histories of colonialism, aesthetics, and anticolonialism as well as the contemporary politics and philosophies that emerged from these intertwined histories. The colonial history of the sublime is often dismissed or avoided, while contemporary Indigenous and Black anticolonial ecological politics and philosophies are ignored or denigrated. This "colonial and environmental double fracture" (Malcolm 3), which makes colonial history and anticolonial politics subordinate to environmental history and environmentalism, is prevalent in the literature on the ecological sublime.

The ecological sublime can be understood as an experience of the "nonhuman world," the "natural world," or "natural spaces" that results in a break with the normal sense of self and rationality (Hitt 609; Dunaway 97; Rozelle 1). This in turn facilitates a reappraisal of a persons' relationship to the environment. Encounters that cause the ecological sublime are connected to the ability of natural phenomena to produce disorientation and overwhelming thoughts and emotions (Hitt 605); they involve "awe and terror," "wonder," "'admiration' and 'respect'" (Rozelle 1; Dunaway 81; and Hitt 607). As a transformative moment in an individual's relationship to nature, the ecological sublime carries the possibility of profound change. It may help prompt "responsible engagements with natural spaces" or foster "stewardship" (Rozelle 1; Dunaway 97). This is accomplished by the disruption of the ordinary functioning of language, culture, and human context (Hitt 614; Rozelle 2; Outka 203). The experience becomes the basis of a new relationship with the natural environment as well as a model for new thoughts and practices. The ecological sublime in its political

aspects challenges status quo policies and ideas that are damaging to the environment and natural spaces due to cultural, linguistic, and social orders that cause environmental destruction. However, this political orientation has left the politics of colonialism largely untouched.

Advocates for the ecological sublime have often ignored, trivialized, or mishandled the historical and contemporary relationships between the sublime and colonialism. Christopher Hitt, for instance, argues that the “ideological” connections between the sublime and racial hierarchies, gender subordination, and colonialism should not prevent the recovery of the sublime (603). The supposed universal experience of the sublime is privileged over the less universal experience of colonialism. In a similar vein, Lee Rozelle addresses colonialism and slavery, but in exploitative ways; in particular, Black and Indigenous histories and bodies become handmaidens in the analyses of ecosublimity. Utilized for the purpose of representing moral clarity and to provide intellectual equivalence to ecological devastation, Black and Indigenous people are rendered indistinct through representations of extreme violence (26-28, 78). A telling detail of the analysis is that the concluding image of a just environmental future is devoid of any mention of the dismantling of racial domination and colonialism, but instead features decentralization, decreased population, and small towns (113). Paul Outka’s engagement with the ecological sublime, in contrast, does address “modernity’s colonial double fracture” (Ferdinand 3), especially as it relates to slavery. This is primarily because he places into relation chattel slavery as a project of racial subjugation and the construction of white racial identity through experiences of nature (4). However, Outka’s optimism that the U.S. may have reached a point of safety whereby the ecological sublime can work simultaneously on uncritical ideas of the natural world and on the racial trauma of slavery has not come to pass (202).

The “double fracture” also appears to haunt the Anthropocene sublime. Marco Caracciolo’s analyses of the limits of the Anthropocene sublime focuses on the necessity of conceptualizing movement as materialist, kinetic, and emotional, which would allow for a deepening communication and relation with the physical world. His account does not deal with the complexities of embodied racialized material emotions, such as Edmund Burke’s terrifying Black woman, or the larger politics of colonialism and the “afterlives of slavery” that have been a part of “values and cultural views that become entangled with our emotional meaning-making” (304). In this way, his account appears to leave the colonial status quo intact in the same way that Hitt’s did decades ago. In a more contentious vein, Claire Colebrook’s view of politics reduces Indigenous and Black contestations against colonialism to a politics of difference (91). Her politics of difference functions as an interpretation of electoral and grassroots politics that she believes are no longer concerned with “socio-economic” relations but rather with affect and identity (115). This Nietzschean and Foucauldian view helps underwrite her desire for a “geological sublime” that would read the human imprint on the planet as an archive of material practices without “readability” or “spirit” (124).

The philosophical stakes of the ecological sublime are hidden in plain sight; a common assumption is its universality. Without attending to the fact that this experience may only be confined to specific cultures and traditions, scholars of the ecological sublime write in the idiom of a “we” which includes all humans regardless or despite cultural differences (Caracciolo 299; Rozelle 2; Outka 202). It is because the sublime experience is universal that it is so attractive as a mode of relating. As Hitt states: “I consider the sublime to be a particular cultural and/or literary expression of something that is indeed universal: human being’s encounters with a nonhuman world whose power ultimately exceeds theirs” (609). If the promise of the sublime is that it can be universalized, then at the bottom of this promise is a particular view of the human: a European one. The critiques of humanism that emerged from outside of Europe have long questioned the universality of European philosophy, including how it establishes itself by remaining pure through non-engagement with other philosophical traditions (Grosfoguel). Moreover, the privileging of European philosophy to solve problems that were created through European thought poses a classic post-Second World War problem recognized by European philosophers. What does one do with a tradition that seems capable of creating the most explosive violence (Arendt)? From the Americas, the question was asked differently: how does one assess a philosophical tradition and civilization that refuses to admit what ails it? If European modernity is in fact a decadent, stricken, and dying civilization that has created problems that it is incapable of solving, including colonialism, capitalism, and environmental destruction, turning to it for answers would be folly (Césaire 31). This is the challenge of the decolonial turn in Black thought; Indigenous thought also has its decolonial streams.²⁰ The universality of the ecological sublime is what gives it philosophical, ethical, and political weight, but it is exactly this universality that goes unexamined in the scholarship, not only philosophically but also historically, when scholarship denies the colonial underpinnings and anticolonial contestations surrounding the sublime.

Conclusion

Erasing the political history, especially the colonial and anticolonial history, of Burke’s sublime has resulted in the sanitized emergence of the ecological sublime; this historical erasure has facilitated the elision of the contemporary workings of colonialism, including settler colonialism, and contemporary Indigenous and Black anticolonial politics. Similarly, the ecological sublime and Anthropocene sublime have avoided engaging Indigenous and Black philosophical traditions that would have challenged its standing, presuppositions, and orientations. These include the scholarship on Black and Indigenous ecologies which have been instrumental in providing a counterweight to Eurocentric environmentalism.²¹

²⁰ See Maldonado-Torres and Sium et al.

²¹ For Black ecologies see Hosbey et al. and Moulton. For Indigenous ecologies see Whyte, “Indigenous” and Maracle.

This inevitably brings up the questions of whom the ecological sublime and Anthropocene sublime are attractive to as means of dealing with current political, economic, and ecological devastations? And why? The ecological sublime may be attractive to some because of its elision or non-inclusion of the histories and materialities of colonialism and the ongoing processes of colonial modernity. In fact, it might be the absence of sublime bodies (and histories) that renders the discourse itself beautiful, an old but effective slight-of-hand of Eurocentrism. As has been examined above, the Burkean (and Kantian) discourses of the sublime have not been neutral, but rather overwhelmingly harmful to colonized populations in the Americas. This is due to the sublime's ability to frame Black and Indigenous peoples and nations as uncivilized, irrational, violent, inferior, disposable, exploitable, and in need of European domination. From this perspective, a theoretical, philosophical, and political turn to the ecological sublime by Indigenous and Black thinkers and activists in the Americas would arguably be a turn towards whiteness and an abandonment of the anticolonial ecological aesthetics that have sustained nations and communities for centuries. This too is a trick of colonialism.²² Querying the ecological sublime from the Americas means doing so with attentiveness to the historic and continual presence of colonialism, including settler colonialism, and the "afterlives of slavery."

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²² For Fanon, colonized peoples' aspirations to whiteness negates their own existence; while for Coulthard, recognition by the settler colonial state constitutes the colonial relation.

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Blackness and the Anthropocene Sublime in Jesmyn Ward's Fiction

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Abstract

This article focuses on the potentials of African American literature to analyze and rethink interlinkages of race, the sublime, and the Anthropocene. Specifically, it discusses two of Jesmyn Ward's novels, *Salvage the Bones* (2011) and *Let Us Descend* (2023), through a focus on Blackness and the notion of the Anthropocene sublime. My readings show that Ward mobilizes traditions of the sublime through an African American environmental perspective, thus highlighting the racial dimensions of the Anthropocene sublime and often suggesting alternative forms of thinking about the human. After introducing the theoretical and conceptual frameworks of my analysis this article focuses on two strategies through which Ward negotiates questions of Blackness and the Anthropocene sublime: playing with collapsing temporalities (*Salvage the Bones*) and with figures that I interpret as "elemental ghosts" (*Let Us Descend*). It argues that Ward's Katrina-novel *Salvage the Bones* speaks to the Anthropocene sublime by representing "civilizational collapse" as part of the present (not a far-off future), by showing the effects of traditions of anti-Blackness on the present, and by collapsing human and more-than-human temporalities through a discourse of motherhood. *Let Us Descend*, on the other hand, a historical fiction set in the antebellum period, addresses Blackness and the Anthropocene sublime by representing the racial sublime of slavery through the figures of "elemental ghosts." Through perspectives developed in African American studies, my readings of the novels demonstrate how Ward strategically deploys established traditions of the sublime in ways that resonate with the Anthropocene and contribute to a more race-sensitive conceptualization of the Anthropocene sublime.

Keywords: African American literature, Anthropocene, sublime, Blackness, race, Gothic.

Resumen

Este artículo examina el potencial de la literatura afroamericana para analizar y repensar las interrelaciones entre raza, lo sublime y el Antropoceno. Analiza dos novelas de Jesmyn Ward, *Salvage the Bones* (2011) y *Let Us Descend* (2023), centrándose en la negritud y en la noción de lo sublime del Antropoceno. Mis interpretaciones sugieren que Ward utiliza las tradiciones de lo sublime a través de una perspectiva ambiental afroamericana, poniendo así de relieve las dimensiones raciales de lo sublime del Antropoceno y tratando de inspirar formas alternativas de pensar lo humano. Tras introducir los fundamentos teóricos y conceptuales de mi análisis, este artículo se centra en dos estrategias a través de las cuales Ward negocia las cuestiones de la negritud y lo sublime del Antropoceno: jugando con temporalidades que se colapsan (*Salvage the Bones*) y con figuras que yo interpreto como "elemental ghosts" (*Let Us Descend*). Argumenta que la novela de Ward *Salvage the Bones* habla de lo sublime del Antropoceno al representar el "colapso civilizatorio" como parte del presente (no de un futuro lejano), al mostrar los efectos de las tradiciones antinegras en el presente y al colapsar las temporalidades humanas y más-que-humanas a través de un discurso de maternidad. *Let Us Descend*, por su parte, una novela de ficción histórica ambientada en el periodo anterior a la Guerra de Secesión trata la negritud y lo sublime del Antropoceno representando lo sublime racial de la esclavitud a través de las figuras de "elemental ghosts". Las lecturas de las novelas demuestran cómo Ward utiliza estratégicamente las tradiciones establecidas de lo sublime en formas que resuenan con el Antropoceno y contribuyen a conceptualizar lo sublime del Antropoceno a través de nociones desde la perspectiva de los estudios afroamericanos.

Palabras clave: Literatura afroamericana, Antropoceno, sublime, negritud, raza, Gótico.

Questions of race have only belatedly found a place in Anthropocene discourse. While many other factors have been considered almost from the inception of the Anthropocene concept in the early twenty-first century (as frequent suggestions for alternative labels suggest), race has for some time received relatively little attention. By now, however, scholars including Nicholas Mirzoeff, Laura Pulido, and Kathryn Yusoff, noting an initial erasure of race in the Anthropocene, have come to articulate the need and provide models for exploring its role more rigorously. Their research complements other critiques of the Anthropocene that revolt against the perception that the concept unduly posits a falsely homogenizing account of the human species, seeking to ensure awareness that the Anthropocene has to be seen as a racial process too.¹

Fruitful ways to discuss race in the Anthropocene can involve perspectives of human geography, postcolonial ecocriticism, or environmental justice scholarship, but also, as this article suggests, concepts from African American literature and African American studies. The field of African American studies often addresses questions of race through Blackness, a notion and term that is variously used by scholars in this field to explore histories of anti-Black violence and racism, but also to extricate Blackness from such histories. The analyses of Ward's fiction presented in this article, on one hand, deploy the analytical potentials of Blackness for genealogies of anti-Black racism and its effects into the present. On the other hand, my understanding of Blackness is rooted in an inclusive idea of Black Studies as a field that, in Cornel West's words, broadly tries "to redefine what it means to be human, what it means to be modern, what it means to be American" (542). In relation to the Anthropocene, this understanding of Blackness both provides a way to show (some of) the Anthropocene's racial histories and helps spotlight how African American literary discourse often creatively attempts to rethink the human.

The writer I turn to in this essay, Jesmyn Ward, is celebrated widely as an environmentally interested Southern author, deeply in conversation with the Black literary canon, and is therefore particularly promising with respect to tracing interlinkages of Blackness, the sublime, and the Anthropocene. Turning to literary discourse in relation to such interlinkages connects my argument to discussions over an Anthropocene aesthetics. With African American literature, these discussions have both crucial synchronic and diachronic dimensions. On one hand, there is the (still) much-debated aesthetic problem for contemporary Anthropocene literature that Greg Garrard once described as a "crisis of representation," in which "[n]one of the traditional forms of literature, film, or television documentary is unproblematically suited to capturing the geographical and temporal scale, complexity, and uncertainty of climate change" and the Anthropocene (709). My readings of Ward's fiction speak to this crisis insofar as her work draws on the potentials of specifically African

¹ On race in the Anthropocene, see also Davis et al., Tuana, and Peters in this special issue.

American perspectives and narrative traditions. On the other hand, exploring these perspectives and traditions through the heuristic lenses of Blackness and the Anthropocene sublime also centrally involves the relation between aesthetics and the figure giving the name to the proposed new geological epoch in question, the *anthropos*. It interrogates the constitutive role of the sublime as what David Lloyd describes as a “regulative discourse of the human on which the modern conception of the political and racial order of modernity rests” (3)—an order whose contestation has obviously been a vital concern for African American literature.

With these conceptual frameworks in mind, this article discusses two of Jesmyn Ward's novels, *Salvage the Bones* (2011) and *Let Us Descend* (2023), by focusing on Blackness and the Anthropocene sublime. My analyses contextualize Ward's fiction and its exploration of racially inflected vulnerabilities and resistance strategies within archives of Black thought and thus as part of a genealogy of (anti-)Blackness and its relations to the sublime. Ward, I show, mobilizes traditions of the sublime in various ways that highlight the racial dimensions of the Anthropocene sublime and suggest alternative forms of thinking the human that are relevant for an Anthropocene context. In order to explain Ward's strategies, I will begin by briefly introducing the theoretical frameworks of my analysis, namely my understanding of the Anthropocene sublime and its potentials in relation to African American literature. Then, I turn to Ward's novels to analyze how they negotiate questions of Blackness and the Anthropocene sublime by playing with collapsing temporalities (*Salvage the Bones*) and with figures that I interpret as “elemental ghosts” (*Let Us Descend*).

The Anthropocene Sublime and African American Literature

While the Anthropocene, in its typical association with large-scale environmental crises and disasters and their overwhelming impacts intuitively interlinks with a sublime vernacular, such links never emerge in a historical vacuum or disconnected from political interests and effects. To the contrary, exploring an Anthropocene sublime reveals the lasso of human aesthetic history that is thrown around the Anthropocene in ways that bear the potential for a more rigorous critique of the Anthropocene. Connecting the Anthropocene with the sublime enables us to analyze the former as dependent on aesthetic and literary histories and choices. As historian of science Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, finding inspiration in foundational theories of the sublime, points out, the Anthropocene, when it relies on the aesthetic of the sublime, “rejuvenates old cultural tropes” (288). Fressoz thus proposes the potential of the Anthropocene sublime as a discourse for sustained critique by identifying several facets of an Anthropocene sublime and by asking us to consider “the function” of the sublime as it (re-)emerges in the Anthropocene (298).

The Anthropocene sublime, as a critical discourse that allows for discussing aesthetic and political dimensions of the Anthropocene, has particular relevance in the context of African American literature. This is for two main reasons. Firstly, a

focus on the Anthropocene sublime is enriching for analyses of the African American literary tradition as a way to critically address the Anthropocene, because this tradition has long been keenly aware that the sublime is not a neutral concept but one with a violent racial history. Focusing on the Anthropocene sublime from an African American perspective can help explicate racial histories and (anti-)Blackness as part of the Anthropocene by understanding the sublime as a discourse that intersects with the production of both the figure of the modern human and modern concepts of race. After all, the classical sublime emerges with racial biases when it draws its power from troubling an experiential stability: it designates not merely an aesthetic framework, but a “state of mind” (Shaw 1), and involves “an experience of potent uncertainty, a moment in which the identities of self and world become energetically interpenetrative” (Outka 15). Such a conceptualization of the (classical) sublime pertains to racialization through the ways in which it has historically involved an othering of racialized (most often specifically Black) bodies (Shapiro 43). Moreover, in classical eighteenth-century aesthetic treatments of the sublime and as part of a “racialization of liberty” in Atlantic modernity (Doyle 13), the sublime has significantly shaped discourses in and of the United States. Not only was the sublime assumed to be ideally suited “to register and interpret the ‘uncivilized’ wilderness of the American continent” (Mohr and Moss 289), but the ways in which the sublime turned dark bodies into others were also aligned with the existence of racial slavery and contributed to a racialized national identity through literature (as Toni Morrison has famously argued in *Playing in the Dark*). The sublime was thus part of what Laura Doyle describes as a continued process of “racializing freedom” and cultivating a “compelling vision for the ‘liberty’ narrative” that had profound cultural and material effects (91, 93). This process includes the large-scale environmental transformations of the New World through racial slavery and the lasting epistemic violence of anti-Blackness that extends beyond the period of colonialism and African American enslavement into the present.²

The second reason why focusing on the Anthropocene sublime is productive in the present context is that it helps critically interrogate and respond to the racial dimensions of the Anthropocene, as the racial biases in classical theories of the sublime have often been met by resistance and counter-discourses in the African American tradition. Such resistance has taken a variety of forms, ranging from a strategic, often double-voiced usage of different types of the sublime to undercut bias to the coinage of alternative critical concepts that reappropriate the sublime. Examples of the former are found in nineteenth-century African Americans’ responses to iconic environments through the natural sublime, as in Frederick Douglass’s take on Niagara Falls, which simultaneously mobilizes a sublime vernacular while performing a subtle critique of the sublime as a marker of racial privilege (Klestil), or the evocation of the sublime to describe the resistance

² On the racial biases of classical theories of the sublime and the complex relations between race and the sublime, see Armstrong, Gilroy 187-223, Freeman 105-147, Hubbard, and Shapiro 41-67.

potentials of swamps (as in W.E.B. Du Bois's novel *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*). Well-known instances of the latter include W.E.B. Du Bois's famous notion of the color line (Shapiro 45-46), Toni Morrison's theorization of race as a sublime, "virtually unspeakable thing" ("Unspeakable" 3), or Ta-Nehisi Coates's attempt of self-empowerment through desublimating the racial sublime in *Between the World and Me*. Such thinking conceptualizes and contests the "racial sublime" as "a vast, difficult-to-comprehend system of oppression" that "separates much of white and black America" (Shapiro 44-46). Additionally, recent scholarship which builds on such critical traditions (even if not primarily or explicitly engaging with the sublime), as in Black Ecologies or in studies that renegotiate a racialized enlightenment humanism—such as Jackson's or Yusoff's—is likewise an important if broader context for my analyses of Ward. Ward's fiction is both part of longstanding counter-discourses that have strategically deployed and reconceptualized the sublime and in conversation with more recent (typically Afropessimist) positions emerging out of such counter-discourses that, I argue, deserve to receive more critical attention in the fields of ecocriticism and Anthropocene studies.

One of the key facets of the Anthropocene sublime identified in Fressoz is particularly important from an African American perspective: the "sublime of the collapse" (292). Rooting the "sublime of the collapse" in a "literary device dating back to the middle of the nineteenth-century," namely "the 'ruins of the future'" (292), Fressoz points out that

Linking the Anthropocene to the idea of civilizational collapse or human extinction is an aesthetic and political choice. Other narratives are possible: for instance, the Anthropocene could be envisioned as a far more perverse and unequal process that accentuates other forms of vulnerability and injustice. If the narrative of collapse is both simpler and more sublime it is also deeply problematic. (292-293)

Fressoz's idea of the sublime of the collapse as part of the Anthropocene sublime thus includes two main components. Firstly, there is the proposal that the Anthropocene sublime emerges from and depends on the notion of future collapse, and thus involves a temporal distancing from collapse for those who experience the Anthropocene sublime. Secondly, Fressoz stresses that telling this narrative (and not another one) is an "aesthetic and political choice" and that alternatives are possible (293).

Both of Fressoz's arguments are crucial in the present context. The idea of a *future* collapse is fundamentally problematic from an African American perspective, since Blackness is bound to a heightened risk of collapse in what Christina Sharpe has described as a (still) persisting anti-Black "atmospheric condition of time and place" (106). This is not just apparent in the continual collapse and expendability of Black life in the U.S. during the historical periods of slavery and Jim Crow, but also because the legacies of these histories persist in transformed ways until today. There has never been an equal opportunity for a distancing from collapse, especially in the contemporary environmental context, given that Black communities in the U.S. continue to be on the frontlines of the risks of climate change and environmental disasters. A distancing from collapse in a spatial as well as in a (deep) temporal sense

is unavailable for many vulnerable Black communities of the present. In other words, the “ruins of the future” narrative is only available for those for whom the present feels (at least relatively) safe (Fressoz 292). From a perspective rooted in the experience of the precarity of Blackness, this fundamentally marks the Anthropocene sublime as privilege and the Anthropocene as evasion.

This is also why Fressoz’s insistence on the narrative focus on future collapse as an aesthetic and political *choice* is so crucial for African American traditions. After all, these traditions have often been engaged in developing counter-discourses to dominant forms of the sublime and may therefore inspire alternative cultural tropes for the Anthropocene sublime too. Accordingly, my readings suggest that by renegotiating the Anthropocene sublime, African American writers like Ward, on one hand, bring that sublime’s racial dimensions and relation to Blackness to light, while, on the other hand, by relying on a long history of resistance to (racialized forms of) the sublime, they are able to inspire alternative narratives that may help prevent reproducing forms of racialization. African American traditions and Black Studies, if meant to “redefine what it means to be human” (West 542), also hold potential for contributing to the imagination of new versions of the Anthropocene.

Collapsing Temporalities in *Salvage the Bones*

This impulse of dethroning and rethinking a racialized figure of the human produced by the notion of Blackness and classical theories of the sublime is essential to Jesmyn Ward’s writing. Ward’s novels consist in a form of what Sharpe has called “wake work” (13), as they explore histories and legacies of enslavement that continue to shape the present. In this project, the sublime is central not despite but precisely because it is deeply problematic for the African American literary imagination. Ward’s texts deploy different forms of the sublime seeking to move beyond the intrinsic dualisms of the classical sublime in ways that help us explore potentials of the Anthropocene sublime. Her writing evokes traditions of the sublime that highlight the racial dimensions of the Anthropocene sublime and that often suggest alternative forms of thinking the human. I argue that these affordances become apparent in two strategies in the novels considered, as Ward plays with collapsing temporalities and the natural sublime (*Salvage the Bones*), and with figures that I interpret as “elemental ghosts” and the racial sublime (*Let Us Descend*).

With *Salvage the Bones*, Ward engages with Blackness and the Anthropocene sublime by collapsing temporalities in three different ways: first, by figuring collapse as part of the present (as opposed to collapse in the future); second, by collapsing an anti-Black past into the present; and, third by collapsing human and more-than-human temporalities through the novel’s discourse of motherhood. With respect to depicting collapse as part of the present, *Salvage the Bones*’ representation of Hurricane Katrina is central. Ward’s Katrina-novel seeks to move beyond merely portraying the natural sublime of a category 3 hurricane, as the author’s response to a question about a declining public interest in Katrina in a 2014 interview shows:

I was hearing that people were tired of Katrina, that there was Katrina fatigue. [...] I think that Katrina revealed yet again a lot of ugly things about the South and the country in general—ugly things about race and class and about how certain human lives are valued more than others. [...] Maybe it was just too much and people are afraid to address it because it was so awful. ("Beating")

This passage mirrors a central choice Ward made for her novel: her focus both in the interview's explanation for receding public interest in Katrina and in *Salvage the Bones* lies less on the disaster as such than on the disastrous conditions it revealed. This becomes apparent as the novel reserves the largest portions of its portrayal of the Batiste family for the days leading up to the Hurricane's arrival. Although *Salvage the Bones* is Ward's most overt engagement with climate change (as a look at scholarly literature on the text confirms),³ the story, told from the perspective of teenage first-person narrator Esch who discovers and contemplates an unwanted pregnancy in the days preceding the storm, is not simply about Katrina as an isolated incident.

This is not to say that the novel omits depicting the destructive forces of Katrina in terms of the natural sublime, thus conveying a sense of collapse in the present by portraying the vastness of the storm and its destruction. In Ward's much-celebrated metaphorical language, *Salvage the Bones* expresses the sublime of the hurricane's landfall with winds that "*sounded like trains*" (Ward, *Salvage* 219; emphasis in original), and suggests its overwhelming character: "It is terrible. It is the flailing wind that lashes like an extension cord used as a beating belt. It is the rain, which stings like stones, which drives into our eyes and bids them shut. It is the water, swirling and gathering and spreading on all sides" (230). The devastating effects of Katrina's destructive forces, too, are revealed in relentless clarity, thereby alluding to a "sublime of the collapse" (Fressoz 291), as entire villages are "[n]ot ravaged, not rubble, but completely gone" (Ward, *Salvage* 253). Crucially, however, this is decidedly not the "ruins of the future" type of narrative that Fressoz refers to, but one that situates "civilizational collapse" into the present through the natural sublime (Fressoz 292).

Such a depiction of Katrina echoes the African American literary tradition—Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* comes to mind—which hints at the second way in which *Salvage the Bones* collapses temporalities: namely in the sense of collapsing an anti-Black past into the present. Ward's novel, after all, is not about the hurricane as the singular disruption of a purely natural disaster as it instead reveals how practices of slavery and segregation have shaped the conditions of collapse in the present. As Katrina was one of the first events that revealed racialized impacts of climate change to a broader U.S. public, the focus in the novel is on the event as one "that exacerbated and exposed—rather than created—scenes of injustice" (Bares 22). It is on the legacy and effects of environmental racism that have produced the Batiste family's conditions on "the trash-strewn, hardscrabble Pit"

³ Environmentally oriented readings of *Salvage the Bones* include those by Santana and Bares; suggestions to read Ward's novel as an expression of "slow violence" (Nixon) come from Hartnell and Leader-Picone (61-79). For readings explicitly focusing on the Anthropocene, see Wilson-Scott and Ivory.

(Ward, *Salvage* 94). Ward's Anthropocene sublime is therefore not primarily that of Fressoz's "geological superhuman," but instead reveals historically grown anti-Black injustices collapsing into the present, thus showing how even a Category 3 hurricane (less severe than Category 5 hurricanes that have also been observed) can mean immediate "civilizational collapse" for some (Fressoz 288, 292).

By emphasizing how, to use a phrase from N.K. Jemisin, "[f]or some, it has always been hard" (qtd. in Jenkins 127), Ward fundamentally opposes a narrative of the Anthropocene's *suddenness*, of how contemplation through the sublime has *suddenly* become impossible, as in Latour's assessment that "the world is *no longer* a spectacle to be enjoyed from a secure place" (170; my emphasis). From the perspectives of Jemisin's "some," Latour's "secure place" never existed. *Salvage the Bones* represents this idea not only in Ward's stretching of the time covered by the story to twelve days (all but the second to last one representing the actual arrival of Katrina), but also by depicting a host of more quotidian forms of violence that give the narrative multiple climaxes. These include an accident that leaves the father of the family with a mutilated hand, Esch's unwanted teenage pregnancy, her brother Skeetah's dog China's killing one of her puppies, and her brother Randall's futile attempts to obtain a basketball scholarship. Such forms of violence manifest in the present but also, Ward suggests, have roots in a past that created the present's systemic, infrastructural conditions. An automated phone call the family receives before Katrina's landfall is revealing: "*Mandatory evacuation. Hurricane making landfall tomorrow. If you choose to stay in your home and have not evacuated by this time, we are not responsible. You have been warned [...] these could be the consequences of your actions*" (217; emphasis in original). What follows, in a man's voice that "sounds like a computer" is a list that implies, in Esch's interpretation and its ultimate rationale, that "*You can die*" (217; emphasis in original). From the perspective of the Batiste family, the phone call represents an automated violence and neglect on behalf of a state authority that—in a dehumanizing manner reflected in the machine-like quality of the voice—washes its hands off potential deaths of racialized groups deemed negligible. For the rural Black family, whose Hurricane-obsessed father is unable to obtain spare parts for their vehicle to evacuate (46), and who continuously struggle for daily survival, the very idea of having a choice in the face of environmental risks is revealed as illusory. The Batistes are Jemisin's racialized "some" for whom it has "always been hard," and Ward's strategy of foregrounding their quotidian catastrophes and slow but constant collapse through the deep irony of the phone call's implication of their free choice spotlights how permanent conditions rooted in a history of anti-Blackness shape the family's experience of Katrina.

Throughout, the novel stresses that the Batiste family's heightened vulnerability is inflected and conditioned by a long history of anti-Blackness, as Ward deploys what she calls her strategy of "narrative ruthlessness" ("Jesmyn Ward on *Salvage the Bones*"). Ward's "Bois Sauvage," the fictional town that is the setting of her first three novels, is "still dense with the memory of the closed, rich bayou in the

marrow of the bones" (Ward, *Line* 239). A "duskier Yoknapatawpha" (Cunningham), this place is always prone to disaster, since

when it's summer, there's always a hurricane coming or leaving here. Each pushes its way through the flat Gulf to the twenty-six-mile manmade Mississippi beach, where they knock against the old summer mansions with their slave galleys turned guesthouses before running over the bayou, through the pines, to lose wind, drip rain, and die in the north. (Ward, *Salvage* 4)

Mention of the slave galleys in conjunction with (touristy) beaches stresses how racialization functions as a differential of human populations that is built into the Batiste's world and their environmental/family history on "the pit," a home shaped by exploitation, as Esch's grandfather was accommodating white neighbors by "selling earth for money" (14). Ward thus claims that acts of exploitation, part of a tradition of anti-Blackness, have (in this case literally) lowered the lived worlds of racialized others, and that environmental racism and the legacies of plantation (and subsequent forms of) slavery have created the violent existence the Batistes experience. In this way, the novel attests to Ward's proposal in *The Fire This Time* (2016) that "[w]e must acknowledge the plantation, must unfold white sheets, must recall the black diaspora to understand what is happening now" (9), but also highlights racial dimensions of the Anthropocene by recalling the history of anti-Blackness.

Beyond representing collapse in the present and showing its emergence from an anti-Black past, a third strategy through which Ward collapses temporalities to negotiate Blackness and the Anthropocene sublime in *Salvage the Bones* comes in the form of a collapsing of human and more-than-human temporalities through the discourse of motherhood that pervades the novel. Motherhood, as a concept, generally holds significant potential with respect to theorizing human life in the Anthropocene, considering its possible interlinkages with thinking the *anthropos* inter- and trans-generationally and across species boundaries. While this article is not the place to investigate such ideas more extensively, Ward's discourse of motherhood connects motherhood with forms of vulnerability historically produced by anti-Blackness, and it serves to imagine an alternative figure of the human that responds to collapse with an ethics of care.

Through Esch, Ward addresses racialized ideas of teenage Black pregnancy and broadly evokes meanings of mothering. This includes, for example, a constant negotiation of motherly absence, for despite the fact that Esch's own mother died giving birth to her younger brother Junior, the figure of Rose Batiste persists throughout the book as what Santana calls "a consistent absent presence" (109), and features particularly prominently in Esch's experience of Katrina. The memory of Rose functions as a perceptive lens for this experience, as the narrator continuously reads Katrina's forces through her mother's stories about her sensual experience of the 1969 Hurricane Camille. Esch thus viscerally makes sense of her own experience by recalling her mother's description of "smells" and "sounds" of the earlier storm (218-219).

The feeling that “*Mama always here*” (220; emphasis in original) evoked by the protagonist, however, is only one way in which a discourse of motherhood shapes Esch’s perception of the storyworld. Additional meanings of motherhood that are significant as part of Ward’s negotiation of the Anthropocene sublime arise specifically through the ways in which Ward’s narrative transcends motherhood of human figures by including a host of alternative mothers. The novel explicitly negotiates competing concepts of motherhood—for instance, in a discussion between Skeetah and Manny, the biological father of Esch’s child (96)—and it evokes the longstanding trope of the loss of a Black mother through Rose as a reminder of the violence and vulnerability of racialized groups in the Anthropocene. Furthermore, Esch invokes and interlinks mother figures ranging from Greek mythology (Medea) to nonhumans (China, her brother Skeetah’s fighting dog). Characteristic of all of these is their ability to both give and take life. While Medea is the life-taking mythological model evoked not only in Ward but also in, most notably, Morrison’s Sethe in *Beloved*, China, while more ambivalent in her temporary gentleness toward her puppies also kills one of her offspring (17, 129). Moreover, Esch herself contemplates (highly risky) methods of ending her pregnancy when she muses about things “you do when you can’t afford an abortion, when you can’t have a baby, when nobody wants what is inside you” (102). Ward thus once again underlines an inequality visible as a socio-economic facet that has grown out of a tradition of anti-Blackness, here with respect to choice-making regarding biological reproduction.

With respect to Ward’s imagining of an alternative human response to collapse and an ethics of care, it is crucial that Esch experiences the hurricane through a multiplicity of mother figures. Her living through the storm is shaped not only by associations to her dead biological mother (Rose): Esch also reads Katrina as a mother. This suggests an alternative idea of the human that is most clearly articulated during the aftermath of the hurricane, when Esch announces:

I will tie the glass and stone with string, hang the shards above my bed, so that they will flash in the dark and tell the story of Katrina, the mother that swept the Gulf and slaughtered. Her chariot was a storm so great and black the Greeks would say it was harnessed to dragons. She was the murderous mother who cut us to the bone but left us alive, left us naked and bewildered as wrinkled newborn babies, as blind puppies, as sun-starved newly hatched baby snakes. She left us a dark Gulf and salt-burned land. She left us to learn to crawl. She left us to salvage. Katrina is the mother we will remember until the next mother with large, merciless hands, committed to blood, comes. (255)

The passage reveals a twofold response to the Anthropocene sublime as perceived through Esch. First, the protagonist’s response to the storm as a “murderous mother” aligns herself (who is also a mother) with the storm and thus signals an experience of the natural sublime (as one of the frameworks Ward uses to represent the storm) that finds its resolution not through a sense of mastery and a practice of othering. The novel underlines that Katrina is not the last devastating natural disaster—“until the next mother [...] comes” (255)—and it does not build toward the restoration of a stable human subject in opposition to the forces of nature (as in other Katrina-novels). While a classical narrative of the natural sublime regularly implies self-

assurance through a sense of mastery, as “the sublime overwhelms the senses and the imagination but is nonetheless a manifestation of the supersensible in the mortal human” (Lloyd 49), Ward’s protagonist is denied such a dimension of closure that hierarchically elevates the human. Instead, Ward opts through Esch for a collective response that interlinks the protagonist as mother and the “murderous mother” Katrina in a new framework of collective relations marked by care. Esch, after all, is not alone by the end of the novel: after her (extended) family learns about her pregnancy, she is assured that “[t]his baby got plenty daddies” (*Salvage* 255).

Furthermore, the novel’s closure hints at the ways this outcome and *Salvage the Bones* more broadly propose a revaluation of forms of interconnectedness and suggest the need to abandon a strict caesura between human and nonhuman life. Scholars have noted the ways in which Ward “activates a complicated interstice of valuation around the human and the nonhuman, revealing the ways in which the relationship between Black rural life and nature is characterized by interbeing and pervasive connectedness” (Dunning 78).⁴ Additionally, while Ward emphasizes the violence of dehumanizing forms of anti-Blackness as echoing through the Anthropocene sublime, her text does not shy away from but embraces what Marjorie Spiegel once termed the “dreaded comparison”: the evocation of similarities between the suffering of African Americans and the oppression of nonhuman animals. Throughout the novel, Esch fuses images of Blackness, the human, and the more-than-human, a process that is also visible when Ward describes Katrina’s survivors by moving from “newborn babies” to “blind puppies” to “newly hatched baby snakes” (*Salvage* 255). Through the narrative technique of a book that uses the word “human” merely ten times (Santana 116), which radically follows through Esch’s observation that “[b]odies tell stories” and which does not shy away from interlinking concepts of Blackness and nonhuman animality (83), Ward offers an idea of the human that does not “master” the sublime, suggesting instead an ethics of care envisioned through an African American experience.

Elemental Ghosts in *Let Us Descend*

With *Let Us Descend*, my analysis shifts the focus to another strategy through which Ward mobilizes traditions of the sublime in ways that speak to Anthropocene discourse, namely by introducing figures that I suggest reading as “elemental ghosts.” Instead of deploying the natural sublime to stress how the ongoing effects of violent racial histories condition collapse for African Americans today, Ward’s most recent novel uses classic gothic elements such as haunted landscapes and supernatural figures to represent antebellum slavery as a racial sublime. Building on the work of Michael Shapiro, I define this racial sublime as “a vast, difficult-to-comprehend system of oppression” that (still) “separates much of white and black America” (44–

⁴ Santana also sees the novel as provoking “a troubling of the human through a coalescence of human and animal identities” (110); contributions by Dunning (73-78) and Ivry make arguments along similar lines.

46). Shapiro conceptualizes the racial sublime as a persisting, “imagination-challenging” “system of racial discrimination and officially sanctioned forms of brutality whose vastness pierces the veil of ignorance only episodically” (42-44). This idea, I argue, is central to Ward’s approach in *Let Us Descend*, as the novel presents its protagonist’s overwhelming and disorienting experience of a dehumanizing system of oppression: a world of antebellum slavery that is not just hellish and haunted but thereby becomes vast, incommensurable, and unimaginable, and that represents continuous collapse as defining the experience of Blackness. The act of (fictionally) depicting antebellum slavery in drastic ways is obviously not an innovation and does not per se qualify as a mobilization of the racial sublime. Nor is including gothic elements a new feature in African American literature (Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* comes to mind) or singular to Ward’s fiction (the gothic has been explored by scholars as a way of expressing a traumatic past).⁵ However, the intensity with which Ward evokes a sense of vastness and incommensurability through her idiosyncratic use of ghostly elemental figures produces an imagination-challenging system that qualifies as a literary version of a racial sublime marked by continuous collapse.

In relation to her previous work, *Let Us Descend*, published six years after *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, and influenced by the death of Ward’s husband during the COVID-19 pandemic, represents both continuity and shifts in Ward’s fiction. The novel, on one hand, retains a focus on the transmission of ancestral, spiritual knowledge through maternal lines and on mother figures and women’s solidarity, as it centers on a teenage Black girl’s horrific journey from North Carolina to a sugarcane plantation in Louisiana. Moreover, as the title suggests, Ward keeps rooting her stories in literary material of the long-distant past—in this case, Dante’s *Inferno*. Being another “potent melding of traditions” (Edemariam), the novel introduces elements of haunting that align with Ward’s idea that the Gothic “always goes back to the beginnings for us as Black southern people. It always goes back to enslavement” (Ward, “Something Beautiful”). On the other hand, *Let Us Descend* also represents a departure, as Ward leaves the contemporary Bois Sauvage setting of her first three novels behind to write her first historical fiction featuring the antebellum world of Annis, a mixed-race protagonist-narrator sired by a North Carolinian plantation owner. The involvement of ghostly figures, too, represents a significant shift. *Let Us Descend* may not, as reviewers have generally agreed, “add much to prior fictional representations of the immoral mechanics and lucrative dynamics of institutional slavery” (Khedhir 44). However, its ghost figures are an innovation in Ward’s work, because they function not primarily as a means of revisiting and consciously revising a traumatic past, as they do in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2011), another Bois Sauvage novel, but as a means of survival as they make up, as I argue, a version of the racial sublime.

Read in relation to notions of Blackness and the Anthropocene sublime, this strategy primarily serves to stress racial processes that have produced stark racial inequalities as part of the Anthropocene. It also allows Ward to introduce ideas for

⁵ See, for example, the studies by Brogan or Gordon; also Freeman 105-148.

rethinking the human. Ward's haunted world in the novel is another instance revealing that the notion of "civilizational collapse" must figure differently from an African American perspective, since the "ruins of the future" narrative evades extensive experiences of collapse in the present and in the past, as Ward suggests through her first-person narrator's experience of slavery as a racial sublime. The novel thus follows an Afro-Pessimist trajectory insofar as it contemplates a departure "from liberal humanism's fictions of universality" through the atrocious journey of Ward's protagonist (Jenkins 129). As a speculative fiction, it poses the question "what it might mean to sit in a place of understanding, and acceptance, of blackness as enslavement, of a world that defines one's metaphoric and literal body as the marker of unfreedom and the end of the human" (Jenkins 129-130) by returning to a primal scene of enslavement.

The harrowing painfulness of this primal scene, fittingly framed as a Dantean narrative of descent into the hell of antebellum slavery in the Deep South, confronts readers with a violent racial sublime, which translates, in the novel, to the protagonist's overwhelming and disorienting experience of a dehumanizing system of oppression. The facets of this system, in *Let Us Descend*, are portrayed through a classical gothic aesthetics. The novel features gothic elements such as wild and threatening landscapes, images of (plantation) ruins, the idea of living entombment, and supernatural spirits that haunt the enslaved protagonist. As Annis is sold down the river to a "Georgia Man," her journey becomes one of torture that involves both incommensurable human cruelty on behalf of the slave traders and the dangers of natural environments (such as crossing torrential rivers). Ward thus uses classic elements of the Gothic to create a nightmarish racial sublime that reveals the incomprehensible and vast brutalities of slavery. Her keenly metaphorical style portrays a world that presents its horrors through the dehumanizing animalization of the enslaved (*Descend* 53), but also through a language that invokes images of fire and burning. What begins with Annis overhearing her half-sisters' tutor telling the story of "an ancient Italian [...] walking down into hell" and her drawing a first analogy to her "mother toiling in the hell of this house" takes its course, via allusions to the *Inferno*, to end with the protagonist's descent into the hell of slavery in the lower South (33).

This (also geographical) descent from the Carolinas to Louisiana, where Annis is sold to a sugar plantation, manifests as Ward's representation of a horrific racial sublime that links Annis's Blackness with the experience of continuous collapse, as it invokes and repeats the sense that "[s]urely the earth is opening to us. Surely this terrible world is swallowing me" (*Descend* 22). The novel's key engagement with the discourse of the Anthropocene sublime emerges in relation to the spiritual survival of Ward's enslaved protagonist. In this respect, Ward's strategy centrally involves, besides references to an ancestral spiritual knowledge as a resource and survival technique, Annis's dealing with the supernatural figures roaming her haunted world that can, I suggest, be read as "elemental ghosts."

Let Us Descend thus addresses the question of the human in the Anthropocene through its portrayal of a spirited world “[g]rounded in an ancestral African cosmological view of the universe as porous terrain between the human and spiritual worlds” (Khedhir 42). Annis’s experience of this world comes in the form of the racial sublime of slavery evoked through a gothic aesthetics that includes classic gothic elements but also features “elemental ghosts.” Significantly, these “elemental ghosts” are not the haunting spirits of those violently killed in the past (as in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*), but take the form of natural elements such as rivers, winds, and fires. Ward depicts a spirit-ridden world through the eyes of her protagonist, where rivers speak, winds talk, fires whisper, and the earth philosophizes. In this world, New Orleans is teeming with ghosts:

She Who Remembers burns over the docks, etching the names of the enslaved on the scroll of her skin as she watches them stumble from the holds of the ships [...]. Another spirit, white and cold as snow, walks the edge of the river; it hungers for warmth, for breath, for blood, for fear, and it, too, glances against the stolen and feeds. Another spirit slithers from rooftop to rooftop before twining about wrought iron balconies outside placage women’s bedrooms, where it hums, telling the bound women to portion out poison in pinches over the years, to revolt, revolt, revolt. Another spirit lopes through the streets, black hat askew, grinning. Another spirit beats drums [...]. (*Descend* 278-279)

These ghosts are not remnants of the dead who trouble the living to consciously revise their traumatic histories, but elemental figures bound to and emerging from the constituent parts of the planet. They “watch,” “walk,” “hunger,” “hum,” and their existence and experience intersects with the empowering ancestral spiritual knowledge Annis has received (“My mama always said this world seething with spirit. She was right” [76]). Even if interlinked with strategies that secure Annis’s spiritual survival, these spirits are not by definition of a benevolent nature, but rather complicit parts of a doomed world and of Annis’s experience of continuous collapse, as their being turns out to be invested with willpower, needs, and interests.

This becomes apparent in Aza, the spirit Annis first encounters during her southbound journey, a “volatile and hurricane-like presence, which appears in a strange unfathomable shape” (Khedhir 43). At first comforted by Aza’s guiding presence during her Dantean descend, as Aza models her appearance after Annis’s grandmother Mama Aza and reveals that she has been a companion of her maternal ancestors, it soon becomes clear that such comforts, in Ward’s hellish world, come at a price. Echoing Dante, the spirit is complicit in Annis’s descent and enslavement—Aza has refused help to her mother in seeking flight, Annis learns—as Aza’s insistent claim reveals: “You must leap. You must do as your people did. You must sink in order to rise” (*Descend* 126). This guide, it turns out, craves “a kind of worship” (185) for herself and Annis eventually realizes that “[t]hese spirits [...] want succor, want adoration, want obedience, want children. They want love. We starve, but they are hungry, too” (250).

Ward’s racial sublime of slavery therefore manifests not only in the representation of the vast and incommensurable brutalities of antebellum slavery through a gothic and hellish atmosphere, but also crucially involves being

overwhelmed by the spirits populating the world of *Let Us Descend*. This is relevant for Ward's engagement with the Anthropocene sublime and her rethinking of the human. When Annis becomes pregnant when taking a maroon lover, Ward's protagonist needs to claim and recreate a sense of herself in order to gain freedom both from her formal enslavement and from being bound by a spirited world. Annis eventually has to literally dig herself out from an underground hole where she has been confined as a punishment, to emerge physically from the "dark mouth of the earth" (*Descend* 146). Ward thus echoes the trope of the underground that is recurrent in the Black literary tradition (Khedhir 42-43), and featured in other contemporary texts such as Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* or Kiese Laymon's *Long Division*. This trope is instrumental in showing that Annis starts the process of her ascent of her own accord while using the spirits infesting her world. Annis paradoxically needs to evoke and use the power of her elemental ghosts to escape their power over her. The secret to achieving freedom, Ward implies, lies in recalling her ancestors and their spiritual powers (*Descend* 273). Only this recall enables her to "jab through the earth," using "[m]y arm [as] a spear" (261, 262). Annis's reclaiming herself in overcoming and resisting the racial sublime of slavery therefore does not succeed without engaging with (and thus accepting) the overwhelming power of the racial sublime (265). At the same time, however, Ward insists that acknowledging this help does not replace Annis's self-reliance ("I delivered myself" [295]) in the process of gaining freedom and articulating herself as human.

Additionally, there is also a spatial dimension to the process of securing freedom and humanity. The swampy wilderness in which Annis solitarily settles is of her own choosing, against the wishes of Aza who implores Annis to return to New Orleans. The geographical positioning of Annis's refuge and its symbolic meanings are crucial, as this place lies beyond the plantation but not entirely beyond its historical remains. On one hand, the space Ward carves out for her protagonist (and the expected child) is separated geographically from the plantation, located in a swamp. With this choice, Ward recalls a history of resistance through marooning that Black writers—as in W.E.B. DuBois' s *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*—have frequently celebrated, but also implies that the racial logics of the plantation and its anti-Blackness must be left behind in order to secure a foundation for freedom and a viable future. On the other hand, it is significant that this does not mean leaving behind the remains of a civil society entirely in redesigning the human (as some forms of Afro-Pessimism would propose). This is implied both by the survival of Annis's ancestral spiritual knowledge, which secures her thriving in her new surroundings, and in her choice of an "empty, green-grown cabin" (*Descend* 285), the remnant of an abandoned plantation, as the place to build a future. Moreover, this choice, and the portrayal of a "hidden, green-walled room" where Annis "gather[s] wood sorrel and mushrooms and sassafras and [...] eat[s] until [...] [her] stomach eases" (286), reveals Thoreauvian qualities that imply that not only material ruins (the cabin), but also literary templates (nature writing) of the past can function as models to survive with

and thrive on in palimpsestic ways. If we understand *Let Us Descend* more broadly as another story of “civilizational collapse” (for some)—and as another story of a response to such collapse—the novel not only presents a strong case for reading the Anthropocene racially as “perverse and unequal process” (Fressoz 292), but also hints at ways to overcome such a process. Ultimately, the strength of Ward’s response to the racial sublime of slavery in *Let Us Descend* lies in pointing to a utopian potential for the Anthropocene sublime from an African American perspective, which involves neither continuing with an idea of the human that has birthed the plantation’s world nor altogether ignoring the material and poetic ruins of that world.

Conclusion

To conclude, I wish to make three broader propositions as to the potentials of analyzing interlinkages of Blackness and the Anthropocene sublime in African American literature. First, it is important to recognize the analytical potentials of the Anthropocene sublime as a critical discourse for reading African American literature. My interpretations of Ward’s use of the natural and the racial sublimines demonstrate that (re)reading African American traditions through the Anthropocene sublime adds to our understanding of how the Anthropocene has involved racial processes that are shaping current material, social, and aesthetic conditions. Second, and conversely, such readings and Black Studies perspectives more generally contribute to advancing the Anthropocene sublime as a concept. The Anthropocene sublime proposes to connect established theories of the sublime to the Anthropocene, and I argue that considering (African American and other) perspectives that have critiqued, resisted, and transformed such theories in the past due to their (initial) racial biases, should be part of a critical conversation today if the Anthropocene sublime is to avoid reproducing racialization. Third, I believe that reading Ward through the lens of the Anthropocene sublime shows how African American literature often seeks to articulate alternative, de-racialized figures of the human that can be included more prominently in the Anthropocene discourse. Both the play with collapsing temporalities in *Salvage the Bones* and with the elemental ghosts populating Ward’s antebellum world in *Let Us Descend* are components of a broader call for an alternative humanism that salvages remnants of a horrific past while seeking an alternative framework beyond a sublime of mastery and othering. If we are to explore further “the function” of the Anthropocene sublime in its emergence and development in the twenty-first century, as Fressoz urges us to, and if we are searching for alternative narratives that move against a problematic Anthropocene sublime that “erase[s] inequalities [...] for a depoliticized fascination for planetary collapse” (Fressoz 298, 297), Ward’s fiction suggests that African American literature is a promising place to look.

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The Environmental Whale Sublime in Doreen Cunningham's *Soundings* and Rebecca Giggs's *Fathoms*¹

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Abstract

This paper explores the environmental whale sublime as shaped through the representations of whales and narratives of whale encounters in Doreen Cunningham's *Soundings: Journeys in the Company of Whales* and Rebecca Giggs's *Fathoms: The World in the Whale* from two perspectives: feminine sensibility and nonhuman spatio-temporalities. It illustrates how conceiving the sublimity of whales within a relational and ecological framework can help transcend the subject/object duality in the traditional sublime. These works exemplify contemporary whale writings that articulate the environmental whale sublime through the writers' nuanced feminine perspectives and epistemological inquiries, drawing attention to cetaceans' ecological roles within the web of life rather than reinforcing their cultural elevation. Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* is considered the seminal work establishing classical conceptions of the whale sublime, reflecting how sublimity was shaped by the socio-economic conditions of nineteenth-century capitalist modernity. Such representations can be critically examined through a gender lens that recognizes the masculine and dualistic hierarchies in human-nature relationships, implicit in the subject/object binary that underpinned classical sublime discourses. Despite advancements in whale knowledge during Melville's era, his understanding was limited by the epistemological frameworks of his time. By drawing on David Nye's notion of the environmental sublime, which emphasizes "patient immersion" and the significance of symbiosis as understood from the spatial and temporal experiences of nonhuman beings, this paper argues for a re-examination of the whale sublime. This investigation highlights non-confrontational, immersive, and entangled human-nature relationships as depicted in Cunningham's and Giggs's works. The primary texts present two comparable yet distinct contemporary cetacean narratives that offer an ecological and relational understanding of nature's otherness and sublime experiences with whales, particularly through the authors' encounters with these animals and their portrayals of whale-fall ecologies and cetacean parasitology.

Keywords: Sublime, Anthropocene, whale nonfiction, entanglement, literary animal studies.

Resumen

Este artículo explora lo sublime ambiental de las ballenas, tal como se moldea a través de las representaciones de las ballenas y las narrativas de encuentros con ballenas en *Soundings: Journeys in the Company of Whales* de Doreen Cunningham y *Fathoms: The World in the Whale* de Rebecca Giggs, desde dos perspectivas: la sensibilidad femenina y las espacio-temporalidades no humanas. Se ilustra cómo concebir la sublimidad de las ballenas dentro de un marco relacional y ecológico puede ayudar a trascender la dualidad sujeto/objeto en lo sublime tradicional. Estas obras ejemplifican la escritura contemporánea sobre ballenas que articula lo sublime ambiental de las ballenas a través de las perspectivas femeninas matizadas de las escritoras y sus indagaciones epistemológicas, llamando la atención sobre los roles ecológicos de los cetáceos dentro de la red de la vida, en lugar de reforzar su elevación cultural. *Moby-Dick* de Herman Melville se considera la obra fundacional que establece las concepciones clásicas de lo sublime de la ballena, reflejando cómo lo sublime fue moldeado por las

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condiciones socioeconómicas de la modernidad capitalista del siglo XIX. Tales representaciones pueden ser examinadas críticamente a través de un enfoque de género que reconoce las jerarquías masculinas y dualistas en las relaciones humano-naturaleza, implícitas en el binomio sujeto/objeto que sustentaba los discursos clásicos sobre lo sublime. A pesar de los avances en el conocimiento sobre ballenas durante la era de Melville, su comprensión estaba limitada por los marcos epistemológicos de su tiempo. Basándome en la noción de lo sublime ambiental de David Nye, que enfatiza la “inmersión paciente” y la importancia de la simbiosis tal como se entiende desde las experiencias espaciales y temporales de los seres no humanos, propongo reexaminar lo sublime de la ballena. Esta investigación destaca las relaciones humano-naturaleza inmersivas, entrelazadas y no confrontacionales, tal como se representan en las obras de Cunningham y Giggs. Los textos primarios presentan dos narrativas cetáceas contemporáneas comparables, pero distintas, que ofrecen una comprensión ecológica y relacional de la otredad de la naturaleza y las experiencias sublimes con las ballenas, particularmente a través de los encuentros de las autoras con estos animales y sus descripciones de ecologías de caída de ballenas y parasitología cetácea.

Palabras clave: Sublime, Antropoceno, no ficción sobre ballenas, entrelazamiento, estudios literarios de animales.

The aesthetic of sublimity in relation to whales, which I will refer to as “the whale sublime,” in contemporary nature writings is figured variously with an environmental and ecological consciousness that departs significantly from that in Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, a text that has arguably initiated modern critiques of human-nature conflicts through literary explorations of whales and the industry of whaling. The sublimity of whales, invoked through both the sperm whale and the experience of the sublime in human-whale encounters, was featured prominently in *Moby-Dick*. Explicit references to the sublime in contemporary cetacean texts, for their part, are less frequent, even though whales, like many keystone species that have taken up central roles in extinction and conservation narratives, continue to induce a deep sense of fascination toward the non-human realm and nature itself. Does this phenomenon suggest the obsolescence of the sublime as an aesthetic category for articulating human perception of nature within the context of today’s disenchanted modernity? Referencing William Cronon’s “The Trouble with Wilderness,” Christopher Hitt illustrates how “the sublime tradition” has faced ideological scrutiny for promoting an idealized and ahistorical view of wild nature (603). In response to the critique of the sublime and its absence in major ecocritical works of the 1990s, Hitt argues that it can be meaningfully re-examined by addressing its ideological objectification of nature while preserving its ecocentric implications (604–607). He contends that an ecological sublime can evoke an awareness that nature “will always be [...] impenetrable,” and that it is necessary for us “to be confronted with the wild otherness of nature and to be astonished, enchanted, humbled by it” (620). The aim of this paper is not only to assert the relevance of the sublime but also to demonstrate the significance of understanding the otherness of nature inherent in the sublime from a relational rather than dualistic framework, which Hitt identifies as the “dogged resistance” in Western civilization (611). With reference to David Nye’s notion of the environmental sublime, I will demonstrate how the whale sublime takes on

environmental significance in two contemporary cetacean writings—Doreen Cunningham's *Soundings: Journeys in the Company of Whales* and Rebecca Giggs's *Fathoms: The World in the Whale*. The environmental whale sublime reflects an appreciation of nature's alterity in non-confrontational, immersive, and relational ways, which will be analyzed through a reading of these two works from two interconnected perspectives: feminine sensibility and contemplations on nonhuman spatio-temporalities. I consider these two perspectives to be constitutive of the environmental whale sublime in *Soundings* and *Fathoms*, as they encapsulate the complexity of whale representations from the vantage point of the Anthropocene²—a contested yet culturally significant epoch marked by anthropogenic environmental crises, exposing the unstable planetary conditions that threaten the survival of both nonhuman and human lives and urging a reconsideration of human superiority and an acknowledgment of the ontological entanglement of all beings. In addition, I will examine how the environmental whale sublime does not merely reinstate human or whale-privileged speciesism, but instead offers visions of multispecies dependencies through cetacean ecologies.

The whale sublime established in *Moby-Dick* can serve as a literary reference point for tracing the influence of classical notions of sublimity on the representations of whales. The sublimity of the sperm whale is mediated through Melville's compelling language, which ranges from the "imposing physiognomical view" of the sperm whale (262) to its movements: the spout that conveys "the great inherent dignity and sublimity" (280) and the whale's breach, described as "the grandest sight to be seen in all animated nature" (282). Barbara Glenn analyzes Melville's whale with reference to Burke's definition of sublimity: "Moby Dick himself is, of course, the epitome of the sublime leviathan. Melville's depiction of the great white whale turns exactly on the 'heightened circumstances' which Burke found in Job's leviathan [...] In all his appearances, he is sublime in the highest degree, a monarch and a god, powerful and terrible in his 'unexampled intelligent malignity'" (169). The sublimity of Moby Dick is in the terror that it invokes due to its elusive and perplexing presence in the unfathomable depths of the sea. Hub Zwart offers a Kantian reading of the sublime in *Moby-Dick*. While Ishmael's descriptions, such as "the largest inhabitant of the globe" and "unimaginable sublimity," reflect Kant's concept of the mathematically sublime as "immeasurable and great 'beyond comparison,'" Zwart also notes that for Kant, true sublimity arises from humanity's ability to conquer and subdue these overwhelming natural forces (93).

The multifaceted representations of the sublime in whales within *Moby-Dick* cannot be fully grasped without considering the historical context of the nineteenth-century interest in whales and the prosperity of commercial whaling, as Melville's literary imagination of the sublime stemmed from philosophical and ethical

² Although the Anthropocene was rejected in an official vote by the International Commission on Stratigraphy on 26 March 2024, as announced by the Working Group on the Anthropocene, scholars and commentators continue to assert the importance of naming it to reflect clear evidence of human impact on the planet and to foster responsibility and efforts toward environmental protection.

reflections on the complex and often exploitative relationships between humans and nature in capitalist modernity. Reading *Moby-Dick* within the historical background of American industrialization, the development of evolutionary thinking, and the whaling industry crisis, Philip Armstrong observes that the novel oscillates “vigorously between apparently opposed attitudes to the whale: wonder and contempt, mundane nonchalance and transcendent awe, humanized fellow-feeling and the calculus of market value and profit” (100). The tension between wonder and exploitation that Armstrong identifies in the novel’s portrayal of whales is largely gendered. Armstrong’s close reading of Melville’s depictions of sperm whales’ social organization and behaviors reveals how Melville maps human gender roles from the separate spheres of American industrial society onto whales, featuring aggressive, active male whales and nurturing, passive female whales. Melville’s narration reveals the nineteenth-century worldview that “an entire sociology and psychology of gender, class, educational and social development—perfectly evolved to suit the economics of industrial capitalism—is being advanced by means of its interfusion with cetacean ethology” (131). In other words, cetacean knowledge in *Moby-Dick* was culturally conditioned and the whale sublime was also enmeshed in the hierarchical structures of domination that govern both gender and human-nature relationships. The history of the discourse on the sublime has been predominantly masculinist, as Barbara Freeman points out, revealing a latent tendency in traditional sublime aesthetics to “master, appropriate, or colonize the other” (11). Patrick Murphy also recognizes a “patriarchal rhetoric” in qualifying nature in terms of the sublime and explores how the concept can undergo “an ecological feminist revisioning” in the context of ecocriticism (80). Although the classical sublime is entrenched in anthropocentric and patriarchal ideological influences, the mode of the sublime can still be a useful lens for conceiving the greatness of nature and its relationship with humanity, as seen in Melville’s unsettling portrayal of the sublimity of both human achievement and nature through a powerful whale narrative.

Cunningham’s *Soundings: Journeys in the Company of Whales* and Giggs’s *Fathoms: the World in the Whale* are two recent works of creative nonfiction that tell human-whale stories from the standpoint of the Anthropocene, both written with an environmental consciousness that addresses the far-reaching effects of pollution, climate change, and ecological disasters on the ocean, whales, and marginalized communities dependent on marine ecosystems. Although these works belong to different genres of nature writing, they represent a literary lineage of cetacean texts that combine personal narratives, biological and ecological knowledge, and natural and cultural histories. Through rich, evocative language and a blend of scientific inquiry and individual contemplation, they illuminate the manifold relationships between humans and whales in a rapidly changing world affected by environmental disturbances and catastrophes. I consider *Soundings* and *Fathoms* whale writings or cetacean texts belonging to the growing body of popular animal writing that forms a recognizable category within nature-themed creative nonfiction, which Simone Schröder refers to as the nature essay. Schröder argues that the nature essay, marked

by its “open and digressive form,” aligns well with the complexities of the Anthropocene, as it fosters a sense of exploration and experimentation in understanding both human and nonhuman agencies, offering space for “imagining boundaries” to contest and destabilize nature alterity and human subjectivity (2). *Soundings* and *Fathoms* are chosen for this paper not only for their contrasting narrative and stylistic approaches but also for the coincidental echoes and convergences in their representations of whales.

Works of whale writing abound in the recent development of animal nonfiction, notable examples include Philip Hoare's prize-winning *Leviathan, or the Whale* and Kathleen Jamie's *Sightlines*, each offering unique environmental visions of nature in distinctive ways. *Leviathan* is considered a transatlantic eco-narrative that expresses a vision of fluid identities, highlighting how “the porous boundary between humans and other animals challenges normative conceptions of space and place” (Huggan and Marland 25). Philip Hoare engages in an intertextual dialogue with *Moby-Dick* throughout *Leviathan*, which serves as both a cultural and natural history informed by Melville's work and a narrative of Hoare's own personal experiences of whales. He explores the nineteenth-century society's passion for whales through their commodification and exhibition, while also highlighting how both Thomas Beale's whale study—an academic interest stemming from a lack of knowledge about them—and Turner's paintings of sublime nature inspired Melville's *Moby-Dick* (Hoare 244–52). Huggan and Marland examine how Hoare's oceanic eco-narratives, including *Leviathan*, depict the sea as a “queer space” (24) and illustrate cetacean sexuality or eroticism that contributes to a “queer environmentality” (40). In contrast, *Sightlines* represents an ethos of British new nature writing through Jamie's reflection on redefining nature and her understanding of nature as “a web of interdependencies” (Lilley 17–18). Jamie's question of what nature is prompts her to visit a pathologist's laboratory, where she observes the examination of human bodies for disease, revealing our interconnectedness with the broader natural world, particularly through the presence of bacteria in the human body. The encounter is framed using pastoral imagery, as Jamie and the pathologist describe the microscopic bodily landscapes they explore, likening them to pastoral scenes that evoke a sense of beauty and harmony within the unseen aspects of life (Lilley 21). Hoare's *Leviathan* and Jamie's *Sightlines* exemplify how contemporary whale writings attempt to open up new avenues to enrich environmental narratives by provoking critical reflections that explore fluid identities and unconventional perspectives to challenge normative conceptions of nature.

Different from Hoare's rereading of Melville's *Moby-Dick*, which recognizes occasional odd and surprising “queer” moments of cetacean eroticism, reflecting his own understanding of the queerness of nature, my discussion of *Soundings* and *Fathoms* attempts to explore the whale sublime through the authors' inquisitive, feminine sensibility. This sensibility emphasizes wonder, resilience, and relationality, showing how the representation of the whale can also be approached through a gendered lens that diverges from Hoare's queer perspective. The whale sublime lies

not merely in perceptions of the massive physicality of whales and their movements, but also in how their enigmatic behaviors, life cycles, consciousness, and intelligence suggest an independent nonhuman agency, as well as the *umwelt* of different whales, which exists beyond human comprehension. This challenges our understanding of sentience and subjectivity, prompting us to consider the expansive realms of nonhuman experience that can never be fully accessible to us. Within the contexts of *Soundings* and *Fathoms*, the shaping of the environmental whale sublime is necessarily conditioned by contemporary scientific and technological progress, which contributes to better knowledge of the biology and cultures of whales, but also poses significant threats to their survivals, ways of lives, and habitats. Both *Soundings* and *Fathoms* portray cetacean habitats not as pristine marine wilderness but as anthropogenically altered seascapes. I propose to reframe the traditional and masculinist conception of the whale sublime that is perceptible in *Moby-Dick* by examining how the two contemporary female writers represent their whale experiences in moments of heightened emotion. These moments engender a range of emotional responses, including fear, wonder, awe, and humility, which are sometimes mingled and not clearly distinguished, to qualify and navigate interspecies relationships.

Furthermore, the sublime experience in *Soundings* and *Fathoms* is also related to nonhuman spatio-temporalities, a notion that is suggested in Jamie's view of seeing a connection of human beings to nature through the human body as a landscape for bacterial ecologies. This dimension of whale existence is implicated in the titles of the two works: "soundings" and "fathoms." Literally, "sounding" refers to whale vocalizations for communications and navigations in the sea and "fathom" means a unit of length used for measuring the depth of bodies of water. The two terms conjure up associations of different spatio-temporalities in nonhuman lives due to diverse biological and social factors, including physiological structures, sensorial abilities, communicative patterns, social configurations, living habitats, and roles in the webs of ecosystems—what is particularly interesting in *Soundings* and *Fathoms* is how whales' ecological significance extends beyond the species themselves to the often neglected worlds of microorganisms and parasites. In the two whale writings, the whale sublime constitutes one crucial aspect of the authors' experiences with whales that serves to recognize nature's more-than-human status.

The traditional conceptions of the sublime articulated by Burke and Kant reflect anthropocentric humanism and masculine privilege, as their formulations prioritize the human subject in sublime experience with patriarchal undertones. According to Burke, the passions belonging to self-preservation "turn on pain and danger" when facing threats, but if we merely have an idea of pain and danger without being in those circumstances, it produces a distinct type of delight that Burke calls the sublime (43). While the sublime arises from the "delightful horror" experienced by the human mind when it confronts the vastness, powerfulness, or infinity of things that exceed its comprehension, Burke's emphasis on human imagination as the locus of the sublime underscores its capacity to appreciate and grapple with the infinite.

Chris Washington points out that, “Burke’s sublime therefore wishes to safeguard the human species from its extintual fears and the pleasure it takes in them; it proves to be another example of anthropocentric politics and extintualism in that the infinity it finally contemplates is human infinity” (16). Anne Mellor analyzes how “the sublime is associated with an experience of masculine empowerment; its contrasting term, the beautiful, is associated with an experience of feminine nurturance, love and sensuous relaxation” by examining the distinction that Burke makes in his *Philosophical Inquiry* (85). The distinction is essentially gendered since the sublime, which is linked to the strongest passions of self-preservation, is often associated with masculine ideals of power, while the beautiful, associated with the passion of love, affection, and tenderness, reflects more supposedly feminine attributes of emotional connection (Burke 44).

Kant’s idealist configuration of the sublime is different from Burke’s empirical perspective, but the underlying concern is still human-centered and masculine. Kate Rigby observes that in the Kantian sublime, the primary concern is the human cognitive faculties, rendering Kant’s theory of the sublime “supremely anthropocentric,” serving to reinforce the rigid separation between humanity and nature, as well as the division between mind and body (79). In Kant’s conception, the sublime is not inherent to the object itself, but rather arises from the mind’s contemplation of that object:

The *quality* of the feeling of the sublime consists in its being, in respect of the faculty of aesthetic judging, a feeling of displeasure at an object, which yet, at the same time, is represented as purposive—a representation which derives its possibility from the fact that the subject’s very incapacity betrays the consciousness of an unlimited capacity of the same subject, and that the mind can aesthetically judge the latter only through the former. (89)

Kant posits that the feeling of the sublime consists of a “displeasure at an object,” which paradoxically represents an “unlimited capacity” within the subject (89). It is the mind’s very awareness of its own incapacity to fully comprehend the object that betrays an underlying consciousness of a greater, boundless faculty within the self. This valorization of the sublime also reveals the gender bias in Kantian idealism, as Anne Mellor points out, he “implicitly gendered the sublime as an experience of masculine struggle and empowerment,” perpetuating masculine ideals through its emphasis on intellectual mastery and transcendental contemplation (87).

Although the term “sublime” is not a central keyword used to portray whales or the authors’ experience with whales in either *Soundings* or *Fathoms*, the emotions that can be associated with sublimity evoked by the presence of these cetaceans, such as fear, awe, wonder, and humility, are palpable in the two works. The whale experiences in *Soundings* and *Fathoms* are diverse and dynamic, and the whale sublime contributes to the authors’ holistic encounters with whales in complex ways that go beyond mere elevation. The whale sublime is manifested through narrations that show a sense of feminine sensibility. My discussion will be informed by the concept of the feminine sublime proposed by Barbara Freeman, which she describes as “a domain of experience that resists categorization, in which the subject enters into

relation with an otherness—social, aesthetic, political, ethical, erotic—that is excessive and unrepresentable.” The feminine sublime is a site of “women’s affective experiences” (2). I will analyse how the whale sublime is embodied in moments of whale encounters where the authors react with strong emotions as they face the “excessive and unrepresentable” aspects of whales. Cunningham’s *Soundings* tells the story of her journey of tracing the migration route of gray whales from their breeding grounds in Baja California, Mexico to their feeding areas in Alaska with her two-year-old son Max. The book is an encircled narrative—the apparent main storyline follows Cunningham and her son as they journey along the whales’ migratory path, but this is interwoven with Cunningham’s past experience of investigating climate change and whale hunting in Alaska as a journalist (on sabbatical with a bursary from BBC) through living with an Iñupiaq family, a journey that she now circles back to in order to fulfil her earlier promise of returning. The traditionally masculine and individualistic quest motif, emblemized by Ahab’s journey of revenge on Moby Dick in Melville’s novel, is refashioned into a whale-watching journey highlighting maternal and communal bonds, where a mother and child follow the migratory paths of whale pods prominently featuring mother-calf pairs.

However, gray whales are not the only species of cetaceans that Cunningham depicts. Cunningham and her son Max have an up-close encounter with humpback whales and killer whales in their natural habitat after they reach Juneau, Alaska. Cunningham’s narration reveals the whale sublime through enacting the interplay of fear and the inaccessible nonhuman intention of an adult orca who suddenly approaches the boat. As the orca draws closer, she describes it as “a messenger from the void, ready to devour,” evoking a profound sense of dread that makes her “freeze in primeval horror,” to the extent that she is thrown into a near-death experience: “I have a sensation of being above the boat, looking down on myself as the predator approaches” (238). Contrasting her own paralysis, Cunningham recalls the instinctual response of gray whale mothers who “don’t freeze when those toothed torpedoes bear down on their calves” (238). This recognition of maternal protective instinct allows her to reconnect with her own body and reach out to Max. The emotion of fear portrayed here departs markedly from the “delightful horror” in the Burkean sublime and takes on a distinctly maternal significance. In this critical moment, the orca’s intent remains ambiguous; it could be a predatory threat or a playful encounter: “Is it going to ram us? [...] Was it playing? Perhaps the orcas enjoy frightening tourists. The alien intelligence glides away, hardly disturbing the surface. I swing my arms, box the air, jump up and down, wave off the orca. Max laughs and copies me” (238). The real intention of the orca is not discernible to Cunningham or the reader, but the narration effectively creates an emotional excess—the intense fear experienced by Cunningham—and the excess of the ferocity and unknowability of the orca. While the question of whether the situation involves real danger remains indeterminate, this sublime experience arises precisely from the inaccessibility of the orca’s nonhuman intention, as well as from the instinctual fear humans feel when confronted with the power of nature.

A similar account of fear arising from the approach of a whale can be found in *Fathoms*. Giggs tells her encounter with a humpback whale in a trip of whale-watching in Eden of New South Wales near Mount Imlay that evokes a sense of fear and awe, illustrating the emotional excess associated with the sublime. Within the distance of “no more than a tennis court,” Giggs witnesses an adult humpback whale and her calf as they gradually swim beneath their boat, seeing the movements of the mother whale in the water:

Tamped power resonates within her, a reserve of ferocity, a fastness in both senses: something internally secured, something quick; spring-loaded. Standing only yards above this mature humpback, my impression of a whale as blubbery is lost. The sheer *isness* of the humpback whale. I am awake. I am slammed into a state of readiness. At that moment, however alive I am, how much *more* alive is she! Blood thudding into every corner of her titanic body. The flex of her peduncle, the base of her tail, is a twitch of the largest muscle on the planet [...]. (87)

As the whale approaches the bottom of the boat, Giggs is overwhelmed by a “dreadful apprehension” that she might capsize, capturing the intense emotion of fear that envelops her as she experiences “the holy shiver of prey sensing a predator’s gaze” (87). In contemplating the whale’s motivations, “was this humpback guided by fear, affinity, curiosity, or aggression?” Giggs acknowledges the limitations of her imagination: “all this was impossible to imagine” (88). This recognition underscores the significance of nonhuman subjectivity, as the whale’s interiority and intentions remain elusive. Giggs’s narration reflects a shift from centering on the perceiving mind, typically the locus of the classical sublime where the human subject experiences sublimity through aesthetic feeling and the intellectual faculty, to a more instinctual resonance between the whale and “the human body, that animal you own unpacified” (89). The sense of “awe” and the fear of “mortality” in Giggs’s rendering connect humans with other living beings rooted in the bio-ontological relationality within the greater natural order.

Another emotion that can be meaningful for interpreting the feminine aspect of the whale sublime in *Soundings* and *Fathoms* is wonder. Some critics have argued for the necessity of separating the sublime from wonder. Louise Economides, for instance, criticizes the conceptual conflation of wonder with sublimity and the dominance of discourses of the sublime, claiming that the sublime, because of its logic of mastery, is an aesthetic that “supports a distinctly masculinist and humanist agenda that is critical to the project of modernity” (19). Genevieve Lloyd, for her part, discusses how wonder is associated with both intellectual discontent and purposeful desire, but has historically been replaced by the sublime, losing its connection to intellectual inquiry as it was understood in antiquity (9). I concur with Mollie Murphy’s formulation of “sublime wonder,” which reframes the sublime by highlighting its connection to wonder, offering a more feminine interpretation of sublimity that can address Economides’s concern of the latent masculine bias in traditional sublime (2). As the traditional concept of the sublime is rooted in a masculine mentality, it fails to represent a universal experience. For this reason, embracing sublime wonder can resist this totalizing notion and more effectively

reflect the heterogeneous nature of these experiences. Murphy explains that “*sublime wonder reclaims the domestic as compatible with the sublime and thus affirms the connection between humans and nature*,” noting that the “profound excess of the sublime” can also be experienced through accessible wonders such as the sky above and migratory birds (2–3). Murphy defines “sublime wonder” as “a practice in engaging with the more-than-human world in such a way that raises awareness of our inability to fully comprehend it” (3). Sublime wonder is “an orientation toward the more-than-human world that resists dichotomizing (feminine) beauty and (masculine) sublimity as well as wild nature and domestic culture” (3). Through a reading of Rachel Carson’s *The Sense of Wonder*, Murphy demonstrates how sublime wonder offers an ecological approach to connect to and appreciate the infinity of the natural world with an inquisitive attitude that is embodied by Carson herself. As such, sublime wonder retains the implication of intellectual curiosity that the notion of wonder has historically connoted.

In *Soundings* and *Fathoms*, wonder is frequently elicited as both an emotion and a cognitive engagement, serving as a reaction to and a mediation of the authors’ relationships with whales and the natural world. Cunningham’s journey into whale-watching is inspired by her casual viewing of a David Attenborough clip about gray whales migrating from warm Mexican birthing lagoons to the northern coast. She learns that every year the whales travel more than ten thousand miles and “the mothers fought off predators, parented, and breastfed, while swimming halfway across the planet” as “[t]hey were endurance incarnate” (7). She wants to bring Max with her, believing she “could share the inspiration [she] found in the wonders of undersea life” (7). This marks the first use of the word “wonder” in Cunningham’s narrative, establishing a motif of maternal bond and caregiving that links her identity as a mother to that of the whales. This connection suggests that the wonders of whales can facilitate a recognition of sameness, prompting her desire to reconnect with the resilient striving power of nature and characterizing the experience as a form of sublime wonder.

The process of Cunningham’s pursuit of the gray whales is not entirely successful, as they often miss the whales when they move from one place to another, unable to catch up with their movements, underscoring the inherent challenges of aligning one’s journey by human means of transportation with the rhythms of the natural world. This frustration serves as a poignant reminder of the estrangement between humans and nature, encapsulated in her sentiment: “I wanted to show Max our connection to the grays, but there’s no connection, just a badly planned trip” (256–57). It is precisely during these moments of disconnection that the agency of the whales is foregrounded. The interplay between the human intention to connect and the whales’ autonomous movements highlights the limitations of human capacity in the face of nature’s inaccessibility. While Cunningham seeks empowerment through her identification with the whales and yearns to reconnect with the natural world via a projection of the maternal image, the experience of missing the whales exposes the wishful thinking and self-absorption inherent in her pursuit.

However, the frustration and disappointment of missing the whales do not undermine the human-nonhuman entanglement depicted in Cunningham's narrative; rather, they add complexity to it. This interplay of longing and setbacks enhances the emotional impact when they finally encounter the whales, reaffirming the experience of sublime wonder that arises from their connection to the natural world. Marco Caracciolo's argument on how the sublime can enlighten our reflection on "an expansion of our affective engagement with the nonhuman" provides a relevant and useful viewpoint for enriching our understanding of the sublime wonder represented in Cunningham's encounter with the gray whale mothers and calves. Caracciolo analyzes how the experience of "being moved" is a "kinaesthetic resonance linking human subjects to nonhuman realities," suggesting that the sublime can be a relevant part of our emotional repertoire in the Anthropocene when "it is complicated by feelings that point to constitutive human-nonhuman entanglement and highlight our moral responsibilities vis-à-vis the natural world" (299). In the Gulf of Alaska on Kodiak Island, joining a fishing boat trip with a local family, Cunningham and Max are finally able to see the gray whales again in their feeding grounds:

Signature heart-shaped blows, mottled gray-and-white humps are suddenly everywhere. They have made it. They are here. They have come all the way from Mexico, like us [. ...] I can't believe they've done it, we've done it. This is a wonder of the world, a migration like no other. I can't feel my body, can't speak. Every surge of water, every pair of rolling backs splitting the waves, every breath fracturing the air with spray, sings of life and survival through unimaginable distances and challenges. This is what the ocean should be like everywhere, what it once was. Populated, a home to wild and teeming communities, to the most incredible of lives, journeys, and ecologies. (266–67)

This is an exemplary moment of how the sublime is experienced through "being moved," a touching emotional response that emerges after an arduous journey of thousands of miles, for both the gray whales and Cunningham and Max. The vivid description of the whales suddenly appearing all around them evokes a sense of awe and wonder at witnessing this "migration like no other"—a natural spectacle that is truly a "wonder of the world."

The passage powerfully conveys the emotional impact of this reunion through Cunningham's speechless yet impassioned reaction. In the absence of language, there is an almost transcendent response that embodies the sublime experience of witnessing the whales' remarkable journey and their resilience. The notion of "*agencement*," as proposed by Vinciane Despret, offers a nuanced understanding of the significance of Cunningham and Max's pursuit of gray whales in the context of human-nonhuman entanglement. She describes *agencement* as "a rapport of forces that makes some beings capable of making other beings capable, in a plurivocal manner, in such a way that the *agencement* resists being dismembered, resists clear-cut distribution" (38). Unlike the traditional subject-object relationship in discourses of the sublime, where the human observer is positioned as the perceiving subject and nature as the passive object, *agencement* suggests a more dynamic interplay in which the human individuals are deeply involved in the sublime experience. While there is an element of self-regard as Cunningham seeks empowerment and healing through

the whales, the whale agency stays intact and expresses itself prominently in the “rapport of forces” in the journey/migration. The passage also imbues this moment with deep environmental significance, as Cunningham reflects on how “this is what the ocean should be like everywhere,” being a “home to wild and teeming communities.” This observation affirms the importance of the delicate balance between human activities and the natural world, and how the whales’ epic migration symbolizes endurance and striving for life of all earthly organisms.

However, Cunningham’s exhilarating narrative of the experience of the whale sublime masks an unsettling reality about the nature of whale-watching activities, begging the question of whether ecotourism can truly fulfill its environmental goals. The romanticizing effect of the rhetoric surrounding the whale sublime obscures the potential negative impacts of human interaction with marine ecosystems and overlooks how human means of transportation have directly or indirectly affected whale movements and their living environments in a broader context. In this regard, I propose to examine the nuances of Cunningham’s whale stories by exploring the whale sublime in relation to nonhuman spatio-temporalities, a perspective that can be understood through David Nye’s notion of the environmental sublime that “retains the humility of the natural sublime but replaces the Kantian apotheosis of Reason with *patient immersion*” (116; emphasis added). The environmental sublime highlights the creative potential of the sublime to appeal to lived symbiotic experiences and consciously address the influences and interactions of human activities with the nonhuman realm on spatio-temporal scales beyond those of humanity. He asserts that, “[the] environmental sublime expresses awareness of the consequences of human action [. ...] In the Anthropocene, human beings need to move beyond celebrating the technological sublime, beyond the pretense that they are not part of nature, and beyond the melancholy contemplation of apocalypse, into a creative engagement with the environment” (14). The environmental sublime attends to the diverse spatio-temporalities of nonhuman entities, demanding an understanding of the multiple rhythms and scales within ecosystems. As Nye explains, “the environmental sublime requires an understanding of the multiple temporal rhythms of plants, insects, birds, animals, and the weather as they interact,” so “[s]eeing landscapes in terms of the environmental sublime demands attention to both the *microscopic* and the *panoramic* view” (132; emphasis added). In this context, the whale sublime takes on environmental significance through the ways it embodies the spatio-temporalities of not only the whales but the marine ecosystems that encompass other oceanic organisms, micro-organisms, and parasites.

In *Soundings*, Cunningham depicts the sight of the bones of a deceased whale in Scammon’s Lagoon in Mexico, supposedly the skeletal remains of a gray whale that has been assembled and put on display. This skeleton prompts a reflection on whale spatio-temporalities, transporting her thoughts to the whale’s previous life, which culminates in an experience of the whale sublime: “Standing where the whale’s heart would have been, I imagine it pumping, once every six seconds [. ...] I wonder when this whale lived, how it died. I imagine it moving through the water [. ...] There’s

pressure on my head, on my chest. I can't feel my feet. I stick my arms out to steady myself against the ribs. Cold skeleton, sit down abruptly on the roadside grass" (95–96). The whale sublime encapsulates the imposing astonishment brought about by the whale's impressive physicality, as well as the excess of emotions induced by the thought of mortality—the vanquishing of a magnificent creature and the fright of entering the realm of death. While the whale fall itself is sublime: "the sand opens in a haze of slow awe as the body settles in the abyssal zone," it also evokes a vivid envisioning of the subsequent decomposition process, where the giant whale becomes a vital part of the entangled marine ecosystem. The dead body, instead of being a mere end, enters a cycle of life that supports a myriad of organisms: "Predators work faster, higher temperatures help the decay. Down where it's colder, where the water pressure is greater, a community gathers. A hagfish uncurls, a wrinkled sleeve of slime. It hasn't eaten for months [...]. This is an island of food in an impoverished region" (96). This transition from the whale's life to its death encapsulates multiple nonhuman spatio-temporalities. The whale does not only represent its own existence; it embodies the interconnectedness of the giant whale and the numerous microscopic lives dependent on it, demonstrating how the whale sublime is related to a broader ecological process as the whale "expands life in every dimension" (96).

Rebecca Giggs's exposition of "Whalefall" in *Fathoms*, where the whale sublime is expressed through the impressive death of a whale, can illustrate the microscopic and panoramic view of nonhuman spatio-temporalities in the environmental sublime and how the spatio-temporality of human beings cannot stand alone from that of nature. The prologue of *Fathoms* narrates Giggs's unsuccessful experience of trying to help push a beached humpback whale back into the ocean, an episode that serves as a starting point for Giggs to explore past incidents of whale beaching and surmise on the various reasons why whales may strand themselves. Rather than accepting the official explanation that the whale is merely malnourished, the crowd attempts to explain its beaching through mystical explanations, which seems fitting for the enigmatic quality of sublime animals such as whales (Giggs 9). However, this mystified perspective is immediately refuted when Giggs confronts the readers with the stark realities of the anthropogenic threats impacting whale populations. Through her research on the causes of whale stranding, Giggs sheds light on how different forms of pollution are conducive to the unfortunate events of beaching. These include the accidental ingestion of human trash, not just abandoned fishing gear like nets, fish traps, and oyster racks, but also terrestrial objects such as parts of mattresses, dishwasher plastic pots, and ice-cream tubs. Additionally, the whale's blubber attracts molecular heavy metals and inorganic compounds from pesticides, fertilizers, and other pollutants that are washed into the sea. As surface breathers, whales also inhale airborne carcinogens emitted by refineries and chrome-plating factories (10–11). Giggs laments how even animals of such immense physicality as whales cannot be spared from the negative influences of human activities and environmental degradation, implying the widespread scale of pollution and toxic waste.

The sublime experience induced by the whale fall is complicated by the fact that the whale's body has become a site of contamination, intertwining the whale sublime with the toxic sublime—a convergence that suggests how the whale body is not only a site of the life and death of an individual whale but also a place where anthropogenic activities inscribe their detrimental effects on the ecosystem. Jennifer Peebles observes that contemporary landscape photography's depictions of contaminated landscapes paradoxically induce a sense of sublimity, resulting in tensions that *"arise from recognizing the toxicity of a place, object or situation, while simultaneously appreciating its mystery, magnificence and ability to inspire awe"* (375). In Giggs's narrative, this duality is embodied in the pervasive pollution and vast amounts of waste that have entered the ocean, ultimately finding their way into the whale's body. Through the intersection of the two kinds of sublime—toxic and whale—the whale's body embodies both human and nonhuman spatio-temporalities in an unexpected and astonishing way, as Giggs writes,

this whale's body serves as an accounting of the legacies of industry and culture that have not only escaped the limits of our control but now lie outside the range of our sensory perception [...]. We struggle to understand the sprawl of our impact, but there it is, within one cavernous stomach: pollution, climate, animal welfare, wildness, commerce, the future, and the past. Inside the whale, the world. (18)

Being confronted by the whale sublime through the whale fall caused by contamination and toxicity, the materialization of the vast scope of anthropogenic pollution compels us to reflect on human environmental impact and our complicity in it, while the sense of sublimity incites an awareness of the interconnectedness of life and the urgent need for ecological responsibility.

Furthermore, Giggs's narrative depicts how cetacean parasitology and the ecological biology of the whale fall reveal the complex relationships of life, dependency, and decay—much like how the whale's body serves as a reflection of the vast scope of pollution. Giggs describes how the story of the whale fall would "transfix" her, emphasizing that it is "emotional," calling it "a great, pluripotent detonation of life striking from a whale's demise" (21). The emotional excess captured in the narration reflects a sublime experience with picturing the whale fall, where the awe of life emerging from death evokes a deep sense of wonder and humility: "In the flatlining of a whale, in the falling apart of its colossal body, this story seeded the rise of organisms more spellbinding and weirder than any I had ever heard of, or dimly pictured before. How little is yet known about the wildness that attends the whale, I realized, and how well the world is built to work without us" (Giggs 21). In a manner comparable to Cunningham, Giggs represents the sublime whale fall through the ecological significance of the body's breakdown, illustrating how this process not only sustains diverse marine life but also challenges our anthropocentric perceptions of existence. Giggs's detailed narration tells the story of how a whale's carcass, after sinking, transforms into an ecosystem itself, supporting a myriad of organisms—from opportunistic scavengers, epipelagic foragers, jawless hagfish, to specialized "fugitive species" that thrive exclusively on the remains of cetaceans. This vast and intricate

web of life reveals how the decomposition of a single whale fosters biodiversity and stimulates genetic exchange among species that might otherwise remain isolated:

A whale body is, to this glitter splash of biology, a godsend, and an occasion for gene exchange. To think such extremophiles³ indestructible—too ancient, or too deep to be affected by the impoverishment of the sea above—is to disregard their interaction with the corpse whales, which function as engines of evolution, and stepping-stones for their migration between stringent, oxygen-poor biomes. Without whales, many kinds of detritivores fail to colonize new habitats. (20).

Such a portrayal transports the reader to the strange worlds of nonhuman spatio-temporalities, where the decomposition of a whale body becomes a catalyst for evolution and a vital pathway for the migration of the “fugitive species” that are in focus here. The whale serves not only as a temporary habitat but also as a crucial resource that enables organisms to colonize new habitats. The whale fall is described as the “springtime—a fountain of life” of the seasonless undersea, a metaphor that captures the paradoxical but profound reality of how death is also life in the more-than-human dynamics of the natural world (20–21).

Moreover, Giggs’s presentation of conceiving whales as hosts to numerous parasites, ranging from whale lice to whale worms, also invites contemplation of nonhuman spatio-temporalities, particularly through the microscopic view of parasites that inhabit the massive creature: “[i]n contemplating this kingdom of dependent organisms, I have found myself stepping away from my own senses to some zone of thought eerily outside of the human scale on which I experience the world” (262). The mind-expanding perspective of exploring the symbiosis between whales and their parasites challenges our understanding of life itself, prompting a recognition of the diverse, often unseen dimensions of existence that coexist within and around whales, whose living bodies serve as “their birthplace, habitat, and the genesis of their labor” (259). While the imagination of this relationship is aesthetically repugnant and often evokes discomfort, and many people care little for these eerie creatures, their existence and ways of life expand our understanding of the multiplicity of the nonhuman realms. Although parasites are not typically objects of the sublime, the way they render the whale body “a zoo” creates a “magical” complexity that can evoke sublime wonder (262–63). The whale sublime, in this sense, creates a tension between the often-overlooked, even abhorrent existence of parasites and the charisma we frequently attribute to whales. While the sublime risks manifesting our anthropocentric tendency of speciesism, prioritizing whales over parasites, Giggs’s narration argues that recognizing this intricate relationship can deepen our appreciation for all forms of life:

If we could learn from the parasites that everything is *not* quite itself, and that it never was—that there is deathliness and irascible vigour, and plurality and plunder, pushing and pulsing within each creature—then we might undo the charms of charisma and expand the boundaries

³ An extremophile is a type of organism that flourishes in harsh and extreme environmental conditions (NOAA).

of our care. We might embrace responsibility for even those things that lie now under our perception, and beyond our control. (262–63)

Giggs aims to foster a more inclusive sense of responsibility for the nonhuman entities that share our world, acknowledging their vital roles in the ecological tapestry of “multispecies worlding,” to use the term of Donna Haraway (10). The environmental whale sublime, viewed from this perspective, mediates the “response-ability” and “responsibility” that Haraway calls for in her theorization of entanglement (12–13). Ultimately, such awareness compels us to confront our biases and expand our ethical considerations to encompass the full spectrum of life, including those often deemed unworthy of attention.

Reading the representations of whales in Cunningham's *Soundings* and Giggs's *Fathoms* through the lens of the environmental whale sublime illuminates the ecological interconnectedness that characterizes more-than-human relationality, enthralling us with the unfathomable extent of the wonders of natural lives. However, attributing sublimity to one particular species might reinstate an anthropocentric bias that elevates human preferences and cultural valorization, posing a potential problem for the theorization of the whale sublime and the effectiveness of the concept to be truly environmental for addressing multispecies justice. Ursula Heise observes that our environmental culture operates under a “proxy logic of narratives about endangered species and conservation,” where “select species assume a central role in narratives” that highlight the loss of biodiversity and illustrate how “a particular community has been changed through modernization, colonization, or a combination of both” (2). This framing underscores the complexity of conservation narratives and invites a critical examination of the implications of prioritizing certain species over others. In both *Soundings* and *Fathoms*, the authors demonstrate an awareness of the significant role that whales play in extinction storytelling within contemporary environmental culture, making references to the “Save the Whales” movement in different ways in their reflections on whale conservation. Giggs's narrative critiques the popular notion of whales as “charismatic” megafauna, a concept she consistently questions throughout *Fathoms*. She examines how this idea establishes a hierarchy in conservation efforts, as “charisma” influences which species are deemed worthy of protection, prioritizing certain species as “mascots” and leading to the anthropomorphism of charismatic animals and their objectification as “logos and playthings” (128–29). Although the two narratives that I examine in this discussion sometimes exhibit characteristics that may fall into the cultural pitfalls described by Heise, it is crucial to recognize that these cetacean texts also demonstrate how creative nonfiction engages with scientific knowledge in ways that go beyond individual species and entities of whales. This engagement encompasses a broader understanding of interdependent ecological systems and multispecies relationships.

The representations of whale falls in *Soundings* and *Fathoms* have shed light on the knowledge of whale carcasses as vital ecosystems, implying that the death of whales is inextricably entangled with the survival and perpetuation of species other

than whales. Michelle Bastian argues that “these ecosystems have been the site of the first anthropogenic extinction” in the ocean “due to the loss of habitat caused by significantly reduced numbers of ‘falling’ whales” (456). This recognition is illuminating in understanding “the deep-sea consequences of industrial whaling,” causing the loss of “unrecorded,” “unmissed,” and “unrecognisable” species that are often overlooked in discussions of biodiversity (456). By shifting narrative attention to the ecological significance of whale falls, *Soundings* and *Fathoms* exemplify how environmental whale narratives transcend the proxy logic of conservation narratives. Heise argues that biodiversity, endangered species, and extinction are fundamentally cultural issues—centered on values and narratives—rather than purely scientific ones. This perspective suggests that endeavors to integrate humanities approaches into the scientific conservation framework are misguided, as anthropogenic biodiversity loss is inherently a human and social issue that requires a rethinking of natural sciences within the context of multispecies justice (7–8). In this light, the depictions of the whale sublime in *Soundings* and *Fathoms* are shaped by a method combining science with literary language since the whale narratives are amply informed by biological knowledge of cetology and marine ecology. The approach serves not only to highlight ecological realities but also to critique conventional conceptions of the nonhuman realm, enriching our cultural narratives about conservation. Therefore, the environmental whale sublime in *Soundings* and *Fathoms* manifests in how the authors have embraced the epistemological and ideological advancements of the twenty-first century, which have greatly improved upon the ideas from the era in which Melville lived. Meanwhile, the feminine sensibility exhibited by the writers also underpins the environmental significance of their engagements with and contemplations on whales, as well as the broader worlds of multispecies entanglement that they belong to.

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Un sublime de l'ordinaire dans le spectacle *Weathering* (2023) de Faye Driscoll

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Résumé

Dans le spectacle *Weathering* (2023) de Faye Driscoll, les corps de dix danseurs-performeurs s'amalgament sur une plateforme qui évoque un iceberg à la dérive. Ils semblent fondre dans une extrême lenteur alors que la plateforme tourne sur elle-même de plus en plus rapidement. Sueur, terre, glycérine, agrumes et objets divers s'immiscent imperceptiblement dans cette chair éprouvée. Les systèmes fermés par lesquels la pensée occidentale a pu extirper le sujet du chaos du monde pour lui donner une position de premier plan dans l'Anthropocène sont progressivement ouverts. L'écologie comprise comme fondamentalement transitive et interdépendante est donnée à sentir par un ébranlement de l'ordre normalisé du spectre de la perception. Le sublime dans *Weathering* emprunte à la tradition philosophique—du Pseudo-Longin à Edmund Burke—son caractère totalisant et saisissant ainsi que sa mise en proximité des contraires, mais fait la part belle aux sens dits "inférieurs" et aux champs du dermique et de l'intime. Driscoll vise à "sensibiliser" (to sensitize) et mettre en mouvement pour contrer l'anesthésie engendrée par la saturation et l'accélération propres aux sociétés néo-libérales. Ce sublime à tendance matérialiste se concentre sur l'intériorité et le devenir du mouvement, de l'expression et du sens plus que sur leur actualisation et donne ainsi à éprouver l'étonnante processualité de l'écologie. *Weathering* convoque un "sublime de l'ordinaire" en ce qu'il ne fait qu'humblement inviter à une expérience de l'être, et, par extension, de l'être au monde.

Mots clés: Danse, Faye Driscoll, écologie, sensorialité, matérialisme.

Abstract

In the dance performance *Weathering* (2023) by Faye Driscoll, the bodies of ten dancer-performers mingle on a platform that recalls a drifting iceberg. They seem to melt away in an extreme slowness as the platform rotates faster and faster. Sweat, soil, glycerin, citrus fruits and various objects imperceptibly intertwine with this exhausted flesh. The closed systems by means of which Western thought was able to extricate the subject from the chaos of the world and give it a leading position in the Anthropocene are gradually being opened up. Ecology, understood as fundamentally transitive and interdependent, is made tangible by the disruption of the normalized order of perception. *Weathering's* version of the sublime borrows from the philosophical tradition—from the Pseudo-Longinus to Edmund Burke—its totalizing and striking character, as well as its setting in proximity of opposites, but gives a prominent place to the so-called "lower" senses and to the dermal and the intimate. Driscoll's aim is to "sensitize" the audience and set it in motion to counteract the anesthesia generated by the saturation and acceleration characteristic of neoliberal societies. This materialist sublime focuses on the interiority and becoming of movement, expression and meaning, rather than on their actualization, and thus enables the audience to experience the astonishing processual quality of ecology. *Weathering* conjures up a "sublime of the ordinary" in that it humbly invites the audience to experience being, and by extension, being in the world.

Keywords: Dance, Faye Driscoll, ecology, sensoriality, materialism.

Resumen

En el espectáculo *Weathering* (2023) de Faye Driscoll los cuerpos de diez bailarines-performers se amontonan en una plataforma que recuerda un iceberg a la deriva. Parecen derretirse con extrema lentitud mientras la plataforma gira cada vez más rápido. Sudor, tierra, glicerina, cítricos y diversos objetos se entrelazan de forma casi imperceptible dentro de esta hastiada carne. Los sistemas cerrados de los que el pensamiento occidental pudo extraer el sujeto del caos del mundo para darle un papel protagonista en el Antropoceno se van abriendo progresivamente. Se considera la ecología esencialmente como transitoria e interdependiente, y esto se experimenta por la ruptura que se produce en los procesos normalizados que rigen el espectro de la percepción. Lo sublime en *Weathering* toma prestado el carácter totalitarista y sobrecogedor de la tradición filosófica—del Pseudo-Longino a Edmund Burke—, de ahí el aproximamiento de los contra-opuestos, pero también confiere espacio a los sentidos llamados “inferiores” y a los ámbitos de lo dérmico y lo íntimo. Driscoll tiene como objetivo “sensibilizar” (*to sensitize*) y poner en movimiento para detener la anestesia que provoca la saturación y aceleración propia de las sociedades neoliberales. Este sublime con sabor a materialismo se centra en la interioridad y el porvenir del movimiento, de la expresión y del sentido antes que en su actualización y así lleva a confrontar el sorprendente carácter de proceso de la ecología. *Weathering* convoca un “sublime de lo cotidiano” en el hecho de que solo trata, humildemente, de invitar a una experiencia del ser y por extensión del ser al mundo.

Palabras clave: Baile, Faye Driscoll, ecología, sensorialidad, materialismo.

Introduction: Vêlage

Lors de son voyage effectué en 2013 sur les eaux de la lagune glaciaire de Jökulsárlón en Islande, l'artiste Wayne Binitie a

immédiatement été frappé par la puissante odeur géothermale imprégnant la lagune et le bruit des gaz atmosphériques comprimés se dégageant des fragments d'iceberg flottants. L'échelle et la masse des icebergs suggéraient une solidité fixe en contraste avec leurs extrêmes volatilité et imprévisibilité, qui peuvent se manifester par la rupture et la chute de gros morceaux de glace à des moments aléatoires, un processus appelé “vêlage” [calving].¹ (10)

Binitie est saisi par le caractère imposant de ces masses glaciaires et devient, comme Pseudo-Longin face aux volcans ou aux longs fleuves (ch. XXXV, 4) (112), ou encore Joseph Addison au sommet de rochers en surplomb ou au pied de chutes d'eau (Addison), spectateur d'une forme de “sublime naturel.” Au-delà de ce saisissement, son récit expose l'état particulier dans lequel il se trouve plongé: déstabilisé par la paradoxale fragilité de cette “grandeur” (E. Burke 119) et sommé à une sorte de vigilance par le rythme contingent du vêlage. La description de Binitie fait également la part belle au sens dit “inférieur,” “chimique” ou “de proximité” de l'odorat, ainsi qu'à l'ouïe. Ces deux sens sont généralement écartés—le premier, presque absolument; le second, dans la mesure où le “bruit” n'est pas musique—de

¹ “immediately struck by the powerful geothermal scent pervading the lagoon and the sounds of compressed atmospheric gases being released from floating fragments of icebergs. The scale and mass of the icebergs suggested a fixed solidity that belied their extreme volatility and unpredictability; this can result in large chunks breaking away at random moments in a process called calving.” Toutes les traductions sont de l'auteur, sauf mention contraire.

l'expérience du sublime dans la tradition burkénne, voire de toute expérience esthétique. En ce qui concerne l'odorat, il supposerait, comme son proche voisin, le goût, une "désintégration de la forme, un mélange entre sujet et objet"² (McKenzie 202) et serait source d'un "plaisir *non sublimé* [emphasis de l'auteur] *per se* (et [d']un dégoût non réprimé)"³ (Herbert Marcuse in McKenzie 202).

Si les sens "inférieurs" sont généralement jugés inaptes à la sublimation, le sensorium n'est pour autant pas négligé, ni chez Pseudo-Longin, ni chez Edmund Burke, pour qui, selon Baldine Saint Girons, "point de sublime pour des esprits dépourvus de corps, car le sublime réside d'abord et avant tout dans l'étreinte inouïe du sensible et du suprasensible" (310). Alan McNee propose toutefois ce qu'il considère comme une nouvelle forme de sublime, "davantage en prise avec la matérialité"⁴ (149) observable dans les écrits des "nouveaux alpinistes" britanniques de la fin de l'époque victorienne. Ce sublime, qu'il nomme "haptique" (haptic), est éprouvé par l'ensemble du corps, au contact de la matérialité du monde et sollicite tous les sens en tant qu'ils seraient complémentaires de celui de la vue (McNee 152–53, 167). David Lombard insiste pourtant sur la nécessité d'une forme de sublime au matérialisme plus radical (70–71). Sans prendre le chemin des sciences cognitives qui décrivent le sublime des Romantiques britanniques comme exclusivement immanent à l'activité neuronale (Richardson), cet article vise à cerner les modalités d'un sublime qui se veut matérialiste dans le spectacle *Weathering* (2023) de la chorégraphe Faye Driscoll. Il s'appuie sur ma propre expérience de spectatrice et analyse le spectacle en lui-même autant que les discours produits autour de l'œuvre, par l'équipe artistique et la critique. Dans son déroulement général, *Weathering* s'est présenté à moi comme suit (voir Image 1).



Image 1: *Weathering* de Faye Driscoll. New York Live Arts, 2023. Photo de Maria Baranova.

² "the disintegration of forms, the mixing of subjects and objects."

³ "unsublimated pleasure *per se* (and unrepressed disgust)."

⁴ "a heightened concern with materiality."

Une plateforme blanche—bloc de cire ou de glace?—à la surface souple est enclose au sein de quatre séries de gradins et habitée pour une durée d'environ une heure par dix danseurs-performeurs. Tout en s'adonnant à un chant choral minimaliste dont le texte est une litanie juxtaposant des champs sémantiques en apparence éloignés ("dents," "peau," "diaphragme," "plastiques," "surveillance,"...⁵), ils viennent d'abord un à un, puis par deux, ou trois, poser durant quelques minutes sur la plateforme. Le regard flottant, indéterminé, habillés de vêtements urbains quotidiens, ils pourraient n'être que de simples passants. Bientôt, ils sont tous réunis dans cet espace restreint et advient un silence qui laisse place à une immobilité fébrile. Ces corps faussement statiques semblent se transformer en une sculpture mobile (vivante?) sur cette plateforme-socle, que font maintenant tourner sur elle-même des techniciens de scène. D'abord un demi-tour, un temps, puis un autre. Les mouvements des danseurs-performeurs sont de moins en moins imperceptibles, mais il est tout aussi ardu de distinguer quel corps meut quel membre, alors que la plateforme se met à tourner sans arrêt, et de plus en plus rapidement. Pantalon, sac, jambe, gant, lunettes, main, téléphone, clefs et portefeuilles chutent; les corps débordent de la plateforme et se délestent de leurs vêtements et accessoires; s'y entremêlent herbes, talc, fruits, glycérine, sueur et terre. À la trame sonore faite de halètements, gémissements et autres râles se superposent ceux des danseurs-performeurs. Presque nus, ils sont maintenant éparpillés dans l'espace, mais en proie à la force centrifuge de la plateforme tournante, vers laquelle ils ne cessent de courir, qu'ils enjambent, sur laquelle ils peinent à rester. Le tourbillon décélère, le silence s'installe à nouveau, ne reste que le rythme décroissant des respirations. La plateforme se désolidarise de son axe pivot, elle erre sur l'espace délimité par les gradins, poussée mollement par les danseurs-performeurs, qui finissent par se blottir, plus ou moins entièrement, contre l'un ou l'autre des spectateurs.

Le vêlage, avec cette temporalité et ce mouvement de chute qui lui sont propres, a servi de "métaphore visuelle" (visual metaphor) et de titre pour *Calving* (2022), une pièce pour six danseurs-performeurs de Driscoll ("*Calving*") (voir Image 2). Contrairement à "vêlage" en français, la forme conjuguée au présent continu du substantif "calving" en anglais traduit justement la processualité de l'œuvre, dans laquelle les six corps semblent fondre et s'entremêler dans un espace-temps élastique. Il en va de même pour le terme "weathering," littéralement la mise en verbe du climat ou du temps météorologique, le titre de la pièce suivante de Driscoll, qui peut être comprise comme l'expansion ou la seconde phase de *Calving* (Driscoll, Entretien). "Weathering" peut renvoyer aux sens les plus communs du verbe en anglais, à savoir l'usure par les éléments naturels—les corps des danseurs-performeurs étant effectivement mis à l'épreuve—ou le fait de relever un défi ou surmonter une crise—la crise écologique? Tel que travaillé par Astrida Neimanis et Rachel Loewen Walker dans leur article "Weathering: Climate Change and the 'Thick Time' of Transcorporeality" (2014), qui est cité dans la "liste de lecture" (reading list)

⁵ "teeth," "skin," "diaphragm," "plastics," "surveillance."

du livret d'accompagnement de *Weathering*, le terme “weathering” établit également un rapprochement entre le corps (humain) et le non-humain, voire les assimile:

Comment le souffle chaud de la terre, les battements de sa pluie, le repos de ses douces neiges ont-ils façonné mes propres tendons, ma démarche, le flux et le reflux de mes propres humeurs corporelles? La durée, étalée sur ma peau avec le lent mouvement des saisons. Comme ces arbres, nous sommes tous, chacun d'entre nous, *en climat* [*weathering*].⁶ (559)

Bien que, du point de vue de Driscoll, *Weathering* ne s'inscrive pas dans une démarche militante qui viserait à dénoncer la responsabilité humaine dans la crise climatique, le spectacle est “écologique” dans la mesure où l'écologie renvoie, selon Timothy Morton, à une conception du système-monde comme étant “ouvert sans centre ni bord” et fondé sur l’“interdépendance” (*Pensée* 73). Jesse Zaritt, l'un des danseurs-performeurs de *Weathering*, décrit sa participation à la pièce en des termes similaires:

Dans *Weathering*, il n'y a pas de héros unique, pas de soliste vedette — chaque artiste occupe à la fois le centre et la périphérie de l'œuvre à tout moment. [...] *Weathering* me rappelle que ce qui est brillant est toujours produit par la collectivité. Mon pouvoir vient du champ de relations qui me produit et auquel je suis lié.⁷ (23–24)

Weathering se rattache certainement à d'autres formes contemporaines de théâtre, ou, plus largement, d'arts vivants, dit “écologique” à travers son évacuation du “héros” (Sermon 82–83)—si tant est que la dramaturgie aristotélicienne ait fécondé la danse—au profit de la collectivité et des relations. Le témoignage de Zaritt n'est d'ailleurs pas sans rappeler les “histoires de devenir-avec, d'induction réciproque” de Donna Haraway (74). Dans les arts vivants écologiques, la notion de climat ou de temps météorologique, occupant ici la place centrale de titre, remplace celle d'environnement pour décrire un type de représentation qui cherche à se défaire de toute forme de cadre contenant l'histoire, sous-entendue comme humaine et distincte de l'histoire naturelle (Sermon 56–57).⁸ Cet article vise à montrer que le sublime dans *Weathering* est un “sublime de l'ordinaire” en ce qu'il ne résulte pas d'une addition, d'une apparition, d'une brèche ou d'un apex extraordinaire dans l'ordre du monde, ni d'un moment privilégié, voire unique, réunissant un sujet, l'humain, et un objet, la “Nature,” mais bien de la simple perception de l'écologie du monde. Cette perception est rendue possible grâce à la mise en œuvre de processus de “dénormalisation” qui court-circuitent les dichotomies entre nature et culture régissant notre expérience quotidienne du monde (Descola). Les trois sections principales de cet article se penchent sur ces processus, à l'œuvre respectivement dans la perception du temps

⁶ “How has the hot breath of the earth, the battering of its rain, the reprieve of its gentle snows shaped my own sinews, my gait, the ebb and flow of my own bodily humors? Duration, spread across my skin with the slow sweep of the seasons. Like these trees, we are all, each of us, *weathering*.”

⁷ “In *Weathering*, there is no singular hero, no star soloist—every performer occupies both the center and the periphery of the work at all times. [...] *Weathering* reminds me that brilliance is always produced through collectivity. My power comes through the field of relation that produces me and to which I am bound.”

⁸ Au sujet de la pièce *The Artificial Nature Projet* (2012) de Mette Ingvartsen, Gerko Egert écrit par exemple: “Ces mouvements ne sont pas ceux du climat, mais le climat *est* mouvement [These movements are not *of* the weather, but instead the weather *is* movement]” (“Choreographing,” italique par Egert, 70–71).

("Immobilité"), le système sensoriel ("Sensorium") et la production de sens ("Diffractions").



Image 2: *Calving* de Faye Driscoll/Unusual Symptoms. Theater Bremen, 2022. Photo de Jörg Landsberg. ©Jörg Landsberg.

Immobilité

L'écologie du monde relève en un certain sens du sublime. Morton nomme l'interdépendance qui la régit "maillage," qui "consist[ant] en des connexions infinies et des différences infinitésimales" sans "arrière-plan défini et, par conséquent, [sans] premier plan défini" (*Pensée* 59, 56). Il poursuit en indiquant que "[t]outes les formes du vivant constituent le maillage, ainsi que toutes les formes mortes, tout comme leur milieu, composé lui aussi d'êtres vivants et non vivants" (57). La sensation de cette "connexion profonde" (Morton, *Être* 85) est vertigineuse, éprouvée comme une perte de repères pour qui cherche un cadre, une distance pour penser le monde. L'"infinie divisibilité," donc l'indivisibilité du monde, est déjà éprouvée par E. Burke dont l'"imagination aussi bien que les sens" se perdent à considérer l'infiniment petit:

Prêtons attention à l'infinie divisibilité de la matière, observons la vie animale jusque dans les êtres infimes et pourtant organisés qui échappent à la plus fine investigation des sens, [...] considérons des créatures plus infimes encore et l'échelle toujours décroissante de l'existence, où se perdent l'imagination aussi bien que les sens, nous demeurons étonnés et confondus des merveilles de l'exigüité, et nous ne distinguons plus les effets de l'immensité et de l'extrême petitesse. Car, de même que l'addition, la division doit être infinie: on n'accède pas plus aisément à l'idée d'une unité parfaite, qu'à celle d'un tout complet auquel rien ne puisse être ajouté. (*Recherche* 119–20)

Cette prise de conscience de l'irréductibilité du monde n'est bien sûr pas un fait nouveau. Elle a sa propre histoire ponctuée par une constante remise en cause des modes d'appréhension humains de la réalité physique, opérée simultanément sur les plans théologique, scientifique et esthétique. La pensée écologique, ou le "maillage," n'est par ailleurs évidemment pas proprement occidentale (Escobar; Abram, *Comment la terre s'est tue*). Cette interdépendance des êtres et des choses, du vivant et du non-vivant, est notamment illustrée par la symbiose (Tsing et al. 4-5; Haraway 87; Morton, *Pensée* 69; Albrecht 286), pour laquelle le lichen est souvent pris en exemple dans la littérature écologique (Kimmerer 375; Haraway 110). La symbiose est une préoccupation centrale des discours autour de l'Anthropocène, qui offrent un large spectre de réponses à cette cohabitation forcée. D'un côté se manifeste la peur d'une dissolution du sujet humain, un "dégoût d'être littéralement recouverts et pénétrés d'être non humains, pas seulement par accidents mais de façon irréductible" (Morton, *Pensée* 91); de l'autre, une ouverture totale, "sympoïétique," affirmerait Haraway (63), à ce qui prend les traits de l'altérité: "[n]ous devons accepter le risque d'une contingence incessante, le risque d'exposer les relations à d'autres relations appartenant à des mondes imprévus" (66).

Cette cohabitation symbiotique dans l'espace est doublée d'une cohabitation dans le temps, dans la mesure où l'Anthropocène est entendu comme le "nombre croissant [emphase de l'auteur] de données révélant les conséquences de l'activité humaine sur notre planète" (Haraway 85). Les récits de l'Anthropocène se donnent sur le mode de l'accumulation, de la saturation et de l'inéluctabilité. Ils témoignent d'une expérience liminale non étrangère au sublime, *sublimis* se rapportant, comme le rappelle Saint Girons, à *limen*, "l'idée de passage, de seuil, [...] de transgression" (18), voire qui le dépasse, à l'image de l'"hyperobjet" théorisé par Morton: "Les hyperobjets suscitent une terreur au-delà du sublime, qui pénètre plus profondément qu'une peur religieuse traditionnelle. [...] Les humains ont fabriqué des substances qui se trouvent déjà au-delà du champ normal de notre entendement" (*Pensée* 214). De la même manière que les frontières entre intérieur et extérieur, sujet et objet, organique et inorganique ont été posées dans la pensée occidentale notamment pour apaiser l'angoisse de l'évidement de la subjectivité dans la contingence écologique, une normalisation du temps s'est opérée, le transformant en une entité linéaire, continue et homogène.

La première trentaine de minutes de *Weathering* présente des corps quasi immobiles. Ils semblent aspirer à l'immobilité tout en pointant l'impossibilité de leur tâche:

Tout est trop lent ou trop rapide, trop intime, trop proche, trop déchaîné, trop exigeant. Le travail est trop dur et il y a toujours plus à négocier, un détail [...] que vous oubliez, ou qui surgit dans votre conscience comme un rappel urgent au milieu de ce que vous êtes en train de faire.... [sic] En fin de compte, il n'y a aucun moyen [...] de remplir les conditions illimitées de la chorégraphie. [...] Il faut s'abandonner aux

tâches densément stratifiées et radicalement interdépendantes qui façonnent l'œuvre.⁹ (Zaritt 22–23)

Cette impossibilité est renforcée par la surface souple de la plateforme qui fait du retour à l'équilibre, tâche corporelle habituellement automatique, une entreprise exigeante. Les mouvements sont au ralenti, mais n'ont pas l'aisance et la fluidité du ralenti cinématographique. Ces corps semblent engoncés dans une forme d'"hyper présent" qui ne cesse de ramener toute tentative de tracé ou de parcours à son point de départ. Cette fausse immobilité, constituée, paradoxalement, d'imperceptibles saccades, instaure une étrange expérience du temps. L'extrême lenteur des mouvements dissout l'attention, d'autant plus qu'au moment où la plateforme se met à tourner, la perspective sur l'amas de corps qui la jonche ne cesse de se renouveler et brouille à son tour les infimes constantes, de forme ou de vitesse, que l'œil avait à peine commencé à fixer. L'entrée "crise" du glossaire qui conclut le livret d'accompagnement du spectacle aborde la lenteur telle que sentie par les danseurs-performeurs : "il ne s'agit pas seulement de se déplacer lentement, mais de se déplacer SUPER lentement tout en restant attentif à une myriade d'actions relationnelles complexes—le temps est conduit vers une crise"¹⁰ (Zaritt et Keates 27).

Il pourrait être avancé que ce n'est pas le temps en soi qui est "conduit vers une crise," mais bien le vernis de continuité qui sert à réprimer la prégnance du passé, du futur, ou plutôt de temps autres, ou involus, dans le présent, un "présent partagé" (Lund 186). L'impossible immobilité des danseurs-performeurs pourrait être une mise en lumière de la "lente violence de l'Anthropocène"¹¹ (Keates 7). Elle pourrait également renvoyer à l'activité fébrile de la vie même, peut-être la temporalité "étrange" (weirdness) du végétal (Marder 22), voire même celle du non vivant: bourdonnement des systèmes informatiques, de refroidissement ou de surveillance qui carburent en permanence sur la surface du globe. Surtout, cette impossible immobilité permet de saisir le caractère conjoncturel du temps. Le temps y est donné à sentir non pas comme une trame que l'exceptionnalité, ou l'extraordinaire, d'un événement viendrait modifier ponctuellement, mais comme "maillage," dans lequel prédomine l'"aléatoire" rendu palpable dans la temporalité du vêlage. Les micromouvements des danseurs-performeurs, qui s'apparentent aux "tremblements corporels" (body tremors) pointés par Gerko Egert comme étant centraux à la sphère du toucher en danse (*Moving* 75), dont il sera question plus bas, donnent une densité à la discontinuité fondamentale du mouvement et du temps. En ce sens, ils agissent

⁹ "It is all too slow or too fast, too intimate, too close, too wild, too demanding. The work is too hard and there is always more to negotiate, some detail [...] that you forget, or that arises in your consciousness as an urgent reminder in the middle of doing the thing you are doing.... [sic] Ultimately, there is no way [...] to fulfill the limitless terms of the choreography. [...] You have to surrender to the densely layered, uncompromisingly interdependent tasks that shape the work."

¹⁰ "it is not just about moving slowly, but moving SUPER slowly while being asked to attend to a myriad of complex relational actions — time is put into crisis."

¹¹ "slow violence of the Anthropocene." Dages Juvelier Keates emprunte sans doute ici le concept de "lente violence" (slow violence) à Rob Nixon (*Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, 2011) pour l'appliquer à l'Anthropocène.

comme ce qu'Erin Manning nomme un "geste mineur," c'est-à-dire "la force gestuelle qui ouvre l'expérience à sa variation potentielle," "un geste qui tord l'expérientiel pour faire sentir ses opérations qualitatives, [...] qui ouvre l'expérience à sa limite" (*Geste* 9, 108). Le micromouvement, en tant que "geste mineur," distord la perception du temps jusqu'à sa limite, c'est-à-dire jusqu'à donner à sentir son étrangeté fondamentale, et donc son caractère insaisissable, laminée par la normalisation: "la normalisation des choses est une distorsion" (Morton, *Être* 63-64). En ce sens, il entretient une certaine familiarité avec la thèse de Saint Giron sur le sublime, à savoir que "[n]ous ne sommes pas ajustés au monde et le propre du sublime est d'accentuer ce sentiment de décalage" (509). Le fait que "nous ne [soyons] pas ajustés au monde" est, à vrai dire, ordinaire, mais s'éprouve ici par une expérience qui relève du sublime.

Sensorium

Si cette impossible immobilité et le tournoiement rapide qui s'y superpose contribuent sans doute à provoquer un état quasi méditatif et une impression de vertige, comme en témoigne une critique ("[l]'étourdissement est réel, [il] provoque presque un choc" [Villalba]), *Weathering* propose également une expérience enveloppante à travers l'éveil des sens qu'il entend provoquer. De Zaritt qui affirme que "*Weathering* m'engloutit [, il] est globalisant"¹² (23) jusqu'à une critique évoquant le fait que "la salle garde sa pleine lumière, comme si le public devait être partie prenante de l'œuvre et pas seulement observateur" (Villalba), les danseurs-performeurs tout comme le public témoignent d'un sentiment d'implication totale dans ce "faire-climat" ou ce "faire-monde."¹³ Ce sentiment naît d'abord du traitement des dispositifs de représentation en jeu. En effet, *Weathering* a lieu au sein, d'une part, d'un dispositif scénique, qui, bien que fondé sur la séparation entre scène et salle, instaure une proximité par son espace quadrifrontal; et d'autre part, d'un dispositif sculptural, dont le socle est l'image même de la mise à distance du spectateur et de la réification, mais dont le tournoiement produit une force centrifuge qui entraîne non seulement les danseurs-performeurs, mais également le public (voir Image 3). Cependant, *Weathering* n'a pas lieu dans un espace ouvert, ni "immersif," et ne prétend pas gommer toute distinction entre les danseurs-performeurs et le public. Julie Sermon, bien que se référant aux représentations théâtrales et non à la danse, rappelle que

la question des effets immersifs, la production d'images haptiques, le sentiment d'être au contact d'un environnement vibrant et animé, ne se réduisent pas à la mise en mouvement des spectateur·rices. Leur implication sensorielle et kinesthésique passe d'abord par un travail des corps, des images et des matérialités en jeu, qui peut parfaitement se déployer depuis le cadre de scène. (112)

¹² "*Weathering* engulfs me. It is totalizing."

¹³ La notion de "faire-monde" (*worlding*) est employée de manière plus assurée par Donna Haraway dans *When Species Meet* (2008). L'utilisation du terme par Karen Barad dans *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (2007) le popularise (Mercier).

Cette “implication sensorielle et kinesthésique” est au fondement de *Weathering*. L'entrée “toucher” (touch) du glossaire dans le livret d'accompagnement explique que le spectacle est né de questionnements portant sur le sens du toucher, “son absence, sa nécessité”¹⁴ (Zaritt et Keates 30).



Image 3: *Weathering* de Faye Driscoll. Présenté par le Kunstenfestivaldesarts au Bozar, Bruxelles, 2024. Photo de Benjamin Boar. ©BenjaminBoar Kunstenfestivaldesarts.

Foncièrement relationnel, le toucher intéresse Driscoll pour sa qualité kinesthésique, qui “étend [la portée de] la peau” (extending the skin) (Zaritt et Keates 30). La kinesthésie est perçue comme un “antidote” (antidote) à l’“hypoesthésie” (hypoesthesia), cet “engourdissement” (numbness) du sensorium induit par le “capitalisme avancé” (advanced capitalism) (Zaritt et Keates 30). Comme le remarque Driscoll, *Weathering* se veut une expérience de “sensibilisation” (to sensitize), pour laquelle elle insiste sur le sens figuré comme sur le sens propre: il s’agit de stimuler les sens, comme le propose par ailleurs David Abram en dehors du champ esthétique à proprement parler (*Devenir animal*), mais aussi la curiosité, notamment pour l’écologie du monde (Driscoll, Entretien). L’extension, voire l’éclatement du corps, matérialisée par la kinesthésie pourrait être comprise comme un “sixième sens en réponse à la sixième extinction”¹⁵ (Keates 6). Bien qu’une primauté soit accordée au sens de la vue dans la majorité des expériences du sublime—Addison évoquant, par

¹⁴ “its absence, its necessity.”

¹⁵ “this sixth sense to meet the moment of the sixth extinction”. Le livret d'accompagnement fait référence à l'ouvrage d'Elizabeth Kolbert, *La sixième extinction. Comment l'homme détruit la vie* (2014, traduction française 2015).

exemple, des “vues illimitées” (unbounded views) (Addison)—, E. Burke reconnaît lui aussi que les frontières entre les sens résultent d'un raccourci conceptuel et ne rendent pas justement compte de la sensorialité: “Je nomme cet effet qui ressemble de façon étonnante à celui de la vue, le beau d'*attouchement* (*feeling*). Toutes nos sensations forment une chaîne; elles ne sont toutes que des manières différentes de sentir (*feeling*), calculées pour être produites par diverses sortes d'objets, mais toutes de la même façon” (*Recherche* 169). Tout comme le “sublime haptique,” le sublime dans *Weathering* ne rejette pas en bloc le sens de la vue, mais cherche plutôt à rendre palpable l'indivision, ou le caractère “symphonique” (symphonic) des cinq sens “historiquement catégorisés” (historically categorized) (Zaritt et Keates 29–30). La puissance de saisissement de cette indivision est homologue à celle des sens “de proximité,” à savoir le goût et l'odorat. E. Burke ne désinvestit pas ces sens de tout potentiel de sublime, mais de leur matérialité, en posant une condition: celle de leur médiation, c'est-à-dire de leur “modération” par la “description” ou le “récit” (*Recherche* 135). Contrairement à E. Burke, Driscoll entend justement user de l'immédiation propre aux sens “de proximité” et fait d'ailleurs appel à un designer olfactif, Dages Juvelier Keates, pour le spectacle: “Les odeurs entrent littéralement en nous. [...] Une fois qu'elles se fixent sur notre bulbe olfactif, nous n'avons pas d'autre choix que de les absorber”¹⁶ (Keates 8). Cette sollicitation d'une multiplicité de sens couplée à la surface molle de la plateforme qui perturbe l'équilibre des danseurs-performeurs et rappelle le poids du corps est susceptible de donner à sentir l'écologie du monde, à accepter l'existence symbiotique, comme le suggère Aurore Després:

La “disparition des sens,” dont on parle souvent, dans nos sociétés, (de la tactilité, des sens du goût et de l'odorat) est directement relative à [...] la désertification de la “sensation de poids” dans les corps. C'est pourquoi les expériences chorégraphiques, tout en travaillant sur les sensations visuelles, auditives, tactiles, olfacto-gustatives, font de la “sensation de poids” leur concept majeur. En investissant la dimension pondérale des corps et leurs contacts avec ce qui les porte, elles affirment l'irréductibilité de la dimension d'un corps in situ dans son rapport avec; elles exaltent le relationnel, travaillent sur ce tabou du Nous. (564)

Sortis subrepticement des sacs et des poches des danseurs-performeurs, des bouquets de menthe ou d'eucalyptus sont frictionnés entre les corps. Du sommet d'une pyramide humaine, une danseuse-performatrice fait dégringoler des pétales de fleur sur sa poitrine et les corps qui l'entourent. Des agrumes sont écrasés, mastiqués. Ces odeurs envahissent, ou plutôt constituent, l'espace englobant scène et salle. À ces éléments odorants s'ajoutent les vaporisations, à la fois sur le public et sur les danseurs-performeurs, d'eau parfumée qui rendent tangible cette brume commune que tous les corps respirent et traversent. Son effluve est aussi évanescence que les points de vue sur la sculpture tournante, comme le reflètent les propos d'un critique du spectacle: cette brume, “j'aurais pu le jurer, [...] a brièvement senti la sauce barbecue”¹⁷ (S. Burke). Il en va de même pour la poudre de talc que certains danseurs-

¹⁶ “Smell literally comes into you. [...] Once they land on our olfactory bulb, we have no choice but to absorb them.”

¹⁷ “which I could have sworn smelled briefly like barbecue sauce.”

performeurs font ponctuellement exploser en petites nuées en la tapant entre leurs mains, enveloppant l'ensemble des corps présents d'une matière plus solide que l'eau mais toute aussi fluide. Les danseurs-performeurs exclusivement, et non le public, ingèrent, laissent macérer ou disposent dans leur bouche des agrumes, des fraises, ce qui ressemble à un gâteau ou encore un embout de vaporisateur (voir Image 4 et Image 5) Le public, lui, ne goûte pas, littéralement, tous ces éléments, qui font ainsi l'objet d'une certaine médiation, ou d'une "modération" dans les termes d'E. Burke. Pourtant, soumis à l'odorat—dont l'expérience commune révèle sans trop de détour qu'il est proche voisin du goût—couplé à la vue, ces éléments revêtent une qualité gustative. Par ces jeux de proximité et de brouillage, Driscoll cherche entre autres à mettre en valeur les décalages entre l'idée de l'odeur généralement associée à un objet et l'expérience sensorielle qu'il induit (Entretien) et, d'après le témoignage de cette critique, atteint son but: "[les techniciens de scène] vaporisent [...] un liquide odorant. Agrumes? Ou est-ce un leurre mental, puisqu'un interprète mord justement dans une orange dégoulinante, pendant qu'une autre enduit ses comparses d'un lubrifiant" (Gagnon-Paradis).



Image 4: *Weathering* de Faye Driscoll. New York Live Arts, 2023. Photo de Maria Baranova.



Image 5: *Weathering* de Faye Driscoll. Présenté par The Blackwood au Daniels Spectrum, Toronto, 2024. Photo de Henry Chan.

Cette désorientation est également effective sur le plan sonore. D'une part, au début et à la fin de la pièce, alors que les danseurs-performeurs investissent à la fois les quatre minces dégagements laissés entre chaque série de gradins et la plateforme, leurs voix contribuent à créer un espace enveloppant. D'autre part, se superposent les mouvements du son dans l'espace, engendrés par les trajets des danseurs-performeurs; l'utilisation ponctuelle du microphone par les danseurs-performers et la chorégraphe elle-même; et la "chanson de respirations" (Faye Driscoll in Villalba) préenregistrée. Cette superposition rend caduque toute tentative d'identifier la source et la destination du son. Ce son, sans compter qu'il est constitué de tous les spasmes possibles de la chair, frappe les nerfs. La collaboration qu'entretient normalement l'ouïe avec la vue pour mesurer et comprendre l'espace (Pallasmaa 59–60) devient hachurée. Cette désorientation spatiale par le son se fait également sentir au moment où la plateforme tourne à sa vitesse maximale et que les voix des danseurs-performeurs qui s'y trouvent s'éloignent et se rapprochent des oreilles de chaque spectateur en suivant le mouvement circulaire de la plateforme. Le son, ici à travers la vitesse et la vigueur du mouvement, mais à l'image de l'impossible immobilité, empêche toute perspective de se solidifier. Le sensorium est distordu de manière similaire au temps, tel qu'évoqué plus haut, et fait craquer le vernis de la normalisation du monde. En ce sens, *Weathering* est un champ de perception que Manning qualifierait prudemment d'"autistique,"¹⁸ c'est-à-dire "qui met au premier

¹⁸ "Mon objectif [...] n'est pas de suggérer que les formes extrêmes de trouble corporel—la perte partielle de la capacité à coordonner et effectuer des mouvements habiles et intentionnels et des gestes

plan l'hétérogénéité d'une expérience qui sourd avant qu'elle succombe dans la catégorisation de ses parties" (*Geste* 176), et dont la synesthésie, à laquelle Zaritt fait appel pour décrire le spectacle—"corne d'abondance synesthésique" (synesthetic cornucopia) (22)—, est une forme d'incarnation.

Diffractions

Si la subjectivité du spectateur, en tant qu'une perception du monde balisée et hiérarchisée y participe, est remise en cause par l'expérience étrange du temps et la "sensibilisation" auxquelles il est soumis, celle des danseurs-performeurs l'est également. Lorsqu'au début de la pièce, ils posent un à un sur la plateforme, leur regard tend vers un horizon incertain. Ces yeux semblent pris à l'étroit, étrangers au crâne auxquels ils seraient censés appartenir. Le regard reste profondément opaque, errant, et ne révèle pas ce qui se trame derrière, si toutefois il y a un quelconque au-delà, qu'il s'agisse d'une "âme" dont ils seraient le miroir, d'un esprit cherchant à faire sens du monde environnant, ou d'une matière grise en pleine activité physiologique. Les yeux ont leur vie propre, voire les pupilles, les cils, les paupières et autres ensembles délimités possibles, déclinables à l'infini. Miguel Alejandro Castillo rend compte de son impression en tant que danseur-performeur: "le chaos dans mon corps s'organise en quelque chose d'harmonieux et en quelque chose qui n'est plus moi"¹⁹ (in Keates 7). Comme le rappelle Saint Girons, Pseudo-Longin fait déjà état de ce "vacillement du sujet" (455) dans l'expérience du sublime:

[Le sublime] naît de l'évidence fulgurante que *je* ne suis pas à la hauteur de ce que je contemple ou entends. Le moi s'éprouve alors comme délogé, sans feu ni lieu, il n'est plus qu'une dimension, qui subsiste (*sistit, manet*) en dehors de lui-même; il s'extasie, au sens antique du terme, qui désigne moins la coloration affective du ravissement que la simple sortie hors de soi, par laquelle Longin caractérisait déjà l'expérience du sublime. (41)

Zaritt évoque d'ailleurs l'"extase" pour décrire le spectacle: "tout [est] à la limite de l'extase et de l'effondrement"²⁰ (22). Ce point de bascule renvoie à l'expérience "limite" qu'est le sublime et que permet l'exercice d'une force de "pression," une image récurrente servant à décrire *Weathering* dans le livret d'accompagnement: "*Weathering* tente de mettre nos sens sous pression" (Zaritt 22); "les corps et les choses, l'humain et le non-humain pressés les uns contre les autres" (Zaritt 22); "À quel moment quelque chose—nos articulations, nos actions, notre rassemblement pour voir et être vu par l'autre—devient-il tellement sous pression que quelque chose

exacts—associées à l'autisme sont si faciles à vivre [sic], et je ne veux pas non plus suggérer que la perception autistique est idéale dans nos mondes faits pour les neurotypiques. Il est indéniable que le monde dans lequel nous vivons est aligné sur le découpage, et qu'au plus vite nous parvenons à percevoir les objets et les sujets, au mieux, nous gérons le quotidien. Je veux proposer que si nous considérons la connexion entre les troubles corporels et la perception autistique, nous pourrions développer une compréhension plus forte de la manière dont les alignements neurotypiques de l'expérience nous limitent en ce qui concerne la complexité de l'écologie corps-monde" (Manning, *Geste* 176–177).

¹⁹ "the chaos in my body organizes into something harmonic and into something that is no longer me."

²⁰ "everything at the edge of ecstasy and collapse."

d'autre est possible?"²¹ (Zaritt et Keates 28). Tout le matériel du monde est "comprimé" en un bloc hétérogène qui se donne en entier à la "chaîne" continue qu'est le sensorium. L'un des exercices proposés en répétition par Driscoll aux danseurs-performeurs pour contrer les chemins de l'expressivité habituellement empruntés dans les arts de la représentation et créer cette impression d'un monde comprimé est le jeu du cadavre exquis, mais transposé au corps et au visage (Driscoll, Entretien).

Dans le spectacle, au fur et à mesure que les corps s'accumulent sur la plateforme, les relations se démultiplient et cette porosité de l'"ensemble-corps" s'étend à l'ensemble du matériel, organique et inorganique, en jeu, ce qu'annonce déjà le texte du chant choral d'ouverture: une joue frôle une cheville, une jointure s'appose sur une boucle de ceinture, une mèche de cheveux se colle au creux d'une aisselle. Les "corps enveloppes" (Manning, *Geste* 199) deviennent "fuyants, perméables [...] dans leurs matières et leurs significations"²² (Neimanis 43). Ils laissent place à une "intercorporé[ité]" (intercorporeal) (Neimanis 43), que l'eau vaporisée, la sueur, la salive et la glycérine dont s'enduisent les danseurs-performeurs ne viennent que soutenir, ainsi que le fait la fulgurance du mouvement propre au vèlage (voir Image 6). Cette déhiérarchisation du corps, comme celle de la source et de la destination du son, à travers laquelle le sujet souverain est distribué entre plusieurs instances ou "tendances" (tendances) (Massumi 188) s'exprime d'ailleurs dans un poème de Driscoll intitulé "Chariots of Flesh" (Chariots de chair) qui est inclus dans le livret d'accompagnement:

Leur poids est sur moi
Je veux te presser de plus en plus fort
Paupières fermées, sphincters contractés
Elle veut regarder ton visage
Il veut que ta sueur tombe sur moi
L'arrière d'une cuisse croisée sur l'avant de l'autre, un pied posé sur l'autre²³ (20)

Dans cet extrait, la multiplication et la diversité des pronoms personnels et des formes possessives permutent les associations possibles entre sujets, actes et membres ou substances du corps. Au fur et à mesure que les vers s'accumulent, les corps s'entortillent, des membres refont surface, puis sont reconfigurés autrement.

²¹ "Weathering is trying to pressurize our senses"; "bodies and stuff, the human and the nonhuman pressed together"; "When does something —our joints, our actions, our coming together to see and be seen by each other— get pressurized to the point where something else is possible?"

²² "leaky, permeable"; "in terms of both their matters and meanings."

²³ "Their weight is on top of me / I want to squeeze you in further and further / Closed eyelids, contracted sphincters / She wants to watch your face / He wants your sweat to drop onto me / The back of one thigh crossed over the front of the other, one foot resting on the other."



Image 6: *Weathering* de Faye Driscoll. New York Live Arts, 2023. Photo de Maria Baranova.

Le contingent, le liquide ou l'ouvert dans *Weathering* ne saurait être ressenti dans toute son ampleur sans qu'une tension ne soit instaurée entre forme et informe, sans qu'une pulsion formelle ne fasse également son œuvre, en opposition à la forme. Cette tension fait partie intégrante de l'expérience du sublime qui naît, du point de vue de Saint Girons, d'une transformation de tout ce qui pouvait tenir lieu d'objet en "*Chose*": "l'objet devient *Chose*, il se distend à l'infini, réussit à capter l'attention par son caractère original, inquiète le regard qui tente d'en saisir les contours et défie l'intelligence qui vise à le reproduire" (40). La pulsion formelle se confronte au tournoiement de la plateforme qui diffracte et stratifie la perspective; à la lenteur des mouvements qui construit un monde dont le spectateur ne peut que sentir qu'il est imperceptible; et à la compression et la déhiérarchisation du monde matériel et du sensorium qui tendent à "chosifier," au sens de Saint Girons, les éléments en jeu dans le spectacle.

Ce qui pourrait être qualifié d'idée, d'image, voire de symbole fait inévitablement surface dans l'esprit du spectateur, car ces objets entre les corps (téléphone, portefeuilles, écouteurs...) appartiennent bien à un univers connu, celui du monde moderne ou encore du "capitalisme avancé" (Zaritt et Keates 30), et remplissent normalement une fonction et ont un sens. L'agencement des corps et les lignes de force qui s'en dégagent renvoient à des ensembles signifiants, par exemple, une danseuse-performatrice coiffée d'un camail, tendant son bras vers le haut et portée par la verticalité dessinée par les corps des autres danseurs-performeurs peut faire écho à une scène épique de conquête (voir Image 7). Dix corps sur une surface synthétique flottante peuvent évoquer tout à la fois un objet défini, comme le "Radeau

de la méduse" (1818-1819) de Théodore Géricault, et une idée plus abstraite, comme la marche inexorable de l'humanité vers sa chute. Les objets, les formes et les corps revêtent un sens du plus binaire au plus complexe tout en étant sans cesse traversés par une tendance forte vers l'informel, l'insensé. La pulsion formelle est d'autant plus contrecarrée que ce qui fait contraste s'embrasse: dans le visage d'une danseuse-performatrice, un rictus de dégoût côtoie un regard apaisé; des corps enchevêtrés dans une dynamique en apparence violente s'enlacent lascivement. La fine construction/déconstruction de ces "tableaux" est notamment due au fait que Driscoll a collaboré pour *Weathering* avec un coordinateur d'intimité, et pour Calving avant, avec un coordinateur de combats (Driscoll, Entretien). Ces deux énergies, ces deux champs expressifs, que la perception oppose généralement trouvent dans *Weathering* une genèse commune, des affinités et des points de contact déroutants.



Image 7: *Weathering* de Faye Driscoll. New York Live Arts, 2023. Photo de Maria Baranova.

"Weathering" au sens de "faire climat" ou "faire temps" reviendrait justement à "[mettre] en équivalence," "[mettre] en relation étoilée et égalitaire des présences

et des sensations" (Sermon 78) à travers quoi, en cohérence avec les propos de Zaritt, le dualisme présentation/représentation, sinon tout dualisme, devient difficilement pensable: "Le réel et l'artificiel, le réalisé et le représenté s'interpénètrent"²⁴ (22). *Weathering* est une expérience du *faire mouvement*, de son "caractère embryonnaire" (incipiency) dans les termes de Manning (*Relationscapes* 6), tout comme du *faire sens* et, bien qu'il n'exclue pas l'usage du matériel comme simple tremplin vers une forme de transcendance, il s'engage aussi à produire ce que Petra Lange-Berndt appelle un "effet de matérialité" (*materiality-effect*):

[N]ous ne connaissons le monde que par l'intermédiaire des sens. Cela dit, il pourrait s'avérer utile, en fin de compte, d'éviter la disparité entre le phénoménal et le matériel—de décrire plutôt le phénomène de matérialité, ou l'*effet de matérialité*, le résultat final du processus par lequel l'on se convainc de la matérialité d'une chose.²⁵ (17)

Sur le plan du geste plus précisément, ou plutôt de l'enchaînement normalisé intention/mobilisation du corps/acte, *Weathering* court-circuite le rapport à l'utilitaire et agit comme la laideur dans l'expérience du sublime chez E. Burke, qui suscite une "levée de l'inhibition ou du refoulement et [...] nous met à même d'accéder à certains cours de pensée, rejetés par les exigences pratiques" (Saint Girons 120). Un danseur-performeur explore la texture, la souplesse d'une vulgaire paire d'écouteurs; une danseuse-performatrice applique à l'aide d'une pipette et avec une extrême précision de la glycérine sur la pommette d'un autre, alors que cette substance finira de toute manière par se répandre dans tout son désordre, dans toute sa saleté, comme la salive qu'un autre danseur-performeur distend en filets, qu'il observe, départage et partage avec un autre (voir Image 8). Le monde de *Weathering* revendique son statut de "crachat," "symbole même de l'informe" (Leiris) selon Michel Leiris et Georges Bataille (382). Détournés de leur fonction utilitaire, les gestes ne sont pas plus expressifs pour autant. Dénués de sujet et de direction, ils échappent au registre de la monstration: ils ne sont pas tournés vers l'extérieur, mais semblent plutôt advenir dans l'internalité et l'interstitiel. L'espace travaille les corps tout comme ils le travaillent, à l'image de ce vers de Driscoll: "Tu mâches ta bouche"²⁶ ("Chariots" 14). Davantage que la création de formes, la tâche principale des danseurs-performeurs dans *Weathering* est de parvenir à des "modes d'hypervigilance non théâtraux"²⁷ (Zaritt et Keates 29). Le terme de "vigilance" est d'ailleurs employé par Sermon pour décrire le type de performance ou plutôt d'"attitude" des performeurs ou interprètes dans les arts vivants écologiques (124) et fait écho à celui d'"écoute" (listening) qu'emploie Gabriele Brandstetter pour rendre compte de l'expérience de "conscience kinesthésique" (kinesthetic awareness) en danse (163). "Processuels" plus

²⁴ "The real and the artificial, the actualized and the representational fall into each other."

²⁵ "[W]e know the world only as it is mediated by the senses. But it might prove useful in the end to avoid the discrepancy between the phenomenal and the material—to describe instead the phenomenon of materiality, or the *materiality-effect*, the end result of the process whereby one is convinced of the materiality of something."

²⁶ "You chew your mouth around."

²⁷ "non-theatrical modes of hypervigilance."

qu'“utiles,” les gestes dans *Weathering* se contentent de “suivre la propension des choses” et “cultivent l'accompagnement” (Després 571). En cela, ils incitent à “accepter le poids et la matière mouvante (en tant, aussi, qu'elle ne cesse de m'altérer)” (Després 571).



Image 8: *Weathering* de Faye Driscoll. Présenté par le Kunstenfestivaldesarts au Bozar, Bruxelles, 2024. Photo de Benjamin Boar. ©BenjaminBoar Kunstenfestivaldesarts.

Conclusion: Esth sie

Est sublime dans *Weathering* la perception de l' cologie du monde, ordinairement occult e par des processus de normalisation du temps, du sensorium et du sens g n r s par un sujet visant   s'extraire du monde pour l'ajuster   sa mesure, voire le dominer. L'exp rience semble extraordinaire, puisqu'elle offre une r sistance   la division du monde telle qu'elle est exp riment e au quotidien, mais elle donne   vivre un fait ordinaire, l' interd pendance.  Cette perception de l' cologie du monde est rendue possible dans *Weathering* par l' obliquit   du regard, qu'inspire, comme le rappelle Saint Girons, l'adjectif *limus* ou *limis* duquel d rive *sublimis* (18), c'est- -dire une  distorsion de la distorsion  (Morton, * tre* 63-64) normative permettant de sentir, peut- tre pour mieux embrasser, l' tranget   ordinaire du monde. L'exp rience esth tique pourrait s'av rer  cologique non pas en se faisant pourvoyeuse de donn es sur la crise environnementale (Morton, *All Art* 58), ni en se substituant   l'exp rience incarn e du monde, mais en agissant comme  amplificateur  (*amplifier*) et  sensibilisateur  (*sensitizer*) (Neimanis 55). L'exercice de cette force de  condensation  (condensed), de  concentration  (concentrated) (Neimanis 55), ou de  pression  permet de plier et d plier des temps et des espaces que la pr hension

normalisée éloigne. Ce qui semblait lointain, abstrait ou conceptuel désormais résonne, brûle et pique. L'impression de Joshua Trey Barnett devant l'installation *Ice Watch* (2014) d'Ólafur Eliasson, qui place elle aussi en son centre un bloc de glace qui fond, est de cet ordre: *Ice Watch* donne à "voir, ressentir, sentir, entendre, même goûter" le "réchauffement climatique"²⁸ (125). Il serait éventuellement légitime de s'opposer à la violence du sublime, qui dépossède et porte atteinte à l'intégrité du sujet, comme une odeur qui s'impose sur le bulbe olfactif. Toutefois, en ne considérant plus le monde comme une matière à "projet" (Lyotard 43) dont dispose le sujet, cette violence perd de son totalitarisme, puisque la "totalité" qu'est l'écologie "n'a pas de but" (Morton, *Pensée* 74). L'expérience du sublime ordinaire consiste en un lâcher-prise qui est tout sauf un renoncement à la liberté du sujet.

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The Anthropocene Cosmic Sublime: Viewing the Earth from Space in Samantha Harvey's *Orbital*

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Abstract

This paper examines the representation of the sublime in Samantha Harvey's novel *Orbital* (2023) in the context of the Anthropocene and space exploration, in which humans markedly engage with and transform terrestrial and extraterrestrial environments. It discusses the concept of the Anthropocene cosmic sublime, which represents an evolving aesthetics that differs from more traditional notions of the sublime as explored by Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant. While these thinkers concentrated on terrestrial phenomena, the article shifts the focus to space travel and the experiences of astronauts in space. The article argues that the Anthropocene cosmic sublime emphasizes the embodied experience of space from the astronauts' perspective, rather than through technological mediation like telescopes. This experience evokes traditional affects of awe and smallness in relation to the vast cosmos, while also highlighting our environmental responsibilities. The article examines how space exploration, although often linked to technological advancement and imperialist rhetoric, can also reflect ecological and ethical considerations through the lens of the Anthropocene cosmic sublime. The article argues that fiction, and particularly works like *Orbital*, can serve as a space for ethical reflection on the Anthropocene. Ultimately, Harvey's novel renegotiates the sublime as a transformative narrative and aesthetic tool inviting readers to reconsider humanity's role in shaping planetary and cosmic environments with a renewed ethical and ecological consciousness.

Keywords: Cosmic sublime, Anthropocene, space exploration, *Orbital*, Samantha Harvey.

Resumen

Este artículo examina la representación de lo sublime en la novela *Orbital* (2023), de Samantha Harvey, en el contexto del Antropoceno y la exploración espacial, en el que los seres humanos se comprometen y transforman notablemente los entornos terrestres y extraterrestres. Se analiza el concepto de lo sublime cósmico del Antropoceno, que representa una estética en evolución que difiere de las nociones más tradicionales de lo sublime exploradas por Edmund Burke e Immanuel Kant. Mientras que estos pensadores se concentraron en los fenómenos terrestres, el artículo desplaza el foco de atención hacia los viajes espaciales y las experiencias de los astronautas en el espacio. El artículo sostiene que el sublime cósmico del Antropoceno hace hincapié en la experiencia encarnada del espacio desde la perspectiva de los astronautas, en lugar de a través de mediaciones tecnológicas como los telescopios. Esta experiencia evoca los afectos tradicionales de asombro y pequeñez en relación con el vasto cosmos, al tiempo que pone de relieve nuestras responsabilidades medioambientales. El artículo explora cómo la exploración espacial, aunque a menudo vinculada al avance tecnológico y a la retórica imperialista, también puede reflejar consideraciones ecológicas y éticas a través de la lente de lo sublime cósmico del Antropoceno. El artículo sostiene que la ficción, y en particular obras como *Orbital*, puede servir de espacio para la reflexión ética sobre el Antropoceno. En última instancia, la novela de Harvey renegocia lo sublime como herramienta narrativa y estética transformadora, invitando a los lectores a reconsiderar el rol de la humanidad en la configuración del entorno planetario y cósmico.

Palabras clave: Sublime cósmico, Antropoceno, exploración espacial, *Orbital*, Samantha Harvey.

The traditional understanding of the natural sublime, as presented by Burke and by Kant, confronts humans with the vastness and power of nature and inspires them with a sense of awe. In their descriptions of sublime experiences, both Burke and Kant primarily focus on terrestrial phenomena, such as volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, and turbulent sea storms. While Kant famously evokes the starry night sky in his conclusion to the *Critique of Practical Reason*, neither of the two philosophers discusses space beyond the Earth's atmosphere. The experience of the sublime of the cosmos, that is, the contemplation of the immensity of the universe and the insignificance of humans in relation to it, became possible with the advent of modern technology. The first images brought by powerful telescopes installed on Earth may have allowed humans to gain insight into the scale of the cosmos. However, it is only thanks to pictures taken from outer space (cameras embarked on rockets, satellites, space missions) that humans have begun to contemplate the infinite grandeur of space and to gain a comprehensive view of Earth in and from outer space, as exemplified by the iconic Blue Marble image captured by the Apollo 17 crew. Additionally, these images offer an unprecedented vantage point from which to observe the Earth, providing a fresh perspective and new horizons for the experience of the sublime.

In *Picturing the Cosmos. Hubble Space Telescope Images and the Astronomical Sublime*, Elizabeth A. Kessler posits that space exploration has yielded a vast array of images captured by telescopes. These images span not only the further reaches of our galaxy and beyond but also phenomena that were previously unseen or inadequately observed. In this book, Kessler focuses on the Hubble Space Telescope and its associated Hubble Heritage Project, which highlights the aesthetic and scientific synthesis that is fundamental to the concept of the astronomical sublime. The Hubble Heritage Project was designed to make celestial images accessible to the public by emphasizing their aesthetic appeal without compromising their scientific integrity. Indeed, the data transmitted by Hubble is modified by astronomers to make it comprehensible. Astronomers and people involved in the Heritage project, Kessler explains, rely on pictorial techniques that are amenable to our senses, particularly vision, while maintaining the accuracy of the data. In the process of image production, astronomers must determine the optimal method for translating invisible attributes into a visible form. Kessler outlines a process of conveying images to the public that emphasizes color schemes and other aspects of celestial phenomena that draw upon the sublime tradition, and particularly upon the landscape paintings of the Hudson River School and Ansel Adams' pictures of the American West (51-55). Additionally, in order to support her definition of the astronomical sublime, she refers to Kant's definition of the mathematical sublime, which shows the pleasure derived from the understanding that human reason can comprehend celestial phenomena (49). The Hubble images invite the viewers to engage with the cosmos in both visual and rational ways, and thus to perceive the universe as both beyond humanity's reach and within the realm of our knowledge. In *Seven Sublimes*, David E. Nye asserts that the astronomical sublime described by Elizabeth A. Kessler partakes of what he calls the

intangible sublime. Nye explains that satellite images are a kind of sublime that shows structures and relations that are invisible from the Earth. The experience of the intangible sublime, he adds, depends on mediating technology on two levels: orbiting telescopes that send data back to Earth and the works of the scientists who process and interpret it (78).

In this article, I focus on the sublime experience of astronauts in space and their embodied encounter with the cosmos that transcends the technological mediation of astronomical observations, and that I propose to call the cosmic sublime. To justify the distinction between the two terms, it is important to consider the specific connotations of the terms “astronomical” and “cosmic” within the broader context of space studies. The term “astronomical” refers directly to astronomy, the science of observing and studying celestial objects such as stars, planets, and galaxies, and phenomena such as black holes and supernovae. It relies on instruments such as telescopes and satellites to make extraterrestrial phenomena visible, which is consistent with Kessler’s definition of the astronomical sublime. In contrast, cosmology goes beyond the observational framework to address existential questions about the origin, structure, and evolution of the universe. While the astronomical sublime is rooted in observational science and invites contemplation of celestial phenomena from afar, the cosmic sublime focuses on humanity’s existential positioning in the universe. The cosmic sublime, as I conceptualize it, provides a more subjective perspective on humanity’s place in the universe and inspires existential wonder, particularly through the firsthand experiences of astronauts. It stirs a profound sense of awe at the immensity of space while also highlighting the ethical dilemmas posed by humanity’s environmental footprint on Earth and beyond. However, the cosmic sublime has inherent limitations that require further conceptual development. First, it remains an exclusive experience that is accessible only to a privileged few, such as astronauts or wealthy space tourists, thus limiting its transformative environmental potential. Second, while it acknowledges the fragility of the Earth and our connection to it, its reflection often lacks concrete solutions for addressing environmental degradation.

To address these limitations, I propose the notion of the Anthropocene cosmic sublime, which builds upon and reconfigures the cosmic sublime to meet the specific challenges of the Anthropocene. This conceptual framework intensifies the ethical and environmental awareness associated with the cosmic sublime while democratizing its impact. I argue that fiction and poetic writing serve as powerful vehicles for the Anthropocene cosmic sublime because they make this experience accessible to broader audiences and thus dissolve the exclusivity tied to firsthand space exploration, which could confine environmental awareness to those with the privilege of experiencing space traveling. Moreover, the space industry, and particularly that of space exploration and tourism, is itself highly polluting, which poses a paradox at the heart of the cosmic sublime: it can inspire environmental awareness while simultaneously contributing to ecological harm. Fiction and poetic writing materialize humanity’s sensorial connection to both Earth and the cosmos

and foster an ethos of inter/codependence and coexistence. The Anthropocene cosmic sublime reimagines the sublime as a collective experience rooted in shared responsibility. It moves beyond the elitist transcendence of the traditional sublime to address the urgent environmental and moral challenges of our time, thereby emphasizing interconnectedness and actionable change.

To illustrate the definition of the Anthropocene cosmic sublime, I will examine Samantha Harvey's *Orbital*, a novel that was awarded the 2024 Booker Prize and that serves as a compelling instance of this reimagined sublime. *Orbital* combines a sense of awe when contemplating the vastness of space with a stark reflection on the pressing environmental crises currently facing our planet. Set on the International Space Station (ISS), the novel offers a valuable interpretation of the concept of the cosmic sublime in the context of space exploration and the Anthropocene. As the six astronaut and cosmonaut characters carry out their assigned scientific missions, they spend considerable time gazing at the Earth through the windows or while spacewalking to conduct repairs or maintenance on the station. The Earth is not viewed as a pristine and distant entity, but as a planet that is increasingly vulnerable to human impact. Observing a space shuttle crossing the dark expanse toward the Moon also makes them reflect on contemporary endeavors to establish permanent colonies on the Moon and then on Mars. These are perceived by some as potential solutions to the imminent uninhabitability of the Earth as a consequence of the environmental crises of the Anthropocene.

Harvey's work is part of a series of cultural productions that explore these themes, including astronaut testimonials, photographs, films, and works of fiction. Authentic first-person accounts by astronauts such as those by Thomas Pesquet and Scott Kelly provide valuable insights into life on the ISS and reflections on humanity's place in the universe. However, I submit that fiction offers a particularly fertile ground for illustrating the Anthropocene cosmic sublime. Indeed, it eliminates the constraints inherent in factual reporting, thereby creating a malleable narrative space in which existential, ethical, and environmental concerns associated with the Anthropocene can be amplified and explored in greater depth. Moreover, it provides an equal or greater degree of integration of themes central to the cosmic sublime (including the fragility of Earth, the insignificant role of humanity in the vastness of the cosmos, and the potential consequences of our planetary impact on Earth and beyond) with speculative themes that delve deeper into questions of human destiny and moral responsibility. In this way, fiction allows for an expansive interpretation of the cosmic sublime that can encapsulate the distinctive combination of awe, fear, and wonder inherent in contemplating the cosmos in the context of current socio-environmental crises. *Orbital* does not focus on the political or military tensions between Earth's nations (as in Gabriela Cowperthwaite's *I.S.S.*), nor does it depict dramatic zero-gravity confrontations or imminent threats from falling debris or mechanical malfunctions (as in Alfonso Cuarón's *Gravity*). Instead, it is a contemplative novel that presents a detailed account of the daily activities of a crew of six astronauts and cosmonauts over the course of a single relatively uneventful day,

which corresponds to sixteen orbits around the Earth. It offers a reflection on how an existential awareness of humanity's place in the vast universe can emerge through the quiet rhythms and seemingly ordinary routines of daily life in space.

I will first define the concept of the cosmic sublime, outlining how it draws on and differs from the traditional sublime. This will lead me to develop the implications of the Anthropocene to imagine a kind of cosmic sublime that is attuned to the challenges of the socio-ecological crises associated with it. In a second section, I will examine how *Orbital* exemplifies this Anthropocene-induced sublime, focusing on its ecological (addressing humanity's environmental impact), existential (exploring our place in the universe), and ethical (confronting the responsibilities and consequences of our planetary and extraplanetary actions) dimensions.

Toward an Anthropocene Cosmic Sublime

In *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Burke defines the sublime as “[w]hatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror” (33). Burke adds that the absence of light (“how greatly night adds to our dread” [48]), the vastness (“Greatness of dimension is a powerful cause of the sublime” [59]) and the infinity (“Infinity has a tendency to fill the mind with that sort of delightful horror, which is the most genuine effect, and truest test of the sublime” [60]) of nonhuman nature tend to trigger the experience of the sublime, because these features disclose the magnificent and deadly forces of nature. The cosmos encapsulates the main features of the Burkean sublime and extends them to a larger and more impressive scale. Although Burke did not use the term “cosmic” and was not able to explore space, I argue that the cosmic sublime appears as the epitome of the Burkean sublime. The cosmic sublime is the sublime’s “most pervasive manifestation” (Ambrozy 365) since it surpasses the experience of contemplating a raging storm or an erupting volcano, especially because of its unbounded darkness and its utter inhospitality.

Similarly, Kant does not directly mention the cosmos when he defines the sublime in the *Critique of Judgement*. However, when opposing two types of the sublime, the dynamical and the mathematical, he uses the example of the contemplation of a starry night-sky as a way to illustrate the mathematical sublime. The mathematical sublime refers to the encounter with vast magnitudes—whether in space or time—where we try to estimate the object’s scale. While the object is not perceived as literally infinite, it evokes the concept of infinity and presents a magnitude that surpasses our perceptual and imaginative capacities. Such an experience combines displeasure, due to the recognition of our cognitive limits, with a unique pleasure derived from the effort to grasp immensity. The dynamical sublime, for its part, involves an object capable of inspiring fear. Contemplating such an object is a paradoxically pleasant experience because it allows us to appreciate the represented power of nature from a secure standpoint, yet it remains negative in that

the object we observe holds the potential to cause our demise. A volcano, for instance, embodies this dual aspect of the dynamical sublime. According to Kant, these two categories of sublime experience render us physically insignificant while simultaneously evoking a sense of spiritual and intellectual strength. We are rational beings, capable of conceiving infinity and exercising autonomous self-determination. Thus, Kant argues, the true source of sublimity does not lie in the powerful forces of nature but in the rational mind, which shows itself capable of apprehending the concept of infinity itself. The imposing object of nature, then, serves merely as a vehicle through which we realize our heightened capacity for reason.

Burke and Kant both view the contemplation of the sky—and by extension, the universe—as a means of engaging with the concept of infinity. For Burke, the vastness of the sky invites a humbling confrontation with what is immeasurable while, for Kant, it elevates human reason to a superior faculty capable of comprehending the infinity of the sensible world. However, in the 18th century, both philosophers could only observe the sky from their terrestrial vantage point; thus, their experience of the sublime was inherently grounded in a sense of distance and confinement to the Earth. Since the launch of Sputnik in 1957, the development of space exploration in the context of scientific and military endeavors has radically altered our perception of outer space and has expanded the experience of the natural sublime as initially conceived by Burke and Kant. Remo Bodei, in his book on sublime landscapes, argues that this shift parallels the cycle of exploration during the Age of Discovery in the early modern period, as both involve a dramatic change of scale—the perception of time and space as infinitely expansive—and the realization that humanity occupies only a limited place on Earth and in the universe (8). With the possibility of viewing the cosmos from perspectives beyond Earth, the infinite vastness of the universe no longer seems bound by terrestrial limitations, thereby transforming our aesthetic and philosophical engagement with the sublime.

The relatively recent human ability to view the infinite vastness of space from previously unimagined vantage points or to view Earth from orbital extraterrestrial space marks a significant shift in how we encounter and experience the sublime.¹ For example, the James Webb Space telescope, launched in 2021, aims to explore the universe further than before, searching for the first stars and galaxies created after the Big Bang. It could thus help us better understand how stars, planets and galaxies are born and evolve. With the pictures of galaxy clusters (SMACS 0723), gigantic gas cavities (“Carena Nebula”) or star formation (“The Pillars of Creation”), the James Webb Space Telescope deepens our sense of scale, creating an experience of the sublime that encompasses not only space but time itself. Photographs such as *Earthrise* (taken by astronaut Bill Anders during the Apollo 8 mission in 1968) and *Pale Blue Dot* (taken by the Voyager 1 spacecraft in 1990, but named after Carl Sagan’s expression), which show the Earth as seen from its orbit, have allowed us to see our home planet from a radically new and detached perspective. Robert Poole insists that

¹ Poole, however, recalls that the first pictures of the curves of the Earth were taken in 1935.

Earthrise reshaped humanity's sense of self by providing an unparalleled view of our planet as tiny and fragile, floating in an infinite sea of darkness (195). According to Poole, this view fostered a sense of planetary unity and vulnerability that would then inspire the burgeoning environmental movement of the 1970s. Carl Sagan, for his part, explores the deep existential and philosophical connotations of *Pale Blue Dot*, a photograph taken from a distant edge of the solar system in which the Earth appears as a "lonely speck in the great enveloping cosmic dark" (8). According to Sagan, this image testifies to the insignificance of the Earth in the vast cosmos and is a humbling reminder of our responsibility to care for the planet. In the two photographs, the so-called "overview effect"—an expression first coined by Frank White to describe the cognitive shift experienced when viewing Earth from an extraterrestrial vantage point—reshapes the experience of the sublime, allowing for a reconceptualization of the astronomical sublime to what I am calling the cosmic sublime.

As noted by Robert Poole and Carl Sagan, the overview effect seems to have led to an enhanced understanding of humanity's connection to the Earth and the imperative to protect it from environmental degradation. Nevertheless, this awareness remains predominantly observational. If images showing the Earth's smallness in the cosmos or its environmental degradation may prompt a reflective and emotionally charged response, emphasizing our collective responsibility in causing planetary destruction, these images do not provide concrete and actionable solutions to the environmental challenges we face. While the overview effect may encourage a sense of stewardship for the Earth, its influence is complex and at times contradictory. Jean-Baptiste Fressoz argues that rather than fostering connection, this vantage point can cultivate a sense of detachment:

The Anthropocene is part of a version of the technological sublime reconfigured by the Cold War. It extends the spatial vision of the planet produced by the American military-industrial system, a deterrestrated vision of the Earth captured from space as a system that could be understood in its entirety, a *spaceship earth* whose trajectory could be controlled thanks to new knowledge about the Earth system. (48; my translation)

This perspective, provided by space technology, creates the illusion that the Earth is a manageable and human-controlled system.² The overview effect highlights the paradox of technology's role in shaping our planetary awareness: although the view of Earth from space emphasizes environmental interconnectedness and the need to respect nature, it is only achievable through technologies that exemplify human dominance over nature. As awe-inspiring as this technology is (a phenomenon David E. Nye refers to as the "technological sublime"), it also serves to reinforce the notion that humanity is inherently superior to nature.

² "De manière plus précise, l'Anthropocène s'inscrit dans une version du sublime technologique reconfigurée par la guerre froide. Il prolonge la vision spatiale de la planète produite par le système militaro-industriel américain, une vision déterrestrée de la Terre saisie depuis l'espace comme un système que l'on pourrait comprendre dans son entièreté, un *spaceship earth* dont on pourrait maîtriser la trajectoire grâce aux nouveaux savoirs sur le système Terre" (Fressoz 48). For a more detailed analysis of the concept of "spaceship earth," see Sebastian Vincent Grevsmühl's book, *La Terre vue d'en haut*.

The technological advances enabling this cosmic perspective have also intensified the pervasiveness of anthropogenic pollution. Indeed, data and imagery from orbiting satellites highlight the extent of human impact on Earth, documenting how human activity, and particularly capitalist systems of production, have altered our planet. Ironically enough, they also testify to the role of space exploration itself in extending the Anthropocene to outer space. The accumulation of space debris, a byproduct of decades of rocket launches, exemplifies how human activities have transformed not only the Earth but also its orbital environment. The Anthropocene is not solely a terrestrial phenomenon; as several scholars have shown (among whom Alice Gorman, Lisa Messeri, and Valerie A. Olson), it has also manifested in orbital space. Since 1957, the number of rocket launches has increased substantially, resulting in the generation of a significant amount of debris in Earth's orbit. This phenomenon is attributable, in part, to the failure to recover defunct satellites from orbit and the production of thousands of tons of small particles and debris as rockets break up.

Amid these developments, the environmental crises of the Anthropocene have fueled a rising discourse of escape and relocation. Some view human expansion to other planets as a necessary solution to our environmental challenges. As Alexandra Ganser explains, astrofuturist ideas of exodus to or resettlements on other planets have emerged since the 1960s and the 1970s as a reaction to growing ecological concerns (37). Pro-space lobbyists and entrepreneurs such as Elon Musk, Ganser explains, view planetary migration as inevitable for humanity to survive. In other words, humanity, according to these views, can only continue to exist if it accepts to become a multiplanetary species.

The link between the Anthropocene and space exploration points to a need to reconfigure the aesthetics of the sublime, as they reveal the binary distinction between human and nonhuman nature that traditionally underpins it. Rooted in Romantic aesthetics, the sublime emerged from a sense of awe and wonder at nature's uncharted forces, leading to a separation between humans and the natural world by allowing us to experience its power from a position of safety and reverence before retreating to "civilized" spaces. In the Anthropocene, such a binary perspective between the human and the nonhuman proves increasingly problematic. However, this does not imply that the aesthetics of the sublime should be entirely dismissed. Conversely, Jean-Baptiste Fressoz posits that the sublime can serve as a potent instrument for reframing our encounter with nonhuman nature, particularly in the context of the Anthropocene. For Fressoz, for example, the sublime is the "cardinal aesthetics" of the Anthropocene (47). Along with scholars such as Marco Caracciolo, Lee Rozelle, and Emily Brady, Fressoz argues that, in order to develop a more ecological version of the sublime, some of the fundamental aspects of the sublime require reexamination since a strict adherence to traditional notions of the sublime may perpetuate the human/nature binary. In other words, to consider how to exit the Anthropocene or at least mitigate its ongoing impact, it is imperative to put an end to this dualistic opposition that the aesthetics of the sublime has contributed to

developing in Western cultures. Furthermore, it is essential to challenge the centering of humanity's perspective and interests and to acknowledge the interconnectedness of all life forms within a larger web of life. In order for the sublime to reflect our vital and profound entanglement with the Earth and to encourage the development of ecologically viable approaches to and relations with the nonhuman world, it would gain in undergoing a modification of some of its characteristics. For example, Marco Caracciolo's notion of the environmental sublime includes grief, guilt, and horror over humanity's impact on systems that were previously considered separate or "natural." Caracciolo insists that this sublime is grounded in a moral awareness of human responsibility and an embodied and sensual engagement with the natural environment (299). Unlike the Romantic sublime, which often encourages awe from a distance, the ecological sublime places us within the precarious systems we affect, urging a closer and more responsible interaction.

Building on these approaches to the ecological sublime, I will now consider how a reconfigured and more ecologically productive version of the cosmic sublime might respond to the challenges of the Anthropocene. How can the cosmic sublime, especially as an aesthetic experience informed by the overview effect, inspire an ethos of interconnectedness and responsibility? Rather than celebrating discourses of technological mastery, a more ecologically attuned cosmic sublime would reinforce human vulnerability and accountability in degrading nonhuman environments. Rather than promoting escapist narratives, it would reflect the interdependence of humans with terrestrial spaces and species. In this way, the Anthropocene cosmic sublime democratizes the impact of the cosmic sublime by making its ecological consciousness and ethical imperatives accessible and relevant to a vast majority of individuals. It transforms the exclusive experience of space exploration into a collective call for respectful coexistence with both terrestrial and extraterrestrial environments, emphasizing shared responsibility and humility over individual transcendence.

The distinction between the cosmic sublime and the Anthropocene cosmic sublime thus extends beyond their ecological and ethical dimensions to include considerations of access and inclusivity. The cosmic sublime is inherently limited to an elite group—astronauts, and more recently, wealthy individuals who can afford private space travel. This exclusivity restricts the transformative potential of the cosmic sublime to a small fraction of humanity, often leaving the broader implications of these experiences underutilized in promoting collective ecological awareness. The Anthropocene cosmic sublime addresses this issue by recentering the sublime experience around ethical and environmental concerns that resonate universally, even with those who will never leave the Earth's surface. It takes the unique vantage point of space—a perspective enabled by advanced technology—and uses it to evoke humility, vulnerability, and interdependence with the nonhuman world. Rather than serving as a status symbol or a demonstration of human mastery, technology becomes an instrument for fostering a deeper connection to the planet and a reminder of humanity's ethical responsibilities.

The Anthropocene Cosmic Sublime in *Orbital*

In *Orbital*, Samantha Harvey puts forward what I define as an Anthropocene cosmic sublime. This type of sublime privileges humility, vulnerability, and interdependence with the nonhuman world over human mastery. It embodies a sensorial connection to our planet, placing technology as an instrument for achieving a deeper connection to the Earth and a reminder of our ethical consideration of it, rather than as a sign of dominance over nature. It is through this type of cosmic sublime that ecological consciousness instills a refocusing of space exploration as a call for respectful coexistence with both the terrestrial and extraterrestrial worlds.

In Samantha Harvey's novel, the description of outer space first seems to follow the Burkean conventions of the sublime. From the ISS, the six astronauts witness "the vacuum depths" (20) and the "staggering blackness" (54) of the universe, "where the darkness is endless and ferocious" (45). In this fundamentally hostile place, the ISS is like a shield protecting the astronauts: "four inches of titanium away from death. Not just death, obliterated non-existence" (49). Being stranded in space, especially without a spacesuit, would mean a quick and painful death unlike anything ever experienced on earth. Indeed, the lack of gravity and pressure and the low temperatures would prevent the oxygen from reaching the brain and the lungs would rupture within a few seconds. In *Orbital*, the safe space from which the powerful and hostile forces of nature can be observed is rather precarious, and further emphasizes the vulnerability of humans.

The sublime description of the sun evokes the spectacular forces of nature. Seen from space, the sun can be seen in better details and its raw energy is magnified:

Some eighty million miles distant the sun is roaring. It edges now toward its eleven-or-so-year maximum, erupting and flashing, when you look you can see its edges are flayed with violent light and its surface sun-spot-bruised. Immense solar flares send proton storms earthwards and in their wake are geomagnetic storms triggering light displays three hundred miles high. [...] The sun's particle clouds billow, flares explode and whip earthward in eight minutes flat, energy pulses, explodes, a great ball of fusion and fury. (90)

By virtue of an accumulation of verbs in the indicative and gerunds ("roaring," "erupting and flashing") as well as of the repetitions of words ("storms," "explode," "earthward") and sounds ("million miles," "miles high," "pulses, explodes," "fusion and fury"), the narrator discloses the unlimited and fierce energy of the Sun that may exceed, in its size and force, terrestrial expressions of the sublime. From outer space, the astronauts see the Sun without its light scattered by our atmosphere, making it appear brighter than from the Earth. The description's effect is further heightened by several independent clauses strung together without conjunctions, creating run-on sentences that intensify the sense of uncontained power. This lack of coordination mirrors the boundless unrestrained nature of the Sun's energy as observed from the void of space. The narrator of *Orbital* employs the metaphor of wild animals to depict the Sun and outer space ("Raw space is a panther, feral and primal" [1]), but also

evokes the Earth with images that highlight its relatively small size and its humble place in the Solar system. Indeed, if outer space is presented as infinitely vast and with no center, the Earth is likened to “a piddling speck,” (28) a “cool marble,” (114) or a “small blue dot,” (52) which evokes Carl Sagan’s “pale blue dot.”

In *Orbital*, then, the cosmic sublime is first a negative sublime, a conflation of fear and overwhelming experiences in the midst of space’s silent darkness:

[Anton is] stopped by a staggering blackness. Not the theatrical splendour of a hanging, spinning planet, but the booming silence of everything else, the God knows what. That’s what Michael Collins called it as he orbited the dark side of the moon alone—Aldrin, Armstrong, earth and mankind all over there, and over here himself, and God knows what. (54)

This passage plays on the paradox of “booming silence,” an oxymoronic expression that stresses the unsayable dimension of the cosmos. The contrast between the imagined “booming” and the actual silence of space creates a semantic tension that highlights the character’s struggle to articulate this sublime experience. Additionally, the juxtaposition of “blackness” and the indeterminate “God knows what” reinforces the character’s inability to capture the vast and almost inconceivable nature of outer space. In *Orbital*, the characters seem incapable of transcending the forces of nature through reason and language. As Christopher Hitt explains, the Romantic experience of the sublime often culminates in the observer’s ability to transcend the forces of nature by naming and framing them through poetic expression, thus reinforcing the separation between humanity and nature. Hitt then proposes a reconfigured version of the sublime in which humans do not rely on language to transcend this sublime experience. One strategy used by writers who seek to avoid concluding the sublime experience with a poetic “self-apotheosis,” Hitt explains (609), is to emphasize their inability to fully translate this experience into words. In *Orbital*, the character demonstrates this form of ecological humility by confessing his inability to name the experience of the sublime.

In this novel, the cosmic sublime becomes inseparable from the traces of human influence, extending beyond the Earth’s surface into its orbital space, where the Anthropocene’s influence reshapes not only the planet but its immediate celestial environment. Two hundred and fifty miles away from the Earth, the characters can measure the decrease in its brightness and radiance with a spectrometer and witness the consequences of climate change on different parts of the globe. This distance produces a mix of fear and pleasure in them. The most striking phenomenon is a Category Five typhoon which hits southern Asia. With its “building magnificence,” (24) the “super-typhoon” (77) threatens to kill hundreds of people and to destroy their homes. The narrator presents two different perspectives on the typhoon: that of the astronauts, and that of the Filipinos directly afflicted by it. The astronauts have a global view and are able to see the formation of the typhoon and predict its trajectory. They can share their findings and photographs, but they cannot stop it. From their safe, distanced, and scientific perspective, the typhoon gives rise to a sublime experience. For them, this massive storm is a spectacle to observe and study, even as

they recognize the consequences of human-driven climate shifts (“these days the typhoons are so frequent and huge” [38]). Although the astronauts find it sublime due to its size and power, their privileged vantage point removes some of its terror, casting it as an object of scientific contemplation. For the Filipinos, on the other hand, the typhoon is no sublime experience. It is a horrifying phenomenon and they logically focus on the destruction it causes, as expressed in the text by a list of tragic events (116). The juxtaposition of these two perspectives underlines the typhoon’s dual reality: it is sublime in scale yet horrific in impact, especially for vulnerable populations. Indeed, the Filipinos have little responsibility for climate change, but their rapidly growing population and the lack of solid buildings make the Philippines, among other countries, more vulnerable to these intense meteorological events (Holden and Marshall). The narrator, drawing on Pietro’s empathy for a Filipino fisherman friend, gestures toward the issue of climate injustice, reminding readers that while the astronauts experience awe, the typhoon is a life-threatening disaster for those on Earth. In this way, the storm exemplifies a conflict between the sublime and the horrifying, suggesting that the experience of the sublime depends on one’s vantage point and level of detachment.

If the typhoon represents climate change’s vast and terrifying impact on Earth, the astronauts also witness other subtle alterations in nonhuman spaces. In the description of neon algal blooms, color-shifting salt flats, retreating glaciers, and geometrically expanding evaporation ponds (74-75), the narrator relies on repetitive structures—anaphora (“every”), polysyndeton (“or”) and repetitions of clauses (“metre by metre,” “more and more people”)—to mirror the pervasive and irreversible impact of these anthropogenic changes within the structure of the text, highlights how human actions have left an indelible and toxic mark on natural landscapes. Seen from space, these landscapes paradoxically evoke aesthetic pleasure. The vividness of these altered landscapes, from pink salt flats in Tunisia to the reflective greenhouses covering southern Spain, invites the astronauts to appreciate the Earth’s surfaces almost like artworks. The picturesque quality of these scenes is characterized by a vibrant palette of colors with “swirling neon,” “red algal bloom,” “pinking of evaporated lakes,” and “green-blue geometries” (74-75) and by the use evocative images. Indeed, the reference to “cloisonné pink,” (74) which describes a form of enamel artwork, and the mention of the “altered contour of a coastline,” which conveys the impression that the surface of the Earth has been shaped by an artist, transform environmental degradation into striking visual impressions. Such devices draw attention to the astronauts’ distanced perspective, which once again separates them from the direct consequences of these ecological transformations and allows them to see Earth’s damaged beauty as an image, or “spectacle,” rather than as an immediate threat. This tendency to find beauty even in polluted landscapes also reflects the astronauts’ fixation on photographing the Earth, as the extensive and picturesque-like quality of Earth’s landscapes in Samantha Harvey’s novel shows, but that can also be seen in the several books astronauts like Thomas Pesquet have dedicated to documenting the Earth’s fragility with

photographs taken from the ISS. This obsession with capturing Earth's visual appeal testifies to a complex dynamic: from space, environmental degradation becomes aesthetically compelling, leading observers to overlook or even romanticize the destructive forces behind it. Such descriptions evoke Jennifer Peeples' concept of the "toxic sublime," which she defines as "*the tensions that arise from recognizing the toxicity of a place, object or situation, while simultaneously appreciating its mystery, magnificence and ability to inspire awe*" (375, emphasis in original). This paradoxical response—from aesthetic appreciation to a form of environmental critique—highlights how space distances the astronauts from Earth's immediate crises yet magnifies their awareness of humanity's pervasive impact on the planet.

Samantha Harvey's novel also illustrates the fact that the Anthropocene has extended to extraterrestrial spaces by disclosing the extent to which low Earth orbit (LEO) has become a dumping ground for waste material:

From an outside view you'd see them wend a long-untrodden man-made trail between two birling spheres. You'd see that far from venturing out alone, they navigate through a swarm of satellites, a midgey seething of orbiting things, two hundred million flung-out things. Operating satellites, ex-satellites blown into pieces, natural satellites, flecks of paint, frozen engine coolant, the upper stages of rockets, bits of Sputnik 1 and Iridium 33 and Kosmos 2251, solid-rocket exhaust particles, a lost toolbag, a mislaid camera, a dropped pair of pliers and a pair of gloves. Two hundred million things orbiting at twenty-five thousand miles an hour and sandblasting the veneer of space.

From an outside view you'd see the lunar spaceship tiptoe its way through this field of junk. It negotiates through low earth orbit, the busiest and trashiest stretch of the solar system, and with an injection burn it forces itself out on its transit to the moon where the clutter thins and the going's fair. (131)

The initial challenge for the lunar mission as it is evoked in the novel is the necessity to fly through a vast array of space debris. The list of debris, the majority of which is man-made, but also includes naturally occurring objects, exhibits a wide range of sizes and shows how long they stay in orbit. This highlights the detrimental impact humans have had on LEO, which ironically hinders the advancement of space exploration.

In a context where interstellar human expansion and space exodus are moving from the realm of fantasy to projects funded by governments and private corporations as a way to address Anthropocene challenges, the Anthropocene cosmic sublime combines an emphasis on humanity's smallness with a denunciation of its multiplanetary ambitions. In contemplating human survival beyond Earth, the Anthropocene cosmic sublime urges us to rethink our attitudes toward both terrestrial and extraterrestrial environments. It invites us to reflect on the place of our attachment to our planet, and evokes a kind of cosmic awe that challenges rather than supports human extraterrestrial colonization projects.

While the six characters of *Orbital* stay in the ISS, other fellow astronauts have embarked on a lunar mission with the goal of establishing permanent outposts on the Moon before setting foot on Mars. The novel thus illustrates contemporary discourses that posit the urge to leave the Earth by opposing the orbital movements of the International Space Station and the vertical trajectory of the rocket sending other

astronauts on the Moon. While the former symbolizes humanity's attachment to the Earth, the latter exemplifies the human urge to conquer unknown territories and to challenge our planetarity (Spivak). The narrator subtly denounces this worldview and characterizes the Earth as "the scene of a crime" (Harvey 131) that some individuals are attempting to flee from, ironically bringing attention to their role in rendering our planet uninhabitable. In *Orbital*, the narrative taps into the rhetoric of the frontier and the wilderness—a language intertwined with the aesthetics of the sublime and often linked to the ideology of astrocolonialism. As Daniel Sage and other scholars have shown, this rhetoric extends imperialist ambitions beyond Earth, framing outer space as the next "virgin frontier" (32). The astronauts in *Orbital* describe outer space as "the only remaining wilderness that we have" (Harvey 106) and view themselves as "intergalactic travelers chancing upon a virgin frontier" (14). This perspective aligns with the views of astrofuturists like Robert Zubrin, who advocate for human expansion into space as an inevitable and positive continuation of humanity's exploratory history. However, as the novel ominously suggests, this cosmic wilderness may ultimately meet the same fate as the Earth's "discovered and plundered" frontiers (Harvey 106), raising questions about the ecological and ethical implications of such expansive and imperial visions.

Yet, the novel moves beyond ideological critiques, foregrounding the astronauts' very physical disconnection from Earth as a stark reminder of human limitations in space. In the context of spaceflight, astronauts experience significant alterations in their sensory perception: their muscles atrophy, their sinuses are congested, and microgravity alters the functioning of the nervous system. This sensory and physical disorientation gives rise to feelings of Earthsickness and a longing for terrestrial sensations and experiences that are characteristic of their animal nature:

With his eyes closed he can hear that gibbon call, hollow and echoing. Can see the dog in the painting in its private dignity. Imagines placing his hand on the warm neck of a horse and can feel the smooth, oily lie of its coat, though he's barely touched a horse in his life. The dart of a jay between the trees in his backyard. The dash of a spider into cover. The shadow of a pike beneath the water. A shrew carrying her young in her mouth. A hare leaping higher than seems warranted. A scarab beetle navigating by the stars. (107)

In the tin ship that is the ISS, Sean imagines encounters with nonhuman animals that are not overwhelming confrontations with dangerous species, which Burke identifies as a sublime experience. Rather, they consist of mundane scenes of feeling and observing birds, insects and farm animals. The passage includes sentences in which the grammatical subject—Sean—has disappeared ("Can see," "Imagines") and nominal sentences describing movements and gestures of nonhuman animals. Such grammatical structures gradually erase the human point of view to focus on other living species. In this manner, the narrator suggests that we consider the perspectives of other species and recognize our interdependence with the natural world. The materiality of the text pertains to this multispecies sensory experience of the world. If the sublime is a purely human experience and mode of engagement with the world,

these quasi-pastoral vignettes invite us to acknowledge nonhuman agency. The monosyllabic words (“the dart of a jay”), the internal rhyme (“a spider into cover”) and the alliteration in /h/ (“a hare leaping higher”) are complementary poetic strategies that contribute to shaping an experience of the sublime, ultimately showing that the Earth is an interconnected living system with multispecies entanglements that can be seen in all aspects of life on Earth, including poetic writing.

Far from monumentalizing distant vistas, *Orbital* gives shape to an Anthropocene cosmic sublime by capturing the delicate and interconnected web of life on Earth upon which we depend and by imbuing its narrative with elegiac undertones. At an intimate level, Chie mourns her mother and is unable to attend her burial ceremony while the astronauts evoke the Challenger mission which killed seven astronauts. At a more global level, humanity and the Earth are said to be doomed, even if it is on different temporalities. However, the narrative of *Orbital* is not structured around a tragic arc. By insisting on a shared sense of vulnerability for both humans and the Earth, the novel encourages readers to acknowledge their intrinsic connection to the planet and to try to explore new approaches to living differently—not merely on the Earth, but with the Earth.

This re-evaluation of the sublime transcends traditional categorizations that privilege charisma, scale, or power. From their vantage point, the astronauts perceive both grandeur and minutiae, which allows them to grasp the invisible yet essential interconnections between all living forms: “Sometimes they want to see the theatrics, the opera, the earth’s atmosphere, airglow, and sometimes it’s the smallest things, the lights of fishing boats off the coast of Malaysia dotted starlike in the black ocean” (Harvey 40). This perspective aligns with the environmental sublime, as defined by David E. Nye, where awe can be experienced even through smaller-scale phenomena that might otherwise be overlooked:

[T]he environmental sublime requires an understanding of the multiple temporal rhythms of plants, insects, birds, animals, and the weather as they interact. Seeing landscapes in terms of the environmental sublime demands attention to both the microscopic and the panoramic view. It is not about the conquest of nature, nor is it about ruined landscapes of the disastrous sublime. Rather, it concerns complex relationships slowly unfolding. (132)

While auroras and typhoons inspire awe, more mundane scenes, such as fishing boats casting starlike lights across the ocean, also evoke a sublime experience. Here, the astronauts marvel at the human presence as an integrated part of the natural landscape, showing the entanglement of human and non-human realms. This view is simultaneously sublime and unsettling, as it reveals humanity’s telluric impact on a planetary scale: the boats’ lights, seen from space, highlight the pervasiveness of human activity, even in seemingly remote waters. Additionally, the metaphor of boats as stars recalls the cosmic origins of human beings, who share elemental commonalities (calcium, iron, nitrogen) with the universe itself. By reminding readers that all terrestrial beings are composed of stardust, the text highlights the organic connection between living and non-living entities, suggesting that the

sublime arises not only from vast natural forces but from the intricate and interconnected nature of life on Earth and beyond.

The novel's portrayal of human and other-than-human sensory experiences reveals the complex interconnections between all living beings on Earth. This reimagined sublime arises not only from grand natural spectacles but also from everyday and multisensory interactions that connect human and nonhuman entities. In the novel's conclusion, for example, a "choir" of sounds is generated by Earth's electromagnetic vibrations:

a complex orchestra of sounds, an out-of-tune band practice of saws and woodwind, a spacey-full throttle distortion of engines, a speed-of-light battle between galactic tribes, a ricochet of trills from a damp rainforest in the morning, the opening bars of electronic trance. (136)

This melding of sounds—from human industry to natural calls—embodies a dynamic and creative interweaving of terrestrial elements, hinting at the entangled coexistence of all beings. While the metaphor of an orchestra suggests that humanity plays a central role in shaping the Earth's soundscape, it does not reinforce human superiority. Rather, it reframes humanity as a planetary force within a broader ecological system. Harvey's use of disorienting metaphors and her emphasis on the mundane sources of the sublime underline a planetary perspective that disrupts the notion of humanity's boundless capabilities and questions the viability of human expansion into other planetary realms. In this sense, the novel not only illustrates an Anthropocene cosmic sublime but also suggests an urgent need to recalibrate our view of human agency within the cosmos.

Orbital offers a nuanced reimagining of both the sublime and space exploration, along with a reconsideration of the complex dynamics between humans and nonhumans. In contrast to the modern view of the universe as an uncharted territory to be conquered, the novel presents an aesthetics of the Anthropocene cosmic sublime that emphasizes human vulnerability and ethical responsibility. By situating this version of the sublime within an environmental ethos, Harvey offers a critique of the imperialist rhetoric that supports both terrestrial and extraterrestrial human expansion. It presents a genuinely humble and relational version of the sublime that takes into account the complex and interdependent world humans inhabit.

By proposing a reconfigured version of the sublime which is more inclusive and that promotes a shared experience of interconnectedness and vulnerability, *Orbital* does not only illustrate how space traveling has an impact on our understanding of our place on Earth and in the universe; the novel also actively shapes our relationship with the world and urges us to reconsider our perception of and attitudes toward the Earth and its orbital environment. As Erin James suggests, fictional narratives have the potential to drive meaningful real-world change. By immersing readers in specific narrative environments, they invite to reflect on and simulate the damaging values, attitudes, and behaviors that underpin the Anthropocene, showing that fiction is endowed with "worldbuilding power" (20).

Orbital can be seen as one example of these “storyworld models” (20) James presents as it enables readers to adopt perspectives otherwise inaccessible in real life, broadening empathy and deepening environmental consciousness. In Harvey’s novel, this perspective is not that of a nonhuman agent, such as an animal, a river, or a plant, as James proposes, but that of astronauts. While the astronauts’ view is inherently elitist, the narrative renders it accessible by offering an embodied and affective experience that highlights the profound connections between humanity and the Earth. Unlike iconic visual representations of our planet, such as *Earthrise* or *Pale Blue Dot*, which often remain at the level of passive observation, or mainstream sci-fi productions which tend to insist on catastrophic scenarios, *Orbital* illustrates how fiction serves as a powerful medium for proposing new ways of relating to both the Earth and the cosmos, particularly when it engages with the qualities that the Anthropocene cosmic sublime entails.

Conclusion

Far from being a mere aesthetic experience, the Anthropocene cosmic sublime leads to an ethical reflection on humanity’s relationship with both Earth and the cosmos. In the context of space exploration, which paradoxically both amplifies our awareness of the Anthropocene and exacerbates its exploitative and destructive patterns, fiction offers a critical space for questioning our actions on Earth and our ties to the universe. Through fiction, one can engage with these profound questions without the need to physically venture into space. Fiction, as a medium, conveys these concerns, making the complex intersection of space exploration and ecological crisis accessible—and thus not limited to astronauts and rich space tourists—and relatable. In other words, fiction enables a democratic and sustainable experience of the cosmic sublime. As Matt Harvey notes in his examination of the cosmic sublime, expanding access to scientific tools like telescopes and incorporating non-Western cosmologies into our understanding of the cosmos may help bridge the gap of disconnection many feel toward the universe. A more inclusive and ethical experience of the sublime, he argues, can enhance our ecological imagination and strengthen our attachment to Earth (185). In *Orbital*, Harvey employs a similar rationale, yet her distinctive narrative techniques serve to critique the expansionist ideologies driving contemporary space exploration. The novel’s portrayal of the cosmic sublime emphasizes humanity’s limited and insignificant position in the vast universe, and thus arguably tempers the urge to colonize other planets. Harvey’s depiction of space exploration invites readers to consider the ethical ramifications of human actions, not only on Earth but in the universe at large, and encourages us to rethink our attitude toward the natural world.

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Romantic Cybernetics: Jorie Graham, Trevor Paglen, and the Sublime Contradictions of the Anthropocene

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Abstract

The Anthropocene sublime is a necessarily hybrid concept, one that is generated from a palimpsest of previous iterations of sublimity, and which is critically modified by contemporary crisis. Alexander R. Galloway's notion of the "juridico-geometric sublime" captures this hybridity in its combination of Romantic play with the homeostatic model of cybernetics, which brings into effect a synthesis of digital unrepresentability and Romantic freedom. Operating as a figure for the incommensurability generated by the confluence of the Romantic sublime and the cybernetic control paradigm, this version of the sublime also relates the concept to the impact of systems of power on aesthetic representation. This article aims to fill in the ecological gap in Galloway's conceptualization, while applying this hybrid sublime to the current era of environmental entanglement. In doing so, it argues that a contemporary, Anthropocene sublime reveals both the lingering impact of Romantic modes of environmental thought and the dominance of a cybernetics-derived concept of a mappable technological biosphere. The magnitude of the totality such a hybrid form constitutes is what inspires the experience of terror and awe that characterizes the sublime. The work of the poet Jorie Graham and the artist Trevor Paglen provide vital documents of the hybrid states and representational impasses of this contemporary sublime, as they demonstrate how natural processes are always already folded into economic and technological systems, while nature is both in our devices and irrevocably exteriorized. In different ways, their work demonstrates the essential incommensurability that is generated by the combination of the Romantic and the cybernetic modes of sublimity, while mapping out the political suspension that an Anthropocene sublime necessarily generates.

Keywords: Anthropocene, sublime, cybernetics, Romanticism, hybridity.

Resumen

Lo sublime del Antropoceno es un concepto necesariamente híbrido, uno que se genera a partir de un palimpsesto de iteraciones previas de sublimidad, y que la crisis contemporánea modifica de forma crítica. La noción de Alexander R. Galloway del "sublime jurídico-geométrico" anticipó esta hibridez en su combinación de juego Romántico con el modelo homeostático de la cibernética, que dio lugar a una síntesis de irrepresentabilidad digital y libertad Romántica (29). Funcionando como una figura para la inconmensurabilidad generada por la confluencia del sublime romántico y el paradigma de control cibernético, esta versión de lo sublime también relacionaba el concepto con el impacto de los sistemas de poder en la representación estética. Al abordar la brecha ecológica en la conceptualización de Galloway y aplicando este sublime híbrido a la actual era de enredo ambiental, este artículo argumenta que lo sublime del Antropoceno contemporáneo revela tanto el impacto persistente de los modos románticos de pensamiento ambiental como la dominancia concomitante de un concepto de biosfera tecnológica derivado de la cibernética—el cual es entendido como un recurso a ser mapeado. La magnitud de la totalidad que constituye tal forma híbrida es lo que inspira la experiencia de terror y asombro característicos de lo sublime. La obra de la poeta Jorie Graham y el artista Trevor Paglen proporciona documentos vitales de los estados híbridos y los impasses

representacionales de este sublime contemporáneo, ya que ambos muestran cómo los procesos naturales están desde siempre entrelazados en sistemas económicos y tecnológicos, y la naturaleza está tanto en nuestros dispositivos como irrevocablemente exteriorizada. De diferentes maneras, su trabajo demuestra la incommensurabilidad esencial que se genera por la combinación de los modos romántico y cibernético de la sublimidad, al tiempo que mapea la suspensión política que necesariamente genera lo sublime del Antropoceno.

Palabras clave: Antropoceno, sublime, cibernética, romanticismo, hibridez.

Anthropocene Modalities

The Anthropocene and the sublime are terms that encompass a markedly similar set of critical contradictions. Depending on their context, they both oscillate between parallel conflicting poles: environmental entanglement and anthropocentrism, the collective more-than-human and the singular *anthropos*, an awareness of ecological interrelation and an elevation of the human, considered as an undifferentiated totality. Taken together, the two terms offer productive, parallel forms of critical ambivalence; a specifically Anthropocene sublime, emerging as a response to the extent of human degradation of the environment, provides a means of evoking the incommensurability *within* these terms, and highlighting the ways in which the subject is paradoxically split between these terms' ranges of competing imperatives. One way of thinking through such contradictions is by considering the inherently palimpsestic nature of both the Anthropocene and the sublime. "If the Anthropocene has a face," Sharon Noble writes, "that face needs to be entirely hybrid. It is a patchwork, palimpsest, which can embody our overwritten and overdetermined ideas of nature and culture as well as reflect them back toward us as in a mirror" (125)—a statement that applies just as much to the sublime. Moreover, the patchwork quality of the Anthropocene reflects what Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, Andrew S. Mathews, and Nils Bubandt describe as "the uneven conditions of more-than-human livability in landscapes increasingly dominated by industrial forms." This unevenness is expressed through the notion of a "patchy Anthropocene": a phenomenon taking shape discontinuously, in ecological "patches" where the overlapping of human and more-than-human worlds becomes acute (186).

Hybridity is particularly evident in Alexander R. Galloway's version of sublimity, which he postulated as a figure for the impasse manifested by attempts to represent digital experience. In *The Interface Effect*, Galloway describes the dominant economic paradigm of the digital era as one of "ludic capitalism," where "flexibility, play, creativity, and immaterial labor [...] have taken over from the old concepts of discipline, hierarchy, bureaucracy, and muscle" (27). The play impulse that underlies this version of capitalism is informed by two influences: "Romanticism and cybernetic systems theory," the confluence of which is described by Galloway as a "juridico-geometric sublime," a hybrid form that draws on seemingly oppositional critical traditions to establish its validity (29). What is crucial about Galloway's intervention

into the tradition of the sublime is that it provides a means of linking this primarily aesthetic concept with systems of power, as they are mediated in technological representation. It thus shows us how that mediation reflects and reinforces those systems and the wider epistemic climate from which they emerge. This version of the sublime therefore raises a series of questions: while it can be seen as a productive means of synthesizing a specific form of digital sublimity, what are its implications when it is applied to aesthetics more broadly? Furthermore, how does this “juridico-geometric sublime” relate to the Anthropocene, an era in which digitality—as what Seb Franklin calls “a predominant logical mode” emerging alongside forms of social control (xviii)—still dominates, and in which it has been subsumed by the imperatives of an escalating environmental crisis? To address these questions, and to interrogate the broader contradictions of sublimity in the Anthropocene context, this article will analyze the way in which two artistic practitioners, the poet Jorie Graham and the artist Trevor Paglen, evoke the experience of the Anthropocene as one of profound, disjunctive sublimity in a way that can be read through Galloway’s hybrid sublime, as a conjunction of Romantic and cybernetics modes of being and representation.

By bringing together Romanticism and cybernetics, Galloway foregrounds the way in which these two seemingly disparate ideological and intellectual frameworks both remain operative in contemporary experience. From Romanticism, Galloway takes the instinct towards play, which was described by Friedrich Schiller as having the capability to “suppress the contingency” in experience (27–28). Play here refers to the imperative of imaginative freedom that motivated many Romantic works: the possibility that the creative impulse, when given free reign or when responding to a sublime object, could mitigate the discordance of human faculties. For Galloway, play represents “abundance and creation, of pure unsullied authenticity, of a childlike, tinkering vitality perennially springing forth from the core of that which is most human” (27–28). From cybernetics, on the other hand, Galloway takes an understanding of the digital episteme as one characterized by control, in the form of data capture, homeostatic feedback, and programmability—all of which operate to restrict the autonomy of the digital user in often invisible or opaque ways. As is evident, there is a productive contradiction between these two terms: the freedom of the play impulse in Romanticism and the control of the cybernetic model are necessarily opposed. It is the friction that arises from the Romantico-cybernetic synthesis that allows Galloway’s version of the sublime to function so effectively as a diagnosis of the incommensurability of a contemporaneity saturated by the digital and threatened by ecological collapse. An essential precursor to this synthesis is Donna Haraway’s cyborg, which similarly emerged from a nexus of oppositional poles. In Haraway’s words, the cyborg was the “illegitimate offspring” of “patriarchal capitalism,” and was, in a rejection of its roots, “resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity” (151)—an echo of the paradoxical synthesis that structures Galloway’s sublime.

The digital, where this version of the sublime becomes manifest, is defined by a combination of geo-spatial determination and a juridical impetus, one modulated by the strictures of control. Dialectically opposing this, as a radical counterpoint, is the Romantic conception of play:

Today's play might better be described as a sort of "juridico-geometric sublime." Witness the Web itself, which exhibits [...] three elements: the universal laws of protocological exchange, sprawling across complex topologies of aggregation and dissemination, and resulting in the awesome forces of "emergent" vitality. This is what Romantico-cybernetic play means [...] labor itself is now play, just as play becomes more and more laborious [...]. (28-29)

For Galloway, it is the subsumption of the play drive, which in Romanticism was a site of freedom, *within* the world of labor that generates the specific character of digital incommensurability. The user within the digital interface is *both* provided with sovereignty and freedom *and* mapped by the very systems he or she appears to be freely navigating. Technological rationalization, epitomized in the homeostatic feedback loop of cybernetics, has been combined with the seemingly irrational Romantic imagination, thus apparently overcoming the opposition between Romanticism and cybernetics, or the sublime and the rational, and revealing how such terms can be related. The sublime that Galloway puts forward emerges from the friction between these two now-conjoined fields, control and play. One example of this friction can be seen in Alenda Chang's analysis of the way that contemporary video games create "mini-ecosystems," in which "real worlds and fictional rules" overlap (20). As Chang makes clear, these gaming ecosystems can be read as environmental spaces, in the sense that they model "ecological dynamics based on interdependence and limitation," thus allowing "players to explore manifold ecological futures" (16).

It is this ecological emphasis that, particularly from the perspective of the Anthropocene, is missing from Galloway's account of the sublime—the way in which the environmental overlaps with the technological or with the social within systems of production (Keller 15). Within Romanticism, the impetus towards forms of creative play, as well as the aesthetic of the sublime, were both manifested in response to nature. For Romantic poets, a sublime experience occurred in response to the incomprehensible magnitude of natural phenomena, while nonetheless allowing for an elevation of the self and a reinscription of human mastery over the environment. The Romantic sublime was therefore paradoxically evoked in response to both environmental entanglement and anthropocentric human hegemony, with the former acting as the means by which the latter could be realized. Experiences of nature provided a realization of what William Wordsworth described as "A presence that disturbs me with the joy / Of elevated thoughts, a sense sublime / Of something far more deeply interfused" (418)—both a means of poetic elevation and a possible vector of transcendence towards a nebulous omnipresent unity. Nonetheless, these modes of both anthropocentrism and transcendence were never more than provisional within Romantic poetics, as they competed with a sense of entanglement within a more-than-human world and a concomitant emphasis on materiality, which

had the capacity to disrupt any project of transcendence. This is why Thomas Weiskel describes the Romantic sublime as “an attempt to revise the meaning of transcendence precisely when the traditional apparatus of sublimation—spiritual, ontological, and [...] psychological and even perceptual—was failing to be exercised or understood” (4). Absent of the teleological aims of conventional religious transcendence, the Romantic sublime is an attempt at finding a replacement in the magnitude and opacity of nature while maintaining the centrality of the *anthropos*. As Marjorie Hope Nicolson argues, it was the manifestation of this aesthetic in externalized nature that marked the “most profound difference between older and ‘modern’ landscape” (27).

In Galloway’s postulation of sublimity, nature can be considered the hidden third term—represented by his recovery of Romanticism and its structures of transcendence but not elucidated as such. However, it is important to note that the play drive, which informs Galloway’s understanding of Romanticism’s relevance, was traditionally considered to some extent a more harmonious counterpoint to the disjunctive experience of the sublime. For Schiller, as noted, play had the potential to suppress contingency and provide it with artistic form, a maneuver that balances human faculties of judgment and allows for freedom to emerge (27–28). In contrast, what Linda Marie Brooks calls the “negative regress” of the sublime—with its suggestion of ultimate formlessness—disrupts the form-giving faculty of the autonomous self and the enterprise of the play drive (950). Similarly, Immanuel Kant’s concept of the sublime, to which later Romantic iterations responded, was based on an understanding of the discordant nature of the human faculties of sense, imagination, and reason. For Kant, the sublime is “the mere ability to think which shows a faculty of the mind surpassing every standard of sense”; this is the “super sensible faculty” that, following a failure to imagine or represent the magnitude of the natural world, emerges to reinscribe humanity’s hegemony by encompassing that world within the workings of reason (88–89). In contrast, play, for Kant, is a manifestation of the free and harmonious interaction of the faculties of imagination and understanding, from which the judgment of taste emerges as “the state of mind in the free play of imagination and understanding (insofar as they harmonize with each other [...])” (217–218). In Kant, as in Schiller, the sublime represents the discordancy between human faculties, while the play drive allows for the harmonious balancing of those faculties. In the context of Galloway’s Romantico-cybernetic sublime and our updating of it for the Anthropocene, this can be considered a productive divergence, as it allows for the competing claims of sublimity and play to operate simultaneously, as two ways our experience of the environment is modulated: through harmonious appreciation and the dissonance of divergent faculties.

Complemented by these divergences, and with the ‘hidden’ ecological element foregrounded, Galloway’s Romantico-cybernetic model provides a compelling means of analyzing the isomorphic relation between nature and technology in the Anthropocene: a time when nature has become a technological space, as prone to be

the object of systems of quantification and mapping as the digital, and a space in which contingency and opacity are sacrificed for a totalizing form of knowledge. Erich Hörl foregrounds a parallel formulation when he cites the “technoecological condition” of contemporary nature, through which “nature’s essential technicity” emerges. Hörl identifies a “cybernetic state of nature” as the dominant paradigm of the contemporary era, in which, “thanks to the radical environmental distribution of agency by environmental media technologies,” what he calls an “environmental culture of control” is crystallized (8–9). If there is such a thing as an Anthropocene sublime, it becomes evident here, in the oscillation between control and freedom, play and labor, technology and the environment, that produces the particular chaotic intensity of contemporary crises. The hybridity of the Anthropocene sublime could be considered an index of this epistemic confusion, in which sublime objects become sublime ecologies, manifested across the complex, interwoven topologies of capitalist processes and environmental materialities.

Jorie Graham: Ecopoetic Entanglements

Galloway put forward the juridico-geometric sublime as a figure for digital unrepresentability, as expressed in the suggestion that interfaces are not workable; they do not provide the transparency they purport to facilitate. In relation to the Anthropocene, such representational unworkability arises in the sense that the totality of humanity’s impact on the environment, as well as the stratification of that impact by socio-economic factors, remains necessarily opaque—there is no representational form that can adequately address the shifting scalar and temporal frames through which the Anthropocene operates. I argue that the sublime can provide a language for expressing this inexpressibility, which helps explain why poets and artists continue to return to this aesthetic. Graham and Paglen both, in different ways, mine the palimpsestic character of sublimity as a means of foregrounding its potential as a figure for contemporary incommensurability and impasse. They also register the sublime as an archetypal Anthropocene aesthetic: one that is redolent of the ways in which economic and industrial processes have impacted the environment, while also being an index of how such impacts have been effaced or obscured in contemporary culture.

In many of her recent collections, including 2017’s *Fast* and 2020’s *Runaway*, both included in the 2022 publication *[To] The Last [Be] Human*, Graham, long regarded as one of the most prominent American practitioners of ecopoetics, persistently returns to the notion of nature’s mediation. This mediation renders nature as an intimately observed site of crisis, one that generates poetic inspiration, but which is also a source of overwhelming alterity. The mediation Graham sees as determining this human and nonhuman relation is digital in character. It is the screen that both radically extends the scope of the lyric self and circumscribes the agency of that self. Graham therefore evokes the paradoxical character of the digital interface that Galloway foregrounded in his Romantico-cybernetic sublime: the duality of a

system that conceives of play as individual liberation while simultaneously enforcing opaque structures of control. The impossibility of dialectically resolving the contradiction between these two impulses is the site of Graham's sense of the sublime; the point at which incommensurability becomes most acute. Unlike in Galloway's formulation, however, it is also the site at which the poet's relation to a crisis-ridden natural world comes into focus.

As in Romanticism, nature is seen to resist figuration, but in Graham's work this is not only because of its magnitude, but also because it is mediated in complex ways that are beyond individual perception; it is made into a resource and its autonomous essence is perpetually withdrawn. Graham's is thus a prototypically Anthropocene poetics, one consumed by an awareness of how the poet's perceptions of the natural world are mediated by technological systems of appropriation and annexation and how they exist within a totality that cannot be entirely comprehended. In this regard, her perspective on nature brings to mind Timothy Morton's concept of the "hyperobject," a thing "massively distributed in time and space" that exhibits "effects *interobjectively*," in the space *between* "aesthetic properties," and which cannot be comprehended in its totality (1). For Morton, hyperobjects show how categories such as nature, understood as an "empty term" that projects the existence of a reified externality, are no longer valid, as they have been replaced by the "disturbing intimacy" of the hyperobject, which makes evident the prevailing immanence of individual and collective experience—a condition that Graham's emphasis on environmental mediation explores (109). Where Graham diverges from Morton, however, and makes the sublime a more apt frame through which to read her poetry, is her insistence on the subject as the locus of such immanence; it is by foregrounding the subject's experience of entanglement, mediation, and the limits of comprehension that Graham evokes a specifically sublime poetics.

"Honeycomb" from 2017's *Fast* encapsulates many of these themes. In this poem, Graham offers a vision of a free-floating consciousness cast adrift by the mediation of the digital interface and struggling to establish a meaningful connection to the object world. The poem establishes a sense of imbrication—epitomized in the image of a segmented honeycomb—and of overlapping claims on identity, which together transform the self into a site of flux. The poem begins with what appears to be a series of alternative titles: "Ode to Prism. Aria. Untitled"—emphasizing the provisionality and uncertainty of the speaker's voice; this is not the self-confident autonomy of the Romantic poet, surveying the grandeur of nature (142). Such provisionality is reiterated in the speaker's subsequent pleas for recognition, which encapsulate the sense that, despite all possibilities for connection offered by the screen, the end result of such mediation is anomie: "Have you found me yet. Here at my screen, / can you make me / out? / All other exits have been sealed" (142). The poem expands on the reality of digital mediation through its ironic insistence on the necessity of quantification and classification as forms of self-knowledge: "We need emblematic subjectivities. Need targeted acquiescence. Time zones" (142). The

quantification that is required is inherently opaque and invisible: “This is / the order of the day. To be visited secretly. To be circled and cancelled” (142). In this context, the self emerges as a contested space, one determined by the interface and its apparent lack of any exterior referent: “If you look in, / the mirror chokes you off. No exit try again” (142). The screen is a mirror that chokes the user, providing no “exit,” and instead leading to the endless quantification of everything, even poetry, which has become debased and denuded in the process: “These talkings here are not truths. / They are needs. They are purchases and invoices. They are not what shattered the / silence. Not revolutions clocks navigational tools” (142). The truth content of poetry has been reduced by the commodification of private life, such that “purchases and invoices” are what make up a poem, which offers no revolutionary or navigational potential. The possibilities of a self-conscious mapping of the self are precluded, as these are functions that have been entirely co-opted by the technological interface.

Graham’s poem links this digital anomie with a vision of environmental degradation, in which nature is conceived of as a techno-biological space permeated with the detritus of industry:

In the screen

there is sea. Your fiberoptic cables line its floor. Entire. Ghost juice. The sea now does not emit sound. It carries eternity as information. All its long floor. Clothed as I am→in circumstance→see cell-depth→sound its atom→look into here further→past the grains of light→the remains of the ships→starlight→what cannot go or come back→what has mass and does not traverse distance→is all here→look here. Near the screen there are roses. Outside a new daymoon. (142)

The screen contains the sea, just as the map contains the territory. In a reformulation of Romantic poetics, the discrepancy between figure and ground has been diminished, but not in the service of human expression. Meanwhile, the sea contains the “fiberoptic cables” that carry digital communications across the globe, or, as Graham terms them, the “Ghost juice”: the spectral emanations of a seemingly ephemeral global network that is in fact, as these cables suggest, a highly complex material infrastructure that intersects with natural landscapes in an often-malign manner. The poem records the discursive effect of such technologies as “Eternity” being reduced to “information,” a maneuver signaled typologically by the use of arrows as punctuation marks. These arrow marks suggest forward motion, metonymically representing the relentless spread of digital technologies or the implacable escalation of environmental crisis, while also evoking the language of code, in which each statement leads ineluctably to the next. They evoke a form of what N. Katherine Hayles has called “dematerialized materialism,” in which materiality becomes an “informational pattern,” to be read in the language of code (104). At the same time, the arrows function to cut up the speaker’s flow and to reduce statements to truncated phrases. Paradoxically, the perception of the speaker seems to widen as these phrases become more succinct, to contain both “cell-depth” and “starlight”—both the microscopic and the cosmic. The speaker therefore experiences the technological colonization of environmental space, epitomized in the cables that line the seafloor, as a transformation of the prosaic into the sublime: a surreal “daymoon”

heralds this shift into the incomprehensible. Graham thereby puts into poetic practice Galloway's conception of the sublime, emergent vitality of the digital network. She does so by giving this sublimity material form in the infrastructure that is hidden in plain sight within nature, and which is both the vehicle for the transparency of media communications, as it provides a vector for economic and political communications networks, and a necessarily obscured technological reality.

"Honeycomb" questions how the individual can relate to a systematic reality of overwhelming complexity, other than by succumbing to the dominance of this system: "can you please / track me I do not feel safe" asks the speaker, suggesting that the search for the "nearest flesh to my flesh" can only be carried out through the computer interface (143). Similarly, nature, "this void," must be monitored and tracked as a means of guaranteeing its survival: "surveil this void→the smell of these stalks and the moisture they / are drawing up→in order not to die" (143). Ultimately, both speaker and natural environment are subsumed by the quantifying gaze of technology, reducing everything of value to an algorithmic calculation:

can you please track that→I want
to know how much I am worth→riverpebbles how many count them exact
number→and the bees that did return to the hive today→those which did not lose
their way→and exactly what neural path the neurotoxin took→please track
disorientation→count death→each death→very small→see it from there→count it
and store→I am the temporary→but there is also the permanent→have you looked
to it→for now→ (143)

The poem ends here, with the speaker imploring its addressee to track everything, to subsume nature within the computational gaze and to quantify the deaths that accompany environmental breakdown, while also moving from the "temporary" to the "permanent," as if facilitating the search for something other than contingency. Ending on a final arrow mark, the text questions what comes after the processes of environmental and ontological destabilization that constitute the present moment of crisis. By doing so, it dramatizes the collision between cybernetic systems of quantification and a neo-Romantic insistence on the imaginative potential of the natural world. The fundamental realization of the Anthropocene is that nature and society are intimately, terminally interwoven. This is made evident here through the subjection of the self to such bio-technological forms of entanglement, and the experience of them as beyond comprehension, as sublime.

Graham's depiction of entangled selfhood, imbricated with systems of technological mediation, evokes Galloway's conception of the juridico-geometric sublime as a form of algorithmic political determination, one in which personal freedom is both encouraged and highly circumscribed, while the impetus towards play, and its evocation of harmonious understanding and imagination, is similarly circumscribed by this technological determination. Her evocation of the environmental materiality of technical media parallels Jussi Parikka's understanding of "media and nature as co-constitutive spheres," in which the "ties are intensively connected in material nonhuman realities as much as in relations of power, economy, and work" (14). This interconnection gives rise to Parikka's concept of

“medianatures,” which expresses the “double bind” of media’s reliance on material resources and its deleterious effect on the state of the biosphere (13). Parikka’s concept of medianatures could be said to reflect the palimpsestic nature of the Anthropocene sublime, in which it is the irreducible complexity of interconnection—between natural processes and extractive systems—that is incomprehensible on an individual scale despite being given material expression through the devices we carry in our pockets. The linkages put forward by Graham’s poetry demonstrate how that co-constitutive relation between such processes impacts selfhood. Mapping the materials of the natural world is depicted as a parallel form of the mapping of the self, and both are seen as examples of an ideology of epistemological transparency and totalizing calculation that underpins the Anthropocene reduction of nature to a calculable quantity.

These ideas come to the fore in Graham’s exploration of forms of machinic and nonhuman selfhood in *Runaway*, in which she foregrounds a conception of the self as both extended and restricted by technology. Graham’s depiction of a posthuman self and of its limitations and possibilities becomes a means of exploring what it means to be human in the Anthropocene, when an awareness of entanglement of the human and nonhuman has become inescapable. This is most evident in “[To] The Last [Be] Human,” the poem which provided the title of Graham’s 2022 collection of her four previous publications. As the title suggests, the poem is both an entreaty to maintain something of human nature in the face of catastrophe and an interrogation of what it means to be the ‘last’ of humanity, before a possible posthuman future. The poem begins with an encounter with a prescriptive, sacred natural object:

Today I am getting my instructions.
I am getting them from something holy.
A tall thing in a nest.
In a clearing. (243)

The “instructions” the speaker receives appear insufficient, as the provisionality evident in “Honeycomb” returns here as a suggestion that the identity and form of the addressee are somehow unstable and immaterial. Furthermore, what the speaker requires from this individual or entity exceeds the boundaries of both language and data:

What is this you
are giving me, where are
your hands, what can you
grip. The thing I am asking for, it is not made of
words. No. It is not made of
data. (243)

What the speaker is searching for from this ‘last human’ is a transcendent property, something that can’t be expressed through any linguistic medium. The “map” that can offer guidance also turns out to be insufficient, being only a catalogue of catastrophe, on which “famine” and “haunted faces” are in evidence.

We’re so full of the dead the burnt fronds
hum, getting going each day again into too much sun to no

avail. I was human. I would have liked to speak of
that. But not now. (243)

The landscape that emerges from the poem is post-apocalyptic, defined by the prevalence of the “dead” and the humming made by “burnt” vegetation. The speaker’s admission that “I was human” suggests that a transformation has occurred, but that it is somehow unspeakable. At the same time, this transformation is bound up with the degradation of the biosphere and a decisive climatic alteration: the “too much sun” that has made life in this landscape precarious. Alongside such precarity, the inability to speak appears to have a political motivation: “yr name just about stripped from / u if u try to say it out / loud” (244). Identity, when enunciated, can be stripped away, and language has therefore become truncated. In this poem, like elsewhere in the collection, Graham condenses language, utilizing a form of text speak abbreviation to evoke technological mediation and to express the rapidity of this state of crisis in which temporality itself appears condensed.

Indeed, temporality is central to the poem, as Graham makes it apparent that the time of the poem is a time of endings, of the “sliver-end of the interglacial / lull,” in which “Human time” is coming to an end:

Whatever *before* had meant
before, now there is a blister over time.
[...]
So one has to figure out now how to
understand
time. Your time & then
time. Planet time and then yr
protocols, accords, tipping points,
markers. Each has a prognosis. (244–55)

The “blister over time” prohibits any clear understanding of conventional chronology, with the implication that the notions of before and after no longer designate anything meaningful. Instead, time is individualized, it is “your time,” the time of this last human, rather than “planet time”—the geological timescales indicated by the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene’s geophysical rendering of the geological as data is referenced through “protocols, accords, tipping points, / markers,” which represent another form of mapping that takes as its object the health of the planet rather than the self. Given the way in which that planetary health has been degraded, there is no prospect of aligning human time with planetary time, which now operates on scales incomprehensible to the observer:

Will the river fill again.
Will there be pity taken.
Will it ever rain again.
What is ever. What is again. (245)

Instead of a conventional sidereal understanding of chronology, there is only a sense of fragmentation and decay, occurring on a geological scale. In a way that evokes the final lines of Percy Bysshe Shelley’s “Mont Blanc”—“And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea, / If to the human mind’s imaginings / Silence and solitude were

vacancy?”—Graham questions what will constitute the time beyond humans, in which human systems of meaning are no longer valid (1107). These parallels are made particularly apparent in the final lines of Graham’s poem: “Blood flows in my hand writing this. / The crows glance through the upper branches. / They are not waiting” (245). The death-stalking crows are either not waiting for the speaker to die, or are not waiting for whatever the poet is bringing forth; they are operating according to their own temporal priorities.

Graham’s poetry presents a refashioning of the lyric self, in which perspective and agency are re-determined by the co-optation of the self within technologically enacted systems of power. Where this refashioning becomes most apparent is in the relation of the lyric self to nature, which, even in its state of crisis, remains a primary imaginative resource for the poet, but which has also been co-opted by a cybernetic worldview. I argue that the contradictions of such a position are the points where an Anthropocene sense of the sublime becomes apparent: the conflict between nature as idealized object and nature as degraded resource; the friction between a seemingly empowered posthuman identity and a comprehensively mapped and mediated self; and the incommensurability of a Romantic view of freedom in nature and a machinic view of autonomous cybernetic systems populating the natural world. These contradictions foreground the intractable paradoxes of the Anthropocene, while manifesting a more ecologically focused version of the dualities and paradoxes referenced in Galloway’s *Romantico-cybernetic sublime*.

Trevor Paglen: Sublime Palimpsests

Galloway’s hybrid sublime allows for multiple readings, signaling its value as an experiential figure for incommensurability as well as a means of thinking through the representative impasse such incommensurability gives rise to. This latter vector is explored by Trevor Paglen, an American artist who has spent his career documenting the aesthetic properties of state power, particularly in terms of its embodiment in an infrastructure that is hidden from the general populace. In contrast to Graham, Paglen focuses on the aesthetic imbrication that results when the aesthetic of Romantic nature is overlaid with that of technologies of control and surveillance. By doing so, Paglen reveals the interrelation between these two aesthetic forms and their underlying political determinations. Paglen is not interested in interrogating how such forms have refashioned selfhood, or, indeed, how their opacity functions to determine systems of oppression, but in how that opacity is inherent to technological domination, manifestations of which return us to a sublime of spectacle and alterity. Selfhood is diminished in such a practice, not as a means of limiting its aesthetic potential, but so as to reveal the immensity of the control architectures being captured and the way in which, in this sublime of state invisibility, obfuscation has been transposed from the unintelligibly of nature in Romanticism to the imperatives of state surveillance and control.

In photographic series such as *Limit Telephotography* and *The Other Night Sky*, Paglen explores the interface of visibility and invisibility as it relates to the machinery of power, machinery that is inherently built on opacity. In the former series, Paglen used high-powered lenses, some of which were designed for astronomical photography, to photograph top secret government sites from extreme distances, thereby questioning how an aesthetic of secrecy can operate within an otherwise familiar geographic landscape. By creating photographs of these highly classified military sites, which are otherwise completely hidden from the public, Paglen extends his gaze technologically, not as a means of piercing the veil of secrecy—often all his photos reveal are indistinct office buildings and hangars—but to make that veil evident, to show the secret architecture of state control that operates within American society, but which cannot be seen or tracked. As many of these facilities operate on an extra-judicial basis, their existence is itself a form of state alterity, and the limitations on public knowledge of such operations parallel the limitation these operations put upon democratic processes. Julian Stallabrass explains that this focus on such operations reveals the different “limits” that lie at the heart of Paglen's project: “the limits of democracy, secrecy, visibility, and the knowable” (3).

The opacity Paglen captures extends to the texture of his photographs, in which blurriness, light features, and general abstraction are prevalent. Forms of abstraction make these seemingly mundane buildings strange, suffusing them with a palpable sense of mystery and, ultimately, sublimity. As John P. Jacob argues, “[b]y augmenting the eye with technology, *Limit Telephotography* first made visible what is hidden in the landscape [...] the photographs ask, ‘How is this space called secrecy produced?’” (35). The interrogation of such a space elevates the photographs from the itemization and categorization of investigative reporting to the space of the sublime, which Paglen himself defines as “the fading of the sensible, or the sense you get when you realize you’re unable to make sense of something” (qtd. in Weiner). The realization that the architecture of control exists in such forms is accompanied by the knowledge that its sublimity reflects the impossibility of truly comprehending the network of power of which one is a part. While Graham’s poetry depicts the effect of such an awareness of sublime entanglement on the observer, Paglen pushes against the limits of what can be seen of this architecture, and therefore undercovers the opacity of state operations as a sublime space, evident only indirectly or in a fragmented form.

The objects of Paglen’s photographs include chemical and biological weapons training grounds, prisons specializing in extraordinary rendition (the state-sponsored transfer of suspects from one state to another for the purposes of extradition, interrogation, and/or torture), and aircraft testing sites, among other establishments. Together, they represent a half-hidden networked architecture, underpinning and facilitating the visible architecture of power in ways that are not possible to track. What Paglen does is document the existence of such an architecture as a means of interrogating the limits of the visible within the existing apparatus of power. Sublimity, for Paglen, is a materially instantiated aesthetic, which derives from

a realization (always partial and compromised) that there is a network of power too large, complex, and multifaceted to observe, and that this network thrives on opacity and invisibility, which allows it to operate in ways that visible state power could not. The technology of Paglen's camera facilitates the realization of this opaque architecture, but it is also the technology of the very military and state surveillance that is the object of his photography. Paglen's work thus evokes Fredric Jameson's understanding of the technological sublime, in which certain forms of technology provide a distorted figuration of the "world system" (37):

The technology of contemporary society [...] seems to offer some privileged representational shorthand for grasping a network of power and control even more difficult for our minds and imaginations to grasp: the whole new decentered global network of the third stage of capital itself. (37-38)

As in Jameson's formulation, Paglen's works, particularly the *Limit Telephotography* series, do not seek to depict the global network of capital, but they do shine an opaque light on the network of power that underpins capital's dominance and facilitates its exploitative and extractive practices.

Where Paglen's work overlaps with the Romantic aesthetic of the sublime is in its allusions to the work of landscape photographers who documented the American West in the nineteenth century. This is most evident in *The Other Night Sky*, in which Paglen replicates some of the iconic photographs of historical precursors such as Timothy O'Sullivan and Ansel Adams, but expands the frame vertically to include the trajectory of communications satellites, including those used for military surveillance. The result, as in a work such as "DMSP 5B/F4 From Pyramid Lake Indian Reservation (Military Meteorological Satellite; 1973-054A)," which references O'Sullivan's photo of the same lake from 1867, make clear the links between an aesthetic of spectacular wilderness and an aesthetic of technological infiltration—an aesthetic resonance that is central to Leo Marx's notion of the technological sublime, which predates Jameson's (145). Paglen's suggestion that O'Sullivan and others were the "reconnaissance satellites" of their day foregrounds the way in which these early photographs were a means of mapping and codifying the American West in the service of both capital and state power (qtd. in Jacob 41). These photographers were also, paradoxically, influential in the consolidation of the national parks system, which, alongside their impetus of environmental preservation, were in many senses colonial projects (Spaulding). The reconnaissance satellites that Paglen captures in orbit above the lake today are merely the most cutting-edge means of advancing the same epistemological goal: the inscription of nature as capturable on behalf of the knowledge systems of state power and capital. The intrusion of satellite technologies into Paglen's frames, alongside the ancient rock formations of the American West, also gestures towards a duality that we have already noted in conceptions of the Anthropocene—what Paglen calls the "temporal contradiction [...] in which Marx's space-time annihilation chafes against the deep time of the earth" (*The Last Pictures* xii). Paglen foregrounds the disjunctive impact of this duality, which is central to the

experience of the Anthropocene, in a way that subverts the monumentalism of the earlier photographers.

In Paglen's work then, the Romantic view of an unblemished landscape, sublime in its scale and emptiness, is overlaid by the cybernetic systems of control and communication management that make up the modern architecture of power. Paglen thus makes apparent the synthesis of Romanticism and cybernetics that informs contemporary sublimity on an aesthetic level by not only revealing the intersection of these two aesthetic paradigms, but also by showing how these paradigms share tendencies towards a totalizing form of aesthetic mastery that elevates the viewer over and above the environmental object. As Paglen claims, "[c]ontemporary military and reconnaissance satellites are ideologically and technologically descended from the men who once roamed the deserts and mountains photographing blank spots on the maps" (qtd. in Jacob 47). Paglen's work suggests that the surveying missions carried out by these nineteenth-century photographers were colonial enterprises, and while their photographs evoke the immensity of sublime nature, the pristine quality these landscapes retain obscures the native peoples who occupied them. Satellite technology surveys and targets to different ends, but with the same imperative of capture and control. Paglen therefore overlays several distinct but interrelated modalities of the sublime, such as those pertaining to nature, the military, and digital technology, to name three of David Nye's seven categories (Nye).

Underscoring the sense of the invisibility of the architecture of power, Paglen's series *Cable Landing Sites* documents the points at which ocean-traversing cables carrying internet communication signals reach land. Utilizing material taken from Edward Snowden's leaks of classified material, Paglen visualizes the massive data gathering enterprise that Snowden's leaks uncovered and shows how this enterprise is carried out in the background of everyday life. Mundane scenes of seaside activities are juxtaposed with geospatial material culled from classified sources that show how, hidden beneath these banal scenes, is the infrastructure of surveillance. The actual subjects of the photographs—the cables—are obscured, buried underground or deep undersea, making the diptychs an exercise in inference: how do the operations of state communication hegemony intersect with the mundanity of everyday life, or with the apparently pristine picturesque of nature? In a way that mirrors Graham's evocation of the materiality of fiberoptic cables as a choke point in which the entanglement of the self and hidden networks of power becomes apparent, Paglen's depiction of these landing sites shows how a seemingly serene scene can be underpinned by an architecture of power stretching far beyond any individual's perspective.

The maps that accompany the photographs of cable landing sites are, like the Snowden files, examples of another form of sublimity that Paglen has highlighted in his work, that of the "bureaucratic sublime" (Weiner). Unlike the Romantic sublime, the bureaucratic sublime is achieved through the layering of seemingly mundane, yet at the same time overwhelming, administrative detail scrapped from the bureaucracy

of state power. The effect is that of tedium rather than awe, but the dread of the sublime is still present, as it becomes evident that the workings of power, the infrastructure of global military and economic might, functions on the basis of such bureaucratic density of information. Sianne Ngai's notion of "stuplimity," which reveals the limits of comprehension through "an encounter with [...] finite bits and scraps of material in repetition" has many parallels with the bureaucratic sublime, as it also reveals how a sublime magnitude is now more often experienced through its fragmentation, which evokes boredom as much as dread, but which yet retains the sense of the individual being dwarfed by an irreconcilable immensity (271). Such an aesthetic is also evident in a different mode in *Limit Telephotography*, where it is evoked by the dreary, humdrum buildings that make up the black sites Paglen photographs, and from which extraordinary rendition was carried out. Similarly, Paglen's compilation of nonsensical NSA codes names in *Code Names of the Surveillance State* functions to reveal the role of the banal in the totality of state architecture. Another series, *Seventeen Letters from the Deep State*, has a similar impact as it reveals the legal mundanity of such operations. It is made up of the letters carried on airplanes that were sent on rendition flights. Written in the dull legalese of bureaucracy, these letters evoke a creeping sense of dread as the purpose to which they were put is considered and the viewer is encouraged to see the immensity of the sublime operations of power they enable. They therefore show how the sublime can underpin the more mundane 'stuplime' of Ngai's formulation, as the immensity of the former term comes into view through the accreted banality of the latter. Evoking the negative sublime, which abstracts the existence of an incomprehensible whole from a series of fragments, the mundane bureaucratic language highlighted by these works intimates the existence of the totality of state architecture while simultaneously showing how it eschews comprehension.

Conclusion

While Paglen's artworks reveal how hidden networks of power intersect with the mundanity of the everyday, and, indeed, are premised upon that mundanity as an aesthetic, Graham's mode of disjunctive juxtaposition renders the incommensurability of individual selfhood with the totality of the operations of power. Paglen works on the surface of visibility, pushing at its weaker points, while Graham attempts to show how the encounter with hegemony, manifested through digital technology or environmental co-optation, undermines the stability of the self. In the service of this hegemony, in both Graham and Paglen, the dominant mode of production and extraction is withdrawn from view, providing an experience of sublime limitation that compels stasis on the part of the individual. Both Graham and Paglen therefore, in different ways, show how the Anthropocene sublime functions: as an aesthetic form that highlights the unrepresentable way in which everyday life is complexly woven into systems of extraction, domination, and exploitation that take the environment as their object and that are enmeshed within broader structures of

state and extra-state power that remain largely invisible. Galloway summarizes how the kind of opacity that both Graham and Paglen highlight functions in relation to systems of power:

Consider the logic of how the thing that most permeates our daily lives will be the same thing that retreats from any tangible malleability in our hands and minds. But what are these things? We must speak of the information economy. We must simply describe today's mode of production [...] these are the things that are unrepresentable. And are they not also harbingers of a new pervasive and insidious social violence? (92)

As I noted, what is missing in Galloway's account are the operations of environmental extraction and annexation that have led to climate breakdown, and which intersect with this information economy in terms of material inputs and negative effects. Nonetheless, Galloway's argument that the "point of unrepresentability is the point of power" makes it clear how modes of production and social violence, including extractive systems, are coordinated as a means of establishing both control and opacity, and how sublimity can function as an index of that unrepresentability—something we have seen in both Graham's and Paglen's work (92). Systems of control and systems of extraction are further intertwined on a discursive level by what Tiqqun calls the common intent towards "*total transparency*, an absolute correspondence between the map and the territory, a will to knowledge accumulated to such degrees that it becomes a will to power" (29). The transformative extent of this power is signaled by the all-encompassing nature of the Anthropocene, which is also the manifestation of the total transparency claimed by cybernetics: the will to make everything computable has resulted in the realization of the magnitude of planetary disruption that is registered by this new geological epoch.

If we take Galloway's intervention as a means of understanding how the self (postulated as Romantic in terms of its capacity for play and creative enterprise) intersects with a social-political framework (postulated as cybernetic in its focus on transparency, control, and communicative feedback), it becomes clear that both Graham and Paglen show how that relation is underpinned by material environmental realities. Taken together, the specific opacity generated by such interrelations, considered either from the subject position (as in Graham) or as an aesthetic conjunction (as in Paglen), represents the site of an Anthropocene sublime. Graham and Paglen both interrogate the limits of such a sensibility, which, for both of them, offers a language of incommensurability that gestures at what is obscured and therefore offers a limited means of contesting its inscrutability. By reflecting on the way in which the sublime figures systems of overwhelming complexity, both Graham's and Paglen's works ultimately offer a means of inscribing ourselves into the network of extraction and power, and itemizing its deleterious effects on selfhood and the environment, however partial or compromised that inscription may be.

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Zombies, Attention and the Sublime in the Digital Anthropocene

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Abstract

This essay offers a meta-critique of the aesthetic and political categories of “the Anthropocene sublimes.” It is interested in the short-film *Zombies* (2019) by filmmaker Baloji, and takes it as an aesthetic catalyst to address some timely questions about the Anthropocene vis-à-vis the digital ecosystem that surround us: What are the prospects of the sublime in an era of generalized attention deficiency? How is the imaginative potential of the sublime foreclosed by our collective suffering of attention deficiency in a Capitalocene? Relatedly, what is the link between, on the one hand, the common interruption of a sustained attention and, on the other hand, the thwarted efficacy of the sublime as an apparatus of critical and eco-consciousness? I look to the film *Zombies* to consider the possibility of responding to its inferred injunction to reclaim attention as one practice in countering the snares of a networked global economy driven by an abiding digital imperative.

Keywords: Attention, attention economy, attention ecology, digital Anthropocene, the sublime.

Resumen

Este ensayo ofrece una meta-crítica de las categorías estéticas y políticas de “los sublimes del Antropoceno.” Se centra en el cortometraje *Zombies* (2019) del cineasta Baloji, tomándolo como un catalizador estético para abordar cuestiones clave sobre el Antropoceno en relación con el ecosistema digital que nos rodea: ¿Cuáles son las perspectivas de lo sublime en una era de déficit generalizado de atención? ¿Cómo se ve limitado el potencial imaginativo de “lo sublime” por nuestro sufrimiento colectivo de déficit de atención en el Capitaloceno? En esta misma línea, ¿qué relación existe entre, por un lado, la interrupción constante de la atención sostenida y, por otro, la eficacia menguante de lo sublime como dispositivo de conciencia crítica y ecológica? A través de *Zombies*, exploro la posibilidad de responder a su aparente llamada a reclamar la atención como una práctica para contrarrestar las trampas de una economía global en red impulsada por un imperativo digital permanente.

Palabras clave: Atención, economía de la atención, ecología de la atención, Antropoceno digital, lo sublime.

Compared to the rather dull program of sustainable development, theorizing the movement of humanity as a telluric force seems much more exciting than reflecting on modes of production, energy transition, or degrowth.

Jean-Baptiste Fressoz

I don't believe our species can survive unless we fix this. We cannot have a society in which, if two people wish to communicate, the only way that can happen is if it's financed by a third person who wishes to manipulate them.

Jaron Lanier

Exploring the convergence of attention economies and planetary ecologies, this essay offers a meta-critique of the aesthetic and political categories of the Anthropocene sublimities. Traversing the terrain of the attention economy by way of a politics of aesthetics, I explore how Congolese artist, Baloji, in his ecological short-film *Zombies* (2019), artfully captures the intersection of aesthetics, technology, and attention in the contemporary digital economy. I argue that Baloji renders the digital Anthropocene as it manifests in the Congo in ways that complicate familiar notions of the sublime. With its 15-minute runtime, Baloji's self-directed short can be read as an extended music video to an Afrobeat urban soundtrack that challenges the basic distinction between "traditional" Congolese music—soukous and rumba—and "modern" tonalities of techno and pop. No doubt, the effectiveness of its visual language is enhanced by a corresponding sonic texture that indexes the ecological degradation of Kinshasa—the capital and largest city of the Democratic Republic of Congo—along with the zombification of its inhabitants whose behavior, desire and affective disposition is overdetermined by digital, platform networks and their associated "attention economy." I consider the possibility of responding to the film's inferred injunction to reclaim attention as one practice of countering the snares of a networked global economy driven by an abiding digital imperative.

The political value of aesthetics may appear overstated at a time when planetary life is more threatened than ever by techno-imperial forces of what Nick Srnicek would call "platform capitalism" (10). While the discourses of the Anthropocene have been ringing the alarm to alert us that we're projected towards a point of no-return, they have also inadvertently fostered a nihilistic attitude that there's no stopping the "natural" forward thrust of innovation. Though efforts can be made to curtail and delay climate catastrophe, such an attitude implies, we're all headed for a fall, and it's best we buckle up for the inevitable. Politicians and some state governments have even come to accept the planetary cost of unbridled innovation in tech, be it the shocking amount of electricity it takes to power our aggressive forays into artificial intelligence, the next and ultimate frontier of the tech economy (Bridle), or the virtual enslavement and defilement of humans made to

break their back in toxic mines in order to extract the raw materials that go into the devices of our daily consumption habits (Kara).

Against this backdrop, *Zombies* offers fleeting, impressionistic flashes of the ubiquity of the mobile device through a figure akin to the *dérive*, one who practices attention to sensibilities, the typical figure of psychogeography who takes in the urban surroundings to deliberately reflect on the emotional and psychic shifts, the spirit, of the city. The opening scene of *Zombies* takes place in a barbershop, where a patron sings the catchy earworm that will come to a crescendo in subsequent scenes: “light on face / everybody shines / stuck to their phones / [...] people dance no more / everyone got the spotlight.” As our protagonist leaves the barbershop, probably having picked up the earworm himself, we perceive an atmosphere of vibrant potentiality brimming in the streets of Kinshasa as he walks briskly through congested traffic and crowded alleyways. Then we cut to a sequence in which our guiding figure of the *dérive*, roaming into night, passes by some curious phenomena amidst the humdrum of the bustling streets. The “ubiquity” of the mobile device is suggested from the start, as we observe him observing, standing as both a witness and spectator to a street-fight between two boys. That is, we watch our protagonist witness the real scene unfolding in front of him, as he simultaneously observes it over the shoulder of a bystander who films the brawl on their phone. Right next to this situation, three people stand in the dark with their arms stretched out, holding a smartphone angled just above the head as if to capture a selfie. A white light from their devices illuminates their motionless faces, and we see the first instance of the ubiquity, “the pixilated mirror” that works only to create “a ubiquitous dream in a megabyte mirage” (*Zombies*). As one critic notes, what the film depicts are ostensibly “instances of incessant dependency on mobile technology, and vis-à-vis colonial ways of being and existing in the world,” a world in which experience can sometimes feel “not real unless it is snapped, posted, viewed and liked” (Dayile). It takes an artist as versatile and all-purpose as Baloji to draw out the themes of a techno zeitgeist. In an age like ours, in which forms of expression such as images, video, sound and text have taken a socially adhesive quality, Baloji’s film warns of the corrupting relation between constant connectivity our collective attention, as well as the degradation of the environment. Using diverse aesthetic forms, from a consistently flamboyant visual language to a sonic and poly-rhythmic sensibility accompanied by elegant dance, *Zombies* touches on the web of socio-political relationality, the self-possession and individuality of an attention economy, and the potential vitality of life lived against the backdrop of a necro-political and neo-colonial structure.

From the first frame in the barbershop to the end credits presented in the form of back-and-forth text messages, the cellphone as the film’s conceit is everywhere present. The technical and cinematographic choices that contribute to the production suggest an experimentalist on the move: the poetry and musicality of a hybrid, visual-sonic enterprise, coupled with the urgency of the medium as the message, makes *Zombies* a video object conducive to easy circulation and distribution. Indeed, the film is shot using an ARRI Mini camera in a 1.33:1 aspect ratio, giving it a retro and box-

shaped frame reminiscent of an old television screen. Beginning with this immediate impression of staring at an old TV, the literal frame and visual effect produced by the aspect ratio is meant to reinforce the ubiquity of screens in our day-to-day rituals. At the same time, the geometric parameters produced by this framing indicate that we are distanced from that which we observe, even as we participate in screening its message and medium. Moreover, the entire film blends the brightness and highlights of the camera it was made on, renowned for its color science and its “dynamic range”—that is, its capacity to enhance the best of both worlds, dark tones as well as bright hues in vivid and richly saturated image quality, evidenced in the contrast of shadows and vibrant strokes that are everywhere in *Zombies*. With a tendency to synesthesia, Baloji is drawn to yellow as representative of Kinshasa’s soundscape. Indeed, this color resonates with “Kaniama: Yellow Version,” the first of only three tracks on his 2019 album of the same name. In this particular film, yellow attracts attention from the very beginning: a yellow t-shirt worn by the barber; a close up of his handy work reveals his clippers—yellow masking-tape wrapped around the base of the blade that glides across a bald head of a patron; a convoy of Kinshasa’s yellow minibus taxis reflected in the mirror he sings to; an assortment of foods sold by street vendors. Yellow is the color in which the artist figures this world of half-aliveness, the anti-social mood of the digital world and, importantly, a reactivating potential within it.

While the film’s portrayal of the social and cultural cost of digital capitalism is a buoyant springboard to discussion of the video object, I’m equally interested in the scenes of resistance and world-making in Baloji’s depiction of Kinshasa as synecdoche for several global south geographies characterized by their historical and material underdevelopment through Euro-American extractivist schemes. Baloji’s film provokes several questions about the affective modalities of the digital Anthropocene, for instance, the unevenly borne weight of what scholars have called “solastalgia,” the emotional and psychic distress brought on by a wounded world from which we have become estranged (Albrecht). I’m therefore interested in *Zombies* because it offers an aesthetic vector by which to raise some timely questions about the Anthropocene vis-à-vis the digital ecosystem that surrounds us: What are the prospects of the sublime in an era of generalized attention deficiency? How is the imaginative potential of “the sublime” foreclosed by our collective suffering of attention deficiency in what has been dubbed a “Capitalocene” (Moore 5-9)? Relatedly, what is the link between, on the one hand, the common interruption of a sustained attention and, on the other hand, the thwarted efficacy of the sublime as an apparatus of critical and eco-consciousness?

I track the combination of music and visuals in *Zombies* as an aesthetic challenge to the ocular-centrism of prevailing concepts of the sublime. Baloji’s musically inflected short-film engenders a type of sonic sublime which registers sound itself as a quasi-spiritual impulse that exceeds the ambit of representation, and that thereby reorients discussions about attention and cognition in the era of the digital Anthropocene. The rationale for taking *Zombies* as an interpretive guide is that

it brings together a critique of the instruments of technology, as well as the self-styling platforms of the network ecology, to offer commentary on the political economy of attention in our techno-social time, a time when the modalities of socialization have become profoundly attached to commercialization.

Naturally, one of the intertextual threads in Baloji's project is the spirit of Fela Kuti—the grandfather of Afrobeats. Bode Omojola's *Yoruba Music in the Twentieth Century* (2012) or Sola Olorunyomi's *Afrobeat! Fela and the Imagined Continent* (2022) are helpful maps in tracing at least one branch of *Zombies'* sonic and aesthetic genealogy. Indeed, Fela's 1976 record, *Zombie*, is a close relative of the film. Baloji's connection to Fela's record is both technical and thematic, though this may go unnoticed since the 1976 title-track is often reductively understood to be a caricature of a soldier, a yes-man fully at the disposal of the Nigerian state armed forces. We could also consider that Fela's eponymous fourteen-minute opening track is not merely a critique of soldiers' obsequiousness to military rule. It also serves as a warning to those civilians beyond the preserve of the military, criticizing their ethical pliability, their being willfully committed to the domestication and pacification of their minds by any controlling authority that wishes to manipulate them. Fela's "Zombie" famously uses call and response to play out a commando drill. In the list of commands that the speaker issues, between his call and the chorus' response, there is a faint sense that psychic potentiality is there for the taking. The song's syncopated baseline is both invitation and suspension—you follow the motion of a beckoning groove that teases a pause or caesura before being yanked out of a trance when Fela barks "Attention!" like a General snapping his fingers at a foot-soldier drifting off on duty. Attention, as the analogue word, here, prepares the zombie to obediently see to a litany of arbitrary instructions. The universal reach of Fela's political intent and social commentary in "Zombie" resonates with the thematic focus of other tracks on the same record such as "Mr. Follow Follow." Philip Effiong has observed a common misinterpretation of the soldier as zombie in the song, noting that while the commands in the song "reinforce the overall cynical tone, however, these commands are not exclusively used by the armed forces. They are also used during drills and parades by members of Nigeria's Customs Service, Police Force, Boys' Brigade, Girl Scouts and Immigration Service" (66). In other words, the many headed organs of the state and general civilian public. Fela's critique in "Zombie," both the title-track and record, fully anticipated the effects of a society zonked out and in waiting, amenable to the normalization of their own docility. After all, as he repeats—"Zombie no go think, unless you tell am to think." It is this recurring and all-out appropriation of mind and attention that telegraphs us directly to Baloji's concern with the digital economy's control and large-scale modification of both human and nature.



Figure 1: *Zombies*, 2019.

***Zombies*, Platform Complex and the Digital Sublime**

We can begin from the idea that our experience of time passing is acutely felt when, increasingly, every facet of our lives unfolds within the ambit of the digital. The link between, on the one hand, the erosion of public relations and ethics and, on the other hand, the erosion of planet, is a feature of the digital age that reveals how “capitalist colonialist thinking, loneliness, and an abusive stance towards the environment all coproduce one another” (Odell xvii). The affective modulations of “sense communities,” along with a corruption of cognitive capacities, suggest the need for more psycho-political accounts of the aesthetic, cultural and social dynamics organized by an economy that relies on digital information technology. I would therefore estimate that the problem in the digital Anthropocene lies at the juncture of time and temporality; the commodification of our inherent neuroplasticity; the profit-based manipulation of individual and collective libidinal energies; and the slow violence unleashed upon the earth. This is to say, whether it is the virtual mining of mass data on the one end, or the illicit mining of cobalt on the other, extraction is the name of the game in the contemporary digital economy.

Weaving various threads of debates from the domain of the attention economy and affect theory, I suggest that questions about how and where to reroute our attention are crucial in the effort to locate the center of gravity for political action in a time of the digital Anthropocene. I propose that we might think about attention not merely as one casualty of politics among others, but to rather understand attention as the very birthplace of politics. This would mean that awareness of the present, to which a recouped attention span potentially gives way, might approach an answer to overarching questions about the infrastructures of connectivity and the outward resemblance of a new type of attention crisis. One example of a question that presently haunts cultural critique, and that has gained more sustained inquiry in

recent years, is posed by the artist and theorist Jenny Odell in her popular manifesto, *How To Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy* (2019). There she prompts: “What does it mean to construct digital worlds while the actual world is crumbling before our eyes?” (xiv). As I show in this essay, the anticipation of such a question comes up against the point that Balaji’s film seeks to illustrate: in contemporary society, the digital world has all but eclipsed the material world, or has at least profoundly subordinated to it such that the boundary between online and off has become irrevocably unstable.

The machinations of the algorithm’s operations and processes today are simply too overwhelming to fully comprehend. James Bridle, in his book *The New Dark Age* (2016), approaches a description of contemporary cyberspace as sublime when he writes that the “cloud” today is “the central metaphor of the internet: a global system of great power and energy that nevertheless retains the aura of something noumenal and numinous, something almost impossible to grasp” (13). The sublime, as an intense experience of the sensorium often characterized as unspeakable because it troubles, eludes, and unsettles re-presentation, is not easily backed-up by the signifiatory powers of a metaphor, and we might even say it brings metaphoricity itself to crisis. This is, at least, according to the Kantian model in which the analytic of the sublime consists primarily as a matter of mentality or cognition, and, we should also add, as a matter of attention. To the Kantian tradition of the sublime, we might also raise a political and conceptual paradox from the perspective of the contemporary moment that has to do, for one thing, with our ability to make ourselves available to an experience of the sublime in the first instance.

One hopes that the sublime is in the material world and not on the screen. Yet in order to be seriously stunned into awe by what I perceive, I must first secure the presence of mind to notice (that I am having) an experience. In the attention crisis of the digital, however, the more time I spend disposed to and preoccupied by platform networks, the more I squander opportunities wherein I might stumble upon something transcendental, that which activates an awareness of the time of perception and situatedness in place. This paradox of the sublime therefore calls into question its cultural-analytic quality in a moment when our collective attention spans have waned, when psychic and imaginative life is shot through with algorithmic overdeterminations.

In his book, *The Political Sublime* (2018), Michael Shapiro ventures to “articulate a politics of aesthetics that can capture the political implications of catastrophic events” (2) and thereby attempts to retrieve the category of the sublime for political ends. By allowing for the possibility that a politics of aesthetics might facilitate interventions that help us apprehend and “make sense of” our present political struggles against institutional and other forms of power, he defends the analytic of the sublime from charges that it is outdated and indulgent, if not somewhat conservative. If there is aesthetic and political value to be found in the sublime, we catch at it from the Rancièrian vantage point that “politics is sublime,” and that its sublimity inheres, importantly, in its interface with radical alterity. Redeploying the

Kantian model of aesthetic faculty, Shapiro asserts that “the aesthetic nature of politics” rather than signaling “a specific single world” instead calls for the recognition of a “world of competing worlds” (4). That would mean, in the most optimistic and reconfigured payoff of this analytic, different “sense communities” find and see each other more relationally to try and exploit an intuition of the transcendental in search of a shared ethos:

the attention-grabbing experience of the sublime therefore leads not (as Kant had hoped) toward a shared moral sensibility but to an ethico-political sensibility that recognizes the fragilities of our grasp of experience and enjoins engagement with a pluralist world in which the in-common must be continually negotiated. (4)

The political wellspring articulated above does not merely yield aesthetic value judgments, but also ways of seeing, feeling and therefore inhabiting the world. Given the multiplicity of individuated worlds in the regime of the digital and in platform capitalism, the revolutionary potential contained in an aesthetic politics may yet suture the ever-widening chasm between the atomized individual who thinks and moves within a solipsistic world, and a social relationality from which techno-capitalist forces have alienated us.

While Balaji’s film gestures towards the social fracture resulting from the mediation of mobile devices, it also subtly hints at the movement of time passing, and the ecological timescale of the planet. In this sense *Zombies* shares a political objective with the works of scholars of attention such as Tiziana Terranova who, in her book *After the Internet: Networks Between Capital and the Common* (2020), considers the possibility of loopholes of retreat from the enclosed architecture of the internet. If the self-contained individual of neoliberalism faces a hard time staging resistance to the attention economy, it is because they are coerced into perpetual harvesting of their attentive and cognitive faculties as well as their affective drives:

Like and dislikes, beliefs and disbeliefs, unthought motivations are the new psychic forces subtending modes of cooperation that do not imply division of labor but relations, such as following and being followed, shaped by the action of forces such as sympathy and antipathy, asymmetrical and mutual possession. (40)

There are several positions from which to track the development of an attention economy. The predominant view of attention is that it is a resource and that it is therefore bound to scarcity. The model of attention scarcity, as Terranova vividly and helpfully sketches, follows the pattern of market and commercial orders when confronted with the abyss of Information that encompasses the internet. The bleak irony of a scarcity equation is that: “attention here becomes the quantity which is ‘consumed’ by that which is abundant, that is, information” (35). Simply put, there is a sure limit to the checkbook I use to pay attention, there is only so much of my mindshare that I can allocate to different tasks at the same time. So forceful is this molestation of the imaginative realm that Odell half-jokingly writes, “one might say that the parks and libraries of the self are always about to be turned into condos” (15). Therefore, the idea of limited supply and unlimited demand configures an attention economy as “the re-orientation of capitalist competition for scarce resources towards

the scramble to capture users' limited attention span" (Terranova 68). In this model, attention happens under the auspices of time, and since by all accounts time is money, it goes without saying that the apparatuses of engineered addiction only work to hold us captive in its cycles of reproduction. There are no unwilling subjects, because even when we strive to "do nothing," we exist in an ecology of networked platforms coopted by finance capital to such an extent that nothing can easily become something, and the becoming-something of "nothing" can itself be captured within the feedback loop of surplus-value, attention and time that flows directly into the entities vying for our incessant engagement with their product.

It's interesting to note that although our existing relation to an attention economy may seem natural, the emergence of platform capitalism is, technically, preceded by a socialist impulse. Indeed, free mass sharing of data "mostly by means of non-proprietary software" (28) laid the foundation for tech companies to turn scarcity into revenue. If the organization of society in service of a common good seems utopic or less than possible, it's better to view the trajectory of the platform age as capital's internal retaliation against "the worrisome possibility of digital socialism" (28) engendered by those earlier free modes of participation. The subsequent adoption of platforms *en masse* is indicative of the consumerist temperament that marked potentiality as lucrative and sought to redefine growth "from participation to revenue" (36). The platform complex does not exist *ex nihilo*, and though it requires growing participation of individuals, the restitution of attention is not an individual's issue:

If the attention economy somehow degrades the quality of libidinal energy, this is not due to some intrinsic limits of the human capacity to pay attention or to the inevitable effects of technique, but rather to a specific conception and organization of the economic system which overlooks the importance of libidinal energy to the production of the psyche and the social. (82)

Attention, then, is not just a matter of concentration on a specific targeted point, we could say that attention is also a spiritual and soulful matter, it is the phenomena of non-pecuniary relations that are impervious to the primary logic of exchange. We might speak of attention to mean the time involved in loving and caring for oneself as well as others, attention shows up as disposition to intuition, as the space from which a wish for climate alleviation or alleviation of its resulting anxieties grows. In short, attention has to do with the direction towards which our desires and aspirations flow. Thinking of the Anthropocene under these circumstances, the stakes of attention pertain to how we might become exposed to influences of moments that we call sublime, in the context of an attention ecosystem that militates rapaciously against our cognitive and attentive capacities. Relatedly, Balaji's film itself stages a serious and pressing question: in what ways does the "qualitative degradation of attention" (85) reflect the quantitative degradation of the environment?

One response comes via a historical map of the internet's broken infrastructure, such as the one Terranova traces, wherein we have displaced the initially enabling architecture of the internet with the self-aggrandizing platforms of

networked communication. Whereas the former might have denoted an aspirational network of inter-personal connectivity commensurate with space-time, the latter operates on a quite different register, and harnesses a combination of connectivity and computation to drive what she calls “Corporate Platform Complex” (CPC) (8). The term itself neatly describes the economic and cultural situation in which the ongoing transformation and displacement of “the internet” by platformed companies such as Meta, Apple, and X dominates. While the Internet proper was once an open and public place of possibility and newness, it is now a back-benched player, not quite off screen, but certainly surpassed by a networked attention ecology that is centered on predictability, preemption, and profitable metrics of a capitalist market (8). This is why, reflecting on his own unrest regarding the persuasion architectures of platforms, the computer scientist, Jaron Lanier, rejects the term “social networks” as a framework for viewing the platform complex, and suggest that they instead function, more directly, as “behavior modification empires”.

It’s clear from the situation outlined above that from the perspective of a techno media culture, one in which an unyielding platform economy rules, a type of cognitive saturation can compromise political organizing and preparation for whatever imagined and wished for futures we might create. This is because, as mentioned earlier, the question of attention is also a question of time, of the political and philosophical inventory that discloses the stakes of a vanishing present. To that extent, depicting subjects in various states of enthrallment with their devices, *Zombies* alludes to the acceleration of what Terranova would call “the systematic integration of communication and computation” (16) as it points to the seductions of Big Tech and the self-absorbing nature of networked platforms in the contemporary moment. Baloji himself makes cameo appearances throughout the film, often off center, as a silent observer of the different scenes of ordinary life in which the mobile device is ubiquitous. The recurring appearance of screens and mirrors hints at a deeper symbolic relation between the two; in one scene, a woman in a hair salon gets her hair platted, and as an intergenerational conversation between the older hair stylist and the younger customer ensues, the latter gleefully exclaims that her posting a picture of her hairstyle is expected to gain three thousand followers on Facebook, revealing how motivation by online aspirations affects the ordinary decisions we make in our lives offline.

From selfie sticks fervently grasped by partygoers, to the dis-location of Virtual Reality headsets on the dancefloor, the film also gives the impression that the device has become an almost natural extension of the body. Although with a distinct conception of the spectral dimension of a visceral zombie in mind, Michael J. Burke observes in *The Ethics of Horror* (2024) that the zombie is a site “through which alterity interacts as a prosthetic extension” of the living (146). If the device as extension of the hand renders the human a zombie, or implicitly a “death bound subject,” “the technoghost manifests itself in and through technological glitches” in that the zombie alterity is “a biological glitch, an undead, cancerous excrescence, posing the slack, blank death mask to a beleaguered humanity” (146). Yet the body

represented in the film, even at risk of being turned zombie, remains a site of self-possession, hence polyrhythmic dancing abounds, whether choreographed or inscribed in the swagger of spontaneous movements in the streets, all the characters respond performatively to the refrain that calls on them to “shake your arm to see if you’re alive and kicking.” A sedating digital imperative requires movement against it, so the film insists upon the vitality of life through dance and music. The film thus recenters the corporeality of biopolitics in the age of the digital, as if Baloji is drawing from a decolonial philosophy and tradition of being that aims to reconnect the separation between mind, body and place, a task for which he relies on rhythm.

On a sonic scale, the film stands out for its interweaving several musical traditions with a contemporary flair; hip-hop melts into electronic dance with modal funk along the way, some hints of jazz and the unmistakable Lingala vocal traditions. The latter, here, includes the use of Congolese guitar with its interlocking rhythms and colorful lead solo ornamentations. The Congolese guitar is hypnotic on the soundtrack “Glossina (Zombies),” transitioning us from the club scene to the zombie/master storyboard halfway through the film; it invites its listeners into a syncopated groove, where sublimity is confronted creatively in movement. Baloji raps in French and Lingala over the guitar, while guitarist Toms Ntale intones a lament, but in a celebratory tone, the soulful warning— “deadly is the routine.” With their bodies in constant motion and corresponding in dance, the subjects of the film are awake to their situatedness and environment, and exhibit more than the demoralizing resignation to simply being made zombies.

The film’s injunction for a “Fighting Spirit, spirit/” is made clear by the presence of three zombies midway through, one made of stretchy condoms, another made of recycled plastic bottled tops, and yet another, more obviously mechanic and metallic. The zombies are not predatory in their manner; they mingle convivially with the crowd and dance to the music of a brassy marching band even when huge flames threaten them. Thandi Loewenson notes that the ensemble of these zombies “speak[s] to the terrains of the struggle for a new world,” and, given the assorted material from which each of them is made, stand as a warning that “disruptions must strike at the heart of the established order and seek to redress entangled injustices; sexual, biological, economic, extractive and ecological” (15).

Describing the “liminality of the undead” that the film employs in the figure of the zombie, Nedine Moonsamy similarly points out that the “sublime biotechnological merging of man and machine” produces a situation in which the body becomes “a technology that can prevent annihilation, but cannot stall zombification” (198). The historical status of the zombie as a symbolic figure is not insignificant, since the zombie emerges in the early twentieth century, at least from this standpoint, to assuage the fears of a white American public in the wake of Haitian people’s emancipation (197). Thus, Moonsamy describes the zombie as “a placatory figure—a wish fulfillment of a docile (black) labor force that would never revolt, never demanded better working conditions, were insensitive to pain, and that could work day and night devoted entirely to carrying out the wishes of the zombie master” (197).

According to one deployment of the zombie trope, the zombie is a “futile, disempowered” figure, and as such its “use in social protest risks transforming a battle cry into a dirge” (Lauro 6). Both as a myth and in its material body, the zombie is pregnant with questions pertaining to its ambivalent ontological status, and can thus help us identify one prevalent expression of political subjectivity within a global technocene. To be sure, a tension persists in the zombie figure’s capacity to refuse; is the zombie still a zombie even though it is seemingly enlivened by a spirit of resistance against an appropriating force? If we take the film’s invocation of the tsetse fly, or being “asleep on your feet” and “sleeping with eyes wide open” the zombie may be emblematic of the type of metaphysical crisis that is occasioned by the presence of a living-dead, as Sarah Juliet Lauro argues in *The Transatlantic Zombie* (2015). Lauro gives the name “zombie dialectic” to this double posture of the zombie, figured as “the specter of the colonial slave and that slave’s *potential for rebellion*” (5). This stance, between slavery and resistance, renders the object status of the zombie undecided, which raises doubts about the potential of a living-dead body, a half-alive figure, to adequately mount a form of rebellion against the forces of global capitalism.



Figure 2: *Zombies*, 2019.

Perhaps the most striking sequence is that which depicts a procession taking place in the hectic streets and, perched atop a throne that is carried on the shoulders of four men, sits a man of superior rank holding a crucifix. A placard that reads “Bolo for President” is hoisted at the demonstration, while the political candidate surfs his crowd of supporters. In an all-white suit and leopard print hat, Bolo intermittently throws fistfuls of money at the cheerful crowd from the rickety and untenable position that he is propped up on, as again the refrain in the song, “because deadly is the routine”—is rapped over the Afro-tech beats of the penultimate scene. It doesn’t end well for Bolo, as we soon see the body of the supreme leader, probably killed by

his erstwhile supporters, carried into a dump site to be disposed of amongst the waste and garbage of Kinshasa. The routine is deadly precisely because it is a routine, indicating that the ways of colonial servitude and exploitation which he represents cannot be “reduced, reused and recycled” for postcolonial times, he must be stopped at once and for all.

A Practice of Attention in the Anthropocene

Against the backdrop of a digital attention economy is a planetary situation, the Anthropocene, which in conventional accounts designates an epoch during which the disaster and deprivation of our planet is a result of human forces and activities. There are several reasons to question the discursive authority of “the Anthropocene,” not least because, as Jean-Baptiste Fressoz elucidates in his critique of the Anthropocene as a conceptual paradigm, “the Anthropocene is part of a larger Western Malthusian discourse: Once again, it blames the human species in general (or vague *Anthropos*, which is basically the same thing) for our predicament” (290). It harbors a primary conceptual error—the implication that our state of environmental collapse is indicative of “a threshold in environmental awareness” (297) and thus a natural, unavoidable evolutionary outcome of our otherwise human ways. If it does not quite properly isolate the specificity of the political reality of climate acceleration as arising from an implacable “technostructure oriented towards profit” (289), in its failure to foreground this point, the Anthropocene concept ignores that the environmental crisis is firstly a historico-political crisis.



Figure 3: *Zombies*, 2019.

Such a view of the Anthropocene is echoed in *Forces of Reproduction: Notes for a Counter-Hegemonic Anthropocene* (2020), wherein Stefania Barca recharacterizes the notion of the Anthropocene by underscoring its asynchronous forms and pointing to its reach beyond the geological imprint of human domination and industry. I draw on the urgency of Barca's proposal, with its echo of Sylvia Wynter's decentering tactics, that we may obtain discursive clarity if we move the needle of ecocriticism away from the prevailing master narrative about "the human" to a counter narrative that underscores what Barca calls the "forces of reproduction"—those modes of attending to, indeed paying attention to and caring for the more-than human world (12). Unlike the forces of production—science, technology and industry—such forms of reproductive world building tend to go unnoticed and are often the labor of subjects who exceed the narrowly ascribed and normative category of the human (7).

Hence when we typically think of the Anthropocene as primarily inaugurated by a binary opposition between production and reproduction, the conventional dualism of this opposition over-determines the flow and movement of human relations in its throng (37). That is, the production and reproduction couplet doesn't become just one flawed conceptual apparatus among others, but becomes instead the master model of interpreting life in the wake of the Anthropocene (7–8). In order to establish the supremacy of Man, the production and reproduction binary enjoins and enfolds other dualisms such as male/female in the domain of gender, body/mind in the sphere of economic relations, human/nature in the ecological discourses, civilized/savage in the colonial relations of power as well as other dualisms that, cumulatively, encompass Euro-capitalist modernity (54). This is another reason why the notion of the Anthropocene as the name for what transpires under techno-capitalist globalization is something of a misnomer, because it obscures and covers over the real culprit of planetary degradation, namely, industrial modernity's imperative for growth and unfettered accumulation figured in the image of the white Euro-American Man. Barca states for this reason that "by privileging the forces of production as the key historical agency of the last 250 years, the Anthropocene storyline reflects this eco-modern masculinity, insofar as it hides and discounts as irrelevant the agency of reproductive subjects and the other-than-industrial ways of interacting with the biosphere" (37).

More than this historical revision of political economy, however, Barca arrives at the idea that the ecological crisis of today emerges not merely from the dominance of a model of life that unfolds on a production/reproduction spectrum, but from a fundamental cleaving of the forces of production from those of social reproduction. And insofar as this spectrum contains all the aforementioned dualisms within it, our vulnerability to ecocide comes from the resulting assertion of the supposedly immutable values of the "forces of production" over the more empowering "forces of reproduction," the latter of which exceeds the boundaries of *homo-economicus*. After all, those who suffer the effects of climate collapse are never in any way beneficiaries of capitalist plunder that accompanies the destruction of their lands, and are

categorically excluded from the world historical “human” as the terraforming *homo-economicus* that is centered in the concept of Anthropocene.

If an analytic that accounts for the subaltern’s experience of climate should welcome the utility of displacing “the human,” that would, alas, not change the corporeal and brute force to which the humans who reside on the continent are made to suffer. As Siddhartha Kara points out in his devastating ethnographic account of the illegal and dehumanizing cobalt mining in the DRC, *Cobalt Red: How The Blood of the Congo Powers Our Lives* (2022):

The journey into the mining provinces was at times a jarring time warp. The most advanced consumer electronic devices and electric vehicles in the world rely on a substance that is excavated by the blistered hands of peasants using picks, shovels, and rebar. Labor is valued by the penny, life hardly at all. (13)

Describing in shocking detail the atrocious, unrelenting and dangerous conditions of the mining fields in the provinces of Katanga and Lualaba, Kara observes unwaged and waged laborer all along the supply chain, but notes that at the very bottom, one finds what he describes as modern-day “slave-like conditions” (10). With no recourse to laws that could protect from the violence of illicit mining practices, the mining communities live in the long shadow of a colonial epistemology, where land is simply regarded by the market as a convenient zone of extraction. This logic of land as extraction establishes of a zone of non-being for its inhabitants, inside the state but outside the law, where law can never seriously nor adequately make their interests count within its preserve. For those made invisible by the digital economy in locations far away, their bodies are pressed to worked in absolutely unforgiving conditions and made disposable. This is very much in keeping with Cajetan Iheka’s mission to “unearth what happens behind the scenes of a global supply chain” in his study of contemporary film and photography’s sublime aesthetics, *African Ecomedia: Networked Forms, Planetary Politics* (6). He invites us to attend to the hard materiality of the digital economy, not merely its preferred and predominant idiom of cyberspace, so that we might reconsider how such dichotomies as “free labor” and “waged labor” are operative on the continent. Given the complications of such notions of free labor and waged labor, Iheka advocates for an analytic that is capacious enough to unsettle such binaries in the networked economy as they fail to capture the unseen of digital labor on the continent. We will be better off cultivating “a decolonial conceptualization that keeps together hardware and software as well as intellectual and manual labor” (8). This sort of double-edged analytic must be adequate to an account of media throughout the supply chain because media itself is not only a fundamentally relational and networked phenomena, but it is on the order of a pharmakon. This is why Iheka draws attention to the two-faced nature of media, while “media, broadly conceived, makes possible commutation and sustenance” it is “also equally tethered to social and ecological degradation in Africa from their production, distribution, consumption and disposal” (5).

As with subaltern groups in other regions of the planet, Africa and its ecological subjects are rendered invisible in the public consciousness of the very

countries that are the beneficiaries of the old imperial schemes of resource extraction. The idea that Euro-America owes an historically unpaid debt to the global south for the mineral resources that power its energy supply has been the subject of many serious investigations. Perhaps most pressingly, Walter Rodney's early discernment in *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1972), which famously delineated the systematic asymmetries of colonial and neocolonial economic infrastructures of global capitalism. From this tradition, one might argue that the extractions of the digital economy pose an arguably even greater threat: unlike oil and gas—perishable consumer goods whose origins are hardly contested—the mobile device that the digital economy requires to continue apace conveniently obscures the earthly matter at its core. It is this mystification of the materiality of cyberspace, the quality of its opacity, that produces a vampiric reflexivity between the minerals extracted from the earth with the blood and sweat of Congolese miners that, in turn, generates and quite literally charges the devices of the global north. Beyond the power required for devices themselves, compounding areas of the network ecology also include service and data centers that impose their own energy demands.

Nonetheless, the degree of separation from the wretchedness of excavation sites is merely a recent iteration of an ongoing story, of Euro-American colonialist exploitation of naturally rich parts of the world while the actual inhabitants of those rich parts are left impoverished by a calculating and parasitic global economic order. The neocolonial devastation of the planet to which the film gestures is as a standard post-colonial script, one in which a former empire such as France, for example, continues to exploit its former African colonies in order to keep the lights on in its own citadels, often while espousing sovereignty on the world stage. In this example, France remains content to plunder, from Niger alone, let's say, more than one-fifth of the uranium needed to power the nuclear plants that generate the former's electricity. Similarly, though on a global and more diffuse level, we can consider the cobalt required for the rechargeable batteries that power the digital economy, grotesquely sourced in the Congo while the country itself remains systematically impoverished, with many of its inhabitants subjected to conditions of enslavement. The entanglement of the virtual "slave" of the digital platforms that feed on attention, and the unrelenting toil and dehumanizing subjugation of the actually enslaved miners, lends a crude new texture to Deleuze and Guattari's notion of "mechanized enslavement" to describe the runaway character of global capitalist production—the untamable beast that turns on and eats its own maker (Massumi 9). This trajectory of the self-destruction of capital has also been recently posited by Nancy Fraser in *Cannibal Capitalism* (2023), wherein "'capitalism' refers not to an economy, but to a type of society: one that authorizes an officially designated economy to pile up monetized value for investors and owners, while devouring the non-economized wealth of everyone else" (xv). In any event, to recall Kara's investigation of the demand and supply structure that underpins the state of abjection in the Congo mines, the planet is, so to speak, in our devices. To be sure, the individual and collective compulsion towards the device that is portrayed in *Zombies* is, in reality,

untenable without the systematized slavery of the artisanal miners whose presence in the film is marked by a curious absence.

Zombies also evokes a certain awe and terror in the face of a world fashioned in the image of neo-imperialism's uneven development; we are confronted with our own collective complicity for the part we play as reluctant or willing participants in sustaining the attention economy. Watching the multiple sequences come in and out of focus, the film mimics the inundation of scrolling mindlessly through the information stream. But taking the sequences of the film as a whole, we are called on to attend to the small and fleeting moments of the present, wherein attention is not waiting in the marketplace of consumer preemption, to be bought by corporations that aim to modify our behavior. *Zombies* invites us to rethink attention in the digital economy; attention as the practice and remembrance of being haunted by the unseen, unremunerated labor afoot in the global south, labor that powers the technical apparatuses that keep the digital economy thriving. Attention, then, is the embodied recognition that we are not so removed from the underbelly of a globalized technoculture, that we are the very reason why someone south of the equator, living and struggling on a desecrated portion of the planet, is exploited in order to accelerate the phasing in of the Green New Deals of the global north. Assuming a posture of aliveness towards the present may allow us to connect with ourselves and then to a social cognition of the struggles taking place in other geographies. One might then imagine the viscosity of a Congolese child thousands of miles away, made to rummage deep in a toxic mine pit with their bare hands in order to extract minerals marked for ascension up a supply chain that ends with an unboxing video on TikTok. The phone, as a device of the film, stands for the "ubiquity" of capital's overreach in social and imaginative life, but it also points to the ubiquity and normalization of the predation and violence that kills thousands and displaces several thousands more through neo-colonial landgrabs.

While the false premises of the Anthropocene are well documented, we might still ask how we come to understand not just the scale of devastation, but the range of affective intensities that climate disaster indexes—frustration and resentment, fear, anxiety, anger, pessimism or even denialism, gratitude for better days past and yet to come. But as I've suggested, critiques of the Anthropocene are more potent when they register the appropriation of potentiation by capital rather than lay blame at the feet of a universalized "human."

Identifying the challenges of the contemporary moment becomes more difficult when prevalent narratives of the Anthropocene downplay attention as crucial to politics. As several scholars unsettle the category of the Anthropocene for the ways that it mischaracterizes and even glosses over the primary source of planetary degradation might argue, an ideal signifier for the uninhabitable planet should openly disclose the underlying conditions of global techno-capitalism and its responsibility in reproducing precarity. For this reason, with a different orientation towards the Anthropocene, Brian Massumi asserts in passing that: "If a vector of becoming has swept through and come out the far side of the human adventure in the

form of the neoliberal-capitalist machinery of ontopower, then the label of the Anthropocene to designate the age we are entering is off the mark” (18). Ontopower is Massumi’s word for a certain kind of pre-emptive power as means to possibility, a power-to in relation to stimulus and response, quite different from a power-over that is common to contemporary politics (64). But we might nonetheless say, whether or not the driving forces of deprivation appear more clearly as a descriptive statement in other frameworks such as the Capitalocene, the crucial point is that the human that is centered in the Anthropocene is actually and ultimately, at the level of ontopower, not behind the wheel. This is because capitalism “now increasingly functions at the infra-individual level wherever capital flows—which is everywhere” (14) and can thus interfere “down to the affective level of felt potential, before life potentials have concretized in a determinate form of life, where life is as-yet emergent” (14). Instead of the presumed subject of the state, it is capitalism that sits in the driver’s seat of “the human’s” adventure into the future, reaching into and tinkering within the domain of “emergence.” Capital in the age of the digital thus arrogates to itself an even more fundamental power to condition subjectivity and temporality at an unprecedented level—it now draws its energies from virtually any prospective becoming.

Yet, despite the experience of capitalism as entirely surrounding and engulfing in the digital Anthropocene, a sublime picture to be sure, there is ever the possibility of creating new life-worlds. If there is no beyond capital, and if everything happens “within it,” there is simultaneously “a surfeit of potentials that are *immanent to capitalism’s field but not inside its system*” (Massumi 30). Notwithstanding the cultural intransigence of techno-culture undergirding contemporary global capitalism, there is still a ghostly matter in the presently unfolding narrative of the life of the internet, and it appears, as Massumi might say, in the form of an enduring “principle of unrest.” The unrest, here, is precisely that potentiality whose force of world-making is not immediately subsumed into a capitalist circuit, it lives rather as a permanent feature, a release valve in the networked structure. In that case, potential for a type of constructive and affirmative disorder resides in the ongoing movement and activity of life in a capitalist field, when a nascent and inchoate principle of unrest flashes up, and is given to its unimpeded conclusion, it can intervene and shock the techno-capitalist forcefield out of business-as-usual. As such, if there is a crucial task or “activity” for activism in a techno-capitalist milieu, it is firstly to affirm this principle, the unsubduable and wayward, even for its own sake. For potentials that mobilize counter-affects, “there is always something that continues across any capture” (101). If we understand the mobile device as a kind of mediator of the present unfolding, *Zombies’* distress about the appropriation of attention and free time in the digital economy exerts upon the viewers’ imagination a strong desire for an antidote to the dizzying images of the platformed network that is alluded to.

It will be important to practice attention, then, because such an antidotal element of potential materializes quietly, on the “micropolitical level,” it may also “happen at any scale” while it “passes unrecognized” since “it isn’t caught in the usual filters of activity and structures of understanding, because it embodies a singular

mode of movement that's too ghostly or slippery" (Massumi 102). No matter the form it takes as it comes into view, the risk is that the principle is itself exposed to capture or to appropriation by capital. We can think of the spontaneous eruption of a social movement that necessarily begins online with a morally inflected goal to challenge a norm, only to have the inputs of the participants' actions measured, monetized and sold off to the highest bidder, thereby neutralizing the manifestation of an emerging counter-power. But even in that seizure of potential in the throes of platform capitalism, there is still an emergent force that can be salvaged, which indicates a disposition to resistance and the very real possibility of breaking out of the prison house of corporate networked platforms.

Certainly, all the commentators of attention caution against the tragic narrative of the onward, uninterrupted growth that is implicit in the concept of Anthropocene, and embrace the search for an inherent antidote, one that is a constitutive element of the structure. In the case of Terranova, we find recourse in the power of "the ghost of the internet" that still "whispers of the possibility of new types of collective intelligence" (Terranova 12). At this point the condition of compulsory and mass enfoldment within the digital platform economy also undermines the remedy of withdrawal dispensed in Odell's account, since, as perennially monetized subjects of a techno-culture, even when we are still, we can never really "do nothing," we can never be in a state of un-productivity. Yet similar to Massumi's phenomenological disposition in which movement is always at play in the field of affectation, even when we are still and "not moving," Odell arrives at the idea that there exists, nevertheless, a small break that can be pried open in an attempt to escape the seemingly inescapable binds of an attention economy.

Although the forces of a techno culture bear upon us, the place for reclamation is in the hopeful recognition that even amidst an enveloped existence, resistance is both necessary and possible. In a way, the practice of attention embodies a certain principle of resistance that is captured by the epigraph; namely, Walter Benjamin's observation that "redemption preserves itself in a small crack in the continuum of catastrophe" (Odell V). This stands as a reminder that although we may be surrounded, one could equally affirm, then, that the planet is not actually in our devices. Odell identifies this fact as her own small crack, and demonstrates how we might cultivate a practice that deactivates the attention demands of a digital economy or networked platform that seeks to profit from our addiction to it. If there is a small opening in the form of "a crack in the continuum of catastrophe," it is firstly in the promise of the immediate relation to place and time that something like "Bioregionalism"—which emphasizes an attunement to "natural (rather than political) geographic boundaries," and is defined by "the human cultures that grow from the natural limits and potentials of the region" (Thayer 3). Given the preponderance of the earthly substance that is globally disseminated as well as the permeation of digital platforms in all spheres of life, from the mediascape to the public sector as well as the corporate world, it's hard to imagine with precision how the tenets of Bioregionalism would ensure that attention is not left defenseless against

the wolves of Silicon Valley. But one can be compelled by and advance the prospect of Bioregionalism as a mode of inhabiting the world, turning with care and attentiveness to the environment around us. While Odell prefers the birds and the wildlife sanctuaries of her location for cultivating a practice of attention, the utility of Bioregionalism is in the ability to situate us in the present, and thereby reassert the power of ecological time over the time of capital that is predicated on the notion of scarcity and that feeds on attention deficiency. There is benefit in thinking with a principle whereby concerted attention, and even a desire for it, may function itself as a semblance of counter power to the market. Intending an anti-capitalist attribute, the vitality in Bioregionalism is in the attentiveness it produces, an “awareness not only of the many life-forms of each place, but how they are interrelated, including humans” (xviii).

I have tried to show that the catastrophe of an aesthetic sublime that *Zombies* aims to capture appears in three forms, the violence and enslavement that takes place in the mines of the Congo, the out of sight subjugation that secures the continued reproduction of the same, and also in giving up of our attention or time such that we cannot avail ourselves to the work of building the shared commons of the future that the very concept of the sublime intends. Through its critical portrayal of the capture of attention, Baloji’s film asks us to seize opportunities to turn away from the seductions of psychotechnology and to instead turn toward the unfurling present, where power may yet be embodied.

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Vom kreatürlich Erhabenen zum solastalgisch Erhabenen in Kerstin Ekmans Roman *Wolfslichter* (Löpa varg)

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Zusammenfassung

Ausgehend von Horkheimer und Adornos Kritik am patriarchalen Mythos der Natur als Jagdgebiet sowie Ursula K. Le Guins Verwerfung der Heldengeschichte als *killer story*, untersucht der Artikel, wie diese hegemonialen Narrative der Naturbeherrschung in Kerstin Ekmans Roman *Wolfslichter* (Löpa varg, 2021; dt. 2023) einer kritischen Revision unterzogen werden. Eine textnahe Analyse zeigt, wie die Begegnung des Protagonisten mit einem Wolf zu einer Erfahrung des kreatürlich Sublimen wird, die sein instrumentelles Naturverhältnis radikal in Frage stellt. Während er sich einerseits Natur mimetisch angleicht und, rational nicht fassbar, als Wolf umgeht, erkennt er andererseits seine Mitschuld an der Zerstörung des Ökosystems Wald. Die schuldbesetzte Erfahrung von Umweltzerstörung und Verlust wird ihm zu einer Erfahrung des solastalgisch Sublimen, die ihn letztlich jedoch befähigt, sich für den Erhalt gesunder Ökosysteme einzusetzen. Was das für sein Verständnis von Männlichkeit heißt, wird abschließend über den Begriff der Ökomaskulinität diskutiert.

Stichworte: Mensch-Tier-Verwandlung, das kreatürlich Sublime, Erinnerung, das solastalgisch Sublime, Ökomaskulinität, Kerstin Ekman.

Abstract

Building on Horkheimer and Adorno's critique of the patriarchal myth of nature as a hunting ground and Ursula K. Le Guin's rejection of the hero story as a killer story, the article examines how these hegemonic narratives of nature's domination are critically revised in Kerstin Ekman's novel *The Wolf Run* (Löpa varg, 2021). A close textual analysis shows how the protagonist's encounter with a wolf transforms into an experience of the creaturely sublime, radically challenging his instrumental relationship with nature. On the one hand, he mimetically aligns himself with nature, moving as a wolf in ways that defy rational comprehension; on the other hand, he comes to recognize his complicity in the destruction of the forest ecosystem. The guilt-laden experience of environmental destruction and loss takes the form of the solastalgic sublime, ultimately empowering him to advocate for the preservation of healthy ecosystems. The article concludes by exploring how this shift reshapes his understanding of masculinity through the lens of eco-masculinity.

Keywords: Human-animal transformation, the creaturely sublime, memory, the solastalgic sublime, eco-masculinity, Kerstin Ekman.

Resumen

Basándose en la crítica de Horkheimer y Adorno al mito patriarcal de la naturaleza como terreno de caza y en el rechazo de Ursula K. Le Guin a la historia del héroe como una *killer story*, el artículo examina cómo estas narrativas hegemónicas de la dominación de la naturaleza son revisadas críticamente en la novela *La carrera del lobo* (Löpa varg, 2021) de Kerstin Ekman. Un análisis textual detallado muestra cómo el encuentro del protagonista con un lobo se transforma en una experiencia de lo sublime creatural, desafiando de manera radical su relación instrumental con la naturaleza. Por

un lado, se alinea miméticamente con la naturaleza, moviéndose como un lobo de maneras que desafían la comprensión racional; por otro lado, reconoce su complicidad en la destrucción del ecosistema forestal. La experiencia cargada de culpa por la destrucción ambiental y la pérdida adopta la forma de lo sublime solastálgico, lo que finalmente lo empodera para abogar por la preservación de ecosistemas saludables. El artículo concluye explorando cómo este cambio redefine su comprensión de la masculinidad a través del lente de la eco-masculinidad.

Palabras clave: Transformación humano-animal, sublime creatural, memoria, sublime solastálgico, eco-masculinidad, Kerstin Ekman.

Wider die patriarchale Naturbeherrschung

In ihrer 1947 veröffentlichten *Dialektik der Aufklärung* entfalten Max Horkheimer und Theodor W. Adorno ihre Kritik an dem Fortschrittsprojekt der Moderne und seinem es vorantreibenden Subjekt, dem qua seiner Vernunft über die Natur herrschenden Menschen. Im Kapitel "Mensch und Tier" fassen sie diese Kritik prägnant zusammen: "Grenzenlos Natur zu beherrschen, den Kosmos in ein unendliches Jagdgebiet zu verwandeln, war der Wunschtraum der Jahrtausende. Darauf war die Idee des Menschen in der Männergesellschaft abgestimmt. Das war der Sinn der Vernunft, mit der er sich brüstete" (264). Horkheimer und Adorno dechiffrieren das vorgestellte Dominanzverhältnis als patriarchalen Mythos und zeigen, wie der Traum des Mannes sich mit der Waffe in der Hand die Natur, das vernunftlose Tier, zu unterwerfen, in einen blutigen Albtraum umschlägt.

Ähnlich argumentiert Ursula K. Le Guin. In ihrem vielbeachteten, erstmals 1986 veröffentlichten Essay "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction" reflektiert sie darüber, wie sich die blutige Spur überhöhter Männlichkeit durch die Geschichte der Menschheit zieht und wie sehr diese patriarchale Perspektive unsere Art Geschichten zu erzählen geformt hat. Eine gute Geschichte, so erklärt uns der männliche Held, ist—natürlich—eine Heldengeschichte. Ihre Erzählform ist die eines zielsicher geworfenen Speers, der geradlinig von A nach B fliegt und 'zack,' seine Beute erlegt. Mit anderen Worten: eine Heldengeschichte ist eine *killer story*. Sie lässt sich vielfach variieren, folgt aber immer dem maskulinistischen Dominanznarrativ. Als Gegenentwurf zu *killer stories* entwirft Le Guin ausgehend von der Idee des Beutels, in der Frauen von jeher Nahrung gesammelt haben, ihre poetische Tragetaschentheorie. Mit dieser Theorie tritt sie für das Erzählen von Geschichten ein, die sich der nährenden Fürsorge verpflichtet wissen und die sie deshalb *life stories* nennt.

Wie es möglich ist, sich dem speerförmigen Narrativ der Naturbeherrschung zu entziehen und das Miteinander von Mensch und mehr-als-menschlicher Umwelt als eine Geschichte des Lebens, des gegenseitigen Respekts und der Sorge zu erzählen, zeigt die schwedische Autorin Kerstin Ekman in ihrem Roman *Löpa varg* (2021), was so viel heißt wie "als Wolf umhergehen." Auf deutsch ist der Roman unter dem Titel

Wolfslichter (2023) erschienen.¹ Aus der Perspektive des Ich-Erzählers, dem Jäger und pensionierten Forstwirt Ulf Norrstig, reflektiert der Roman über das Verhältnis von Mensch und Natur, und insbesondere über das Verhältnis von Mensch und (gejagtem) Tier als ein problematisches, schuldbehaftetes Verhältnis. "Ich hatte schon viele getötet. Vielleicht sollte es jetzt genug sein" (5),² denkt Ulf zu Beginn der Romanhandlung. Wie es dazu kommt, dass der Erzähler aufhört die Natur als unendliches Jagdgebiet zu betrachten und zu einer umweltbesorgten Ökomaskulinität findet, stellt der Roman über zwei ineinander verwobene Erzählfäden dar. Der eine Faden entwickelt sich aus der Begegnung des Erzählers mit einem Wolf, der andere aus der schmerzhaften Einsicht in menschengemachte Umweltzerstörung und Klimawandel.

In dem ersten Teil meiner Analyse widme ich mich der Begegnung des Protagonisten mit dem Wolf, den er zunächst über eine Spur in unberührter Schneelandschaft wahrnimmt. Um die starke Wirkung zu verstehen, die der Wolf auf den Ich-Erzähler macht, führe ich den Begriff des kreatürlich Erhabenen ein. Der Eindruck des Erhabenen, so meine These, erwächst dem Erzähler aus der Wahrnehmung des Wolfs als Lebewesen, das in der Welt seinen "natürlichen" Platz hat. Der Wolf gehört in die Welt, er ist "da" und hat ein Recht da zu sein. Statt das jedoch zu respektieren und den Wolf in seinem Dasein in Ruhe zu lassen, greift der Mensch gewaltsam in dieses Dasein ein. Der Wolf als Kreatur ist verletzlich. Sein "erhabenes" Leben, seine Existenz als "Hochbein," wie der Erzähler den Wolf nennt, ist vom Tod bedroht. Und mit ihm, in "geteilter Kreatürlichkeit," wie Anat Pick es in *Creaturely Poetics* formuliert, auch der Erzähler, der für (mythische) Augenblicke selbst zum Wolf wird.

Im zweiten Teil der Analyse wechselt die Perspektive von einer erhabenen (aber immer schon vom Menschen bedrohten, also nie wilden oder unberührten) Natur zu der vom Menschen zerstörten Natur. Zur Einsicht in das Ausmaß der Zerstörung kommt der Protagonist zum einen über eine Reihe schmerzhafter Erinnerungen, die ich über Walter Benjamins Begriff des Eingedenkens untersuche, zum anderen über seine erhöhte Aufmerksamkeit auf die Folgen von Klimawandel und Artensterben. Das Erhabene der Natur gewährt dem Erzähler nicht länger kreatürliche Ruhe und Trost, sondern implodiert im Gefühl von Schmerz, Schuld und Trauer über eine irreversibel geschädigte Umwelt. Dieses Gefühl nenne ich in Anlehnung an Glenn Albrechts Begriff der Solastalgie das "solastalgisch Erhabene." Neben dem solastalgisch Erhabenen widmet sich dieser Teil der Analyse auch der Rolle, die die Frau des Protagonisten, Inga, für die fortschreitende Einsicht ihres Mannes in menschengemachte Umweltzerstörung spielt. Die Frage nach dem Zusammenhang von Geschlecht, Naturverhältnis und ökologischer Praxis wird im

¹ Die Übersetzung des Titels wirft Fragen auf, da in dem Roman an keiner Stelle von *Wolfslicht* die Rede ist. Auch auf metaphorischer Ebene werden Wolf und Licht nicht zusammengebracht. Mit Longinus könnte man die Lichtmetaphorik als Ausdruck des Numinosen denken (Longinus 27; Pries et al. 1363).

² "Jag hade dödat många. Det borde kanske räcka nu" (*Löpa varg* 5). Alle im Folgenden angeführten schwedischen Originalzitate stammen aus dieser Ausgabe.

abschließenden dritten Teil vertieft. Indem ich den Bogen zurückschlage zu den eingangs genannten Überlegungen patriarchaler *killer stories*, zeige ich, wie die Auseinandersetzung des Protagonisten mit den zuvor untersuchten Formen des Erhabenen einen Wechsel von patriarchaler Naturbeherrschung zu Ökomaskulinität ermöglicht.

Wolf werden als Erfahrung des kreatürlich Erhabenen

Wolfslichter ist ein in weiten Teilen realistischer Roman, der aus dem Alltagsleben Ulf Norrstigs und seiner Frau Inga erzählt. Zeit der Romanhandlung sind die Jahre 2018 und 2019, Ort ist ein Dorf im waldreichen Mittelschweden. Da der Ich-Erzähler sich kritisch mit seiner Vergangenheit als Jäger und Forstingenieur auseinandersetzt und er zunehmend betroffen auf die anthropogene Klima- und Biodiversitätskrise reagiert, lässt sich der Roman dem Genre der ökologischen oder umweltengagierten Literatur zuordnen (Goodbody). In *Wolfslichter* wird die Klimakrise mit all ihren weitreichenden ökologischen, sozialen und kulturellen Implikationen aber nicht als in die Zukunft verschobene Katastrophe erzählt (Horn). Ihre Auswirkungen werden im Hier und Jetzt in den Blick genommen und über extratextuelle Verweise wie die schwedischen Waldbrände im Sommer 2018 in der ökologischen Wirklichkeit des Anthropozäns verankert. Deshalb kann von einem Roman des anthropozänen Realismus gesprochen werden, der uns "realism's vital role in communicating the present-day urgency of the crisis" (Thieme 5) vor Augen führt. Als Teil dieser Krise reflektiert der Roman auf das Machtverhältnis zwischen Mensch und Tier, womit *Wolfslichter* sich in das Feld der anthropozänen Mensch-Tier-Literatur einschreibt (Lönngren, Lockwood). Zu bedenken ist jedoch, dass der Modus des realistischen Erzählens genau hier, am Schnittpunkt der Begegnung zwischen Mensch und Wolf aufgebrochen wird. Statt den Wolf als Beute zu erlegen, verwandelt sich der Erzähler auf rational nicht fassbare Weise selbst in einen Wolf. Grund dieser Verwandlung ist der starke Eindruck, den der Wolf auf den Erzähler macht und den ich im Folgenden als Erfahrung des kreatürlich Erhabenen untersuchen will.

Ich verstehe das kreatürlich Erhabene als eine Variante des Naturerhabenen, schließe mich aber nicht der einflussreichen Definition des Naturerhabenen als Erfahrung der Erschütterung durch eine als übermächtig empfundene Natur an—wie von Edmund Burke in seinem Werk *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* wirkmächtig dargelegt. Auch Immanuel Kants Verständnis des Naturerhabenen als etwas, das nicht in der Natur, sondern im Geist des Menschen seinen Sitz hat, sehe ich kritisch. Das kreatürlich Erhabene ist nicht das, was der Mensch als moralisch-vernünftiges Wesen zu transzendieren vermag (Pries et al.), sondern im Gegenteil das, was sich als körperliche Erfahrung in den Menschen einschreibt und ihn ethisch in die Verantwortung nimmt, der nichtmenschlichen Natur ihre Ruhe zu lassen.

Mit dieser ethisch verankerten Rekonzeptualisierung des Naturerhabenen führe ich weiter, was Christopher Hitt bereits Ende der 1990er Jahre als "ecological

sublime” und Emily Brady rund 15 Jahre später als “environmental sublime” definiert haben. Hitt zu Folge ist es nicht der *logos*, der die physische Welt transzendiert, sondern das Erhabene der physischen Welt, das den *logos* in die Immanenz des körperlich Erlebten zurückholt. Damit wird, so Hitt, Natur als “the wild otherness” anerkannt (620), aber nicht als von uns getrennt und unterlegen verobjektiviert. Hitt folgend sehe ich in dieser Anerkennung der Natur als anders und doch mit uns verbunden das ethische Potential des ökologisch Sublimen: “There will always be limits to our knowledge, and nature will always be, finally impenetrable. An ecological sublime would remind us of this lesson by restoring the wonder, the inaccessibility of wild nature” (620).

Ähnlich argumentiert Emily Brady, die das Erhabene in *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy* zwar anders als Hitt nicht auf die ‚wilde‘ Natur begrenzt wissen will, aber gleichwohl betont, dass das “environmental sublime” eine “aesthetic-moral relationship” etabliert (183), die uns aufgrund ihrer Un(be)greifbarkeit “humility and respect” lehrt (202). Diese Verbindung von Naturerfahrung und Naturethik ist wichtig, da sich unser Umgang mit Natur nach dem richtet, wie wir sie wahrnehmen und welchen Wert wir ihr zumessen. “[T]he core meaning of the sublime, as tied mainly to nature, presents a form of aesthetic experience which engenders a distinctive aesthetic-moral relationship between humans and the natural environment” (3), betont Brady. Wie diese ästhetisch-ethische Auffassung des Naturerhabenen über die Erfahrung geteilter Kreatürlichkeit und geteilter Verletzlichkeit genauer zu fassen ist, möchte ich jetzt über die textnahe Analyse von Ekmans Roman zeigen.

Dass das Erzählen der Mensch-Wolf-Begegnung in *Wolfslichter* mit dem Naturerhabenen zusammengedacht werden kann, zeigt sich gleich zu Beginn des Romans, wo auf das Erhabene als Grenzerfahrung zwischen Demut und Überheblichkeit angespielt wird (Pries). Für den Erzähler manifestiert sich diese Grenze als Grenze zwischen Leben-lassen und Töten-können. Es ist früh am Morgen des Neujahrstags 2018 an einem Ort zwischen Zivilisation und Wildnis, einen Tag vor dem 70. Geburtstag des Protagonisten und dem Beginn der Lizenzjagd auf die Wölfe. Der Erzähler sitzt gemeinsam mit seinem alten Jagdhund in einem kleinen Wohnwagen am Waldrand, um sich dem Trubel der Geburtstagsvorbereitungen zu entziehen. Neben ihm liegt seine Waffe, doch ist sie nicht geladen. Warum das so ist, scheint dem Erzähler selbst unklar. “Es kommt halt so,” denkt er sich. Mit dem Alter: “Nicht bei allen, das ist mir klar. Die meisten wollen schießen, solange der Zeigefinger den Abzug drücken kann. Solange das Glied sich aufrichtet, lebt und tötet man. Ich hatte schon viele getötet. Vielleicht sollte es jetzt genug sein” (5).³

Ohne Hund und Waffe begibt der Erzähler sich auf diese Überlegung hin in den Wald, der aufgrund des frisch gefallenen Schnees unberührt und in dieser Unberührtheit erhaben erscheint. Auf seinen Skiern “leicht und leise durch den

³ “Varför vet jag inte. Det blir så bara. Inte för alla, det hade jag klart för mig. De flesta ville skjuta så länge pekfingeret kan pressa avtryckarn. Så länge kuken reser sig lever man och dödar. Jag hade dödat många. Det borde kanske räcka nu” (*Löpa varg* 5).

Neuschnee der Nacht" gleitend (8),⁴ stößt der Erzähler auf die Fährte eines Wolfs. Die Größe des Pfotenabdrucks erstaunt und beeindruckt ihn: "So groß! Das war mein erster Gedanke" (8).⁵ Bedenkt man, wie Burke die Erfahrung des Erhabenen beschreibt, nämlich als Begegnung mit dem, was "comes upon us in the gloomy forest, in the howling wilderness, in the form of the lion, the tiger, the panther or the rhinoceros" (Burke 66), mutet das Trittsiegel eines Wolfes zunächst wenig erhaben an. Dass der Roman trotzdem das Staunen des Protagonisten betont, lädt dazu ein, das Naturerhabene nicht notwendig als etwas Dramatisches zu denken, sondern als etwas, das sowohl Achtung und Abstand fordert, aber auch die Bereitschaft, den Zeichen der Natur zu folgen.

So wie Ekman in *Wolfslichter* das Burkesche Erhabene aus seiner dramatischen Überhöhung in einen Kontext von aufmerksamer Ruhe und Respekt überführt, verfährt der Roman auch mit Pseudo-Longinus' Begriff des Erhabenen. Zu Beginn seiner Abhandlung *Über das Erhabene* bestimmt Pseudo-Longinus das Erhabene als literarischen Stil, der so formvollendet ist, dass er den Leser nicht argumentativ überzeugt, sondern ihn wie eine Art Blitz "mit seiner erschütternden Kraft" überwältigt (7). Der Wolf in Ekmans Roman arbeitet mit weniger gewaltsamen Mitteln, seine Schriftspur im Schnee lässt sich aber trotzdem als Ausdruck eines erhabenen Stils lesen, den der Erzähler biosemiotisch zu entziffern vermag: "Aus seinem Körperabdruck sprach Ruhe. Der Wolf hatte lange gerastet und gewusst, dass er hier nicht behelligt wird" (9).⁶

Auch später, als der Erzähler aus den Spuren ableitet, dass der Wolf ein Reh gerissen und einer Wölfin begegnet ist, zeigt er sich nicht überwältigt, sondern führt Wolf und Mensch in einer intimen Geste näher zueinander, indem er aus dem Schnee ein langes Wolfshaar aufnimmt und es in seine Brieftasche legt. Noch näher kommt der Erzähler der Kreatürlichkeit des Wolfes, als er sich nach seiner Skitour zurück in seinen Wohnwagen begibt und dort still wartet. Und zwar nicht als Jäger, der auf der Lauer liegt, sondern als jemand, der sein Menschsein ein Stück weit preisgibt und Teil des Waldes wird: "Es war so unerhört, so unglaublich still. Ich saß da wie ein Uhu auf einer Kiefer oder ein schneebedeckter Stein im Wald" (12).⁷ Über diese natursensitive Mimesis gibt der Protagonist dem Wolf Raum, von sich aus aus dem Dickicht herauszutreten: "Da kam er" (13).⁸

Obwohl die Wortwahl an eine Epiphanie denken lässt, ergeht der Text sich nicht in spiritueller Überhöhung. Das wird besonders deutlich, wenn man ihn mit anderen Erzählungen über die lebensverändernde Begegnung zwischen Mensch und Wolf als (vermeintlich) unvermittelte Naturerfahrung vergleicht. Während dort häufig auf einen direkten, den Menschen spirituell berührenden Blickkontakt mit dem

⁴ "lätt och tyst i nattens nysnö" (8).

⁵ "Så stora! Det var det första jag tänkte" (8).

⁶ "Det var et lugn över det där avtrycket av hans kropp. Han hade vilat länge och vetat att han fick vara i fred här" (8).

⁷ "Det var så oerhört, ja så osannolikt stilla. Själv var jag orörlig som en uv i en tall eller en översnöad sten i skogen" (11).

⁸ "Då kom han ut" (12).

Tier abgehoben wird (Puig und Echarri), sieht der Erzähler in *Wolfslichter* den Wolf durch ein Fernglas. Damit verbleibt er zwar einerseits in der Distanz des Betrachters, kommt aber andererseits ganz nah an das Tier heran, ohne es in seinem Sein zu stören. Fasziniert macht er auf die hellen Augen, die markante Zeichnung der Wangen und die hohen Vorderläufe des Wolfs aufmerksam. Ehrfürchtig und liebevolle zugleich nennt er den Wolf "Hochbein." Mit diesem ästhetischen Blick auf den Wolf, der im Auge des Betrachters als zugleich schön und erhaben erscheint, hebt der Erzähler die so häufig gezogene Grenze zwischen dem Naturerhabenen und dem Naturschönen, dem Ehrfurcht gebietenden Wilden und der Liebe zum domestizierten Tier auf (Lombard 1-2). Die Erhabenheit des Wolfes zeigt sich dem Erzähler in dessen Schönheit. Und dieser erhabenen Schönheit der Natur gibt der Erzähler sich so vollständig hin, dass es ihm, nachdem der Wolf wieder "fort in die Wildnis, in sein Pfotenland" verschwunden ist (14),⁹ vorkommt, als hätte er sich in einem Ausnahmezustand außerhalb von Zeit und Raum befunden. "Ich hatte keine Ahnung, wie lange es gedauert hatte. Was ich erlebt hatte, lag jenseits aller Zeit und ihrer Messung" (14).¹⁰

Der Wolf als Erhabenes der Natur wird in *Wolfslichter* aber nicht einfach nur als das große Unaussprechliche (Pries et al. 1366) adressiert. Der Erzähler versucht stattdessen zu einer neuen, kreatürlichen Sprache zu finden, in der er mit dem Wolf kommunizieren und ihm das ethische Versprechen geben kann, dass er von den Menschen in Ruhe gelassen wird. So wie zuvor der Wolf seine Spur in den Schnee geschrieben hat, möchte nun der Erzähler dem Wolf eine Botschaft in den Schnee schreiben: "Du wirst jetzt deine Ruhe haben, Hochbein" (16; Hervorhebung im Original).¹¹ Die Schneesprache bringt, weil sie verweht, ihre menschengemachte Zeichenhaftigkeit zum Verschwinden, bleibt aber, so hofft der Erzähler, als spürbare Spur im "kräftigen Körper" des Wolfs bewahrt (16).¹²

Dass das tatsächlich gelingt, zeigt sich wenig später an der Szene, mit der der Roman den Rahmen des realistischen Erzählens sprengt und in ein mythisches Erzählen übergeht. Ulf wird zum Wolf, auf Schwedisch *ulv*. Dass sich die erste dieser rational nicht erklärbaren Transformationen in einer Nacht ereignet, in der der Strom ausgefallen ist und alles im Dunklen liegt, ist dabei ebenso bezeichnend wie der Umstand, dass der Erzähler gedanklich um sein Verhältnis zu dem Wolf kreist und erkennt, dass er mit Worten nicht an ihn herankommt. Nicht kognitiv, sondern körperlich gilt es dem Tier zu folgen. Ähnlich wie in Aino Kallas Erzählung "Die Braut des Wolfs," in der der Wolf als aktiv handelnder die junge Aalo zu sich ruft (Lönngren 2015), fühlt sich auch der Erzähler in *Wolfslichter* von dem Wolf gerufen. Er folgt diesem Ruf, indem er sich, wie Alex Lockwood es im Anschluss an Anat Picks Konzept der von Mensch und Tier geteilten Kreatürlichkeit ausführt, auf den "creatural path"

⁹ "in i skogen, bort i sin tassemark" (13). Im schwedischen Original ist an dieser Stelle nicht von Wildnis, sondern schlicht von Wald (skog) die Rede.

¹⁰ "Hur länge det hade varat visste jag inte. Det jag hade upplevt var bortom all tid och mätandet av den" (13).

¹¹ "Du får vara i fred Högben" (14).

¹² "den starka kroppen" (14).

begibt, also dem Tier als Tier folgt, und damit seine “bodily alienation from the nonhuman world” überwindet (33).

Formalästhetisch wird das Betreten des kreatürlichen Pfads angezeigt, indem die Erzählinstanz unvermittelt von der ersten in die dritte Person wechselt und sich die interne Fokalisierung vom Menschen zum Tier verschiebt. Verstärkt wird der Körper- und Stilwechsel außerdem durch einen Tempuswechsel. Das Erzählen in der Vergangenheitsform wird abgelöst durch ein evokatives Präsens, in dem die Distanz zwischen Erleben und Erzählen aufgehoben scheint. “Er läuft. Der Harsch ist dünn und bricht so leicht, dass er die Läufe nicht verletzt. [...] Er weiß, was eine Fichte ist, hat aber kein Wort dafür. Weiß, dass die großen, alten Fichten Schutz bieten” (20).¹³

Für den Erzähler handelt es sich bei dieser Mensch-Tier-Transformation nicht um einen vorgestellten oder symbolischen Akt, sondern um eine wirkliche *body-change*-Erfahrung. Am Ende der Romanhandlung versichert Ulf Norrstig seiner Frau, und damit auch der Leserin: “Nachts war ich manchmal er. [...] Habe Dinge erlebt, für die ich keine Worte hatte. [...] Er hat einen Hasen gerissen. Oder ich habe ihn gerissen. [...] Die Leber war das Beste. [...] Nein, ich habe nicht geträumt. [...] Ich bin schlicht und einfach als Wolf umgegangen” (163).¹⁴ Der Roman schließt damit an den bekannten Werwolfmythos an (Metzger), deutet ihn jedoch um. Statt sich in einen Wolf zu verwandeln, der Menschen angreift, versteht der Erzähler durch den Perspektiven- und Körperwechsel, wie ein Wolf in der Welt ist: kreatürlich und stark in seinem selbstverständlichen, “natürlichen” Dasein—aber eben auch verletzlich, “a living body—material, temporal, and vulnerable” (Pick 5).

Wie körperliche Vitalität (nicht zuletzt in seiner triebhaften, geschlechtlichen Form) und Verletzlichkeit im Roman miteinander verbunden sind, und inwiefern das kreatürlich Erhabene durch das Dominanznarrativ gefährdet ist, zeigt sich in der zweiten Wolfverwandlungsszene.

In der ersten Verwandlung folgt Ulf/ulv der Spur eines weiblichen Wolfs und der “gute, satte Geruch der Wölfin” führt zu “Unruhe in seinen Leisten” (20).¹⁵ Dieser feine Geruchssinn bleibt dem Erzähler erhalten, nachdem er wieder Mensch unter Menschen ist. Aber was er jetzt riecht, verursacht ihm Übelkeit, da das Gerochene auf die tödliche Macht des Menschen über das Tier verweist. Das zeigt sich am Tag von Ulfs Geburtstag und, wie oben bereits genannt, dem Beginn der Lizenzjagd. Offiziell dient die Lizenzjagd in Schweden dazu, den Wolfsbestand kontrolliert zu regulieren. In *Wolfslichter* werden die Jäger, und hier insbesondere Ulfs junger und sich seiner Jagdkünste brüstender Gegenspieler Ronny, aber als Männer dargestellt, die von Wolfshass getrieben sind und nur allzu gerne eine weitere *killer story* im Sinne LeGuins erzählen möchten. Auf dem Geburtstagsfest nimmt der Erzähler die Gerüche der ihn umgebenden Menschen so stark wahr, dass ihm übel wird und er sich hinlegen

¹³ “Han löper. Skaren er tunn och brister så lätt att den inte sårar benen” (18).

¹⁴ “Jag har ibland varit han om nätterna. [...] Varit med om sånt som jag inte hade ord för. [...] Han slog en hare. Eller jeg gjorde det. [...] Levern var bäst. [...] Nej jag drömte inte. [...] Jag löpte varg helt enkelt” (142).

¹⁵ “goda mättade tikdoften,” “oron i ljumskarna” (19).

muss. Im Schlaf geht er dann ein zweites Mal als Wolf um und hört das Lärmen der Hunde und dann ein Knallen und Pfeifen, das Unheil bedeutet: "Er weiß jetzt, dass er die Wölfin nicht mehr finden wird" (29).¹⁶

Im direkten Anschluss an diese Szene klingelt Ulfs Telefon und Ronny berichtet mit schriller Stimme, dass er einen Wolf geschossen hat. Diese Nachricht schlägt dem Erzähler so sehr auf den Magen, dass er sich übergibt. Das kreatürlich Erhabene, das er nicht nur in der realen Begegnung mit dem Wolf im Wald erlebt hat, sondern auch in seinem eigenen Wolfsein, schlägt in sein Gegenteil um. Die erhabene Ruhe (in) der Natur wird abgelöst durch das Getöse der Männer und macht dem Erzähler sein Mann-unter-Männern-Sein schwer erträglich: "Um mich herum surrten und lärmten die Stimmen. Die Bierdosen knackten beim Öffnen" (31).¹⁷ Die Erfahrung des kreatürlich Erhabenen (und die für den Erzähler in diese Erfahrung eingeschriebene sexuell-sinnliche Qualität, die ich hier nicht so sehr genderkritisch als "kreatürlich" lese) führt aber auch dazu, dass der Erzähler gegen das respektlose Verhalten der anderen Jäger aufbegehrt. Als Ronny das Bein der geschossenen Wölfin hochreißt und grinsend zeigt, dass es eine Wölfin ist, und die anderen Jäger über Wölfe als Ungeziefer reden, das es zu vernichten gilt, hält er der Jagdgesellschaft ihre "Verstrickung in blinder Herrschaft" vor (Horkheimer und Adorno 8). "Das Wilde ist nichts wert. Außer man schießt es," fährt Ulf die Jagdgenossen an (32).¹⁸

Die Einsicht in ökologische Schuld als Erfahrung des solastalgisch Sublimen

Die Begegnung mit dem Wolf in der für den Augenblick unberührt wirkenden Natur und die mythische Wolfsverwandlung werden dem Erzähler zur Erfahrung der Natur als kreatürlich erhaben. Der gewaltsame Tod der Wölfin zeigt jedoch deutlich, dass ein solches Verständnis des Naturerhabenen fragwürdig ist. In der Zeit des Anthropozän kann das Naturerhabene nicht losgelöst von dem schuldhaften Eingriff des Menschen in die nichtmenschliche Umwelt gedacht werden. "Grief, distress, and guilt complicate and enrich the sublime," wie Marco Caracciolo in seinen Überlegungen zu den Grenzen des ökologisch Erhabenen hervorhebt (303). Während der Erzähler lange braucht, um zu dieser Erkenntnis zu gelangen, ist sie dem Roman auf der symbolischen Ebene schon von Anfang an eingeschrieben, und zwar über die Webtätigkeit der Frau des Erzählers, Inga. Zu Beginn der Romanhandlung webt Inga ein Tuch mit einem komplizierten Muster, bei dem "ein Teil der Kettfäden rot und ein Teil silbergrau war" (45).¹⁹ Dieses rot-graue Tuch lese ich als Verweis auf den späteren gewaltsamen Tod des Wolfes. Nicht nur aufgrund der Farbsymbolik, bei der silbergrau für die Farbe des Wolfspelzes und rot für das vergossene Blut steht, sondern auch aufgrund der semantischen Koinzidenz von Jagd und Weben. So wie bei der Jagd Schuss und Patrone eine zentrale Rolle spielen, bezeichnet man beim Weben den

¹⁶ "Nu vet han att tiken inte längre finns att leta på" (26).

¹⁷ "Rösterna surrade och bullrade omkring mig. Det knäppte när de öppnade sina ölburkar" (28).

¹⁸ "Det vilda är inget värt. Bara om man kan skjuta det" (29).

¹⁹ "av varptrådarna var en del röda och en del silvergrå" (41).

quereingetragenen Faden im textilen Gewebe als Schuss oder Einschlag. Außerdem nutzt man zur schematischen Darstellung eines Webmusters eine sogenannte Bindungspatrone. Und eben eine solche "Bindungspatrone" sieht der Erzähler neben der webenden Inga liegen (45),²⁰ so, als sei es jene Patrone, die dem Gewehr fehlt, von dem es im ersten Abschnitt des Romans heißt, dass es ungeladen neben dem Erzähler im Wohnwagen liegt.

So zurückhaltend wie dem Roman dieser Zusammenhang eingeschrieben ist, so zurückhaltend, aber dennoch wirkmächtig, bringt Inga ihren Mann auf den Weg zur Erkenntnis seiner eigenen Verstrickung in das Ausmaß anthropogener Naturzerstörung. Es beginnt damit, dass sie ihn ermuntert, seine alten Jagdtagebüchern zu lesen. Indem er das widerstrebend tut, werden eine Reihe unangenehmer Erinnerungen wach, z.B. die an einen angeschossenen Hasen, den er mit einem großen Loch im Hals durch den Wald laufen sieht. Diesem Bild der Schuld folgen andere. Als ob er sich freiwillig in ein Dantesches Purgatorium begibt, sucht der Erzähler in den alten Aufzeichnungen nach "Schande und Hölle" (56).²¹ Während Dante wohl kaum zufällig der Lieblingsautor von Inga ist, könnte man mit Ursula K. Le Guin auch sagen, es geht Ulf um die Überprüfung, wie sehr er dem Genre der *killer stories* verhaftet ist. Das zeigt sich nicht zuletzt über seine Relektüren von Rudyard Kiplings *Dschungelbuch*, Jack Londons *Ruf der Wildnis*, Ivan Turgenevs *Aufzeichnungen eines Jägers* und den Jagderzählungen Gustaf Schröders. Was den Erzähler damals fasziniert hat, mutet ihm heute verkehrt an. "Die schrödersche Sorglosigkeit bei Strapazen und beim Schießen sagte mir nicht mehr zu" (135).²²

Doch nicht nur als Jäger, sondern, so wird dem Erzähler langsam klar, auch als ehemaliger Angestellter der schwedischen Forstbehörde steht er in einem problematischen Verhältnis zum Ökosystem Wald. Diese Einsicht führt zur Erfahrung dessen, was ich in Weiterführung von Glenn Albrechts Begriff der Solastalgie das solastalgisch Erhabene nenne. Der Neologismus Solastalgie ist zusammengesetzt aus einerseits dem Wort *solace*, Trost, verweist aber auch auf *isolation* und *desolation*, und andererseits dem Wort *algia*, was so viel wie Schmerz, Leid, Krankheit heißt. Somit bedeutet Solastalgie "the pain or sickness caused by the loss or lack of solace and the sense of isolation connected to the present state of one's home and territory" (Albrecht, "A New Concept" 45). In einem späteren Aufsatz präzisiert Albrecht Solastalgie als "place-based distress in the face of the profound environmental change" ("Environmental Damage" 35). Da diese profunde Änderung eines geliebten Naturorts nicht nur krank machen kann, sondern aufgrund der Einsicht in eigene Schuld an dieser Veränderung so tiefgreifend ist, dass sie die gesamte Denk- und Existenzweise erschüttert, spreche ich von dem solastalgisch Erhabenen. Dieser Begriff erscheint mir als Analysekategorie ergiebiger als ähnlich gelagerte Begriffe, mit denen betont werden soll, dass die Erfahrung des Naturerhabenen nicht ohne

²⁰ "Solvnotan" (41).

²¹ "skam och helvete" (51).

²² "Men den schröderska sorglösheten i strapatserna och skjutningen tilltalade mig inte längre" (118).

menschengemachte Naturzerstörung gedacht werden kann. Neben Bradys Begriff des “negative sublime,” lässt sich hier auch an Jennifer Peeples Begriff des “toxic sublime” denken, mit dem sie die Erfahrung kontaminierter Landschaften beschreibt. Der analytische Vorteil des solastalgisch Erhabenen besteht darin, dass er die weitreichenden psychischen, aber auch physischen Folgen negativen Naturerlebens deutlich benennt und zudem die eigene Verstrickung in diesen Zusammenhang aufscheinen lässt.

In *Wolfslichter* geschieht die Einsicht in eigene Verstrickung in Verbindung mit verdrängten und wiederauftauchenden Erinnerungen, die ich mit Walter Benjamin als “ungewolltes Eingedenken” bezeichne. Ist nicht, fragt Benjamin in seiner Untersuchung der Erinnerungsarbeit als Webarbeit bei Proust, Prousts literarische Arbeit das “Werk spontanen Eingedenkens, in dem Erinnerung der Einschlag und Vergessen der Zettel ist” (311)? Übertragen auf Ekmans Erzähler, und unter Rückgriff auf den zuvor erläuterten Zusammenhang von Weben und Jagen, heißt das, dass das ungewollte Erinnern des Erzählers der querlaufende Einschuss in den längslaufenden Faden des gewollten Vergessens ist. Der “Einschuss” macht dem Protagonisten seine Erfahrung des kreatürlich Erhabenen zunehmend ambivalent.

Zu dem ersten “Einschuss” kommt es, als der Erzähler im Sommer 2018 Zeuge der verheerenden Waldbrände in Schweden wird. Als Ulf wegen der ungewöhnlichen Hitze nicht schlafen kann und bei Turgenev über Leibeigene liest, versteift er sich zunächst zu der Aussage, dass wir im Grunde alle an eine Obrigkeit gebunden sind und deshalb nicht verantwortlich für das, was wir tun. Wohin diese Einstellung führt, wird ihm jedoch schmerzlich bewusst, als er sich an seine erste Dienstreise zu dem großen forstwirtschaftlichen Unternehmen Graningeverk erinnert. Statt Einspruch zu erheben gegen die Abholzung des Waldes aus ökonomischen Interessen, hat er geschwiegen und sich mit dem Gedanken beruhigt, dass die Forstbehörde schon dafür Sorge, dass kein Raubbau an der Natur geschehe. Mit fatalen Folgen: “Wald als Berge von Abfall. Reste des Industrieholzes, zu dem die Fichte geworden war. Überbleibsel eines toten Waldes. Das fiel mir jetzt wieder ein. Graninge hätte mein Wendepunkt sein müssen. War es aber nicht” (82–83).²³

Der zweite “Einschuss” bringt das Erleben des Waldes als tot mit der Jagd zusammen. Als der Erzähler eines Abends auf den Dachboden geht, um dort Mausefallen aufzustellen, werden ihm die dort aufbewahrten Jagdtrophäen, die größtenteils noch von seinem Vater und Großvater stammen, auf unheimliche Weise lebendig: “Die Geweihe bedrohten mich. Spitze Schnäbel und Krallen wollten an mir reißen. [...] Ich bekam kein Wort heraus. Auch keinen Schrei. [...] Jetzt sterbe ich, dachte ich. Nein, ich dachte nicht. Ich spürte es nur. Sie greifen an mein Herz. Mein Leben” (110–111).²⁴ Statt den Wald als Ort der Lebendigkeit, der wohltuenden Ruhe und des kreatürlich Erhabenen zu erleben, wird er ihm zu “a reminder of our

²³ “Skog som berg av avfall. Rester av det industriella träd som granen hade blivit. Lämningar av en död skog. Jag minde det nu. Graninge borde ha varit brytpunkten för mig: Men det blev inte så” (73).

²⁴ “Hornen hotade mig. Vassa näbbar och klor ville riva mig. [...] Ord fick jag inte fram. Inget rop heller. [...] Nu dör jag tänkte jag. Nej, inte tänkte. Jag kände det bara. De kommer åt mitt hjärta. Mitt liv” (96).

destructive relationship with the environment, here and now, perceiving the negative effects of our actions" (Brady 202). Ähnlich argumentiert Hitt: nicht die Natur selbst wirkt bedrohlich, und in dieser Bedrohlichkeit erhaben, sondern die Naturzerstörung des Menschen ist zur Bedrohung geworden; "the threat is of their own making" (619).

Wie sehr der Erzähler dieser Bedrohung, und damit dem solastalgisch Erhabenen, auszuweichen versucht, wird an dem dritten Beispiel besonders deutlich. Diesmal geht es um eine schon Jahrhunderte zurückliegende Schuld, die der Urgroßvater des Erzählers auf sich geladen hat, indem er 400 Jahre alte Bäume gefällt und zu Holzdielen verarbeitet hat. Jahre nachdem der Erzähler die Dokumente über diese Tat verbrannt hat, taucht nun das gewollte Vergessen als unwillkürliche Erinnerung wieder auf. Erst sind es nur einzelne Worte, die dem Erzähler einfallen, dann aber arbeitet er sich, wieder mit der Hilfe von Inga, an die ganze Geschichte der Schuld und Scham heran. Diese Annäherung an seine eigene und die Schuld seiner Vorfahren setzt ihm so zu, dass er weitere Herzinfarkte erleidet. Während er das Erleben auf dem Dachboden noch so deutet, dass die getöteten Tiere sein Herz attackieren, scheint es später so als ob er sich das Jagen und Töten von Tieren so zu Herzen nimmt, dass er selbst nicht mehr leben kann oder will. Zweimal bekommt der Erzähler bei einem Jagdausflug einen Herzinfarkt, der ihn fast das Leben kostet, dem gejagten Tier aber das Leben lässt. Als Konsequenz beschließt Ulf seinen Posten als Jagdleiter aufzugeben und fortan nicht mehr zu jagen.

Die Selbstzweifel und die Traurigkeit über eine zerstörte Natur sind damit aber nicht aufgehoben. Sie werden immer stärker. So wie oben gesehen der Geruchssinn des Erzählers feiner geworden ist, scheint nun sein gesamter Sinnesapparat geschärft. Er nimmt wahr, dass die Vielfalt an Vögeln im eigenen Garten zurückgegangen ist. Und er bekommt ein gesteigertes Bewusstsein für das globale Artensterben. Um seinen Erfahrungs- und Wissenshorizont zu erweitern, kauft Ulf ein Buch, dessen Titel im Roman nicht genannt wird, bei dem es sich jedoch wahrscheinlich um Elizabeth Kolberts *The Sixth Extinction* handelt. Was er dort liest, macht ihn jedoch so traurig, dass er das Buch wieder beiseitelegt. Inga hingegen liest es zu Ende und insistiert, dass nur das Wissen um die Gefährdung des Ökosystems uns helfen kann den Schaden zu begrenzen.

Der Umschlag von der Erfahrung des kreatürlich Erhabenen in die des solastalgisch Erhabenen hat jedoch nicht nur negative Folgen. Im Gegenteil. Auf längere Sicht motiviert sie den Erzähler, sich für eine bessere Zukunft stark zu machen. Wie Albrecht, allerdings ohne näher auf Fragen von Schuld einzugehen, unterstreicht: "Clear acknowledgment of that which needs to be confronted can be an empowering experience" ("Environmental Damage" 36).

Ökomaskuline Sorge

Dass der Erzähler das Gefühl der Solastalgie in ökologische Praxis umzusetzen vermag, hängt bezeichnenderweise nicht mit einer neuen Erfahrung erhabener Natur zusammen, sondern mit einem kleinen Hund. Diesen Hund kauft Inga, nachdem Ulf

seinen alten Jagdhund erschießen musste, und er selbst, nach einem weiteren schweren Herzinfarkt, für längere Zeit im Krankenhaus liegt. Anders als alle anderen Hunde, die Inga und Ulf jemals besaßen, handelt es sich bei dem neuen Hund nicht um einen Jagdhund, sondern um einen kleinen dänisch-schwedischen Hofhund. Als Ulf aus dem Krankenhaus kommt und den Hund sieht, reagiert er stark ablehnend und schimpft ihn, weil er statt einer ordentlichen Rute nur "ein Stöckchen" hat (146),²⁵ Köter und Promenadenmischung. Nach einem Streit mit Inga besinnt er sich doch und wendet sich dem Hund mit Sorge und Empathie zu. Die daraufhin einsetzende Ruhe zwischen den Ehepartnern wird jedoch erschüttert, als der Wolf, den Ulf Hochbein nennt, unter mysteriösen Umständen zu Tode kommt. Er wird nämlich nicht regulär, d.h. im Rahmen der Lizenzjagd erlegt, sondern erschlagen, in Ulfs Wohnwagen gelegt, und mit dem Wohnwagen verbrannt. Erst fällt der Verdacht auf Ulfs Widersacher Ronny, doch über eine Jacke, die Inga zum Weben verwenden wollte, an der aber Blut klebt, stellt sich schließlich heraus, dass es der 16-jährige, sozial benachteiligte Kennet ist, der den Wolf getötet hat. Nicht aus Bössartigkeit oder triumphaler Selbstgefälligkeit, sondern aus der verzweiferten Überzeugung, sich als "ein richtiger Kerl" beweisen zu müssen (206).²⁶ "Hegemonic stereotypes of being a real man include being a winner, a hunter, a leader," erklären Martin Hultman und Paul Pulé in ihrem Buch *Ecological Masculinities* (53), in dem sie mit eben dieser Vorstellung aufzuräumen versuchen. Und genau das leistet auch Ekman mit ihrem Roman.

Das Ende von *Wolfslichter* zeigt nicht nur die verheerenden Folgen der Jägerideologie, sondern nötigt den Erzähler auch ein weiteres Mal, sich aus seiner Verstrickung in bestehende Denkmuster zu lösen. Wäre Ronny der Täter gewesen, hätte Ulf sich in seiner Abneigung ihm gegenüber bestätigt gefühlt und hätte sich ihm gegenüber weiter so verhalten, wie die klarsichtige und literarisch bewanderte Inga es zuvor mit Verweis auf die altnordischen Njalssaga dargelegt hat. Ronny und Ulf verhalten sich Inga zufolge nämlich genau so wie die beiden männlichen Protagonisten dieser Heldensaga, in der männliche Rivalität zu immer neuen Gewalttaten führt und schließlich mit der Tötung Njalls und seiner Familie durch einen Mordbrand endet. Da nun aber Kennet der Täter ist, ist ein solcher Verbleib in der Gewaltspirale ausgeschlossen. Ulf muss umdenken. Das tut er, indem er den von Hultman und Pulé aufgezeigten notwendigen Wechsel "from hegemonisation to ecologisation" vollzieht und sich auf die Idee von "relational and more caring masculinities" einlässt (53, 8).

Gefolgt von seinem kleinen Hund sucht Ulf mehrere Monate nach der Tötung des Wolfs Kennet im Wald auf, wo dieser einige Bäume roden soll. Hier konfrontiert der Erzähler den Jungen mit seiner Tat, macht aber in ruhigen Worten klar, dass es ihm nicht um moralische Verurteilung oder strafrechtliche Verfolgung geht, sondern um Kennets Einsicht, dass es falsch war, den Wolf zu töten. Als zentrales Argument führt er an, dass jedes Lebewesen und jedes Element der Natur einen intrinsischen

²⁵ "en pinne" (127).

²⁶ "karl" (179)

Wert besitzen. Außerdem macht er auf die geteilte Kreativität aufmerksam und bringt damit implizit noch einmal den Gedanken der erhabenen Natur und der Möglichkeit des Menschen in der Natur im Sinne Albrechts "at home" zu sein, ins Spiel: "Das war sein Wald hier. Verstehst du? Sein Jagdrevier. Er war hier zu Hause. Bei sich zu Hause. [...] Er hat hier sein Leben gelebt, so wie du und ich unser Leben leben" (204–205).²⁷

Mit diesen altersweisen Worten durchbricht Ulf die Logik von *killer stories* und setzt an deren Stelle die Ethik von *life stories*. Kennet soll sich nicht als Mann unter Männern beweisen, sondern lernen das Leben wertzuschätzen. Dazu gehört sorgsam mit der nichtmenschlichen Natur umzugehen. Wie das konkret aussehen kann, zeigt der Erzähler, indem er Kennet abschließend erklärt, was nachhaltige Forstwirtschaft und Waldpflege heißt: "Von den Espenschossen da unten kannst du zwei stehen lassen. Die kräftigsten. Ein Stück voneinander entfernt. Die Birkenschosse rings um die kleinen Fichten rodest du besser" (206–207).²⁸ Dieser neue Blick auf den Wald ersetzt die Orientierung an Tod und Zerstörung mit der Orientierung am Leben und wirft ein neues Licht auf die Vorstellung des Erhabenen. Der Wald, in dem Ulf und Kennet sich begegnen, erscheint weder als unberührte Schneelandschaft, in dem ein wildes Tier seine Spur hinterlässt, noch wird er als Ort des Schmerzes über den Verlust unberührter Natur erzählt. Wir befinden uns also weder im Modus des kreativ Erhabenen noch des solastalgisch Erhabenen. Stattdessen wird der Wald, der hier symbolisch für die Gesamtheit von Natur steht, als Ort praktizierter Ökologie vorgestellt. Das scheint eine Sichtweise zu sein, die wenig Raum für die Aura des Naturerhabenen lässt. Wenn wir die Szene jedoch so lesen, dass hier Menschen lernen, gut miteinander und der Natur umzugehen und so ihren Beitrag zu einer Geschichte des Lebens leisten, könnten wir zu einem neuen Verständnis des Erhabenen kommen, dem Erhabenen als Ort praktizierter Naturethik.

Konklusion

Die in Kerstin Ekmans Roman *Wolfslichter* erzählte Begegnung zwischen dem Ich-Erzähler und einem Wolf weist Züge auf, die an Burkes Konzept des Erhabenen als eine den Menschen überwältigende und sein Selbstverständnis als autonomes Subjekt erschütternde Naturerfahrung erinnert, geht in diesem aber nicht auf. Anders als Kant es in seinen Gedanken zum Naturerhabenen darlegt, wird diese Erschütterung aber auch nicht im *logos* transzendiert. Stattdessen wird sie in die Körperlichkeit der Existenz hineingekommen. Der Wolf in *Wolfslichter* nimmt den Erzähler in sein Wolfsein hinein und lässt ihn so körperlich erleben, was es heißt Teil der Natur zu sein. Durch diesen Perspektivenwechsel wird sich der Erzähler der Notwendigkeit, aber auch der Möglichkeit bewusst, mit der Vorstellung von Natur als

²⁷ "Det var hans skog ser du. Hans jaktrevier. Han var hemma här. Hemma hos sig själv. [...] Här levde han sitt liv precis som du og jag lever våra" (178).

²⁸ "I aspslyt därnere kan du spara två stycken. Dom kraftigaste. En bit ifrån varandra. Røj björksly kring smågranarna" (179).

unendlichem Jagdgebiet im Sinne Horkheimers und Adornos zu brechen. Nachhaltig wird dieser Bruch aber erst da, wo der Erzähler über die Erfahrung des kreatürlich Erhabenen hinausgeht und sich der eigenen Mitschuld an der Zerstörung komplexer Ökosysteme, hier v.a. des Walds, bewusst wird. Dies geschieht im Schmerz der Erinnerung, der sich mit Walter Benjamin als Ausdruck eines ungewollten 'Eingedenkens' fassen lässt. Da sich dem Erzähler die anthropogene Naturzerstörung als Schmerz über den Verlust von Natur als "Heimat" einschreibt, kann von einem solastalgisch Erhabenen gesprochen werden. Statt dem solastalgisch Erhabenen verhaftet zu bleiben, gelingt es dem Erzähler jedoch, aus dem Zirkel von Schmerz und Gewalt herauszutreten und sich denen zuzuwenden, die seiner Fürsorge bedürfen, sei es ein kleiner Hund, ein schuldig gewordener junger Mann oder der Wald.

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"A Tough Bitch": Lynn Margulis and the Gaian Sublime¹

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Abstract

This essay challenges Bruno Latour's elegiac pronouncement of the sublime's death in the Anthropocene, proposing instead a "Gaian sublime" emerging from Lynn Margulis's radical reconceptualization of planetary life. Analysis of Margulis's scientific nonfiction reveals how her work on microbial agency and symbiosis disrupts traditional sublime theory's emphasis on human transcendence and geological spectacle. The essay traces how sublime aesthetics, from Longinus through Burke and Kant to contemporary environmental thought, has historically reinforced racial hierarchies, gender binaries, and human exceptionalism. Margulis's perspective offers a crucial corrective by revealing Earth's smallest inhabitants as its most profound transformers, generating sublime experience not through nature's brute force but through recognition of life's collaborative creativity across scales and through deep time. This reframing moves beyond both conventional sublime theory and contemporary Anthropocene discourse, demonstrating how scientific understanding might enhance rather than diminish the capacity for awe and wonder. The Gaian sublime thus emerges as both aesthetic category and mode of attention, potentially enabling more ethically attuned relationships with our living planet.

Keywords: Gaia theory, Lynn Margulis, microbial evolution, planetary resilience, nonhuman agency.

Resumen

Este ensayo cuestiona el pronunciamiento elegíaco de Bruno Latour sobre la muerte de lo sublime en el Antropoceno, proponiendo en su lugar un "sublime gaiano" que emerge de la reconceptualización radical de la vida planetaria de Lynn Margulis. El análisis detallado de los escritos científicos de Margulis revela cómo su trabajo sobre la agencia microbiana y la simbiosis interrumpe fundamentalmente el énfasis de la teoría tradicional de lo sublime en la trascendencia humana y el espectáculo geológico. El ensayo rastrea cómo la estética de lo sublime, desde Longino hasta Burke y Kant hasta el pensamiento ambiental contemporáneo, ha reforzado históricamente las jerarquías raciales, los binarios de género y el excepcionalismo humano. La perspectiva de Margulis ofrece un correctivo crucial al revelar a los habitantes más pequeños de la Tierra como sus transformadores más profundos, generando una experiencia sublime no a través de la fuerza bruta de la naturaleza sino a través del reconocimiento de la creatividad colaborativa de la vida a través de escalas y tiempo profundo. Este replanteamiento va más allá tanto de la teoría sublime convencional como del discurso contemporáneo del Antropoceno, demostrando cómo la comprensión científica podría mejorar en lugar de disminuir la capacidad de asombro. El sublime gaiano emerge así como categoría estética y modo de atención, permitiendo potencialmente relaciones más éticamente sintonizadas con nuestro planeta viviente.

Palabras clave: Teoría de Gaia, Lynn Margulis, evolución microbiana, resiliencia planetaria, agencia no-humana.

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The sublime persists as a central paradox in aesthetic philosophy—at once visceral experience and elusive concept, immediate sensation and enduring theoretical problem. While conventionally associated with nature's grand spectacles—vast landscapes, towering peaks, furious storms—the sublime has undergone constant reinterpretation, from Longinus to Lyotard. These varied frameworks share a common thread: the sublime emerges in moments when human perception confronts overwhelming force, whether natural or conceptual. Yet in an era where anthropogenic change rivals geological agency, this traditional dynamic between human subject and natural power grows increasingly unstable. As we witness ourselves reshaping Earth's systems, the very grounds of sublime experience shift beneath our feet.

Bruno Latour, in his seventh Gifford lecture, later published in *Facing Gaia*, advances a provocative thesis about this destabilization: the sublime is slipping from our senses. For Latour, the traditional crucible of sublime experience—the stark contrast between nature's overwhelming power and human insignificance—dissolves as anthropogenic impact rivals planetary forces. "Never again," he declares, "will we be able to tamp down our hubris simply by contemplating the spectacle of grandiose landscapes." This shift transforms our position from passive observers of an immense and brutal nature to active agents under Gaia's constant scrutiny: "From now on, everything is looking at us." Thus, Latour's question—"How can we keep on experiencing the sublime in the Anthropocene?"—seems to answer itself: we can't. "The feeling of the sublime," he concludes, "has escaped us" (254). Yet this elegiac pronouncement, while compelling, may mistake transformation for disappearance.

The sublime is indeed undergoing a seismic shift—but rather than extinction, it faces evolution. I want to suggest that our understanding of the sublime is expanding beyond its conventional geologic and humanist frame through what I call the Gaian sublime. This mode of aesthetic experience, emerging from microbiologist Lynn Margulis's radical reconceptualization of planetary life, arises from recognizing two interconnected phenomena: the vast drama of deep-time evolution and the world-shaping agency of microscopic life. Where traditional notions of the sublime emphasize either human transcendence over nature or the overwhelming power of geological forces, the Gaian sublime foregrounds the intricate interplay of living and nonliving systems. It evokes awe not at nature's brute force but at the resilience, creativity, and interdependence of Earth's myriad life forms across multiple scales, from the microbial to the planetary. Paradoxically, our current fixation on the term "Anthropocene," despite its intent to shift paradigms, reinforces both an anthropocentric view of Earth and a restrictively geological framework, tethering our understanding of the sublime to a narrow, materialist conception of planetary evolution.

The Gaian sublime both emerges from and critically extends recent developments in Anthropocene discourse. Scholars like Bruno Latour and Donna Haraway have drawn productively on Gaia theory to highlight the complex entanglements of social and ecological systems, challenging simplistic narratives of

human dominance. Yet even as this discourse grows more nuanced in its acknowledgment of biospheric agency and its critique of dualistic thinking, it often fails to capture the visceral experience of encountering Earth's living systems. The Gaian sublime addresses this crucial gap by offering a way to affectively engage with the planet's vast web of agencies. Where traditional sublimity emphasized nature's overwhelming power, and early Anthropocene narratives inverted this to focus on human geological agency, the Gaian sublime locates awe in the creative force of Earth's myriad life forms working in concert across scales and through deep time. This reframing resonates with recent work by scholars like Dipesh Chakrabarty on situating human history within planetary evolution, while insisting that such understanding must be not merely intellectual but visceral—a felt recognition of our embeddedness within Earth's living systems.

The Gaian sublime thus emerges not merely as critique but as a reorientation in how we experience and understand our relationship with Earth. While the Anthropocene narrative remains fixated on human impact and geological traces, the Gaian sublime attunes us to the awe-inspiring, often invisible processes that sustain planetary life. This perspectival shift builds upon Latour's call to "face" Gaia's agency as a complex, self-regulating system. Indeed, as Claire Sagan shows, Gaia theory itself encompasses competing visions of planetary agency: James Lovelock's conception of Earth as a fragile "old woman" requiring human intervention stands in stark contrast to Lynn Margulis's vision of Gaia as a "tough bitch"—a robust, self-regulating system fundamentally beyond human control. The Gaian sublime, grounded in Margulis's perspective, invites us to experience awe not at human agency but at the vast web of living processes that have long shaped—and continue to shape—planetary evolution, processes that both precede and exceed human influence.

As Bruce Clarke argues in *Gaian Systems*, Margulis's crucial intervention in Gaia theory lay in her insistence on viewing Earth's present through "the sublime Gaian backdrop of deep evolutionary time" (173). Where Lovelock remained focused on currently observable systems, Margulis developed a unified narrative spanning roughly 3.6 billion years—a temporal expanse that renders the entire history of complex animal life a geological instant. This vast temporal perspective, coupled with her emphasis on microbial agency, provides precisely what the Anthropocene narrative needs: a framework for experiencing sublimity that transcends both human timescales and human-centered agency. By reframing Earth's evolution as a microbial drama, Margulis's vision disrupts traditional sublimity's emphasis on human transcendence, repositioning humanity as a peripheral player in what Clarke terms Earth's ongoing story of "autopoietic immortality" (173)—not the immortality of individual organisms, but life's persistent ability to recreate and maintain itself through bacterial innovation and adaptation across deep time.

While current strands of ecocritical sublime theory emphasize reengagement with Earth's "material existence" (Murphy), the Gaian sublime demands we recognize something more profound: our planet's holistic agency, resilience, and moral indifference to the prospect of (non-microbial) extinction. This recognition

necessitates abandoning naive narratives of "protecting" or "saving" Earth in favor of learning to sensitize ourselves to Gaia—that planetary-scale, protean force that currently sustains our species—with the pragmatic aim of maintaining habitability. By foregrounding the agency of Earth's living systems over their materiality, the Gaian sublime enables an affective recognition of planetary aliveness that transcends conventional Anthropocene discourse. This visceral understanding, once grasped, compels us to seek more nuanced ways of relating to Earth's ongoing story—a narrative in which microbes remain the principal actors. Far from escaping us, as Latour suggests, the sublime instead reemerges through engagement with the liveliness that both engenders and envelops us. It asks us to look beyond immediate perception and human timescales to recognize the wiggly invisible world that has been creating and maintaining planetary habitability for billions of years.

Awe-Struck yet Short-Sighted: Examining the Legacy of Sublime Theory

The genealogy of sublime theory reveals how deeply current frameworks remain indebted to their historical antecedents. Longinus, in the first century BCE, established the concept's foundational connection to transformative experience, arguing that "the sublime inheres in the extraordinary adequacy of words and rhetorical structures, which provoke amazement and wonder as well as influence" (Shapiro 19). Edmund Burke's eighteenth-century intervention expanded this framework by uprooting the sublime from its purely rhetorical context. Burke's key innovation lay in his theorization of the sublime as "delightful horror"—a paradoxical response emerging from the safe contemplation of terror, which "produces a response that is neither pleasure nor pain" (Peters 782). This reconceptualization not only extended the sublime's domain from language to nature but also established a crucial link between terror and human transcendence. For Burke, confrontation with the awesome and terrible produces not cowering but "swelling"—a psychological expansion where the soul stretches to match nature's grandeur. His rhetoric of "triumph," "glorying," and "inward greatness" (Doran 160) transformed the sublime into a mirror of human potential, where survival of terror enables the harnessing of power. Burke extended this framework beyond natural phenomena to human labor, allowing the rising bourgeoisie to find sublimity in work itself. This expansion transformed "the taste for the sublime" into what Emma Clery identifies as "a moral foundation for economic individualism" (175).

Immanuel Kant's intervention in sublime theory marked a decisive shift from Burke's empirical psychology to transcendental philosophy. Rejecting Burke's assertion that "the experience of the sublime is necessarily accompanied by fear or terror" (Mellor 88), Kant insisted that mere psychological or emotional responses could not adequately explain the sublime's transformative power. His *Critique of Judgement* relocated the sublime's essence from bodily sensation to rational cognition, specifically to moments when consciousness confronts its own limitations in comprehending nature (Doran 229). This reframing generated Kant's influential

bifurcation of the sublime into mathematical and dynamical forms. The mathematical sublime emerges in confrontation with absolute magnitude—endless stars or boundless oceans—where imagination fails but reason triumphs in its capacity to conceive infinity (222). The dynamical sublime, by contrast, arises from encounters with overwhelming power—violent storms or towering mountains—where physical vulnerability gives way to recognition of our moral autonomy, “putting us directly in touch with the supersensible realm of freedom” (221). This realization, Kant suggests, “gives us courage to be able to measure ourselves against the seeming omnipotence of nature” (91). This transcendence requires aesthetic distance—a theatrical position that enables contemplation while ensuring safety. Through such calculated detachment, nature’s voice is muted so that we might hear what Latour and Hache term the “little music of morality” within ourselves (Latour & Hache 325).

These foundational theories of the sublime did more than establish frameworks for aesthetic experience—they actively constructed and reinforced racial hierarchies that would shape centuries of philosophical thought. Burke’s theory racialized the sublime through its treatment of blackness, most notably in his deployment of a “horrifying” Black woman as exemplar (Peters 786). This rhetorical move implied an inherent connection between dark skin and sublime terror, providing theoretical scaffolding for racial oppression during slavery’s expansion. Kant’s framework proved even more explicitly racist, linking sublime experience to European cultural superiority and systematically excluding “racially and culturally inferior peoples from access to the sublime” (Battersby 73). Together, these theoretical moves reveal how sublime aesthetics helped construct modern racial hierarchies, as both philosophers “sought to define sublimity by using images of racial others as deficit models” (Shapiro 43).

The sublime’s power dynamics extended beyond race to manifest rigid gender hierarchies. As Philip Shaw demonstrates, the concept has consistently encoded masculine ideals of power and reason, while relegating beauty to a feminized realm of passivity and emotion (10). Feminist scholars, however, have not merely critiqued this gendered binary but reconceptualized the sublime itself. Barbara Freeman’s theorization of the “feminine sublime” offers a radical alternative that “does not attempt to master its objects of rapture” (3), instead advocating for an aesthetic of receptivity and “taking up a position of respect in response to an incalculable otherness” (11). This reframing of sublime experience as receptive rather than dominating provides crucial theoretical groundwork for understanding how the Gaian sublime might operate beyond traditional gender hierarchies.

Through its association with European masculinity, whiteness, and human exceptionalism, sublime theory thus became a sophisticated philosophical apparatus for justifying multiple forms of dominance. This theoretical development paralleled and legitimized technological progress, as sublime experience gradually transferred from natural phenomena to human achievement. The twentieth century’s emergence of what David Nye terms the “technological sublime” marked a decisive shift, as industrial and mechanical marvels usurped the reverential status once reserved for

natural phenomena. As artificial wonders increasingly commanded sublime response, the concept's original connection to natural phenomena attenuated, threatening to sever what remained of Western culture's visceral connection to nonhuman agencies.

Christopher Hitt's intervention in sublime theory marks a crucial attempt to reclaim the concept for environmental thought. His argument that the "rapidly increasing impact of technology on the world has only heightened the urgency of the need to reconsider the sublime" (618) directly confronts the concept's compromised history. While acknowledging how "technology has assumed an integral role in the ideology of the sublime" (619), Hitt undertakes a strategic recuperation of sublime experience for ecological purposes. His "ecological sublime" reconceptualizes the aesthetic category as a potential bridge between human and natural worlds rather than a reinforcement of their separation. This theoretical move explicitly rejects technological solutions, arguing that "contrary to Kant, reason can never master nature" (619–620). Yet his framework, while advancing beyond traditional formulations, remains tethered to conventional scales of perception and agency.

The persistence of both traditional and technological sublime frameworks becomes particularly evident in Lovelock's formulation of Gaia theory. Lovelock first conceived of Gaia at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory in 1965, when data about Mars's CO₂-dominated atmosphere led to a revolutionary hypothesis: Earth's living organisms must actively maintain conditions suitable for life through complex feedback loops. While his conception of Earth as a self-regulating system appears ecological, his consistent advocacy for geoengineering betrays an underlying commitment to technological mastery. Claire Sagan's analysis exposes this contradiction, noting how Lovelock ultimately "fantasizes further about a future in which Gaia will shed her organic layers in favour of her technological ones" (11). His characterization of Earth as a vulnerable "old lady" requiring "dialysis" unconsciously reproduces the traditional sublime's gendered assumptions, while his techno-utopian vision reduces planetary processes to "informational bits." Sagan's critique of Lovelock's "imperialist, militaristic, medical and masculine language" (11) reveals how his framework perpetuates a problematic pattern: feminizing planetary processes while reserving transformative agency for masculinized technological intervention. Thus, Lovelock's interpretation of Gaia remains captured by the very power structures it supposedly challenges.

Margulis's interpretation of Gaia disrupts these persistent binaries and hierarchies. Her vision reimagines the sublime by recognizing a systematically overlooked truth: that microscopic life forms have been the primary agents of planetary transformation since life's emergence on Earth. This shift in perspective does more than simply add another voice to Gaia discourse; it reconfigures how we might experience and theorize sublime encounters with planetary life.

Small Players, Big Impact: Margulis's Microbial View of Earth

Margulis's Gaian view shifts our perception of Earth-life relationships. While she developed the framework in dialogue with Lovelock, her version emphasizes the primary agency of microbial life in orchestrating Earth's systems. Her theoretical contribution emerges from what Donna Haraway characterizes as her interdisciplinary mastery: "an adept in the study of microbes, cell biology, chemistry, geology, and paleogeography, as well as a lover of languages, arts, stories, systems theories, and alarmingly generative critters, including human beings" (60). This synthesis allowed Margulis to challenge conventional wisdom about both evolution and planetary processes. Central to her reimagining of Earth is a radical reassessment of microbial life that transforms bacteria from pathogens into sophisticated agents of planetary change. Microbes, she argues, possess capacities and exhibit behaviors that not only underpin evolution but continue to shape Earth's systems. "Our ancestors, the germs, were bacteria," Margulis insists, confronting a persistent cultural myopia that obscures a crucial truth: these disparaged "germs" not only preceded but "germinated all life" (96).

The sheer temporal and operational scope of bacterial existence poses a fundamental challenge to traditional theories of the sublime. Where Burke and Kant located sublimity in immediately perceptible manifestations of nature's might, Margulis uncovers a more profound source of awe in the microscopic realm. "The book of life," she insists, "is written in neither mathematics nor English: it is written in the language of carbon chemistry. 'Speaking' the language of chemistry, the bacteria diversified and talked to each other on a global scale" (Symbiotic Planet 108). Her research reveals how bacteria, through their sophisticated "nanotechnology, metallurgy, sensory and locomotive apparatuses" (Hird 22), have functioned as Earth's primary innovators and transformers since life's emergence. This microbial ingenuity operates across a radical spectrum of scale: individual bacterial cells perform sophisticated feats of chemical transformation that, when multiplied across billions of years and trillions of organisms, fundamentally reshape planetary systems. The Gaian sublime thus emerges from this dramatic rescaling of agency and impact—a theoretical move that collapses conventional distinctions between the infinitesimal and the infinite, between immediate perception and deep time.

Margulis's microbial ontology fundamentally subverts the Kantian sublime's celebration of rational mastery over nature. Instead of celebrating human transcendence, her work reveals how Earth's smallest inhabitants have engineered its most profound transformations. "We animals, all thirty million species of us, emanate from the microcosm," she asserts, reminding us that "the microbial world, the source and wellspring of soil and air, informs our own survival" (14). Her detailed accounts of how bacteria mastered substance conversion and invented fundamental processes like photosynthesis and aerobic respiration, generate an alternative sublimity—one that derives not from nature's brute force but from its capacity for creative transformation across scales and through time. This bacterial sublimity

reveals how microscopic life forms have functioned as Earth's premier innovators, developing sustainable solutions that outshine our technology in efficiency, sustainability, and global impact. This reframing not only topples conventional hierarchies of life but suggests our most prized traits and capacities have bacterial roots, prompting a radical rethinking of all "simpler" life forms. Margulis thus suggests that our best solutions might lie in synergizing with natural processes rather than attempting to dominate or transcend them.

Beyond challenging Kantian transcendence, Margulis's framework reconstitutes the relationship between consciousness and planetary life. Where Kant located moral elevation in reason's triumph over nature, Margulis proposes a more expansive view of mind and consciousness rooted in evolutionary history. Her assertion that "our sensibilities come directly from the world of bacteria" emerges from her systematic analysis of life's deep interconnectedness, evidenced in observable patterns of bacterial sophistication where "cohabitation succeeded in some with great perseverance through the ages." This Gaian perspective suggests that our moral sensibilities emerge not from transcendent reason but from life's long history of coevolution and adaptation. Her claim in "Prejudice and Bacterial Consciousness" that bacteria "invented consciousness" (Dazzle Gradually 37), while provocative, represents a calculated rhetorical move—an attempt to dislodge anthropocentric assumptions about mind, agency, and morality. This reframing suggests that ethical thinking requires not transcendence of our biological nature but fuller recognition of our embeddedness within Earth's complex web of life.

Margulis's expansive view of bacterial capabilities thus generates a distinct dimension of the Gaian sublime—one arising from the recognition of life's collaborative interconnectedness. The diversity and sophistication of biological innovations reveal evolutionary dynamics that transcend conventional narratives of competition and individual fitness. In *Microcosmos*, co-authored with her son Dorion Sagan, Margulis articulates an alternative paradigm of life's development: "Life did not take over the globe by combat, but by networking. Life forms multiplied and complexified by co-opting others, not just by killing them" (29). Her theory of endosymbiosis provides the empirical foundation for this perspective, demonstrating how certain organelles within complex cells—including mitochondria and chloroplasts—originated as free-living bacteria that formed permanent symbiotic relationships with their hosts rather than being digested when engulfed. The resulting sublime experience stems from recognizing our own bodies as living testimonies to ancient bacterial collaborations; as fundamentally symbiotic assemblages. As Donna Haraway observes, the "core of Margulis's view of life was that new kinds of cells, tissues, organs, and species evolve primarily through the long-lasting intimacy of strangers" (60). This recognition—that "in the arithmetic of life, One is always Many" (Margulis and Guerrero 51)—starkly contrasts with Western culture's emphasis on individual prowess and competition.

The Gaian sublime achieves perhaps its most radical expression in Margulis's extension of symbiotic interconnection to planetary scale. Her assertion with Sagan

in *What is Life?* that "Earth, in a very real sense, is alive" (23) generates sublimity through the recognition that planetary habitability itself emerges from microbial agency. From the ancient cyanobacteria that oxygenated Earth's atmosphere to contemporary microbes, bacteria regulate the planet's essential gas cycles. Through their management of carbon, nitrogen, sulfur, methane, and oxygen flows, living systems manifest an endless capacity for self-renewal through bacterial innovation. Margulis and Sagan capture this paradigm shift through a decisive analogy: "Earth is no more a planet-sized chunk of rock inhabited with life than your body is a skeleton infested with cells" (24). This formulation collapses distinctions between body and planet, microscopic and macroscopic, revealing symbiotic processes operating across all scales of existence.² Their vision presents Earth as a dynamic entity pulsing with the collective "breath" (35) of innumerable organisms, whose "geophysiological" (*Symbiotic Planet* 155) activities maintain conditions for life. Crucially, however, this planetary self-regulation emerges not from conscious design but from what Margulis identifies as "an emergent property of interaction among organisms, the spherical planet on which they reside, and an energy source, the sun" (149)—a description that reconfigures traditional notions of agency and intentionality.

Through her Gaian framework, Margulis dismantles traditional notions of nature as a delicate balance vulnerable to human disruption. Instead, she presents Earth as a resilient system that has endured countless perturbations throughout its history. Her characterization of Gaia as "an ancient phenomenon" and "a tough bitch [that] is not at all threatened by humans" (149) deliberately challenges both conventional environmental discourse and the gendered assumptions embedded in sublime theory. By figuring Gaia as a "tough bitch" (149), Margulis reframes planetary agency not through the traditional trope of passive mother nature but as a dynamic, self-directing force. While this characterization challenges passive feminine tropes, the phrase itself remains deeply gendered and warrants closer examination. The term "bitch" historically functions as a misogynistic slur, yet has been strategically reclaimed in feminist discourse to signify female power and resistance to patriarchal control. Margulis's deployment of this loaded term thus performs multiple rhetorical functions: it maintains feminine coding while rejecting traditional nature-feminine associations of nurturing passivity, and it provocatively positions Gaia's indifference to human concerns as a form of resistance to masculine-coded attempts at domination. Yet this linguistic choice also risks reinforcing gender binaries even as it attempts to subvert them, highlighting the persistent challenge of articulating planetary agency outside patriarchal frameworks.

Her description of "Gaia, in all her symbiogenetic glory" as "inherently expansive, subtle, aesthetic, ancient, and exquisitely resilient" emphasizes Earth's complexity and dynamism, transforming the static spectacles of traditional sublime

² This scaling between microscopic and macroscopic dimensions resonates with David Nye's recent theorization of the environmental sublime in *Seven Sublimes* (2023). Nye argues that experiencing the environmental sublime requires attention to multiple temporal and spatial scales, from microscopic processes to panoramic views, as they interact in "complex relationships slowly unfolding" (132).

landscapes into recognition of ongoing, often invisible processes (160). Moreover, Margulis inverts conventional narratives of brutality, relocating it from nature to anthropocentric excess. She positions humans as the true brutes, characterized by our "brazen, crass, and recent" nature, even as "we become more numerous" (160). Through this contrast between Gaia's ancient symbiotic processes and human temporal and scalar myopia, Margulis challenges the progress-oriented perspectives dominating Western thought. Her intervention extends beyond scientific discourse to re-evaluate anthropocentric and gendered frameworks for understanding planetary life, a reframing that compels us to consider Earth's systems beyond human timescales, interests, and power dynamics—recognizing instead the complex, resilient processes within which humanity remains embedded.

Margulis substantiates her vision of Earth's resilience through compelling empirical evidence: "Fossil evidence records that Earth life [...] has withstood numerous impacts equal to or greater than the total detonation of all five thousand stockpiled nuclear bombs." Her analysis reveals how catastrophe functions as an evolutionary catalyst: "Life, especially bacterial life, is resilient. It has fed on disaster and destruction from the beginning. Gaia incorporates the ecological crises of her components, responds brilliantly, and in her new necessity becomes the mother of invention" (151). Yet this planetary resilience carries profound implications for human futures: "It's not the Earth that's in jeopardy, it's the middle-class Western lifestyle." While acknowledging that "soil erosion, loss of nutrients, methane production, ozone depletion, deforestation, and the loss of species diversity may all be Gaian processes," she warns that human activity has "accentuated them to the point of near catastrophe." Though life will persist beyond the Anthropocene, our actions may "stress the system to such an extent that the earth will roll over into another steady-state regime, which may or may not include human life" ("Living by Gaia" 76). This Gaian perspective thus reframes environmental crisis: rather than threatening some imagined natural balance, anthropogenic changes function as evolutionary provocations—catalysts for adaptation within life's continuing narrative, though not necessarily with humans as protagonists.

Through Margulis's analysis emerges an existential challenge: "Have we the intelligence and discipline to resist our tendency to grow without limit?" (160). While microbial life will undoubtedly persist, the fate of larger species and ecosystems remains precarious. Yet from this recognition emerges a new form of sublime experience: not the traditional sensation of separation and transcendence, but a visceral awareness of our embeddedness within Earth's living systems. The Kantian sublime's promise of a "supersensible realm of freedom" thus transforms, drawing us not toward transcendent reason but rooting us deeper into our planetary entanglements. Even as Margulis emphasizes Earth's fundamental indifference to human survival, she evokes a profound sense of connection to life's ongoing drama: "Our deep connections, over vast geological periods," she insists, "should inspire awe, not repulsion" (4–5). This reorientation moves us beyond narrow considerations of human impact toward a more capacious understanding of our place within Earth's

evolutionary epic.

The Sublime Shift: From Victorian Deep Time to Anthropocene Urgency

Margulis's etymological observation in *Symbiotic Planet* reveals a crucial tension in Earth science: while "the ancient Greek word for 'Mother Earth,' Gaia, provides an etymological root for many scientific terms, such as geology" (147–148), the discipline has mostly diverged from this holistic origin. Despite its nominal connection to Gaia suggesting "an organismlike body in which geology and biology are [...] intimately linked" (148), the field has historically developed through practices of fragmentation and objectification. This methodological trajectory has systematically "matterized" both planet and inhabitants, transforming living systems into inert objects of study. This scientific reduction of life to matter represents more than a methodological convenience; it reflects and reinforces a broader conceptual framework that continues to shape how Western culture approaches questions of planetary agency and life.

Kathryn Yusoff's *A Billion Black Anthropocenes Or None* reveals how geology's reductive materialism intertwines with colonial and extractive practices. Her analysis demonstrates how geological frameworks have systematically transformed both Earth and its diverse inhabitants into non-agentic resources available for exploitation. Central to this process is what Yusoff identifies as "the inhuman," a category that operates across conventional distinctions between life and nonlife within "the indifferent register of matter" (5). This conceptual framework enabled and justified specific historical violence: geology's involvement in processes of racialization and the inscription of racial logics within "the material politics of extraction" created devastating parallels between "matter as property" and the dispossession of both land and persons. This parallel became particularly evident in slavery's transformation of racialized individuals into "inhuman matter"—mere commodities stripped of agency. These practices consolidated what Yusoff terms the white geology of the Anthropocene: "an extractive axis in both subjective and geologic (or planetary) life" that undergirds "the twinned discourses of geology and humanism" (5). This geological worldview thus performs a double violence: while reinforcing racial and exploitative ideologies, it simultaneously obscures the agency of the living world, rendering invisible the complex, interconnected systems that Gaia theory seeks to illuminate.

Naturally, the materialist reduction of planetary life extends beyond scientific discourse to structure broader cultural frameworks. As Amitav Ghosh demonstrates in *The Great Derangement*, even "serious" (9) literature manifests this limitation, particularly in its persistent failure to engage meaningfully with climate change. Modern literary fiction, he argues, often excludes environmental crisis as too extreme or improbable for realist narrative—a limitation that stems from what he identifies as a deeply embedded cultural commitment to gradualism. This perspective, which has shaped both scientific and literary conventions since the nineteenth century,

assumes "in both fiction and geology, that Nature [is] moderate and orderly." Ghosh reveals how geology and the novel developed in parallel, each relegating catastrophic change to the "un-modern" margins of respectability (22). This mutual development of scientific and literary conventions reveals how thoroughly gradualist assumptions have structured Western ways of perceiving and representing planetary processes.

While geological science has ultimately been forced to acknowledge the reality of sudden, catastrophic events, Ghosh argues that modern literary conventions remain trapped within gradualist assumptions. He identifies a profound irony in "realist" novels: "the very gestures with which it conjures up reality are actually a concealment of the real." Literary fiction, in its commitment to probability and moderation, "has never been forced to confront the centrality of the improbable" (23). This limitation has produced a telling cultural division: narratives engaging with extreme events or vast forces find themselves relegated to "lesser" genres like fantasy, horror, and science fiction, excluded from the realm of serious literature. Yet the Anthropocene fundamentally challenges these generic divisions, demanding engagement with what Ghosh terms "insistent, inescapable continuities, animated by forces that are nothing if not inconceivably vast" (62). The global scope of climate change, affecting diverse regions simultaneously, introduces a new reality where geological and meteorological forces assert themselves with "relentless directness" (62)—a reality that defies both gradualist assumptions and conventional narrative frameworks.

The Anthropocene compels us to confront vast planetary forces echoes a previous epistemological rupture: the Victorian encounter with geological deep time. Vybarr Cregan-Reid reveals how this earlier crisis emerged through the profound entanglement of geological science and sublime aesthetics: "Geology and the sublime have been linked since their inception in Western culture" (9). This connection, far from incidental, proved instrumental in shaping Victorian conceptions of both history and human temporality. Nineteenth-century geology's introduction of "deep time" fundamentally challenged prevailing biblical chronologies, generating what Cregan-Reid identifies as a profound paradigm shift: human understanding suddenly had to accommodate temporal expanses that defied comprehension (18). This cognitive challenge required new aesthetic frameworks, transforming how Victorians perceived Earth's features. As Cregan-Reid observes, "mountains, which had once been seen as despicable excrescences that ruptured the natural and classical beauty of the landscape, came later to be regarded as objects of awe, terror and sublimity" (9). This transformation reveals how aesthetic categories like the sublime become crucial tools for processing radical shifts in scientific understanding.³

Our historical moment requires recognition of another paradigm shift, manifested in our growing preoccupation with the term "Anthropocene." Unlike the

³ In *How the Earth Feels*, Dana Luciano similarly demonstrates how "geological fantasy" operated through aesthetic categories to make the "hard truths" (6) of deep time comprehensible and meaningful. As she argues, imagination was central to geology's popularity, bringing "the embodied subject into the drama of alien landscapes and bizarre life-forms" (8).

Victorian confrontation with deep time's backward expansion, we now face temporal collapse—a future rushing inward with unprecedented velocity. Where nineteenth-century geology rendered Earth's past newly comprehensible, the science of Gaia makes our conventional gradualist assumptions about the future increasingly untenable. This epistemic rupture generates its own sublimity, one born from simultaneous recognition of life's vast history and the possibility of rapid, system-wide transformations that will alter human futures. This dual temporal consciousness—contra Latour's elegiac pronouncement of the sublime's death—actually intensifies sublime experience in the Anthropocene. The Gaian sublime, as articulated through Margulis's work, asks us to confront both the probability of imminent catastrophe and the awesome resilience of planetary life, lending new urgency and existential weight to our encounters with Earth's living systems.

The challenge of communicating planetary-scale phenomena through human-scale experience has a rich scientific history. Paul White demonstrates how the sublime aesthetic proved crucial in early nineteenth-century geological discourse, particularly in Charles Darwin's work. Darwin's strategic deployment of sublime rhetoric—comparing the earthquake-ravaged Chilean city of Concepción to ancient ruins, for instance—made geological processes simultaneously comprehensible and emotionally resonant. This rhetorical strategy enabled Darwin to “manage the emotions of fear, excitement, and wonder that the earthquake inspired,” while situating catastrophic events “within a larger process of change, producing a new moral landscape, a sense of interconnectedness with the deep past, and of humility before the power and age of the earth” (50). Yet White identifies a crucial limitation: Darwin “rendered the earthquake a sublime experience only insofar as it was linked to human loss,” insisting that to fully observe such events, “one had to witness its effects on human life and emotion” (56). This anthropocentric framing of sublime experience—while effective for Darwin's purposes—reveals the persistent challenge of representing planetary processes that exceed human scale.

Contemporary environmental communication faces an even more complex challenge: articulating catastrophic events whose scope encompasses both human and nonhuman worlds while avoiding the reductive frameworks of either white geology's “inhuman matter” or what Ghosh terms our “great derangement.” This challenge requires forms of literacy that integrate scientific understanding with ecological and ethical imagination; forms that reimagine how we perceive, articulate, and respond to our entanglement with Earth's living systems. Scientific nonfiction emerges as a crucial genre for engaging these complexities. Building upon but transcending Darwin's strategic deployment of sublime aesthetics, such hybrid writing can mobilize aesthetic experience to render complex scientific concepts both accessible and affectively powerful. This approach cultivates a new mode of sublime experience that encompasses both the awe-inspiring and unsettling dimensions of rapid planetary change. These texts thus perform essential cultural work, helping to attune moral consideration to nonhuman agencies and bridging what Ghosh identifies as modernity's great epistemological divide.

This necessary expansion of moral consideration toward planetary scale finds theoretical articulation in contemporary philosophical discourse, particularly in Latour and Émilie Hache's reconceptualization of environmental ethics. Their article "Morality or moralism?" introduces sensitization as a framework for extending moral consideration beyond conventional human boundaries. They argue that modern science's reduction of life to matter has artificially severed nature from moral consideration. Through etymological analysis of "response" (*respondeo*), they demonstrate how genuine responsibility emerges from increased sensitivity to diverse forms of being. This insight enables their crucial distinction between "moralism"—which acknowledges different types of beings while remaining deaf to their appeals—and true "morality," characterized by growing attunement to the living world's multiple voices (312). Their framework thus provides theoretical grounding for the kind of expanded moral awareness that engagement with the Gaian sublime might enable.

Latour and Hache develop their theory through a crucial engagement with Michel Serres's philosophy of response. They position Serres in explicit opposition to Kant, who "against his own cognitive appetites, set aside his knowledge so as to experience the sublime" (320). Where Kant insisted on separating knowledge from aesthetic experience, Serres's framework suggests that scientific understanding actively enhances moral and aesthetic engagement with the world. As they explain, "if a rock ultimately has meaning (or value), it is not in spite of what the sciences say about it but thanks to scientific knowledge," precisely because "the sciences teach that rocks are linked to us through an extremely complex history [...] in which human subjects and the objects of their world are reciprocally constituted and in which all the interesting realities are situated between those two poles" (320). Their section "How to teach ourselves to respond to Gaia" argues that this responsiveness requires fundamentally "reopen[ing] basic questions about the sciences," since "the fact-value distinction is possible only if one embraces a conception of nature that empties the world of morally consequential yet nonhuman beings" (320–321). The very act of naming Earth as Gaia or recognizing it as alive thus performs crucial theoretical work, allowing us to "reopen the question of the range of beings to which we might be led to respond" (312).

Margulis's Gaian perspective, emerging from rigorous scientific investigation of Earth's myriad agencies, transforms how we might respond to planetary life. Her work does more than document bacterial agency; it enables new forms of attunement to the complex interplay of living systems that shape our world. This approach extends far beyond her stated mission to "put the life back into biology" (*What Is Life?* 2), ultimately reanimating our entire conception of Earth's aliveness. By revealing the sophisticated agency and profound interconnectedness of the planet's diverse life forms, her work opens unprecedented possibilities for moral consideration and ecological awareness. As Latour and Hache observe, "Change your conception of science, and you become sensitive to appeals of a kind different from any you have experienced before" (321). The Gaian sublime thus emerges not merely as an

aesthetic category but as a mode of attention that might enable more responsive relationships with the living planet we inhabit.

From Spectators to Attuned Participants: Evolving with Gaia

Latour's June 2013 address at the Holberg Memorial Prize Symposium, delivered just four months after his Gifford lecture pronouncing the sublime's demise, offers a striking reconceptualization of human-planetary relations. This lecture, "Which Language Should We Talk with Gaia?" (later published as "Agency at the Time of the Anthropocene"), reveals how traditional modes of scientific objectivity have become inadequate to our moment. Even seemingly neutral data—"at Mauna Loa, on Friday, May 3, the concentration of CO₂ in the atmosphere was reaching 399.29 ppm"—now reads as narrative, as "drama," as what Latour calls "the plot of a tragedy" in which "human actors may arrive too late on the stage to play any remedial role" (11). This transformation signals a fundamental inversion of Western philosophy's "most cherished trope": where human societies once positioned themselves as active subjects observing passive natural objects, we now find ourselves reduced to "the role of the dumb object" while planetary processes assume center stage as active subjects. The resulting temporal distortion proves particularly unsettling: human history appears to freeze while natural history accelerates to what Latour terms "a frenetic pace" (11–12).

This inversion of subject-object relations calls for more than the Anthropocene narrative's simple acknowledgment of blurred boundaries between human and natural histories. It requires fundamental recognition that we have never been the world's sole agents of change—indeed, that nonhuman agencies operate at temporal and spatial scales our culture struggles to comprehend. Moving beyond purely geological frameworks opens new possibilities for environmental engagement. While terms like "Anthropocene" and "matter" serve important descriptive purposes, they often obscure what Margulis's work reveals: the deep-time creativity and ongoing responsiveness of Earth's living systems, whose collective agency has shaped both planet and ourselves since life's emergence. This recognition requires modes of attention that can track between scales—from bacterial metabolism to atmospheric transformation, from momentary chemical reactions to evolutionary innovations spanning billions of years. Neither conventional scientific observation nor traditional aesthetic contemplation alone can capture these dynamic intersections of scale, agency, and time.

Margulis's Gaian perspective, I've argued, offers a crucial corrective to these limitations. Yet as Zakkiyah Iman Jackson demonstrates in *Becoming Human*, we must scrutinize the very language and metaphors through which we articulate life's interconnections. Jackson's analysis of how Margulis and Sagan occasionally deploy racially charged terms like "miscegenation" to describe cellular merging reveals the persistence of problematic hierarchies even within ostensibly revolutionary scientific frameworks (153–154). This critique illuminates how any reconceptualization of the

sublime must confront not only questions of scale and agency but also scientific discourse's historical entanglement with racial and colonial power structures. A genuinely transformative vision of the Gaian sublime must therefore actively dismantle the racial and species hierarchies that have structured Western thought about nature and evolution, while maintaining critical awareness of how we frame relationships between different forms of life.

This critical awareness enables recognition of how "matter" and "living" function not as opposing forces but as intimately entangled aspects of Earth's evolution. This recognition of Earth's complex systemic interplay compels us to attend to what might be called the planet's grand experiment. Rather than maintaining the stance of detached observers or reducing ourselves to abstract geological forces, we must attune our scientific and cultural sensibilities to Gaia's manifold expressions—from the subtle activities of atmospheric microbes to the dramatic signals of planetary shifts. This sensuous expansion directly addresses this essay's central concern: how the Gaia narrative might fundamentally transform sublime experience. Margulis's vision enables a mode of awe that privileges the world-shaping presence of the biosphere over what Yusoff terms the "indifferent register of matter," generating affective recognition of planetary aliveness. The possibility of *wise* participation—of attentive engagement with Earth's living systems—thus requires we rethink sublime experience itself, replacing the traditional aesthetic of distant contemplation with an evolutionarily-informed practice of responsive attunement.

"Gaia," as Latour insists, "is not the same character as nature" (12). She transcends conventional categories—neither pure subject nor mere object, neither inert matter nor transcendent life force. Despite her name's mythological resonance, Gaia remains resolutely non-divine: we cannot appeal to her benevolence or expect her protection. Our attempted extrication from her systems—however persistent—remains impossible. Yet precisely this inescapable embeddedness within Gaia creates the possibility for enlarging our moral sensitivity. While transcendence proves impossible, we might learn to evolve with her, following the path that bacterial life has traced for billions of years. Gaia's fundamental indifference to human futures presents us with a profound challenge—one that could radically reconfigure our understanding of our planetary position, if we develop the capacity to sense its sublimity.

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