



Ecokritike

Vol. 1 - Num. 1 February 2024



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Editor in Chief
Peggy Karpouzou



Ecokritike is an international, open access, blind and double peer-review journal for academics and researchers who study the fields of Environmental Humanities, Literary Theory and Cultural Criticism. The journal seeks to explore issues beyond the traditional binary and complex relationship of nature-culture, and also examines the changing status of subjectivity, agency, and citizenship, while envisioning matters for sustainable futures in a more-than-human world.

e-ISSN: 3034-9214

Publication Frequency: two issues per year (February and September)

The abbreviated title of *Ecokritike* is *Eke*.

The journal is published by Apeiron Editoria e Comunicazione Srl, Via Giovanni Livraghi 1, P.C./ZIP: 40121, Bologna, Italy. CF e P.IVA 01958601203.

Tel.: +393402513890. Email: info@siua.it

Ecokritike is currently under review by various indexing and abstracting services.

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Devastative Naturescapes and Superhuman Saviors: Analyzing Postcolonial Ecological Crises in Contemporary Times with a reference to Kornei Chukovksy's Doctor Powderpill

Sayan Dey¹

Abstract. The European colonizers treated the natural environment, the wild lives, and the plant lives in the Global South as insurmountable, wild and redundant. Ample of literary, historical and anthropological records from the colonial era reveal how the naturescapes in Africa, Asia, and other parts of the Global South have been perceived as 'wild, dark and uncivilized' because the Europeans encountered a lot of challenges in taming, pruning, shaping, and reconfiguring the natural environment according to their whims and fancies. With the passage of time, such problematic narratives have systemically, epistemically, ontologically, and ideologically trickled down from one generation to another in the forms of folk tales, children's tales, poetries, short stories, novels and various other forms of narratives. This article uses Russian poet Kornei Chukovsky's poem *Doctor Powderpill* as a reference point. Through attempting a postcolonial critique of the poem, the article unfolds the possible 'ecological postcolonialscares,' which can be implemented to re-read and reinterpret the existing histories, cultures, literatures, and societies around us in a 'trans-habitual' existential way.

Keywords: naturescapes, ecological postcolonialscares, postcolonial, trans-habitual, superhuman.

Reworlding: Towards a Human Collapse

Isn't the world that we currently live in need to reworld? An important aspect of reworlding is cross-existence. So, it is also important to ask: Do humans exist on their individual terms or they have always been cross-existing with other living species? These questions, in relation to the poem titled *Doctor Powderpill* by Russian poet Kornei Chukovsky, serve as the foundation of this article

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because, through the character Doctor Powderpill, the poet makes a consistent effort to argue how humans are capable of surviving on their own and no other living species like plants, animals, insects, and other can survive without the humans. It is also important to clarify that the arguments in this article are not restricted to the poem. The poem has been used here as a referential point to engage with the human-more-than-human hierarchies in the contemporary era. The motivation behind choosing this particular work has been explained in the consequent parts of this article.

The abovementioned questions may appear to be very generic and have been widely asked across multiple social, cultural, political and other knowledge-making spaces. But, a deeper investigation would unfold that, they have hardly been addressed practically. In fact, under the narratives of “relative opacity” (Bhabha, 2022, xix) and ‘obviousity,’ the questions have often been systemically, epistemically and ontologically silenced and ignored. With respect to these questions, the article argues how, in spite of the steep rise in natural disasters and climate catastrophes across the planet, the human society continues to conform to and celebrate the reckless developmental policies of capitalism. The article also outlines how the phenomenon of postcolonialscapes can be adopted as a possible existential methodology through self-reflections, self-transformations, and self-interrogations, so that the exclusionary, hierarchized, invasive and dictatorial attitudes of the humans towards the more-than-human-beings can be planetarily transformed.

To elaborate further, the Eurocentric paradigms of science, technology, anthropology, literature, cultural studies, and other disciplines, in order to dictate the existence of every living being across the planet in an anthropocentric fashion, have invisibilized the questions through “projection, phobia, negation, phantasm, identification, objectification, inversion, anxiety [and] disavowal” (Bhabha, 2004, xix) and have categorized them as ‘obviously’ unintellectual, unsmart, and unscientific. However, centuries of ecological crises, climate catastrophes, and geological shifts have historically regulated the geopolitical movements of the human communities. The shifts and movements reveal that these questions are not obvious and they need to be consistently and collaboratively addressed through postcolonial methodological viewpoints. I identify this process of methodological interrogation as a ‘human collapse,’ where the preconceived enclaves of social, physiological and ideological superiority of the human civilization over other living beings are systemically dissolved through the phenomenon of “reworlding” (Huybrechts, 2022, 174). Reworlding questions the “artificially constructed and mystifying separations between social and environmental worlds” (Huybrechts, 174). Through a human collapse, the practice of reworlding enables humans to rethink and reshape the relationships between human and more-than-human beings in a non-linear, interwoven, entangled, and rhizomatic fashion, where the physical,

intellectual, psychological, and ideological growth of the human beings can be analyzed in connection to other forms of living beings. In a reworlded planet, the paradigms of growth and development need to be perceived horizontally, where the existential philosophies of every living being are knitted with each other through threads of mutual interactions and inter-actions.

The phenomenon of reworlding also invites the humans to think that “climate change, sustainability and antitoxin movements make environmentalism a practice” (Alaimo, 2016, 131). The practice “entails grappling with how one’s own bodily existence is ontologically entangled with the well-being of both local and quite distant places, peoples, animals, and ecosystems” (ibid.). The human collapse has been psycho-socially reconfiguring the humans as a trans-habitual species, whose existential performances are redefined through “aggregation, co-constitution and co-construction” (Ghosh, 2019, 280) of knowledge-making systems that exist beyond the parameters of “opportunistic colonizations” and “invasiveness” (Ghosh, 2019, 279) and acknowledge the knowledge values of every living being. The aspect of trans-habituality gets nurtured through the mutually accepted values of cohabitation, where humans can co-exist and co-learn from plants, animals, birds, insects and other forms of living beings without trying to appropriate them. It is a common sight how certain animal and plant species are often considered a threat by the humans and are openly massacred without realizations and regrets. However, the transformation of the humans from an inter-habitual² species to a trans-habitual species will diversify the physical, ideological and intellectual processes of knowledge-making in intersection with other living forms. Prior to engaging with the necessities and possibilities of trans-habituality, it is crucial to engage with the strategic systematization of ecological imperialism by the European colonizers, and this aspect will be contextually elaborated in this article through Kornei Chukovsky’s poem *Doctor Powderpill*. The poem “collectivizes, historicizes and politicizes” (Holloway, 2020, 27) the colonial projects of ecological violence and the postcolonial projects of capitalistic cataclysms. The violence is very pertinent in the poem through Doctor Powderpill’s all-knowing and all-pervasive attitude towards the ailing birds and animals in Africa, who are portrayed as helpless and incapable without human interventions – a form of existential attitude that has been historically shaped by the European colonizers.

Prior to discussing further about Chukovsky’s poem, it is crucial to clarify the positionality that motivated me to engage with this particular literary work in the context of post-coloniality. I was introduced to this poem by my mother. This poem was one of the first works that introduced

² The term inter-habitual has been used here because a lot of human communities have the tendency to remain enclaved within anthropocentric societal structures and interact with more-than-human living entities in preconditioned ways, without trying to come out of the structures and understand the existential philosophies of other living forms.

me to a normalized world of capitalistic anthropocentrism, where humans are acknowledged as living beings with super powers, who can overcome any form of ecological and environmental challenges, have solutions to every form of worldly problems, and are superior to any form of more-than-human living beings. Besides this personal positionality, it is also essential to note that during the 1990s this poem was a widely celebrated text in the field of children's literature in India. In homes and educational institutions, this poem was widely introduced as a narrative of positive human values of love and selflessness by strategically and systemically hiding the derogatory portrayal of animals, birds and the natural environment. Besides projecting the natural environment in demonic and redundant ways, the poem is laid with racial undertones that celebrate the degrading Euro-colonial representations of nature in the continent of Africa and other parts of the Global South. The colonial representations are relevant even today and are put into practice by the socio-economically privileged countries of the Global North through treating specific geopolitical sites in the Global South as ideal laboratories for conducting nuclear tests, mining activities, industrial constructions, medical experimentations, and environmental erasures (Mignolo, 2011; Baumann and Bultmann, 2020; Nigam, 2020; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2022). Especially, after getting introduced to the theories, philosophies and methodologies of postcolonialism, cultural studies, critical race studies, ecocentrism, ecological sustainability, and anthropocentrism, I realized how the literary imageries of 'heroization,' 'sufferings,' 'saviorism,' and 'resurrection' in the poem unpack the colonial ritual of "cross-border appropriations in a restless parataxis" and "re-premises the local-global divide in terms that are far more complicated than conventional understanding would allow" (Ghosh, 2019, 282). In *Doctor Powderpill*, the divide is evident with respect to the patterns in which the ailing animals and the insurmountable natural environment in Limpopo have been simultaneously depicted in sympathetic and barbaric ways.

The following section elaborately reflects on the literary imageries and outlines the ways in which the interactions between Doctor Powderpill and the ailing animals in Limpopo function as a repertoire of colonial savagery.

Ailing Animals and the Savior (Super)human: *Doctor Powderpill* as a Repertoire of Colonial Savagery

The planetary project of European colonization was socio-historically unleashed in an episodic and systemic fashion. The episodes and systems have undergone reformulations across generations through the glossaries of fancy and deceptive colonial terms and phrases like enlightenment, positivism, industrialization, commercialization, diversity, inclusivity, humanism, green capitalism, development, progress, and many others. It is such terminologies that celebrate and rationalize the performances of colonial savagery in the contemporary era in creative and aesthetic ways. In the poem *Doctor Powderpill*, the creative and aesthetic portrayal of colonial savagery takes place through multiple forms of colonial imageries.

Doctor Powderpill was originally written in Russian in 1929 and was titled *Aybolit*. It was translated into English by D. Rottenberg in 1978. The poem, written as a children's tale, talks about desolated and ailing wild animals, unconquerable mountains, and rough weather conditions in Limpopo (a province in South Africa that borders Botswana, Zimbabwe and Mozambique). The descriptions are not very different from the anti-ecological narratives of the governing institutions in India, United States, Brazil, Columbia, Australia and other parts of the world, who regard the natural environment as a potential hindrance in their development projects of railways, roadways, waterways, residential complexes, shopping malls, business districts, industrial complexes, and others. The poem begins with projecting Doctor Powderpill, an aged, white-skinned, white-haired and blue-eyed animal doctor from Russia, as a super-human, "spectacular, [and] hypermasculine" (Lawrence, 2016, 777) healer, who has a solution to every form of illnesses and crises of the animals and the natural environment. As the poem initiates:

Dear *old* Powderpill,
 If you're *ailing*, if you're *ill*
 Come and see him and *be healed*,
 Beast and bird and wood of field... [italics added]

The phenomena of white, colonial, and heteronormative hypermasculinity and spectacularity are structurally performed at the beginning of the poem through the usage of words and phrases like "old," "ailing," "ill," and "be healed." Prior to discussing about ecological violence and postcolonial counter-resistance, it is crucial to initiate the arguments through the perspectives of coloniality, heteronormativity, and hypermasculinity, because, they serve as few of the many factors that have historically triggered the dissolution of the natural environment and carved out pathways for capitalistic violence. The edifying portrayal of Doctor Powderpill by Chukovsky reinstitutes the colonial imageries of piousness, saviorism and divinity that were once

manufactured and globally disseminated by the pastors, anthropologists, historians, medical practitioners, litterateurs, and others from Europe. Historically, any form of ecological resistance against European colonization has been intellectually and aesthetically silenced by all-pervading and all-knowing white human entities like Doctor Powderpill, who as a healer and caregiver, celebrate “the European self-identity as the world’s master race” (Vera, Feagin & Gordon, 1995, 296). According to Chukovsky:

Everyone from everywhere

Will receive his *aid and care!* [italics added]

In order to further systematize the colonial performance of ecological catastrophes in Africa and other parts of the Global South, Chukovsky sketches an unpleasant, derogatory and wild picture of the natural environment in Limpopo, where the animals, birds, and insects fight and injure each other. Chukovsky’s vision of the natural environment in Africa vastly resonates with the notion of a fractured, chaotic and uncivilized Africa that was imagined and disseminated by the colonial governing bodies during the Berlin Conference of 1884 and later. It can be categorically understood through the following lines:

Once a fox paid him a call:

“Oh, a wasp stung my back!” Did she squall!

Then a pup came to see him, morose:

“Oh, a hen pecked my poor little nose!”

The lack of understanding of the existential and the functional patterns of the natural environment and misrecognizing the natural environment as a barbaric and undisciplined entity, unpack a normalized narrative of “symbolic violence” which “entails the imposition of systems of meaning on subordinated groups in an attempt to make the dominant group’s actions appear legitimate” (Vera, Feagin & Gordon, 297) as can be seen in the case of the interactions between Doctor Powderpill and the animals in Limpopo. Eventually, the symbolic violence has given birth to a state of ‘multitudinous colonization’ where every aspect of human and natural civilizations is dictated by the anthropocentric, heteropatriarchal and monopolized ideologies of Euro-colonial ideologies. Today, the dictatorship is institutionally deployed by destroying forests to construct roads and railways, choking water bodies to build pipelines and underwater transportation systems, and polluting open natural lands to develop housing complexes (Bindra, 2017).

The messianic Doctor Powderpill is not just a character in the poem, but serves as a metaphor for all the colonial minds and bodies who came together on 15th November, 1884 at the Berlin Conference and legitimized the “ideas of Africa as a playground for outsiders, its mineral wealth as a source for the outside world and not for Africans, and its fate as matter not to be left to Africans” (Gathara, 2019). The culture of hunting, gathering, and laboratizing humans, nature and the indigenous knowledge systems of Africa and the world continue to take place in the contemporary era in the forms of conducting medical experiments, building mining industries, launching discovery projects, etc. For instance, in 2020, during a TV debate on Covid-19 vaccine trials, Jean-Paul Mira, head of intensive care of Cochin Hospital in Paris, argued: “If I can be provocative, shouldn’t we be doing this study in Africa, where there are no masks, no treatments, no resuscitation?” (Mira cited in BBC, 2020). Doctor Powderpill’s ignorant ways of approaching, caring and healing the animals in Limpopo is quite identical to Jean-Paul Mira’s ignorant approach of socio-historically regarding Africa as culturally, medically and scientifically backward and the necessity of the Europeans to ‘enlighten,’ ‘teach,’ and ‘educate’ them. The ignorance and all-pervasive attitude get further reflected in the following lines:

“Come and see us, Doctor,
In Africa, be quick.
Save our children, Doctor,
They're very, very sick!”

“Really? Truly? What is wrong?
Have they been laid up for long?”

“Yes, oh yes, they’ve got the ‘flu,
Chickenpox and smallpox too,
Measles, mumps, appendicitis,
Malaria and brochitis.

“Come, dear Doctor Powderpill,
All depends upon your skill!”

In the above lines, Chukovsky shows how Dr. Powderpill is capable of healing every fatal disease. The sole dependency of the animals and birds on Doctor Powderpill also symbolically

signifies how the colonized were psychologically and intellectually sterilized by colonial sciences and medicines. To explain further, the animals and birds in the poem function as a metaphor of colonized, racialized and enslaved human and more-than-human bodies, whose sufferings were justified by the European colonizers as civilizational and disciplinary initiatives. One of the many purposes of celebrating the narrative of healing in this poem is to systematically and aesthetically conceal three major intentions of colonizing Africa – destroying the naturescapes, disturbing the natural ecology by spreading fatal diseases, and disrupting the ecologically sustainable indigenous modes of knowledge production. The successful concealing of these intentions has allowed the colonizers to consistently justify and re-justify that it is necessary to colonize, civilize and educate the “inferior, backward and barbaric Africa” (Olusoga, 2015). The colonial ritual of hiddenness has also led to the foundation of a “traumatic bond” to illustrate the bond of intertwined emotions between the violated and violator” (Thapar-Bjorkert, Samelius & Sanghera, 2016, 147). As Chukovsky describes in the poem, the animals have developed a traumatic bond with Doctor Powderpill by exclusively depending on him and inviting him to treat them, because they believe that he has vaccines for all the diseases like influenza, chickenpox, smallpox and others. The traumatic bond strategically hides the ways in which the colonizers have simultaneously acted as killers and healers. To explain further, in the poem, the diseases that the animals are suffering from where mostly introduced by the European colonizers (Gale, 1982; Boutayeb, 2010; Pringle, 2015) and Doctor Powderpill has been launched as a healer and savior to enshroud such a reality. Such traumatic bonds are fleshed out in the contemporary times as well and the politics of extending medical help across the world can be taken as an example. The processes of producing and distributing medicines have been historically underpinned with multiple forms of geopolitical, cultural, social, and economic hierarchies produced by the economically privileged countries in the Global North and their close associates in the Global South, which eventually have led to situations like vaccine crisis, selective imposition of medical taxes, meteoric rise in infectious and fatal diseases within selective locations and communities, and not allowing certain socioeconomically vulnerable communities to have access to basic health facilities (Kim et al., 2017; Reidpath and Alloty, 2019). Many deliberately generated crises allow these countries to wear the mask of sympathizers and extend ‘help’ to the socioeconomically underprivileged countries in exchange for social, political, economic, administrative and military favors.

The importance of savior figures like Doctor Powderpill have been further justified in the poem through presenting him as an innocent and ignorant character. The innocence and ignorance of the doctor gets categorically highlighted when he expresses his utter surprise after hearing that the animals are suffering from fatal diseases – “Really? Truly? What is Wrong?” Such a

performance of innocence has been actively constituted and represented as an act of power (Feenan, 2007, 514) by the colonizers. When Jean-Paul Mira was criticized about his racialized remarks, he feigned a similar form of ignorance like Doctor Powderpill.

This poem was published a year before the influenza vaccination was started in the United States (US). So, when this poem was written, at that time the US was conducting vaccine trials on various Afro-American bodies. Europe was also finding ways to counter influenza by conducting medical experiments on the colonized human and animal bodies (Quinn et al., 2017; Elliott, 2021; Mahmud et al., 2021). Besides initiating vaccination against influenza in the early 20th century, Europe and the United States were experimenting with medicines to counter other fatal diseases, and during that time, like many other “books, pamphlets, cartoons, and speeches” (Olusoga, 2015), this poem served as a doctrine of regularizing white experiments on the black bodies in Africa. The exclusive dependency of the animals on Doctor Powderpill also epitomizes what Terr Ellingson argues as “the myth of the noble savage” (2001). The myth has compelled the animals to undergo “internationalization/epidermalization of inferiority [...] and cultural trauma under colonialism” (Desai, 2022, 73). The experiences of inferiorization and traumatization across generations have made the colonized minds and bodies firmly believe that the distant and dualistic knowledge cultures of the colonizers are superior to their own trans-habitual existential cultures. As a result, the animals in the poem are seem to be performing the ritual of self-demonization and self-marginalization by describing their natural environment in a derogatory way. The ritual can be observed in the following lines:

“Very well, I'll come, all right,
And help your children in their plight.
Only your address — what is it?
Hill or swamp — what shall I visit?”

“Well, we live in the Sahara,
In the *scorching* Kalahari,
Up on Mount Fernando-Po,
Where the *grumpy* Hippo-Poppo
Roams the *mighty* Limpopo.” [Italics added]

The usage of imageries like “scorching Kalahari,” “grumpy Hippo-poppo,” and “mighty Limpopo” reproduces the colonial imageries of the wild, untamed and the unconquerable natural environment

of Africa. Doctor Powderpill's question – "Hill or Swamp, where shall I visit?" showcases the ecological stereotypes that have been generated by colonial scholarships about the Global South. These stereotypes are celebrated throughout the poem by gradually portraying the doctor as a superhuman figure, who is able to brave "roaring" waves, "stormy" seas, and steep mountains to treat and cure the ailing and weeping animals.

It is children's tales like Doctor Powderpill that have socio-historically ingrained the narratives and imageries of 'superior' humans and 'inferior' nature within the psyches of individuals across generations. With human-nature dualism at the back of the mind, the children who reads this poem grow up as advocates of a capitalistic extra-terrestrial dream that encourages humans to desert the planet earth and explore civilizational possibilities in other planets of the solar system. The extra-terrestrial dreams of the contemporary times are manifested in texts like *Doctor Powderpill*, where the natural environment is treated as a non-descriptive, alienating, uncivilized and out-of-the-world entity. The extra-terrestrial dream is underlined with a sense of "wonder" and "desperation" (Holloway, 2022, 6) and causes "world alienation," which promises a "collective flight from the earth into the universe" (Arendt, 1958, 23) as "swift as lightning" (Chukovsky, 1978). As a consequence, today, we are less concerned with the heaps of garbage that are choking the forests, the mountains and the seas, and are more interested in dumping the planet earth and find shelter in other planets. In this way, we are eventually building a future that would be dictated by 'garbocratic' and 'garbo-imperialist' paradigms, where the physical, psychological and emotional aspects of human existence will be regulated by the human-generated domestic, industrial, emotional, psychological, cultural, and digital wastes. The psychological impact of Doctor Powderpill's health and medical support on the ailing animals was garbageous in nature – manipulative, disruptive, seductive, invasive and convincing at the same time. In the name of trials, industrialization, development and artificial intelligence, the collective performance of ecological catastrophes by the human civilization are rooted in superhuman (also read as pseudo-human) and overconfident characters like Doctor Powderpill, who pretends to have a solution to all terrestrial and extra-terrestrial challenges. In order to dismantle such fake narratives of the colonial/capitalistic systems of knowledge production and save the planet from a complete ecological collapse, it is urgently necessary to "rebuild broken relationships, damaged ecosystems, and obsolete institutions, through explicit recognition of the capacity of agency and practices that involve people, animal, objects, and other materials" (Blanco-Wells 2021, 2). Simultaneously, it is important to acknowledge a human collapse that will "abandon hierarchical comparisons in deciding the value or operative potential of humanity or a plant or a fly (for example)" and re-

position the human civilization within “mutually affective ‘inter-kingdoms’” (Bignall & Braidotti, 2019, 1).

In the context of Chukovsky’s poem, the following section further discusses the possibilities of a human collapse through proposing a “postcolonial turn” (Devisch and Nyamnjoh, 2011) and a possible manifesto of ecological postcolonialscapes.

The Postcolonial Turn: A Possible Manifesto of Ecological Postcolonialscapes

The phenomenon of postcolonial turn is underpinned with the notion of “ecologies of repair” that “explore the ways in which different groups, in contexts of socio-environmental conflict or crisis, relate to nature [...] to repair the damage provoked by the effects of industrial processes” and to transform “the conditions of coexistence for various life forms” (Blanco-Wells, 2021, 2). The planet needs an urgent ecological repair, during which characters like Doctor Powderpill will not force themselves physically and ideologically on the natural environment in the name of heroism and super-humanness, but will treat the natural environment according to its respective terms and conditions. The possibility of human and nature coexisting in a de-hierarchical and reciprocative manner has been deemed as unessential and unusual by Chukovsky in the poem. However, despite the submissive character of the ailing animals, the invitational and affectionate nature of the animals cannot be ignored. In order to make sure that Doctor Powderpill reached the ailing animals on time, the eagles and the whales carried the doctor on their back. The caring and sharing nature of the animals in the poem opens up the possibility of curating heterogenous existential spaces, where “human-nonhuman assemblages” can function “as a genetic condition for the emergence of capacities to act” (McCullagh, 2019, 142). The aspect of human-nonhuman assemblage functions as the core of the manifesto of ecological postcolonialscapes and it is outlined below:

- i. Self-reflecting: The exaggerated presentation of Doctor Powderpill’s hardships and sacrifice in the poem have overpowered the contributions of the sharks, whales and the eagles in curing their fellow animals, fishes and birds. Such a depreciative portrayal of the animals and the natural environment by Chukovsky calls for a set of self-reflections, where the humans need to revisit and re-interrogate their positionalities and identities within the planetary ecological spaces. The ways in which Doctor Powderpill was assisted by animals and birds like eagles, whales, rhinos and elephants to reach the mountains of Limpopo, provoke us to ask the following questions: Could the human civilization evolve without the existence and assistance of the natural environment? Every single aspect of existence that the humans regard as their ‘own’ have geo-historically emerged from different

components of the natural environment. Is it possible for the human civilization to survive on their own without co-habiting with the natural environment? As humans, can we deny that our physical, psychological and emotional dimensions have been widely shaped by the civilizational and existential features of the natural environment?

- ii. Re-rooting and Re-routing: These questions instigate us to revisit the roots and routes of the biological origin of the human civilization, and how the roots and routes are deeply entangled with the shifts of tectonic plates; eruptions of volcanic mountains, expansions of seas, mountains and forests; formations of glaciers, and other geological shifts. The geological, geographical, topographical and climactic diversity of the planet Earth gets displayed in the forms of varied shapes, scars, scratches and steepness of the mountains, rocks, boulders and the oceans. As a result, if a mountain is insurmountable or an ocean is unnavigable for the humans, as in the case of Limpopo in *Doctor Powderpill*, then there is nothing unnatural and unscientific about it. Unlike Euro-North American-centric academic disciplines, the geological shifts and their ecological impacts are not regarded as a distant occurrence by the indigenous communities. Instead of restricting the shifts and impacts within specific spatial and temporal enclaves, and demonizing them, as found in the poem *Doctor Powderpill*, the indigenous communities have socio-culturally regarded the natural environment as a living and transitional entity, whose movements habitually regulate the movements of the human civilization. As a part of the exercises of re-rooting and re-routing, it is urgently necessary for the human civilization to respect and imbibe the functional patterns of the natural environment to prevent further ecological catastrophes, and Doctor Powderpill's unnecessary, obnoxious, and hyperreal superhuman characteristics serve as a gentle reminder.
- iii. Cross-existing and Eco-family building: Besides countering ecological catastrophes, re-rooting and re-routing have the potential to rekindle the indigenous culture of cross-existing through other living beings. Cross-existence in the form of "bonding and crossover multiplication" (Ghosh, 2021, 67) will conceptualize a shift from a human world towards a more-than-human-world. The more-than-human-world will function "beyond a cross-cultural understanding of nature" and will challenge the ability of the scientists to "comprehend modes of existence" and "destabilize the boundaries of the self and the social, the organic and inorganic, the single and the multiple, and many more deeply rooted conceptual binaries" (Blanco-Wells, 2021, 2). The destabilization of such conceptual binaries will mold a culture of eco-family building, which can be conceived as an "arrangement or layout of heterogenous elements" (Nail, 2017, 22) interwoven with each

other. In other words, eco-family building has the potential to develop a postcolonial geopolitical realm in which the physical, psychological, emotional, and the biological human-self needs to be reinterpreted in collaboration with the different components of the natural environment, and the “multiple temporal rhythms and trajectories” (Tsing, 2015, 24) of human-nature assemblage needs to be appreciated. The perspectives of cross-existing and eco-family building get visible in the poem through the warm and welcoming nature of animals and birds. On the one side, they plead Doctor Powderpill to visit their community urgently, and on the other side, they assure him comfort and safety. Unlike, what Kornei Chukovsky intended to portray in the poem or the colonizers intended to project through their cultural, biological and anthropological narratives, more-than-human beings have their own ways of thinking, weaving and executing ideas, emotions, and knowledges. Even if, they are non-interpretable to the human beings, it doesn’t mean that they have no rights to exist.

The purpose of proposing this manifesto is to collectively imagine a broader composition of what Bruno Latour understands as “the social” (2008), where ignorant saviors like Doctor Powderpill will transcend from being superhumans to trans-habitual humans. Instead of dictating and overpowering the nature, humans will be able to co-function with other living beings and co-create a “post-human present” (Horl, 2017, 3). It is also important to note that this manifesto is an inconclusive one and the readers are warmly invited to keep expanding this manifesto.

Conclusion: Imagining a Trans-habitual Present

Altogether, this article, through a postcolonial analysis of the poem *Doctor Powderpill*, outlines how the existential and the knowledge patterns of human and more-than-human beings “intersect, entangle, constellate and trajectorize” (Ghosh, 2022, 8). The article discusses how literary works like *Doctor Powderpill* have been socially, culturally and aesthetically celebrating the colonial/capitalistic narratives of human-nature dualism across generations and how such narratives need to be identified and questioned. The article also explores the necessities and possibilities of nurturing a trans-habitual humane present by proposing a manifesto of ecological postcolonialscapes. The article is not only centered on the thematic contents of the poem, but also discusses how the colonial and anti-ecological perspectives of the poem can be observed through the capitalistic designs of growth and development in the contemporary times.

It is high time that we stopped operating the natural environment according to our needs. Rather, we should concentrate on how to initiate physical, emotional and ideological self-

transformations, so that the existential and the knowledge-making patterns of every living being in this planet can be perceived beyond the “hubris and malignant narcissism of the colonial creator” (Gordon, 2022, 6) in an intersubjective, reciprocative and trans-habitual manner. Otherwise, very soon, with rapidly melting glaciers, drying oceans; mounting domestic, industrial and digital wastes; and increasing climate catastrophes, the entire planet will be transformed into a debris. This article, with reference to a poem, serves as a gentle reminder to such an alarming future.

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*How Do We Write about “Anthropocene Water”?
Hydrofeminism in the Poetry of Małgorzata Lebda*

Ewelina Adamik¹

Abstract. The last decade of Polish poetry illustrates the complex image between body and water. My paper presents several poems written by Małgorzata Lebda, included in the poetry volume *Mer de Glace* that shed light on female corporeality situated in a hydrological cycle, emphasizing the water flow from one living being to another in the Anthropocene. I intend to situate these poems in a hydrofeminist narrative. Astrida Neimanis in her work *Bodies of Water. Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology* enters into dialogue with: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Luce Irigaray, Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, Donna Haraway, and Rosi Braidotti, emphasizing the importance of hydrofeminism in the Anthropocene. Neimanis’ feminist manifesto raises viable issues such as the presence of microplastic in fetal waters. The philosopher uses the term “Anthropocene water” concerning the relationship of living beings with water, which has been polluted by human activity. In my presentation, I analyze Lebda’s poems, through the lens of the discourse found in *Bodies of Water*. The figuration of Bodies of Water proposes a realisation of bodies which form a hydrocommunity. Concluding, the purpose of my paper will focus on the poetry involved in the climate catastrophe, linking female corporeality to the issue of water pollution.

Keywords: feminism, hydrofeminism, poetry, anthropocene, phenomenology

Contemporary Polish poetry often explores the themes of environmental catastrophe caused by the negative impact of humans on the planet. This includes poetry volumes written by women authors who combine ecological issues with feminist narrative. It is important to mention such names as Julia Fiedorczuk and Barbara Klicka, as well as Małgorzata Lebda, whose poetry is the subject of this article. In my analysis of individual poems, I will draw on the theories of Astrida Neimanis, a philosopher who works at the intersection of feminism and environmental change. Neimanis addresses the body-water-weather relationship in her most important work to date, *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology*, which also serves as a feminist manifesto. The purpose of my work is to demonstrate that Małgorzata Lebda's poetry tells the

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stories of women about the environment in a novel way. I am particularly interested in texts in which femininity is intertwined with water, referring to the field of blue humanities².

The Polish poet made her debut in 2006 and has since published six volumes of poetry: *Otwarta na 77 stronie* [*Opened up on Page 77*] (2006), *Tropy* [*Tracks*] (2009), *Granica lasu* [*Border of the Forest*] (2013), *Matecznik* [*Queen Cells*] (2016), *Sny uckermärkerów* [*Uckermarker Dreams*] (2018) and *Mer de Glace* (2021).³ In 2023, Lebda published her first novel, *Łakome* [*Voracious*].⁴ My analysis primarily concerns the latest volume of poems, in which, in my opinion, the poet's diction resonates most fully. Additionally, in these poems, there is a captivating portrayal of women, which I refer to as psycho-somatic and corporeal, especially prevalent in the hydrological circulation discussed by Neimanis in her works. Lebda is deeply fascinated by the element of water. In 2021 she ran 1113 kilometers along the Vistula, the Poland's principal river. This endeavor was a response to plans to build the E40 waterway, connecting the Baltic and the Black Sea. The poet explained her decision for this physical activity in the following way: "I want to run on my terms [...] guided by the lines of the terrain, or simply by what my body tells me. I may be talking about freedom, liberty, and the desire for self-determination, even in the choice of route, its intensity, and its fluidity."⁵ To conclude the introduction to the author's portrait, I will quote another comment from her, published just a few weeks ago. This text highlights the special bond between Lebda and the Vistula and provides an important interpretive direction for my work:

Embarking on a running-poetic-activist adventure along the Vistula, I intuitively felt that the Vistula was like a woman. My body accompanied the body of the river, a being that - I repeated it to myself many times on that memorable September day for me – lives and shares a fate akin to that of a woman.⁶

² The term "blue humanities" was implemented into the discourse by Serpil Oppermann, author of a book of the same title, although the term had been used before by other researchers. The field has created a variety of understandings of wet matter in the environmental movement and has influenced the real relationship between humans and the water environment.

³ More information about the poet's work: <https://www.versopolis.com/poet/250/malgorzata-lebda> [accessed 8.09.2023].

⁴ The novel will soon be published in English.

⁵ This section comes from a questionnaire *How do I work with the body?* conducted by the editors of the journal *Znak*, see: Lebda, M. (2022). Movement against loss, *Znak*, 808: 22–24.

⁶ Lebda's full article was published in the biweekly magazine, see: https://www.dwutygodnik.com/artukul/10832-sadzic-deszcz-siac-wode.html?fbclid=PAaAaA5SojQQ_y0F95272s3R96idVx9-QPV1SvU8B7U5C_new9dh7U4e1YtfU_aem_Aac5vTFhbGxSzGocBWtRj-2tc-z43QnlB3vAemeAaUfjNVu1zoPG9nONziKQck7vtus [accessed 8.09.2023].

The title of the poetry volume, *Mer de Glace* (in English the glacier is called “Sea of Ice”), which is the focus of this article, is derived from the name of the longest glacier in France on the northern slopes of the Mont Blanc Massif in the Alps. Its movement and length are significantly affected by climate change. The volume consists of poems in which moisture permeates between words, and through sentences and stanzas, rivers flow, ice melts, and snow transforms. In this world brimming with water, human beings, particularly women, maintain close contact with their environment. The book also features two cycles, the first titled *Z ciała / From from the body* and the second *Pory miejsc / Seasons of places*. In Polish, “pory” can also be interpreted as “pores” (on the skin), alluding to the proximity of space and skin. I will commence my analysis with the poem *From the body: twelve*:

Its boundary remains the waters of the bay,
Which took place here today. A cramp,
if it has a beginning somewhere, it's here (calf),
and goes on, leaves the body and enters
into the water. The exchange of the warm into the advancing
(Lebda, 2021, 40).⁷

The first verse highlights the unique connection between the body of the lyrical subject and the body of water in which they are immersed. It appears that a human becomes one with the water, merging themselves into its boundaries. The cramp that originates in the calf transcends the body and merges with the surface of the water. In constructing this poem, Lebda aimed to portray the lyrical subject to be as universal as possible, erasing even their subjectivity. Another perspective is showcased in the opening poem of the cycle, where readers are confronted with a more anthropocentric view:

From the body: one
Today it was obedient. Before running, tell
it the road, remind it of the stones, the roots, the veins
of the earth. If the road goes through the forest, it tends to obey.

After hours in a promised stream, I cool it down,
just below the house. A woman with a boy in her arms
points at me from the road and says: oh, look,
oh there, lady, and enters the cold, brrrr.
He repeats: brrrr

⁷ All poems are translated by the author of the article: “Jego granicą zostają wody zatoki, / które miały tu dziś miejsce. Skurcz, / jeśli ma gdzieś początek, to tu (tydka), / i idzie dalej, wychodzi z ciała i wchodzi / w wodę. Wymiana ciepłego w posuwiste”.

(Lebda, 2021, 6).⁸

In this poem, we encounter a similar lyrical situation as in the previous one, but here, we gain more insight. Given the feminist aspect of my analysis, in which the figure of the poet herself also plays a crucial role, I will highlight the presence of autobiographical elements in this work, particularly her experience of physical activity. The first stanza is more enigmatic. Interestingly, the lyrical subject treats her body as a separate entity, somewhat independent of herself. However, it is important to note that the body is “alive,” which aligns Lebda’s poetry with the phenomenology of the body as seen by thinkers such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty and later feminist phenomenologists such as Neimanis.⁹ After a run, the woman cools her body in a stream, once again underscoring the intimate connection between the body and water. An additional element is the perspective of a woman with her child and their reaction to the subject’s actions. These analyzed poems provide intriguing insights into people’s relationship with the environment.

Perhaps the most efficient way to show the rich implications of Lebda’s poetry for thinking about water is to read it through the lens of Neimanis’ work. Neimanis is primarily known as the author of *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology*, which explores the relationship of living beings to water, from the perspective of both politics and poetics, and a co-editor of two collections of essays related to the blue humanities *Hacking the Anthropocene! Feminist, Queer Anticolonial Propositions*, and *Thinking with Water*. Her research, based mainly on phenomenology, interrogates questions of corporeality, weather and water in times of climate catastrophe. In *Bodies of Water* Neimanis frames her research as a redefinition of how we perceive water and an attempt to recapture its significance for humans living in the Anthropocene. Neimanis initiates her discussion with the thesis that humans are embodied, cultured, and hydrated entities and then proceeds to derive its biological, and ecological implications. In order to fully understand that thesis and its implications, one must consider its rootedness in the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty.¹⁰

The philosophy of the French phenomenologist and existentialist, which rejects thinking about human nature in dualistic terms, was relevant to feminists who wrote about corporeality. However, many of them criticized Merleau-Ponty for insufficiently recognizing the perspective

⁸ „Dzisiaj było posłuszne. Przed biegiem należy opowiedzieć / mu drogę, przypomnieć o kamieniach, korzeniach, żyłach / ziemi. Jeśli droga idzie przez las, ono bywa posłuszne. / Po godzinach w obiecany chłodzę je potoku, / tuż pod domem. Kobieta z chłopcem na rękach / wskazuje na mnie z drogi i mówi: o, zobacz, / o tam, pani, a wchodzi w zimne, brrrr. / On powtarza: brrrr”.

⁹ In the context of the lived body, it is worth looking at the work of Merleau-Ponty, see: Merleau-Ponty, M. [Trans. A. Lingis] (1962). *Phenomenology of Perception*. Northwestern University Press.

¹⁰ Moira Gatens, citing Spinoza’s thought, also sees the body as part of the commons: “The human body is radically open to its surroundings and can be composed, recomposed and decomposed by other bodies. Its openness is a condition of both its life, that is, its continuance in nature as the same individual”, see: Gatens, M. (1996). *Imaginary Bodies: Ethics, Corporeality and Power*, (p. 110). Routledge.

of women in his works.¹¹ Neimanis, nevertheless, does not reject Merleau-Ponty's thought, believing that post-human feminism can be usefully combined with his phenomenology. She notes that phenomenological thought opens the field for discussion of the intercorporeal and the environmentally situated; the connections of bodies with other bodies between human and non-human bodies form an entanglement with the world and show what it means to be embodied *in* the world: “our bodies – watery, fleshy, and otherwise – are a key resource [...]. For Merleau-Ponty, corporeal existence is central: going ‘back to the things themselves’ is necessarily an embodied undertaking” (Neimanis, 2017, 44). For the French phenomenologist, the body is what we are, not what we have. Neimanis thus advocates a return to thinking about the body as a site of experiential knowledges (2017, 43):

Merleau-Ponty rejects dualisms in which humanist understandings of embodiment are usually mired, and instead presents us with a body that emerges from various debts and connections to other bodies, whereby bodies are always chiasmically entwined with the world. For Merleau-Ponty, what we can know about things resides neither in a transcendent platonic realm of ideals nor solely in our solipsistic imaginings; it emerges in the ineluctable imbrications of body and world in a lived experience that is necessarily somewhere, sometime, and somehow.

In Neimanis' thought, then, it is important to realize that humans, through bodies, are part of the more-than-human hydro-commons. We involuntarily participate in the hydrological cycle of water exchanges and flows. In this regard, the philosopher references the ideas of Rosi Braidotti, emphasizing that we have never been – only – human (2013, 1). It is worth noting that 60 to 90 percent of our bodies are composed of water. In the Anthropocene, the planet faces a significant ecological catastrophe: uncontrolled droughts, floods, and ocean acidification. Conversely, our bodies are open and inseparable from the world around us: “[o]ur bodies of water are neither stagnant, nor separate, nor zipped up in some kind of impermeable sac of skin. These bodies are rather deeply imbricated in the intricate movements of water that create and sustain life on our planet” (Neimanis, 2017, 65). The flow of water that takes place in the hydrological cycle affects humans directly, just as it affects other bodies of water (Neimanis, 2017, 27):

¹¹ One philosopher who takes a cautious approach to the French philosopher's thought is Elizabeth Grosz. In *Volatile Bodies* Grosz emphasizes that the philosopher treated male experience as human in his works, see: Grosz, E. (1994), *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (p. 103), Bloomington: Indiana University Press. An important aspect in the context of gender is also pointed out by Linda Fisher, writing that the basic component of social existence and lived experience. This thesis also distances the researchers from the conclusions of the French philosopher, see: Fisher, L. (2011). *Gendering Embodied Memory*. In Ch. Schües, D. E. Olkowski and H. A. Fielding (Eds.), *Time in feminist phenomenology*, (pp. 91–110). Indiana University Press.



We are the watery world – metonymically, temporarily, partially, and particularly. Water irrigates us, sustains us, and comprises the bulk of our soupy flesh. Yet it isn't easy to begin with a 'we'. Granted, its inclusions are intentionally abundant; counted here are not only humans and other animals, plants, funghi, and protoctists, but also geological and meteorological bodies such as oceans, rivers, aquifers, subterranean streams, clouds, storms, swamps, and soils.

In my view, *Bodies of Water* was written out of a necessity to confront an unwinnable situation, namely the state of the planet. The philosopher explicitly describes her work as a feminist protest, hoping that her writings will teach readers how to *swim* in the Anthropocene (Neimanis, 2017, 26). I will proceed to characterize "Anthropocene waters" shortly, but for now, I would like to return to one of Magdalena Lebda's poems, which aligns well with Neimanis' phenomenologically lived bodies:

Sage

Soon the city will put the damp body closer to the ground,
will lower the curtains, eyelids of heavy material, to eat
late dinners behind them: white meat of perch seasoned with
garlic, basil and sage. To go with the wine, necessarily
suvignon blanc.

[...]

Down the map, the movement continues: the countries of the South. Here, someone is cleaning the body of the fish from the silver. Someone is just wiping their hands on an apron, puts wine in cold ones, cleans glasses with saliva (Lebda, 2021, 33)¹².

In the poem titled *Sage*, the city is personified as having a moist body. Its inhabitants are depicted as enjoying dinner, specifically seasoned fish, accompanied by French wine. Simultaneously, in another part of the world, the preparation of a meal is just beginning, mirroring the previous scene. An unidentified person is seen cleaning glasses with their saliva. The juxtaposition of moisture, wine, fish, and saliva is intricate and forms the essence of the poem. Regardless of where the characters in the text are situated or in which time zone, they are united by a common culture and biology. This context brings to mind the notion of "natureculture," proposed by Donna Haraway. In *Staying with the Trouble* the researcher discusses this category, which challenges dichotomies and underscores the interdependence of

¹² "Niebawem miasto położy wilgotne ciało bliżej ziemi, / opuści zasłony, powieki z ciężkiego materiału, by jeść / za nimi późne kolacje: białe mięso okonia doprawione / czosnkiem, bazylią i szałwią. Do tego wino, koniecznie suvignon blanc. [...] W dole mapy trwa ruch: kraje Południa. Tu ktoś dopiero / czyści ze srebra ciało ryby. Ktoś właśnie wyciera dłonie / o fartuch, wkłada wino w zimne, śliną czyści kieliszki".

humans (and their creations) with other living creatures. Culture has always been an integral part of nature. Haraway notes that no one is immune in the Anthropocene: “[r]ight now, the earth is full of refugees, human and not, without refuge” (2016, 100). What is also worth mentioning in this context is Stacy Alaimo's new-materialist concept of transcorporeality. In Alaimo's view, the corporeality of the individual is oriented towards coexistence in a complex network of interrelationships between organisms and the environment. Based on this premise, she concludes that posthuman environmental ethics “is not circumscribed by the human but is instead accountable to a material world that is never merely an external place but always the very substance of ourselves and others.” (2010, 158).¹³ In the poem, it seems that humans can, to some extent, find refuge, but the impression lingers that the end is inevitably approaching—after all, the Mer de Glace is constantly melting. The culture that surrounds us encompasses pharmaceutical products. In this sense, Haraway's concept of the cyborgization of the human body resurfaces.¹⁴ Humans cannot function adequately without the influence of medicine. This context also resonates with Paul B. Preciado's work *Testo Junkie* in which the researcher analyzes the effects of synthetic hormones on his own body. When considering the impact of pharmacology on identity politics, Preciado introduces the concept of the body as an artifact, a body produced during a cultural, political, and technological process (2021). The bodies in Lebda's poetry are also dependent on medicine:

Feeding dogs

Mornings here in the humid valley are good, about the end of the world,
which is underway, I am reminded of infrequently, for there are things
more important: take an euthyrox pill in the morning, put a quart of
of doxybactin in the cat's muzzle. And also: feed the dogs,
tell the dogs a dream, walk the dogs.

Mornings here are good, calm, stretching into the night.
(Lebda, 2021, 5).¹⁵

Medication for hypothyroidism also appears in a line from the poem dedicated to a visit to an endocrinologist. The poem concludes with the doctor's comments addressed to the subject: “if you decide to have children, / be sure to arrange this with me in advance, / agreement?” (2021, 17). In the poem *Zinc* we also hear the words of a woman lacking zinc. She yearns to give birth at any cost – even to a headless child (2021, 15). Women facing zinc deficiency or

¹³ See also; Alaimo, S. (2008). Trans-Corporeal Feminisms and the Ethical Space of Nature. In S. Alaimo & S. Hekman (Eds.), *Material Feminisms*, (pp. 237–264). Indiana University Press.

¹⁴ See: Haraway, D. (1991). *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (pp. 149–181). Routledge.

¹⁵ “Ranki tu, w wilgotnej dolinie, są dobre, o końcu świata, / który trwa, przypominam sobie nieczęsto, są bowiem sprawy / ważniejsze: zażyć rano tabletkę euthyroxu, umieścić ćwiartkę / doxybactinu w pyszczku kota. I jeszcze: nakarmić psy, / opowiedzieć psom sen, wyprowadzić psy. / Ranki tu są dobre, spokojne, ciągną się do samej nocy”.



hypothyroidism can potentially become mothers. Astrida Neimanis sheds light on the physicality of mothers. The philosopher references various studies and notes that breast milk contains toxins such as mercury, lead, paint thinner, and toilet deodorants.¹⁶ The flow of toxic substances is evident in the situation where “[a]s watery milieus for other bodies, we are always gathering the debts of the myriad watery bodies that are the condition of our possibility. Eventually, we all give ourselves up to another wet body. We all become with, or simply just become, other bodies of water” (Neimanis, 2017, 39).

The phenomenon of the melting Mer de Glace glacier, which also appears in the title of the poetic volume, qualifies as what can be termed “Anthropocene water”. Neimanis, citing various cultural texts, attempts to define our contemporary waters. The philosopher, maintaining the thesis that water is not a singular entity, references Jamie Linton's work: “[w]ater, rather, is many, and according to Linton, what we make it. In other words, what water *is* is inextricable from how we imaginatively produce it” (2017, 157). Linton views water as both a substance and an idea, proposing the concept of “modern water,” the water of late capitalism, which, though originating in Western Europe and North America, is becoming a global presence. Modern water is an abstraction, but also a representation of what the researcher calls “global water”. The hydrological cycle of water displacement, renders it global. Linton emphasizes:

[n]o longer taking water for granted in a material sense, we have also begun to think about water in a different way. Water is now more complicated than it seemed in the mid-twentieth century. In modern times, water has most commonly been thought of as a resource that could be considered and managed in abstraction from the wider environmental, social, and cultural context(s) in which it occurred. (2010, 6).

The concept of “Anthropocene water” proposed by Neimanis is rooted in the idea of water that is in some way man-made (Neimanis, 2017, 162). I believe the philosopher's project is still evolving, but it can certainly be characterized as an attempt at control. Humans strive to control water, but it continues to elude them. The introduction of more water control regimes has had a limited impact, as humanity grapples with rising sea levels, melting ice caps, and storms (Neimanis, 2017, 160–161). An alternative to the idea of Anthropocene and “Anthropocene water” in Neimanis’ philosophy is the figuration of “bodies of water”:

¹⁶ Neimanis refers to multiple crucial contexts, see: Williams, F. (2012). *Breast: A Natural and Unnatural History*. The Text Publishing Company; Simms, E. (2009). *Eating One's Mother: Female Emodiment in a Toxic World*. *Environmental Ethics*, 31: 263–277; Morgensen, U. B., et. Al. (2015), Breastfeeding as an Exposure Pathway for Perfluorinated Alkylates. *Environmental Science and Technology*, 49 (17): 10466–10473.

[b]odies of water ask us to imagine these corporeal waters as part of hydrocommons that we make, and that makes us in turn. This conceptual, yet embodied commons that I've developed through a feminist posthuman phenomenology in the preceding chapters, seeks to get us out of the discrete individualism that underpins dominant Western theories of body-subject as discrete and autonomous. At the same time, it attends to the anthropocentrism of a nature/culture split, and offers a different kind of environmental imaginary that draws on a feminist lineage of relational ethics and distributed bodies. [...] Bodies of water recognize the need to understand waters as emplaced, specific, and contingent on relations, but they reject the binary of "local" and "global" as well" (2017, 169).

The concepts cited above are well reflected in Lebda's poetry. The waters surrounding the characters in *Mer de Glace* are "Anthropocene Water", contaminated by human activity yet still beyond human control. On the other hand, we can also find numerous descriptions that correspond to the figuration of Bodies of Water and the relationships between them in the hydrological cycle. Significantly, the female character in Lebda's poems is closely connected to the world around her. She is aware of being part of a community and of sharing her life with other beings.

The last poem I will analyze is another cultural text that explores the river and humanity's relationship with water, with a special emphasis on the connection between the work of the body and the work of the poem¹⁷:

From the body: three

It was grateful (to remember) as if we
belong to the same view: the Oder

If the body is grateful, muscle work
resembles a good poem.

(Lebda, 2021, 22).¹⁸

The poem employs a metaphor likening the work of the poem to the work of the body. While this metaphor is a well-known literary device that can be used to describe the inner and outer actions of a text, in Lebda's case, the poem is akin to a "living tissue" that, like the phenomenological living body, functions and defines itself in space. Although this text may

¹⁷ Neimanis also often turns to poetry to talk about his research leads. In a lecture titled "Sea and Breath," Neimanis, referring to the work of Adrienne Rich, links gender politics with eco-poetics, problematizing the connections between gendered, racialized and ecologically conditioned forms of violence, see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GZI287u_R0M&t=47s [accessed 8.09.2023]

¹⁸ „Było wdzięczne (zapamiętać) tak, jakbyśmy / należeli do tego samego widoku: Odry. / Jeśli ciało jest wdzięczne, praca mięśni / przypomina dobry wiersz”.



seem like a simple poem, it transcends traditional literary frameworks. The body of the text merges with the body of the subject. This relationship occurs in a tranquil setting of the Oder River, yet another of Poland's main rivers, which becomes much more than a setting for the lyrical subject of the poem. The subject defines herself, and some other unspecified beings, as belonging to the setting ("the same view: the Oder"). In this way, she transgresses both her personal perspective (she can belong to "the view" only from somebody else's perspective) and her human identity. After all, in the poem, she belongs to the view of the Oder, whereas humans are typically considered as something distinct from the view of large-scale inanimate objects: as figures that appear *in* a landscape or have it as a *background*. Once again, the concept of "natureculture" corresponds to the experiences of entities immersed in real life and the text.

As Serpil Oppermann notes, seeing water as the subject of a literary narrative, lyrical or otherwise, can lead to a shift in thinking, and thus a transformation of overly harmful capitalist practices:

[s]tories can change our customary ways of thinking about troubled waters and help us discover deeper meanings about our entangled relations with water that gave us and all that is biological the gift of life on this planet. Thus, though it may sound like a bold claim, I want to conclude by affirming that solutions lie in the new stories we tell, and in stories. (2023, 57).

A promise of this kind is indeed offered by Lebda's poetry. First, the narratives of watery entanglements of human and non-human bodies constitutes a kind of "[t]hinking with water" that "encourages relational thinking" (Chen, MacLeod, Neimanis, 2013, 12). Second, aside from drawing the reader's attention to the general ontological relations between humans and water, it also links them to the political and social realities of gender oppression and water pollution, thereby encouraging us to adopt a feminist perspective on water. As Neimanis points out:

[w]atershed pollution, a theory of embodiment, amniotic becomings, disaster, environmental colonialism, how to write, global capital, nutrition, philosophy, birth, rain, animal ethics, evolutionary biology, death, storytelling, bottled water, multinational pharmaceutical corporations, drowning, poetry. These are all feminist questions, and they are mostly inextricable from one another. (2012, 110–111).

Needless to say, this postulated impact of Lebda's poetry might seem like wishful thinking. However, it is worth noting that empirical ecocriticism has recently provided convincing evidence for the overall power of environmental literature to influence beliefs, emotions,

attitudes, and actions.¹⁹ Whatever its wider influence among readers is, Lebda's feminist poetry volume, filled with Bodies of Water and permeated by Anthropocene water, undoubtedly provides an intriguing example of how one can write about human life during climate catastrophes. The characters in these poems, much like Neimani's concept, are learning to *swim* in the face of impending catastrophe.

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¹⁹ See: *Empirical Ecocriticism: Environmental Narratives for Social Change*. (2023), Matthew Schneider-Mayerson, Alexa Weik von Mossner, W. P. Malecki, Frank Hakemulder (Eds.). University of Minnesota Press.

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*Leslie Silko: Nuclear Landscapes, Environmental Catastrophe, and
the Power of Indigenous Storytelling*

Mark Cladis¹

Abstract. “You don’t have anything if you don’t have the stories” (Silko, 1986, p. 2). With this warning, Laguna Pueblo author Leslie Marmon Silko begins her novel, *Ceremony*. But Silko’s warning is also a message of hope: You have everything (or at least *much*) if you have the stories—powerful, vital resources for healing, resilience, resistance, and social transformation in times of settler violence and climate destruction. This article is largely written in the mode of listening: of attending to Silko and the stories she weaves from her life and her Indigenous traditions. In the act of listening, questions are posed: What is the connection between having the stories and having sources of life and resilience, especially in times of oppression and despair? In the following pages, I start by exploring the power of Indigenous storytelling as sources of healing, resistance, and transformation. I then focus on nuclear storied landscape, first as found in Silko’s novel *Ceremony* and then in *Almanac of the Dead*. Finally, I conclude by reflecting on the role of curative of storytelling and the more-than-human in assisting humans survive and even flourish as we seek to make a *just home* in the face of such catastrophes as climate change and nuclearism.

Keywords: environmental humanities, Leslie Silko, ecocriticism, nuclearism, climate change, Indigeneity

“You don’t have anything if you don’t have the stories” (Silko, 1986, p. 2). With this warning, Laguna Pueblo author Leslie Marmon Silko begins her novel *Ceremony*. But Silko’s warning is also a message of hope: You have everything (or at least *much*) if you have the stories—powerful, vital resources for healing, resilience, resistance, and social transformation in times of settler violence and climate destruction. This article is largely written in the mode of listening: of attending to Silko and the stories she weaves from her life and her Indigenous traditions. In the act of listening, questions are posed to us: What does it mean to “have the stories”—to have them “taking form in bone and muscle” (Silko, 1986, p. 226)? Which stories? Whose bone and muscle? What is the connection between

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having the stories and having sources of life and resilience, especially in times of oppression and despair, in the face of nuclear colonialism and climate change? And what might it mean to forget or neglect the stories? These are some questions posed to us as we seek to listen to Silko—to learn from her. Every listener, of course, is grounded, is situated, in a socio-cultural context. I listen to Silko as the child of Greek immigrants; as a US citizen who is both complicit in, and resistant to, white settler colonialism.

In the following pages, I began by exploring the power of Indigenous storytelling as sources of healing, resistance, and transformation. I then focus on nuclear storied landscape, first as found in Silko's novel *Ceremony* and then in *Almanac of the Dead*. Finally, I conclude by reflecting on the role of curative of storytelling and the more-than-human in assisting humans survive and even flourish as we seek to make a *just home* in the face of such catastrophes as climate change and nuclearism.

Introduction: Justice through the Power of Stories

In *Yellow Women and a Beauty of the Spirit*, Silko describes how she dropped out of law school due to the savagery of the U.S. settler legal system. Instead of law, she “decided the only way to seek justice was through *the power of stories* [emphasis added]” (Silko, 1996, p. 20). That claim may sound like hyperbole, but such judgment should be suspended until one learns what exactly the power of stories is. What if stories refer to the matter and manner of dynamic, emerging traditions, beliefs, rituals, and practices—replete with despair and hope, catastrophe and resilience, violence and love, and courageous solidarities and role models?

Rather than assuming that one already knows what stories can and cannot accomplish, one needs to wait and learn more about the power of stories. This, in fact, is what Silko herself did. When she dropped out of law school, Silko already understood the importance of stories—including stores which paired photographs and images with texts, looking to William Blake as a model. But she knew that she needed to learn more (see Silko, 1996, p. 20; Ibrahim, 2023). So she moved to Chinle in the Navajo Nation, taught at Diné College, and opened herself up to her Indigenous students, colleagues, and to the land itself (Silko, 1996). Silko, a Laguna Pueblo woman who already knew much about her family's and people's stories, allowed the stories to grow in her still more deeply as she lived and worked in Chinle with various Diné storytellers.

Storytelling, in Silko's view, is not principally a form of entertainment but a survival skill and a practice; it is history and medicine, it is diagnostic and prognostic. Storytelling assists Indigenous populations in practical ways to cope with life's challenges. What kinds

of challenges? Certainly, the dispossession and oppression that has come from settler colonialism. But Indigenous storytelling as a practical praxis predates the arrival of white settlers. It is an ancient practice that has assisted with such public and private hardships as war, hunger, sickness, and heartbreak.

Storytelling is also “pleasurable.” As Silko states, “stories rich in detail and description became the most pleasurable because they gave the listeners the most information. The association of knowledge with power begins here” (Silko, 1981, p. xviii). Here, with this line, Silko subtly challenges the English philosopher Francis Bacon: Power via knowledge—for Silko, unlike Bacon—is associated not with exploitive science and technology but rather with the life-giving, well-crafted, authentic story. For Silko, the more detail and description, the more the story lends pleasure, knowledge, and power.

There is urgency in Silko’s work and in her understanding of the need for the power, pleasure, and knowledge of the stories. The stakes are high for Silko—to combat settler colonialism and its ensuing racism, dispossession, and environmental catastrophe. In *Almanac of the Dead*, Silko expresses both the “high stakes” and the power of storytelling through the character Weasel Tail, a Lakota who is raised near the site of the Wounded Knee massacre. The site is haunted by the horrific, and it informs the nature and passion of Weasel Tail’s vocation as an activist and storyteller who combats unjust settler law with the power of the story—in this case, the power of poetry:

Weasel Tail had dropped out of his third year at UCLA Law School to devote himself to poetry. The people didn’t need more lawyers, the lawyers were the disease not the cure. The law served the rich. The people needed poetry; poetry would set the people free; poetry would speak to the dreams and to the spirits, and the people would understand what they must do. ... The [white man’s] law crushed and cheated the poor whatever color they were. “*All that is left is the power of poetry* [emphasis added].” (Silko, 1991, pp. 713–714).

Like Silko herself, Weasel Tail becomes disillusioned with the study of settler law and turns to “the power of poetry.” For both Silko and her literary character, radical change is required, and it cannot be brought about principally from working inside such settler institutions as the courts. Stories and poetry, at first blush, may seem even less productive than law in affecting revolutionary change, but that belief carries a narrow view of the power of stories and poetry to vividly depict injustice, acts of resistance, and paths toward justice. After all,

in the pages of *Almanac of the Dead*, Marx is declared a great storyteller who understood that

the stories or “histories” are sacred; that within “history” reside the relentless forces, powerful spirits, vengeful, relentlessly seeking justice. ... [Marx] worked feverishly to gather together a magical assembly of stories to cure the suffering and evils of the world by the retelling of the stories. Stories of depravity and cruelty were the driving force of the revolution. (Silko, 1991, p. 316).

Here we learn not of Marx the social scientist but of “Marx, tribal man and storyteller” (Silko, 1991, p. 520). Silko suggests that Marx’s primary power was not his marshalling of historical and economic facts but of complex, compelling stories of the workers’ “tears, blood, and sweat” (Silko, 1991, p. 520). Marx, in Silko’s account, understood the power of stories—especially non-hegemonic stories that seek to “to cure the suffering and evils of the world.”²

My aim, here, is not to evaluate Marx but to expand our understanding of stories and poetry by listening carefully to Silko. In both novels, *Almanac of the Dead* and *Ceremony*, the central characters caution the reader again and again not to forget the stories. Why does Silko have her central characters issue such incessant warning? Without the stories, Indigenous people and their potential allies lack power. We forget who we are, what we need to do, where we need to go. We lose our humanity, our ability to love and grieve, to resist and create. Those who would oppress and crush life in its various forms understand the power of the stories. *Almanac of the Dead* and *Ceremony* are brimming with evil witchery, with destroyers working hard to eradicate life-enhancing stories and to replace them with stories that bring death and despair—such as many of the settler’s destructive stories that spoke of manifest destiny, American exceptionalism, and white male, human exceptionalism (which racist, patriarchal, and environmentally destructive). As Ts’eh the medicine woman warned in *Ceremony*, “The destroyers: they work to see how much can be lost, how much can be forgotten. They destroy the feeling people have for each other” (Silko, 1986, p. 229). These destroyers have malicious interest in attempting to make Indigenous populations forget the stories, because the stories provide the ways of life to survive, resist, and even flourish. No wonder white settler agencies and the U.S. government took Indigenous

² But Marx and his followers, in Silko’s view, had their limits and were wrong about many things, and this is in part because “they were Europeans” (Silko, 1991, p. 316). Real change is not likely to come from a European (see Silko, 1991, p. 316).

children from their families and placed them in “boarding schools.” These schools attempted to achieve a genocide of Indigenous identities, disparaging Indigenous ways and beliefs, forcing children to abandon their language, culture, and religion. For centuries, white settlers endeavored strenuously, by excruciating methods, to make Indigenous people forget their stories—an incessant attempt to render them powerless.

In Silko’s 1977 novel, *Ceremony*, suffering, healing, and resistance are embedded in Southwestern Indigenous stories and storied landscapes. They depict such private crises as loss of identity, the trauma of war, and ruined friendships, and such public crises as environmental disaster, racism, and extractive capitalism—interrelated crises produced by settler colonialism. *Ceremony*’s protagonist Tayo, suffering from post-war trauma and alienation, seeks health via a ceremonial journey through a socio-natural landscape filled with multispecies relationships and Indigenous stories and rituals. Indigenous lands and ceremonies of the Southwest become locations of healing as Tayo connects to sources of life and identity and taps into wells of communal wisdom. *Ceremony* reveals how Indigenous responses to personal pain and social injustice entail a dynamic interaction between Indigenous stories, ceremonies, land, and a non-linear understanding of time and space that connects past, present, and future, as well as distant lands.

In her 1991 novel, *Almanac of the Dead*, we again find stories of suffering, healing, and resistance in both a private and public register. But this time the cast of subjugated characters and the geography are more diverse and transnational, including Indigenous peoples of Mexico, Black people from Africa and the diaspora, various Latin Americans, and impoverished whites in South and North America. All seek in various ways to recover their stories and stolen lands, and to restore health and justice to local and transnational communities by means of radical upheaval and revolution.

In both novels, past and present events and characters produce storied landscapes that speak of stolen lands, subjugated bodies, racial oppression, and broken relationships. These storied landscapes stand in opposition to the storied landscapes of settler colonialism (e.g., those settler stories that depict the white man bringing civilization and religion to the beautiful but savage new world). And in both novels, recovered stories, memories, and ceremonies work together to bring socioeconomic, ecological, and spiritual transformations. Each presents a vision of sovereignty reclaimed, cultural and personal identity reaffirmed, and land liberated from white settler colonialism.

A particularly powerful set of storied landscapes are clustered around abandoned uranium mines. These nuclear storied landscapes vividly illustrate: the role of art seeking justice, the awakening to everyday suffering and joy, the cultivation of praxis-oriented

empathy, the healing that comes from connection to people and place, and the powerful otherness and agency of the more-than-human. These narratives of oppression and resilience manifest Silko's commitment to exposing the exploitation of Indigenous peoples and the poisoning of their lands, but also to advancing Indigenous sovereignty and flourishing and the protection of their lands.

A Nuclear Storied Landscape: Witness to Suffering and Injustice, Healing and Resistance

Tayo, a protagonist in *Ceremony*, approaches the end of his ceremony, an elaborate ritual that has involved wild Mexican cattle, a sacred mountain, a revelatory constellation of stars, and a powerful medicine woman and medicine man. The ceremony has led him far across the land as he interacts with wise teachers—human, more-than-human, and spiritual beings—who assist him as he searches for answers and perspectives, ways and beliefs, that will bring healing to himself and his people. Healing, here, refers to the process of recovery from trauma, both public and private. It includes the easing of physical and mental suffering as well as a mending of drought-stricken lands and the brokenness caused by stolen lands, racial oppression, and extractive capitalism. Healing, then, is about personal well-being and public justice. Tayo's ritual leads him to an abandoned uranium mine where he reaches the culmination of his ceremony: "He had arrived at the point of convergence where the fate of all living things, and even the earth, had been laid. ... The pattern of the ceremony was completed there" (Silko, 1986, p. 246). Earlier in the novel, a terrible witch tells a story of—and thereby *actually conjures*—"white skin people" (Silko, 1986, p. 135). (Storytelling is indeed powerful as it participates in worldmaking.) To these white skinned people, "The world is a dead thing ... / the trees and rivers are not alive / the mountains and stones are not alive" (Silko, 1986, p. 135). The white world, in contrast to the Laguna Pueblo world, is not animated and vibrant, teeming with agency and spirit. Instead, "when [the white people] look / they only see objects" (Silko, 1986, p. 135). Humans, too—especially Indigenous peoples—are seen as objects. And since they see no life, they bring death to everything and everyone, even to themselves:

They will take this world from ocean to ocean
they will turn on each other
they will destroy each other
Up here
in these hills

they will find the rocks,
rocks with veins of green and yellow and black.
They will lay the final pattern with these rocks
they will lay it across the world
and explode everything. (Silko, 1986, p. 137).

The white skinned people do indeed find the rocks. They hire Indigenous people to do the dangerous work of digging up the once serenely positioned uranium ore. For eons, the rocks had rested in the ground doing no harm, but when brought forth from the earth and laid in “the final pattern,” the white skinned people fashion weapons that could instantly vaporize life as we know it. In doing so, the white people become the ultimate agents of witchery, yet as I discuss below, they themselves are not the witchery.

The mining and development of the nuclear bomb is the absolute, logical extension of extractive, settler colonialism. It is the result of what Heather Davis and Métis scholar Zoe Todd (2017) have called the “severing of relations between humans and the soil, between plants and animals, *between minerals and our bones* [emphasis added]” (p. 770). In stark contrast to this severing of relations—in this case, severing humans from a pacific relation to the uranium rocks—many forms of Indigenous spirituality, according to Kyle Whyte of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation (2018a), “[foster] accountability between humans and the environment” (p. 141). This Indigenous spirituality calls on humans to maintain suitable and sustainable relations with the more-than-human world, with its plants and trees, insects and animals, rivers *and rocks*. Yes, there are appropriate and inappropriate relations with rocks: ways of approaching them, finding them, utilizing them. The nuclear pursuits of colonialism is perhaps the furthest point from Indigenous spirituality.

Silko has personally witnessed the hardship and suffering brought to her people and place as a result of nuclear colonialism (for “nuclear colonialism,” see Kuletz, 2001, pp. 240–243; Lockhart, 2020, pp. 679–680). She has seen the U.S. government’s and global energy companies’ forcible efforts to extract uranium from Laguna Pueblo lands, among other Indigenous lands in the American Southwest, rendering Indigenous people as dispensable and Indigenous places as wastelands (for “wasteland,” see Voyles, 2015, pp. 1–26). On Laguna Pueblo lands, three open pit uranium mines—Jackpile, North Paguate, and South Paguate—were the largest in the U.S. and operated from the early 1950s until 1982, when uranium prices suddenly dropped. These open, abandoned pit mines poison people and land alike. Abandoned uranium mines, waste dumps, and stockpiles are littered throughout

the Southwest, and their toxicity threatens the Laguna Pueblo, Acoma, Zuni, Hopi and Navajo peoples.

The government mined the rocks regardless of whether they were found on sacred sites. *Tsé Bit' a' i'* (Winged Rock), or Shiprock, is a sacred site to the Diné—but evidently not to the U.S. government. Near Shiprock, the U.S. government, pursuing the credo of the Cold War nuclear arms race, constructed uranium mines. Uranium was unearthed, bombs were built and stockpiled, and Tuba City—the Navajo Nation’s largest community—became a central office for the Rare Metals Corporation and the Atomic Energy Commission. About 3.9 million tons of uranium were dug up from 1944 to 1986 in the Southwest (Pasternak, 2006). The U.S. government was the consumer, private mining companies were the producers, and Indigenous populations were the exploited laborers. Indigenous miners, in desperate need of employment, were neither provided with any protective gear nor told of known health risks. Moreover, without their knowledge or consent, they became the subjects of medical investigations on radiation exposure. Many suffered and died from lung cancer and other diseases, and their sorrow spread to family and community members (Brugge et al., 2006). When the mines shut down as the Cold War thawed, fences and other basic precautions against the dangers of nuclear debris failed to go up. To this day, piles of radioactive waste and miles of open tunnels and pits deface Indigenous sites, and radioactive dust carried by desert winds contaminates Native American populations and lands. Indeed, the land is so polluted the U.S. government has sought to declare the area a “National Sacrifice Area” (Tillett, 2005, p. 153). Such a designation would permit renewed mining and the dumping of nuclear waste, exacerbating what is likely the worst case of environmental racism in the U.S.

Indigenous storytelling around the world has recorded and responded to the ongoing suffering caused by uranium mining. The *power* of these stories is to witness the suffering, bring healing, and exact justice from governments and global energy companies for subjecting Indigenous communities to radioactive poisoning, covert medical experimentation, forcible removal, and exploitative labor practices. Silko is among the storytellers who seek to bring witness, healing, and justice to their people’s suffering.

At the abandoned uranium mine, Tayo remembers his grandmother telling him of the morning when she saw a bright “flash of light through the window. ... It must have filled the whole south-east sky” (Silko, 1986, p. 245). She wondered what it was and later reads about it in the newspaper, commenting: “Strongest thing on this earth. Biggest explosion that ever happened” (Silko, 1986, p. 245). Shaking her head, she says to Tayo: “Now I only wonder why, my grandson. Why did they make a thing like that?” (Silko, 1986, p. 245). At

the time his answer was that he did not know, but now, near the end of his ceremony, “he knew” (Silko 1986, p. 245). To the south of him was “Trinity Site, where they exploded the first atomic bomb”; to the north was Los Alamos, “where the bomb had been created deep in the Jemez Mountains, on land the Government took from Cochiti Pueblo” (Silko, 1986, pp. 245–246). Silko places Tayo at the heart of the development and testing of nuclear bombs, bombs detonated near Indigenous populations deemed dispensable and useful for radioactive experimentation. In the 1950s, the U.S. government would deliberately (and covertly) release radiation near “Native American and Spanish communities” to perform research on potential health risks (Kuletz, 1998, p. 44).

Why did they make a thing like that? Why unleash darkness, despair, and death onto the entire planet? Fear, hatred, conquest, racism, greed—these are some of the destructive reasons. But ultimately, in *Ceremony*, they performed the work of the witchery, “the fate the destroyers planned for all of them, for all living things” (Silko, 1986, p. 246). Tayo’s own ceremony brings him to “the middle of witchery’s final ceremonial sand painting” (Silko, 1986, p. 246). He now understands why the voices and faces of Japanese soldiers in World War II and those of the Laguna people had merged in his mind and dreams. He wasn’t hallucinating or insane. He was seeing clearly a world in which there were no longer any boundaries: “Human beings were one clan again ... united by a circle of death” (Siko, 1986, p. 246). The Japanese soldiers, for example, were not separate from but linked to the Laguna people by “the rocks” mined on Laguna lands as well as by their “distant,” shared heritage. The Laguna and Japanese people both faced destruction by the imperial nuclear project of the U.S. This global interweaving is nothing new; rigid boundaries and separateness have always been delusional or artificially imposed. All along, Tayo had indistinctly sensed the porosity of boundaries, as when he saw his uncle’s face in that of a Japanese soldier, or when the Laguna and Japanese languages merged in his mind. All living things were now linked by the evil witchery. Tayo was a mirror reflecting the interconnection of all things. The witchery had exploited that very interconnection in order to bring about catastrophic harm. Yet in the midst of this revelation of evil at the uranium mine, Tayo can now clearly perceive the vast interconnectedness of time and space, and with such discernment comes curative understanding as well as empowering resistance.

Tayo cries tears of relief now that he sees “the pattern, the way all the stories fit together—old stories, the war stories, their stories—to become the story that was still being told” (Silko, 1986, p. 246). His tears are a bodily, affective response to this pivotal moment of salutary understanding—the result of an expansive, living story weaving together Tayo’s personal narrative with a larger, comprehensive one. His personal story includes grappling

with his mixed Laguna-white identity, experiencing the trauma of war, undergoing the incompetent treatment of white doctors, and embarking on an elaborate ceremony with the help of Betonie, the medicine man, and Ts'eh, the medicine women and sacred being. The larger, global story includes settler colonialism, systemic racism, the annexation of Indigenous lands and culture, World War II, and the development and deployment of the nuclear bomb.

Throughout *Ceremony*, stories and events are understood not as frozen in a linear timeline or in an inflexible geography, but rather as interconnected in a spiraling timeframe and geography, responding to and growing in an ever-changing world and set of relationships. Stories and worlds respond to each other and are endlessly in transition. “The story,” then, is always being retold: It gathers from the past, looks to the future, responds to the present, ever offering new knowledge, patterns, and medicine. Indeed, dynamic Indigenous stories challenge linear notions of time, for “past” ancestors and lands and “future” descendants and lands are active agents in the story. Although Kyle Whyte (2018b) is referring to Anishinaabe perspectives, he illuminates Silko’s perspectives when he writes: “The spiraling narratives unfold through our interacting with, responding to and reflecting on the actual or potential actions and viewpoints of our ancestors and descendants. *They unfold as continuous dialogues* [emphasis added]” (p. 229). The ruined mine reveals a complex temporality and spatiality. It is a vibrant ghost that speaks to us of what has happened in the past and how that past connects to the present and future. In the past: the operational uranium mine and atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki; in the present: the nuclear waste dump and its toxicity; in the future: the possibility of nuclear annihilation: the ghost of the ruin connects otherwise desperate pieces of geography and time.

The “spiraling narrative” that Tayo has received is a gift and a burden. He still has one more task: “He had only to complete this night, to keep the story out of the reach of the destroyers for a few more hours, and their witchery would turn, upon itself, upon them” (Silko, 1986, p. 247). But what does it mean to “keep the story out of the reach of the destroyers”? Tayo’s task is to break the cycles of violence that the destroyers incite and feed upon. Stop the violence, and the witchery starves—at least for the time being. Recall that in Silko’s Indigenous storytelling and worldmaking, personal narrative and global histories are tightly interwoven. Tayo’s task is to break the local cycle of violence and thereby stymie the witchery and its more local destruction—“for now” (Silko, 1986, p. 261). Yet all is interconnected, and hence the ripples of Tayo’s actions would move outward to the stars themselves (see Silko, 1986, p. 254).

At the abandoned uranium mine, Tayo hides when he hears the approach of the friends who had betrayed him—Emo, Leroy, and Pinkie. By car they arrive drunk, loud, and violent. After building a fire, they begin to pound their car with a tire iron. Silko reminds us again of the connection between the local events and their broad repercussions:

The destroyers. They would be there all night, he knew it, working for drought to sear the land, to kill the livestock, to stunt the corn plants and squash ... leaving the people more and more vulnerable to the lies; and the young people would leave, go to towns like Albuquerque and Gallup where bitterness would overwhelm them, and they would lose their hope and finally themselves in drinking. (Silko, 1986, p. 249).

The drought, racism, poverty, homelessness, and the robbery of Indigenous land and hope—these large-scale harms are also part of the witchery that Tayo contends with as he attempts to complete the ceremony and stop his old friends' violence at the mine.

Tayo now hears his friend Harley screaming as the other men drag him from the trunk of Emo's car. Soon afterwards, Harley's body is hung "upright between strands of barbed wire" (Silko, 1986, p. 251). Emo tortures Harley, baiting Tayo to come out of hiding and confront him. Tayo knows that he could stop and kill Emo and is strongly tempted to do so. He realizes, however, that he must break the cycles of violence to stop the witchery. He must keep the curative story "out of the reach of the destroyers." If he kills Emo, the witchery prevails: A "drunk Indian war veteran" will have murdered to settle an old feud; the white doctors would say this was bound to happen; the white people would say, in faint pity, that it takes a "white man to survive in their world and that these Indians couldn't seem to make it"; and at home, on the reservation, they would blame it all on alcohol, the army, the war, and all the other ills that come from the whites, but mostly they would blame themselves (Silko, 1986, p. 253). If Tayo kills Emo, the witchery wins again, having spun together racism, classism, settler colonialism, extractive capitalism, trauma, violence, and war into webs of personal and public lives and narratives. Tayo must defeat the story-weaving of the witchery with the story-weaving of Betonie and Ts'eh.

Tayo appears to be the weaker party in this match, but strengthened by the ceremony's story and the stars joined to it, Tayo resists and prevails. The ceremony is completed—"for now." The drought would end, the rain would come, Tayo would gather and plant Ts'eh's seeds, and "the plants would grow there like the story, strong and translucent as the stars" (Silko, 1986, p. 254). And with his eyes open, Tayo would dream: He is in his uncle Josiah's wagon, wrapped in a blanket, moving beneath Paguate Hill, with

junipers blowing in the wind, his grandmother holding him, and his cousin Rocky whispering, “My brother.” “They were taking him home” (Silko, 1986, p. 254). Fully awake—perhaps more awake than ever—he dreams the truth: He is loved, he belongs to a family, a tradition, and a place. He is home. For Silko, dreams—like stories—are not a departure from reality but inform and illuminate it. The dream is telling the truth: Like the junipers rooted beneath Paguate Hill, the site of the emergence of the Laguna Pueblo people, Tayo is for the first time rooted and at home (for significance of Paguate Hill, see Silko, 1999, p. 38). His ancestors—Josiah and Rocky—are not gone but are with him. He knows who he is and who his people and traditions are. He has “crossed the river at sunrise,” he is awakened, and he knows what he now must do (Silko, 1986, p. 255). He must travel to the Laguna Pueblo *kiva*—a sacred place for ceremonies, teaching, and councils—and tell the story.

The elders sit on the wooden benches that line the long kiva, and they ask Tayo to sit on a “folding steel chair with ST. JOSEPH MISSION stenciled” on it (Silko, 1986, p. 256). Sitting there, Tayo wonders about “how far the chair had gone from the parish hall before it came to the kiva” (Silko, 1986, p. 256). The chair, like Tayo himself, has traveled to the kiva from a place of racial and religious conflict and hybridity. Like the *San José de la Laguna Mission*, Tayo inherits the challenges of a mixed ancestry. His green eyes are a reminder to him and those around him of his mixed racial identity and the alienation that comes with it. He never knew his white father, his Laguna Pueblo mother left him when he was four, and he was mostly raised by an aunt who practiced both Roman Catholicism and Indigenous traditions—and practiced both blindly and narrowly, as if they were fossilized relics, in contrast to the dynamic, vital ceremony of Ts’eh and Betonie. Yet Tayo—like the folding steel chair—is now at home on Laguna Pueblo sacred ground. It is here that he tells his story: “It took a long time to tell them the story; they stopped him frequently with questions” (Silko, 1986, p. 257). The elders were particularly interested in the sacred woman Ts’eh, and it was later announced: “You have seen her / We will be blessed / again” (Silko, 1986, p. 257).

Ts’eh is related to Ts’its’tsi’nako, the Thought-Woman who, with her sisters, creates the universe by thinking it: She “named things and / as she named them / they appeared” (Silko, 1986, p. 1). Storytelling is a form of naming, an act of creation. Silko is a storyteller, a creator. But storytellers and their stories come from somewhere (except perhaps for Ts’its’tsi’nako, the Creator herself, but *that* is a different story). Storytelling is an act of creation but also an act of listening, of *receiving*. We have seen this intimate relation between worldmaking and worldfinding again and again in radical Romanticism. And now we find it here. In the kiva, Tayo tells the story that he was given and that he in his own way creatively

performed. Silko herself does the same: *Ceremony* begins with the narrator announcing that she is telling a story that she has received: “She [Thought-Woman, the Creator] is sitting in her room / thinking of a story now / I’m telling you the story / she is thinking” (Silko, 1986, p. 1). Silko is creating a story—a world of sorts. But this storied world is not a flight of fancy. It is not an escape from the actual world. It is the real world—with its pain and injustice, its beauty and love—portrayed with exquisite clarity and power. Indeed, it is due to the profound authenticity of the story that it can help one to see the world clearly, as if for the first time. The familiar becomes new, strange, disturbing, yet streaked with sunrise—with hope. What was once a nondescript abandoned mine is now a place of intricate personal and public struggle, violence, racism, and geopolitical exploitation and war. This is how the storied landscape works. For non-Indigenous listeners, it names and brings to light suffering and injustice (and beauty and love) that were not understood or seen. For Indigenous listeners, it affirms and clarifies centuries of struggle and oppression, of resistance and accomplishment, and of beauty and love. In either case, the power of storytelling is rooted in the meeting place of worldfinding and worldmaking—of receptivity and imagination.

Silko creates the story that she has inherited, making something new. Her people have been exploited, their land polluted, and yet they refuse the colonial settler story of their extinction.³ Rather, they continue to remake themselves and their world despite grave hardships. Those who hear their story are likewise called upon to receive it and make something new—something that witnesses injustice, works for change, and offers some kind of dark, wild hope.

With a final chant, *Ceremony* concludes:

Whirling darkness
has come back on itself.
It keeps all its witchery
to itself...

It is dead for now.

It is dead for now.

It is dead for now.

³ For an excellent account of Silko’s decolonial practices, including resistance in the face of radioactive toxicity, see Lockhart, 2020. In particular, see pages 680 and 693 where, for example, she writes: “Silko resists narratives that reproduce an impression of Indigenous homelands as toxically, tragically doomed, and that perpetuate the colonial tethering of Indigenous peoples to extinction” (693).

It is dead for now.

Sunrise,
accept this offering,
Sunrise. (Silko, 1986, pp. 261–262).

Here, at the conclusion of the story, it is good to be reminded of how it began:

I will tell you something about the stories,
[he said]
They aren't just entertainment.
Don't be fooled.
They are all we have, you see, all we have to fight off
illness and death.

You don't have anything
if you don't have the stories. (Silko, 1986, p. 2).

A Nuclear Storied Landscape: Awakening to Everyday Suffering, Oppression, Resilience, and Hope

It may seem paradoxical, but Silko attempts to *wake up* their readers to the *commonplace*, to the familiar. Depending on the reader, this may happen in different ways. A white American from the Northeast might be awakened to the everyday realities of Southwestern Indigenous populations navigating settler colonial cultures, environmental racism, and imposed boundaries—as well as of the beauty and wisdom of Indigenous peoples and lands. An Indigenous reader might be awakened to or reminded of ever-present forms of struggle and survival, grief and joy, sources of oppression and of beauty. In any case, the art of Silko attempts to inform readers' perceptions of the everyday world, honing and transforming their senses so that they observe with greater insight and accuracy, with more nuance and depth. Such awakening to the everyday may be quite modest, creating a slight opening here or there. The world found is experienced somewhat anew, bringing

potential beneficial challenge and change to readers and ultimately—it is hoped—to the world itself. Such transformation is possible when art authentically addresses the whole person, truthfully connecting the dynamic “inner” landscape of readers to the dynamic “outer” landscape of the worlds they find themselves in (see Lopez, 1988, pp. 64–65). This, in part, is why Silko claims that “a great deal of the story is believed to be inside the listener; the storyteller’s role is to draw the story out of the listeners” (Silko, 1996, p. 50). The story appeals to the listener’s experience even as the story challenges and expands it.

We see the art of waking up readers to the everyday and drawing “the story out of the listeners” in Silko’s powerful and deft storied landscapes of uranium mines and nuclear weapons in *Almanac of the Dead*. We are in desperate need of such an awakening. The world has fallen strangely asleep to the threat of nuclear catastrophe and the dangerous toxicity associated with the nuclear industry. Nonetheless, the reality and threat of nuclear waste, toxicity, and annihilation—like that of climate change—is lodged inside all of us, however buried or inchoate. Silko’s art raises this submerged consciousness and places it in interpretative frameworks that help us to see and feel more keenly the horror and injustice of colonial nuclearism but also to relativize the durability of settler colonialism via Indigenous vast, spiraling, and intertwined perspectives on time and space. So, on the one hand, Silko attempts to wake us up and motivate us to denuclearize the world and end settler uranium mining and its disastrous environmental racism; yet on the other hand, she reveals the inner self-destructive interior logic of colonial nuclearism. Its end will come, one way or another.

“Home” is the name and topic of the last chapter in Silko’s 763-page novel *Almanac of the Dead*. “Home” is also the place from which to view colonial nuclearism. Wherever or whatever you might call home, the threat of colonial nuclearism is at your door; and if you live in the Southwest and you are Indigenous, colonial nuclearism *and* the poison of uranium mining are likely in your backyard. Colonial nuclearism, then, is always everywhere close to home, but for some, it is nearer still.

When Sterling, a protagonist in *Almanac*, returned to the Laguna Pueblo and “caught a glimpse of the distant blue peaks of Mt. Taylor”—of Mt. Tse-pi’na, or Woman Veiled in Rain Clouds—he knew he had arrived home (Silko, 1991, p. 756). Of all the sacred mountains, Spider Woman first created Mount Taylor as a home for the Laguna people. Sterling made his way to the family sheep camp and drank: “The taste of the water told him that he was home. ‘Home.’ Even thinking the word made his eyes fill with tears” (Silko, 1991, p. 757). Like Tayo in *Ceremony*, Sterling leaves home, learns hard-won lessons about

his life and the world around him, and eventually makes a redemptive return to his Indigenous home.

Why did he leave home? Many reasons, including that the “old ways” were not important or convincing to him, and he enjoyed traveling outside Laguna. But ultimately Sterling left because he had to: He was banished by the Tribal Council. White people had been raiding the Laguna Pueblo for centuries, stealing land, people, and sacred objects. When uranium was discovered near Paguante Village and mining started near “the holy place of the emergence,” there was still more pillaging and destruction (Silko, 1991, p. 34). For some time, then, the Laguna people had been familiar with how white people take and destroy things. So, when a Hollywood film crew showed up to make a movie, the Tribal Council appointed Sterling to keep an eye on the film crew and make sure they didn’t take or disturb things. In the meantime, a sacred stone snake suddenly appeared near the mine tailings. When the Hollywood crew filmed at the foot of the mountains near the mine tailings, they inadvertently filmed the sacred stone snake. Nonetheless, it was deemed that sacrilege had occurred still once again, and Sterling was held responsible. As punishment, the Tribal Council exiled him.

The abandoned uranium mine, the sacred stone snake, and Sterling’s return home all come together at the conclusion of *Almanac*. Sterling is transformed. Earlier, he was indifferent to both the uranium mining and the appearance of the stone snake. Earlier, he was captivated by white settler culture and its magazines and their inane, gossipy news about the white world. Now, upon his return, “the magazines referred to a world Sterling had left forever” (Silko, 1991, p. 757). Now, instead of looking at the magazines, he focuses on the things that he could see and touch himself, like tiny black ants gathering food. He remembers his aunt and the old people telling him that “ants were messengers to the spirits,” and the people would give the ants “food and pollen and tiny beads as gifts” (Silko, 1991, p. 757). Sterling feeds the ants and desires to understand what the old ones understood: “the connection between human beings and ants” (Silko, 1991, p. 758). If Sterling is to understand the connection between the uranium mine, the stone snake, and his own return home, he must learn something of the relationships between the human and the more-than-human, a more-than-human world that includes ants, ancestors, and spirits such as the stone snake. Now that he is back home, the more-than-human reaches out to Sterling and he responds accordingly.

As part of that response, Sterling finds himself walking toward the abandoned open-pit uranium mine and the shrine of the giant stone snake: “Sterling knew the visit to the giant snake was what he must do, before anything else” (Silko, 1991, p. 758). As he walks, he

feels connected to the life around him. The Indian tea, the bee flowers, and the larks calling become sources of strength. Like such characters as Coleridge's "The Ancient Mariner" or Silko's Tayo, Sterling *wakes up* to the complexities and sources of life around him. This awakening can be understood as a personal transformation: He grows in strength, health, and awareness. But again, like the Ancient Mariner and Tayo, this awakening also has a public, collective significance. Indeed, it can be understood as a social or political awakening and transformation. Sterling now has a greater understanding of the tiny black ants as well as of the uranium mine and its colonial nuclear logic, pain, and destruction. Having been awakened to the familiar and everyday world, he perceives his life and the world around him anew.

Sterling's awakening also entails a newly acquired comprehension of collective Indigenous grief and protest in Laguna: "He had not understood before why the old people had cried when the U.S. government had opened the mine. ... 'Leave our Mother Earth alone,' the old folks had tried to warn, 'otherwise terrible things will happen to us all'" (Silko, 1991, p. 759). We might wonder: "to us all"? All Laguna Pueblo people? All people in the U.S.? All people, animals, trees, plants, waters, and rocks in the world? "The old folks had seen the first atomic explosion—the flash brighter than any sun—followed weeks later by the bombs that had burned up a half a million Japanese" (Silko, 1991, p. 759). The old folks saw, learned of, and remembered the massive nuclear destruction. "Terrible things will happen to us all."

In *Ceremony*, Silko also writes of Laguna people witnessing uranium mining, nuclear tests, and the connection between these local events and nuclear catastrophe in Japan. And there was also the awareness that from the uranium mining, terrible things will happen *to us all*: "They will lay the final pattern with these rocks / they will lay it across the world / and explode everything" (Silko, 1991, p. 137). As you may recall, in *Ceremony* witchery is responsible for creating the white-skinned people who bring terrible destruction to the world. In *Almanac*, it is sorcerers—the Gunadeeyahs or Destroyers—who bring massive, inhumane suffering and destruction. They delight in cruel acts and have a violent appetite for human blood. Unlike the witchery in *Ceremony*, the Gunadeeyahs did not *create* white Europeans but rather *invited* the white people to join them: "The appearance of Europeans had been no accident; the Gunadeeyahs had called for their white brethren to join them" (Silko, 1991, p. 760). As *brethren*, the Gunadeeyahs and white Europeans are related or at least closely associated, tied to one another by a desire for destruction.

Sterling is now close to the Paguate mine, the largest open pit uranium mine in the world. He "tore a cuff on his pants crawling through the barbed-wire fence that marked the

mine boundaries” (Silko, 1991, p. 760). In *Almanac* as in *Ceremony*, white settler boundaries are erected, enforced, trespassed, and broken down. Sterling moves in and out of settler boundaries, but not unscathed. This time, the tear is a reminder that he is moving from a place of flourishing to a place of destruction. Yet he increasingly comes to understand that even the most robust settler boundaries are temporary and unstable. Eventually, the high fences will be brought low by time, ancestors, and Indigenous peoples of all kinds. On the settler side of the boundary, Sterling sees “mounds of tailings thirty feet high, uranium waste blowing in the breeze, carried by the rain to springs and rivers. Here was the new work of the Destroyers; here was destruction and poison. Here was where life ended” (Silko, 1991, p. 760). Poison, destruction, and death are on the white settler side of the boundary, but their reach is not confined. This boundary is ultimately temporary, and even now it is porous—dangerously porous. Once again, Silko traces the interconnectedness that attends nuclearism: Its lives and half-lives traverse time and space, connecting past, present, and future, as well as the local with the global—deadly connections. White settler boundaries, however high or secure, cannot contain white settler nuclearism. Uranium in wind and rain, in missiles and fallout, cannot be shut in or out.

Sitting among the toxic tailings is the giant snake. When Sterling first heard of the snake, he thought it was a joke or merely an odd outcropping of sandstone. Yet there it was, “the stone snake’s head ... raised dramatically and its jaws ... open wide” (Silko, 1991, p. 761). Sterling is now awakened to the power and significance of the snake, Maahastryu—a protector of the Laguna people, but also a spirit creature found among many Indigenous Mexican and African populations. The giant snake is Laguna and local, but is also transglobal, honoring the distinctiveness of diverse Indigenous groups while also uniting them. Sterling now understands. The snake is looking in the direction of South and Central American Indigenous peoples and ancestors that will one day join North American Indigenous peoples and ancestors, bringing revolution and tearing down white settler U.S. borders.

The revolution will come, the boarders and fences will give way, and the buffalo will return—inexorably. The correlated suffering and death of Native Americans and the American buffalo is well documented. This mutual sorrow and harm (and near extermination) is expressed powerfully by the words of Plenty Coups, chief of the Crow Nation: “When the buffalo went away the hearts of my people fell to the ground, and they could not lift them up again. After this nothing happened. There was little singing anywhere” (Lear, 2008, p. 2). But the buffalo and the singing will return, according to the Indigenous

prophecy recounted in *Almanac*. Sterling recalls this prophecy as he is walking and gaining new strength during his Laguna homecoming:

Sterling had to smile when he thought of herds of buffalo grazing among the wild asters and fields of sunflowers below the mesas. He did not care if he did not live to see the buffalo return; probably the herds would need another five hundred years to

complete their comeback. What mattered was that ... the Great Plains would again host great herds of buffalo and those human beings who knew how to survive on the annual rainfall. (Silko, 1991, pp. 758–759).

The great return of the buffalo and liberation of Indigenous peoples may take hundreds of years. But it would happen. It was unstoppable. *Almanac* is clear about this:

Marx had understood that ... the within “history” reside relentless forces, powerful spirits, vengeful, relentlessly seeking justice. ... The turning, the changing were inevitable. The old people had stories that said much the same, that it was only a matter of time and things European would gradually fade from the American continents. (Silko, 1991, p. 316).

The stone snake embodies a sureness of the unescapable, a solidness of endurance, and an expansive perspective on time and place. “The snake didn’t care if people were believers or not; the work of the spirits and prophecies went on regardless” (Silko, 1991, p. 762). It would be as the Mexican Indian revolutionary Angelita had said: “We are the army to retake tribal land. ... The ancestors’ spirits speak in dreams. ... We wait for the tidal wave of history to sweep us along” (Silko, 1991, p. 518). Sterling is now awakened to what the stone snake and Angelita understand: The oppression inflicted by settler colonialism is real but fleeting in the sacred vastness of time and space and in the holy presences of ancestors and spirits. “The earth would still be sacred. Man was too insignificant to desecrate her” (Silko, 1991, p. 762).

This awakening does not bring fatalism or nihilism but rather hope and meaning. Sterling’s awakening and homecoming are both personal and collective. He finds his home, his place in Laguna lands and ways. He is renewed by a place that knows him and is known by him. This awakening and homecoming, however, are not private feats or events. With the help of many—including agents of the more-than-human world—he is awakened to his connection to Laguna and trans-Indigenous histories, futures, and their intermingling in the

present. He is now alert to the ways of personal flourishing and meaning as well as transnational solidarity and liberation. The personal and public are mutually related to and informed by Sterling's encounter with the multifarious presence of the land, the steady southern gaze of the stone snake, and the vast timescales and spatialities posed by the uranium mine. Together, these encounters both relativize the occupation and force of white settler colonialism and reveal the enduring sacredness of the earth. Is it any wonder, then, that personal healing and growth would emerge from such a new, global perspective on the eventual demise of settler oppression and the endurance of those who identify with the sacredness of the earth?

In Silko's writings, the ruined uranium mine is the image of both nuclear colonialism *and* Indigenous resistance—the quest for justice and freedom from government and global energy companies that have subjected Indigenous communities to radioactive poisoning, covert medical experimentation, exploitive labor practices, and forcible removal. What was once the fenced off or hidden abandoned mine is now a place of intricate personal and public struggle, violence and racism, healing and hope. The imagery of the uranium brings alertness to the multiple catastrophic forms of settler colonialism, including the displacing, poisoning, and plundering of Indigenous populations. Moreover, Silko's Indigenous perspectives radically expand Euro-American *temporal* and *spatial* accounts of struggle, justice, and transformation. The ruined uranium mine operates within millennial timescales and instances of the bending of space that are simply not found in Euro-American traditions.

The art of Silko seeks to wake up her readers and facilitate their becoming witnesses to suffering and injustice as well as hope and joy. For example, the catastrophic environmental racism inflicted on Indigenous populations in the Southwest is not widely known to settler populations. Moreover, while the threat of nuclear annihilation may be widely acknowledged in the abstract, it fails to *concretely* manifest itself among the public or world leaders. Silko's art, here, would wake us up even to things we already know but fail to appropriately register, feel, or act upon. Silko's craft works to bring *tangible* attention to that which connects all living things: the distinct possibility of nuclear annihilation. Who will join Silko in her attempts—in both *Ceremony* and *Almanac*—to wake us up to such destruction? And who will wake us up to that other catastrophe that links all living things, climate change?

Curative Homemaking with Indigenous Storytelling

It is commonplace in settler colonialism to associate spiritual healing with Native American cultures. Native Americans, in this view, live close to nature and can thereby tap

into its healing powers. This “romanticized” portrait of Indigenous peoples establishes them as “the other.” Unlike white North Americans who do not live “close to Nature,” presumably because they are more “advanced,” Native Americans enjoy a simpler, “primitive” life. This simpler life, while deemed “other” and “lower” than white settler cultures, does have its benefits, including offering settler colonialism some possible antidotes to settler problems that come with its fast-paced, mobile way of life. Indigenous people, then, become the imagined, mirror image of alienated settler culture, and they can thereby provide a solution to settler alienation by offering ways to get back in touch with nature and experience its healing.

It would be unfortunate if this harmful, racist depiction of U.S. Indigenous populations were to lead us to neglect Silko’s powerful accounts of the potential healing that in fact comes from individuals being reconnected appropriately to people and place, including more-than-human inhabitants and entities. Silko’s storytelling describes numerous, liberatory interconnections between humans, place, and the more-than-human. Such interconnections include practices and traditions that name, honor, and in some cases attempt to shape those interconnections. There are better and worse ways for humans to dwell in a place, and Silko’s Laguna traditions assist its people to experience health by being in proper relationship to “the land.” When an individual is disconnected from its people and place, alienation and suffering are a natural result. Of course, unlike settlers, U.S. Indigenous populations have to cope with this burden: *How to establish home and belonging while simultaneously experiencing the dispossession of one’s land?* How are Indigenous people to build—or rebuild—homes and communities on lands stolen from or foreign to them? I will not pretend to be able to address that issue. But I will say that in Silko’s writings, connection to the more-than-human, under conditions of settler colonialism, is a challenge but also a source of reliance and power for Indigenous peoples as they seek to establish homes in lands free of social and nuclear oppression.

In Silko’s stored landscapes, we are presented again and again with the palpable, powerful otherness and agency of the more-than-human: “otherness,” because the more-than-human are a distinctive presence and force that cannot be reduced to human needs, wishes, or anthropocentric projections; and “agency,” because more-than-human beings and forces purposefully inhabit and shape the world in both individual and interdependent ways. Although “other,” these non-human agents interact with humans, and some even have kinship relationships with human communities. “Otherness,” then, signifies their relative autonomy and distinctness from humans, not a radically different ontological category or binary dualism (e.g., nature vs culture).

For some time now, a challenge for many Indigenous populations has been to establish appropriate relationships with the more-than-human after having experienced displacement or loss of sovereignty. Some Indigenous groups have been moved thousands of miles from their homeland, experiencing disconnection from their various more-than-human familiar relationships. Others have remained on their homelands but have lost their sovereignty within it, and they are thereby thwarted from exercising stewardship and other relational practices with the more-than-human (for a treatment of the attempts to thwart Indigenous stewardship, see Whyte, 2016, pp. 165–167).

Silko's storytelling depicts the profound struggle and resilience of Indigenous peoples as they work to establish home and belonging under these conditions of displacement and sovereignty loss. And that *struggle and resilience is supported by engagement with, and assistance from, the more-than-human*. The struggle to make a home in concert with the more-than-human stands in stark contrast to settler colonialists who sought to make homes in North America by *conquering* the “wild land,” including its Indigenous inhabitants who were typically identified not with humanity but rather with the land to be conquered. Of course, in Silko's storytelling, Indigenous peoples *are* identified with the land but in a worldview in which there is not a hierarchical or adversarial relation between humans and the more-than human.

In the context of catastrophic displacement, erasure, and upheaval, Silko's storytelling vividly depicts Indigenous peoples' survival and resistance as they seek to reestablish home and belonging in conjunction with the more-than-human. To make their way home, Tayo and Sterling require the collective effort of humans and more-than-humans. In this journey toward healing and justice, the more-than-human does not loom outside humanity but rather forms a complex, interwoven tapestry of life in which humans belong. The more-than-human is plural, dynamic, multi-agential, and, under the proper conditions, *supports humans in their endeavors and journeys*.

Robin Wall Kimmerer (2018) refers to the widespread call to bring Indigenous ecology

to bear on contemporary social and environmental issues. ... Environmental leader and Onondaga Nation clan mother, the late Audrey Shenandoah, taught, “This is why we have been able to hold on to our traditional teachings, because there would come a time when all the world's people will need to learn it for the earth to survive.” (p. 42).

The stakes are high: For the earth to survive, learning from Indigenous peoples—with respect, integrity, and humility—is an urgent, ethical imperative. Surviving and addressing the twin threats of nuclearism and climate change will require a vast marshaling of human creativity, labor, passion, and commitment, working in various ways but for shared ends. Indigenous ecologies, including its prodigious power of storytelling, will be a necessary part of that collective effort if the earth is to continue to be home to the human species among countless others. That earth home, however, must not be a place where humans have only survived the catastrophic, but a home where flourishing ways of life nurture sustainable, just relations among humans and between humans and the more-than-human. To achieve that, it will be necessary to respectfully and humbly learn from those who have suffered most under the cruel subjugation of empire, white supremacy, and settler colonialism.

Acknowledgments

I am profoundly grateful to my research assistant, Lucy Cooper-Silvis, for her expert editorial skills and deep engagement with my work.

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Commentary



Karpouzou, Peggy and Zampaki, Nikoleta (eds.). (2023). *Symbiotic Posthumanist Ecologies in Western Literature, Philosophy and Art. Towards Theory and Practice*. Peter Lang.

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The alarming rise in environmental violence, climate catastrophes, failures of human-made sciences and technologies, and the dislodgment of human perspectives as an all-encompassing solution to every form of human and more-than-human crises, is provoking us to rethink and reinterpret the anthropocentric modes of knowledge production beyond the dynamics of human civilization. To explain further, it is important to admit that the humans never had and still never have a capability to exist on their own terms and conditions, and need to respect and acknowledge the existential and knowledge systems of every other living civilization. Without even venturing into these complex conversations, if we simply look at the geographical, biological, emotional and cultural patterns in which the humans have evolved in the planet, we would realize that it has always been a symbiotic and intersectional process, where different forms of plants, animals, bacteria, microbes, and various other forms of living beings contributed towards physiologically shaping the human civilization (Latour, 2008; Braidotti, 2013; Ferrando, 2019; Dey, 2022). The edited volume titled *Symbiotic Posthumanist Ecologies in Western Literature, Philosophy and Art. Towards Theory and Practice* not only unfolds the necessity of embracing posthumanism as a habitual way of being and becoming, but also sensitizes us about the diverse intersectional and interwoven ways in which knowledges are produced across human and more-than-human minds, bodies, ideologies, and knowledge disciplines. Though this volume is not the first one that extensively engages with the phenomenon of posthumanism, the thematic and methodological diversity of this volume is breathtaking and provocative in nature.

The perspectives of literature, philosophy and art have been addressed through a “symbiotic lens” by Pramod K. Nayar, “posthumanist realizations” by Francesca Ferrando, “technology and hybridization” by Roberto Marchesini, “queer kin groups” of cyborgs, machines and animals by Teresa Heffernan, “inter-ship” by Mieke Bal, “symbiotic citizenship” by Peggy Karpouzou, “ecological communications” by Bruce Clarke, “posthuman subjects” by Irene Sanz Alonso, “cyber bodies” by Aleksandra Łukaszewicz, “metabolic artistic practices” by Dimitris Angelatos, “geomancy” and “technomancy” by David Fancy, “deconstructive forces of posthumanism” by Nicole Anderson, “chaosmocene” by Fred Evans, “embodied

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phenomenology” by Glen A. Mazis, “eco-phenomenology” by Cassandra Falke, and “climate control” by Avital Ronell. Besides introducing us to different dimensions, theories and methodologies that are associated with the paradigm of posthumanism, the volume also serves as lexicon of posthuman jargons, which, in order to engage with critical arguments on human and more-than-human relationalities and tensions, are extremely vital to understand. On the one hand, the jargons enable the readers to rethink the bodies like humans, plants, humanimals, animals and their ontological status and, on the other hand, they signal a “[...] shift away from, both anthropocentrism and ecohumanism as traditionally practiced [...]” (Nayar, 2023, 8). A lot of relevant scholarships have been generated on posthumanism thus far, however, they are all restricted to only a few sets of theories and contexts, engage with very fixed and socioeconomically privileged geopolitical locations, and are often repetitive in nature.

This volume successfully challenges and deviates from these limitations by provoking the readers to think not only within the realm of theory, but also with respect to the experiences of daily life. For, instance, the “[...] symbiotic nature of all life on earth [...]” (2023, 7) as argued by Nayar can be related to the varied ways in which humans co-exist with plants, animals, birds, fishes and other forms of more-than-human living beings through food, agricultural, spatial, and residential systems; the requirement of “[...] personal commitment and pluralistic elaborations” (2023, 10) towards the natural environment as philosophized by Ferrnado can be related to the ways in which it is necessary to respect, protect and appreciate the existential values and knowledge systems of forests, oceans, rivers, plants, and animals; “shared precariousities, vulnerabilities” (2023, 11) as outlined by Karpouzou and Zampaki can be related to the ways in which disruptions of the natural environment impacts the existence of the humans in the forms of droughts, earthquakes, flashfloods, storms, and various other catastrophic ways; “[...] hybrid condition of the human being” (2023, 44) as observed by Marchesini can be located in ways in which humans habitually draw inspiration from the natural environment for social, cultural, and intellectual growth; the criticism of the western cultural “[...] assumption that man is a unique ‘animal’” (2023, 65) as put forth by Heffernan is quite relatable to the preconceived superiority of the human bodies and psyches over other living organisms; the existential, emotional, and intellectual values of “inter-ship” (2023, 83) as proposed by Bal can be related to the ways in which consciously and unconsciously humans and more-than-humans collaborate and co-exist through appreciations and tensions; the necessity of nurturing the existential values of “symbiomimicry”, “symbiogenesis” and “symbiocracy” (2023, 99) as unpacked by Karpouzou can be connected to the urgent necessity of co-building posthuman existential values of caring and sharing within the otherwise self-centric and chauvinistic urban ecosystems; “[...] turning away from the human exceptionalism practiced in popular scientific ideology” (2023, 127) as portrayed by Clarke can be practically understood in terms of the consistent failure of the humans to find solutions to every form of crises caused by humans and more-than-humans; the amalgamation of “techno-human” and “real human memories” (2023, 147) as explained by Alonso can be related to the ways in which robots, humans,

humanoids, and androids function together in inseparable ways; synesthetic artworks as forms of posthuman cohabitations and interpretations (2023, 161) as highlighted by Łukaszewicz can be related to how various forms of artworks in the forms of designs, color palates, and thematic dimensions are used to project non-linear and symbiotic modes of human existence; the importance of challenging the “structured discourses of power” (2023, 179) on humans, environment and biodiversity through metabolic artistic practices as analyzed by Angelatos can be connected to the different forms of creative resistant movements that have been taking place against reckless capitalistic designs and climate catastrophes; imbibing the values of “geomancy” in order to reimagine the connection of the humans with the planet earth (2023, 189) as elaborated by Fancy can be related to various forms of indigenous existential values that are being revived to understand how the knowledge values of the human civilization cannot be interpreted without taking into account the knowledge values of the natural environment; a posthumanist deconstruction of the existential and knowledge systems around us (2023, 216-17) as reflected by Anderson can be associated with the ways in which human-centered knowledges are gradually getting decentered by the knowledge systems of the more-than-human beings; the posthumanist symbiotic practice of “unnatural participations” and “becoming-everybody/everything” (2023, 227) as shared by Evans can be interpreted in terms of the ways in which the capitalistic ideologies of development and progress in the contemporary times are challenged; the philosophical and emotional values of “co-birthing with myriad beings” (2023, 245) as reflected by Mazis can be associated with cultural, spiritual, geological and biological phenomena through which humans trace their roots with other living beings; the practice of self-questioning as a way of de-hierarchizing human-nature relationalities (2023, 267) as fleshed out by Falke can be related to different scholarly activists that have been taking place in the field of posthumanism; and the problematic arts and sciences associated with weather forecasting (2023, 282) as portrayed by Ronell can be related to situations when human-made technological mechanisms fail to forecast climate and environmental catastrophes accurately.

These diverse forms of practical analysis allow the volume to have a diverse readership irrespective of professional positions and disciplinary associations. This work can serve both as a beginner’s and expert’s guide to any scholar who is interested or working on the aspects of climate studies, posthuman studies, environmental studies, cultural studies, urban studies, sociology, arts, design studies, and anthropology across the world. However, the geographical scope of the scholarship could have been a bit more expansive, in terms of more representations of voices from vulnerable communities. Hopefully, the editors would consider bringing out a series of volumes on symbiotic posthuman ecologies with more representations with and from socially, culturally, politically and economically vulnerable communities (like indigenous practitioners, LGBTIQ+ activists, underrepresented races, and others) across the planet.

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Commentary

Karpouzou, Peggy & Zampaki, Nikoleta. (eds.). (2023). *Symbiotic Posthumanist Ecologies in Western Literature, Philosophy and Art. Towards Theory and Practice*. Peter Lang.

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After a few decades of development and progressively grounding in the academic discourse, posthumanism has become an established critical lens for negotiating rooted dualistic, anthropocentric axioms in Western thought, tackling an array of topics and addressing different disciplinary fields. However, there remain possibilities to further assess its potentialities as a critical perspective considering the ever-new challenges of the present-day world.

Along this line, *Symbiotic Posthumanist Ecologies in Western Literature, Philosophy and Art* (2023), edited by Peggy Karpouzou and Nikoleta Zampaki, explores posthumanism as a tool for re-configurations of human and nonhuman relationships in response to the ethical urges promoted by current ecological crises. The volume, available as an open access source on the Peter Lang platform, offers an original take on posthumanism along a burgeoning (trans)disciplinary dialogue in the context of the Environmental Humanities. The editors advocate for an approach that responds more effectively to the “‘danger’ of blurring the boundaries between human and non-human life-forms” (14) arising from the oft-neglected complexity that characterizes the understanding of the nonhuman, which should encompass *both* organic, *and* nonorganic entities. Similarly, the volume engages with *practical* translations of the ethical framework of posthumanism: as the editors explains, the book concerns “not only non-human beings but also humans’ place in the world” (20), thus anticipating the focus of the several chapters on both theoretical and material practices to depict embodied and embedded alternative forms of human-nonhuman co-existence in the Anthropocene.

The book addresses these topics by exploring the possibilities of critical knowledge production offered by the concept of ‘symbiosis’. As the Karpouzou and Zampaki explain, the notion “epitomizes the narratives of posthumanism and Environmental Humanities that perceive the world as a whole Being rather than a resource for use and exploitation” (24). In this way, interrogating ‘symbiosis’ allows for cultivating posthumanist and ecohumanist epistemologies, ethics, politics, and aesthetics while delineating paths of sustainable futures. Far from running the risk of oversimplifying the discussion on symbiosis – which remains crucial in current academic discourse – sixteen chapters present different angles on the original notion of ‘symbiotic posthumanist ecologies’. The contributions, organized in three sections, span different disciplinary backgrounds, from literature to art history and philosophy. Through this multiperspectivist structure, Karpouzou and Zampaki

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demonstrate how the concept of symbiosis functions also methodologically by favoring a plurilogue among different scopes, which converge in emphasizing the importance of effecting a paradigm shift in the way one thinks and acts in relation to the nonhuman, compared to still dominant cultural dualistic narratives.

Among these chapters, two introductory contributions by established posthumanist philosophers, Pramod K. Nayar and Francesca Ferrando, are featured. Their opening remarks delineate the ethical stance permeating the collection: as Nayar underscores, it is relevant to develop creative explorations to deepen debates on Critical Theory. This is illustrated in the book which, as Nayar explains, “heralds a new posthumanism too – by asking for posthumanism to account for the ecological” (8). But also, this prefatory section emphasizes that the awareness of the human condition, as ontologically and materially connected with the nonhuman, (“We are the Earth; we are Everything”, 9) is a fundamental assumption for the 21st century and its urgencies, starting with the Covid-19 pandemic, as Ferrando reminds us. The first part of the volume, titled “Framing the Symbiotic Posthumanist Ecologies,” offers readers a deeper theoretical exploration of symbiosis as a productive concept for investigating the complexity of alternative understandings of humans and nonhumans. This section includes distinct but interlocking discussions. For example, Roberto Marchesini elaborates on the descriptive possibilities and ethical implications of hybridization forms between humans and technology. This is illustrated, for instance, through the idea of conceiving *techne* as a virus (which “enters the organism through a redefinition of the metabolic performative parameters” 50) or as involving processes of somatizations (“interacting with all the phenotypic translation systems” 52). This chapter engages in a dialogue with Teresa Hefferman’s observation regarding the recent resurgence of dualistic, Cartesian figurations in the understanding of animals as machine in current debates on AI and robots. As the author underlines, this situation necessitates a critical perspective and an investigation of possible ways out of it in order to “interrupt literal and reductive readings of fiction, restore the ‘literariness’ of literature, and return the animal/ human as machine back to its home in fiction, allegory, and metaphor” (76).

Leading scholar in Cultural Studies, Mieke Bal, also contributes to this theoretical framing with an examination of the linguistic, philosophical, and cultural implications the prefix ‘post-’ compared with other expressions like ‘trans-’ and ‘inter-’ to more effectively depict ethical forms of relationalities in the symbiotic turn evoked by the volume’s main argument. ‘Inter-’ is discussed by Bal as particularly valuable in this sense, since, as suggested by the idea of ‘intern-ship’, it “denotes a willingness to exchange on an equal basis; it is relational” differently from the notion of “post-” which, instead, according to Bal, “disavows what came before and hastily rejects it” (84). In the same section, Peggy Karpouzou intertwines contemporary urban planning discourses about smart cities with inquiries about speculative fiction dealing with future cities. While merging different posthumanist philosophies, e.g. taking from Haraway to Latour, with *A Flash of Silver-Green. Stories of the Nature of Cities* (2019), a collection of fifty-seven flash fiction stories speculating about future cities in an age of ecological change, Karpouzou illuminates the capacity of Citizen Science Fiction to “enact symbiosis with more- than- human world [and] imply that we need a transformation of



urban ethos cultivating responsibility” (117). The focal point of her inquiry pertains to the examination of three distinct processes, namely “symbiomimicry,” “symbiogenesis,” and “symbiocracy” which, collectively, serve as mechanisms for redefining the parameters by which individuals or entities are conceived of as citizens within smart biocities.

A similar dialogue between analysis of culture and development of praxis for negotiating long-standing anthropocentric habits emerges in the second part of the book titled “Symbiotic Posthumanist Ecologies in Literature and Art”. Here a more focused perspectives on contemporary literary and artistic expressions acknowledges that ongoing narratives are already at hand to delineate possible – and somehow necessary – evolving futures for human-nonhuman alternative relational praxis. The first two essays in this section delve into the narrnovels presented by the Spanish author Rosa Montero’s science fiction trilogy centered around Bruna Husky, a combat-ready female android (as in the case of Irene Sanz Alonso’s essay) and Richard Powers’ Pulitzer-winning novel *The Overstory*, which is analyzed in Bruce Clarke’s essay. These works are examined in juxtaposition with posthumanist theorists such as Haraway and Braidotti to highlight the emergence of a distinctive ontological domain that encompasses the inherent dualistic dynamics human-nonhuman relationality illustrating alternative scenarios. While Clark illustrates that *The Overstory* “offers a fictional reflection on new modes of cross- species understanding by placing its human characters at the margins and in milieux where other species share the same medium and invite them to consort with their symbiotic neighbors” (128), Sanz Alonzo observes that what seems a “as a cautionary tale about the dangers of human progress and the dangers it can pose to our planet and to our identity as humans” can also illustrate “how scientific advances may be used correctly in order to create a fairer society” (155).

Other chapters in this section pave the way on similar discussion in material realizations in the field of contemporary visual art. Aleksandra Łukaszewicz, for instance, explores in her essay, titled “Cyber body as Medium of Art in the works by Neil Harbisson and Moon Ribas”, how constant flux and transformation of the interconnections realized by the artists under examination between their neural systems and bodily senses allow for “consciously search for new ways of reconfiguring their nervous systems, adjusting their bodies, minds, and functionalities to the new technological reality, and also to the natural reality – to our biotechnosphere” (173). In this sense, these example of human-nonhuman symbiosis illuminates ongoing metaphorical and practical translations of critical discussion on postdualism and postanthropocentrism. Similarly, Dimitris Angelatos’s chapter, titled “Folded Tactility: Tracing Metabolic Artistic Practices in Contemporary Sculpture”, invites for a critical analysis of artists compiling sculptural polymorphic strata, made of material fragments of the natural world and synthetic left by de- industrialization and material wear – such as in the case of the works by Greek artist Yiannis Markantonakis and Kenyan artist Tahir Karmali. According to Angelatos, their works are representative of human-space relationships alternative to forms of environmental exploitation which dominates current time: sculptures of waste disposal and natural materials enhances symbiotic relationships between space, artworks, and their spectators which “call the viewers to a critical vigilance against human and environmental mutilation” and “release the

tension that characterizes the true critical consciousness and its vigilant resistance to generalized degeneration” (186). David Fancy’s chapter concludes this section with an exploration of ‘geomancy,’ described as the “art of engaging magically with the earth” (189) in the philosophy of Gilbert Simondon. This topic serves as a way to envision futures that extend beyond the Anthropocene, in opposition to the prevailing ‘technomancy’ observed in the present-day world, which exemplifies the “practice of capitalist dissemblance through the conceptual fusion of technology as magic, either in the necromantic mode of capitalism as a form of sorcery” (191).

The concluding section of the book, titled “Symbiotic Posthumanist Ecologies in Continental Philosophy,” adopts a more philosophical approach by engaging in a plurilogue among a range of philosophers – including Deleuze, Merleau-Ponty, and Nietzsche – as another way to reevaluating ongoing exclusive paradigms within the possibility of posthumanist symbiotic ecologies. For instance, Nicole Anderson addresses the theme of animal-human differences by emphasizing the importance of adopting a ‘deconstructivist’ perspective in the context of posthumanist discussion. She combines this with a discussion on symbiotically oriented communication between herself and a wild possum, Edna, providing a practical demonstration of navigating and rethinking culturally constructed boundaries between species: “Through Edna’s touch and through mine, through smell, through our body gestures and eye contact, we have a language in which my human subjectivity, the ‘I Am’ (ipseity) that defines me, becomes secondary, but without losing my humanness” (224). Fred Evans, on the other hand, examines the political ethics of contemporary cosmopolitanism through the lens of Deleuze’s concept of “chaosmos” – defined as “a cosmos that is simultaneously an anti-cosmos or anti-order” (229). This exploration highlights the potential of a ‘Chaosmocene’ as an alternative to the Anthropocene. Through this neologism, Evans supports the notion of a new vision of cosmopolitanism that recognizes “the creative interplay among the voices of the cosmic body, equivalent to Deleuze and Guattari’s ‘becoming-everybody/everything’” (241).

Maintaining a keen philosophical lens, Glen A. Mazis, instead, relies on Merleau-Ponty’s embodied phenomenology and his attentiveness towards the potentialities of literary language. He observes how literature, especially selected works on Proust, Silko, and Woolf, manifest a posthumanist sense beauty by opening a liminal space of displacement into the depths of the world. Aligning with the idea that the chosen works resonate with Merleau-Ponty’s discussion on the ontology of the ‘flesh of the world’, Mazis acknowledges that “in describing things and articulating their sense, the creative writer or the artist pulls their audience beyond themselves and their reflective boundaries into an emergence of themselves from the world as suggested by those voices of silence of the things themselves” (263). Personal experiences are presented in Cassandra Falke’s essay. Drawing, again, on the phenomenological insights of Merleau-Ponty’s discussion on chiasmic reversibility and overflowing givenness, as well as of Jean-Luc Marion’s “saturated phenomenality,” Falke discusses the usefulness of eco-phenomenology in reevaluating the experience of spending time in the “woods in the dark” (265) during Arctic winter, in Norway. Through this experience, as the author explains, a more profound understanding of the interconnectedness between various forms of life becomes possible which allows this ‘dark’ complexity to serve as a metaphor for a symbiotic and

ecologically sustainable way of living: “In the forest here at night, there is a minimal technological boundary between me and the local ecosystem, which makes it easier to perceive the radical finitude that impedes our decision-making with regard to the environment.” (278). Avital Ronell’s chapter concludes the book with a discussion of Goethe, Nietzsche, and Freud as ‘weather prophets’ exploring matters of climate and the potential interpretability of weather. According to the author of the essay, they delve into non-empirical, poetic, and speculative scopes, somehow anticipating the current relevance of climate in ongoing debates. Specifically, Ronell observes more attentively that for the three thinkers, “the quasi-philosophical yet poetically urgent cast of climate, a nearly unconscious brace of Being, called up an aspect of existence that exposed man to radical contingency [...] while hovering between meaning and the senseless, weather was always susceptible to a sense-making hustle” (283). It is along this line that Ronell acknowledges in Goethe, Nietzsche, and Freud an awareness of a sense of connectedness between humans and nonhumans, negotiating beyond a mere dualistic understanding of the self.

The book’s reading flows smoothly and engagingly, demonstrating that neither the complexity of the topics explored – also related to the various nuances of the concept of symbiosis discussed – nor the diverse critical perspectives adopted compromise the coherence and consistency of this edited collection. Furthermore, the effective intertwined dialogue between posthumanist theories and approaches relevant to the context of Environmental Humanities makes the book a signpost for researchers exploring this combined scholarly trajectory. One aspect to critically consider is perhaps the potential for a broader variety of case studies to be included, to further demonstrate the effectiveness of the volume’s framework in contexts beyond literature and art (e.g. digital media, architecture). This addition could have possibly enhanced the transcultural significance of the discussion. However, this observation is by no means a limitation. Instead, it further affirms the effectiveness of the angle embraced by Karpouzou and Zampaki, encouraging readers to continue this discourse in their own research paths and areas of interest. As a result, the book is also recommended for scholars interested in exploring the challenges posed by humanist (dualistic and anthropocentric) assumptions through a more practical and transdisciplinary lens. Eventually, a notable benefit of this publication is its free accessibility, which facilitates this pursuit and leaves no excuse for not heeding the editors’ call to “further stimulate the exploration of the complex reevaluations of the ‘human’ in the 21st century” (31).

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Karpouzou, P., Zampaki, N. (eds). (2023). *Symbiotic Posthumanist Ecologies in Western Literature, Philosophy and Art. Towards Theory and Practice*. Peter Lang. 2023.

Commentary



Karpouzou, P. and Zampaki, N. (eds.). (2023). *Symbiotic Posthumanist Ecologies in Western Literature, Philosophy and Art. Towards Theory and Practice*. Peter Lang.

J.J. Sylvia IV¹

Over the course of the past few decades, posthuman theory has thoroughly critiqued a humanist perspective which places the human not only outside of, but above and in control of nature. However, the success of this critique has also left a significant question about how to best address human activity without problematically centering humans in the era of human-caused planetary harm dubbed the “Anthropocene.” Collections such as *Posthuman Ecologies: Complexity and Process after Deleuze* (Braidotti & Bignall, 2019) have argued that this should be addressed through ecological-based thinking. They precisely note the challenge of this approach:

[...] there is an urgent need for new thinking about the differential nature of human influences in complex interactional systems, and about the nature of such systems of agency within them, when such phenomena are conceived in non-anthropocentric ways. Indeed, the question of what human-actioned systems would look like beyond anthropocentrism haunts a range of contemporary enquiries into the nature of the diverse phenomenon that interact in complex affective ecologies. (p. 4)

Peggy Karpouzou and Nikoleta Zampaki have brought together a collection of writings in *Symbiotic Posthumanist Ecologies* that extends this ecological approach and proposes a potential answer to the challenge by conceptualizing human activity as a form of symbiosis and by “rethinking human subjectivity and agency in the 21st century as shaped by dynamic interplays between nature, technology, science, and culture,” (p. 12). Chapters come from contributors that span North America and Europe and explore symbiotic ecologic approaches that span literature, philosophy, and art.

The collection is divided into three sections, in addition to three introductory essays by Pramod K. Nayar, Francesca Ferrando, and an introductory piece by the editors, Karpouzou and Zampaki. The first, and overall strongest section, emphasizes the framing of symbiotic ecologies,

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while the latter two address how these are applied within literature & art and continental philosophy, respectively. The range of contributions demonstrates just how widely posthuman theory can be applied, even when focused on a topic such as symbiosis. The most impactful chapters in this collection, however, are those that hue most closely to the theme of symbiosis, especially when grounding themselves in the critical posthuman traditions of N. Katherine Hayles and Rosi Braidotti.

Roberto Marchesini's "Somatizing Alterity: Technology and Hybridization in the Post-Human Era" opens Part I of the book with a chapter that re-conceptualizes the normally humanistic idea of *téchne* in a symbiotic way that can help avoid the extremes of neo-Luddism and techno-enthusiasm. Importantly, Marchesini notes that technology comes from a place of desire rather than of lack, or deficiency: "Techno-poiesis does not make up for some deficiency but produces shortcomings," (p. 49). He demonstrates this by wryly noting that no one ever felt bad about not having the latest mobile phones until after the mobile phone had been invented. These technologies, once invented, are then somatized and the "*téchne* is body, just like a spider's web, a bower-bird's bower, a hermit crab's shell, or a bee's honeycomb," (p. 54). Such a perspective sheds light on how we might understand a posthuman symbiotic relationship between humans and *téchne*.

Teresa Heffernan discusses challenges to systems of ethics attempting to de-center the human in the chapter "Rethinking 'Queer Kin Groups': Cyborgs, Animals, and Machines." She notes that, whereas in the past animals were denied moral status because philosophers such as René Descartes saw them as nothing more than machines, arguments are now being made to extend moral status to robots because they have the same alterity to humans as animals. However, this does not consider the larger ecological connections of such robots: "Because of the resources they demand, we cannot talk about robots as 'autonomous' entities and the AI industry as separate from capitalism and its unsustainable infinite growth model," (p. 70). She insists that alterity alone does not grant animals and machines the same moral status, and that we must take into account the larger ecological connections and impacts of technology as we consider them ethically. Machines are animals (including humans) will increasingly be, if they are not already, competing for the same limited resources such as water. Viewing machines as the moral equivalent of animals is problematically reductive.

Mieke Bal's chapter, "How to Say It? Symbiosis as Inter-Ship," critiques the terminology of "post-" and "trans-" when used with humanism, suggesting "inter-ship" instead. She notes "the disingenuous [use of the] term 'posthuman' written by people who, I suppose, would not prefer to die, yet, claim to be already in the 'beyond'." (p. 84). Bal believes that the use of "post-" is an attempt to escape responsibility from the past by moving beyond it. While there may be a

grammatical point to be made, this critique seems disengaged from scholarship in critical posthumanism, which largely does not seek to escape responsibility in the ways it is here accused of doing.

In “Symbiotic Citizenship in Posthuman Urban Ecosystems: Smart Biocities in Speculative Fiction,” Peggy Karpouzou highlights how speculative fiction can help us imagine better alternative futures that “encapsulate the mutual beneficial relationships between different life-forms,” (p. 100). In a world where many of our current billionaires have accumulated their wealth by building the technological systems of surveillance and control that were featured in the dystopian science fiction of their youth, the speculative fiction highlighted by Karpouzou offers welcome symbiotic alternatives. Extending existing research on biomimicry, this chapter further elaborates Glenn Albrecht’s concept of symbiomimicry, which offers a vision of ecosystems that remain in a state of change but nonetheless allow for “the possibility of reconnecting the living systems that embody balance and interconnectedness,” (p. 107). One intriguing example is a story in which a variety of living creatures, including plants, ants, wolves, and worms, use new smart technology that allows them to make their needs heard as part of the democratic process of cities.

Several chapters in Part II of the collection analyze works of fiction and art, noting how they connect to posthuman themes. These offer interesting explorations of how art is approaching such topics but could be an even stronger part of this collection if they were more explicit in analyzing how such works might clarify thinking about symbiotic posthumanist ecological thinking in our own present or future.

Bruce Clark’s chapter, “Cracking Open: Ecological Communication in Richard Powers’ *The Overstory*,” explores the story of how an ecologist learns to communicate with trees, hinting at ways we might begin to explore non-anthropocentric communication. In addition to emerging research on plant communication, there are potentially valuable connections to be made to communication as ontogenetic emergence, which builds on the work of philosopher Gilbert Simondon (Choukah & Theophanidis, 2016). The chapter, “Posthuman Subjects in Rosa Montero’s *Los tiempos del odio*” by Irene Sanz Alonso analyzes the way Montero crafts a story around a transfeminist conceptualization of a cyborg, raising questions about the threshold between human and non-human. The chapter concludes by arguing that “scientific advances may be used correctly in order to in order to create a fairer society,” (p. 155). Such literature can perhaps help us better conceptualize philosophic work based around the idea of technobodies such as those explored in Rosi Braidotti’s (2022) *Posthuman Feminism*.

Aleksandra Łukaszewicz explores how to apply ecological approaches in the chapter, “Cyber Body as Medium of Art. The Case of Neil Harbisson and Moon Ribas.” After noting the cyborg modifications made by Harbisson and Ribas that allow them to hear color and feel

earthquakes and the movement of the moon, Łukaszewicz argues that “these senses permit a new closeness with the Earth and other cosmic objects... expanding the limits of relationships possible in present reality,” (pp. 168-169). Here we clearly see an example of how humans might increase their engagement with and connections to a wider variety of non-human ecological elements. A chapter on “Folded Tactility: Metabolic Artistic Practices in Contemporary Sculpture” by Dimitris Angelatos uses papier mâché and textile sculptures to explore the relationship between the human and the natural world, though this chapter may be less accessible for those not already well-versed in artistic theory related to sculpture.

Part III of this collection explores resonances between posthumanist ecologies and continental philosophy. Francesca Ferrando (2020, p. 54) has noted that philosophical posthumanism “implies the understanding of the plurality of the human experience; the human is not recognized as one but as many, that is human(s).” This section explores those philosophical implications from a symbiotic perspective, including two chapters on Merleau-Ponty’s embodied phenomenology: Cassandra Falk’s “Eco-Phenomenology in the Dark,” and Glen A Mazis’ “A Posthumanist Truly *Back to the Things Themselves*: Merleau-Ponty’s Embodied Phenomenology and Literary Language.” Mazis explores how we might experience “signification that is not yet language,” (p. 253) while Falk explicitly links this methodology to ways that we might better understand interdependence (and perhaps symbiotic relationships) with the more than human ecology around us. This eco-phenomenology, she argues, “encourages us to make a habit of knowing what we don’t know and imagining what we cannot sense,” (p. 278). Such approaches could help develop our understanding of the plurality of the human experience.

In “Animal-Human Differences: The Deconstructive Force of Posthumanism,” Nicole Anderson reminds us that while de-centering the human is a laudable posthuman goal, it’s important not to take this to an extreme. She argues that “Acknowledging difference is what enables an acceptance of the other as absolute alterity and safeguards against the cannibalization of the other to the same,” (p. 218). In other words, we need to see the human as only one part of the overall ecology, while de-centering the human and focusing on other non-human components. Understanding the connections and differences between those human and non-human elements can serve an important role in that de-centering.

Fred Evans’ “Deleuzian Cosmopolitanism: From the Capitalist Axiomatic to the Chaoscene,” argues for a deterritorializing form of parrhesia to disrupt the capitalistic axiomatic. This would open us up to what Claire Colebrook (2013) describes as the elemental and inhuman, perhaps then affording an opportunity for ecological symbiosis.

Although Deleuze and Guattari are referenced together frequently throughout this work, none of Guattari's single-authored work is ever cited. This seems like a bit of an oversight, especially considering the potential to make connections to his work in *The Three Ecologies* (Guattari, 1989). This collection also faces the same challenge that every edited collection must face in that some of the contributions deal more directly with the topic at hand than others. In this case, entries on "Geomancy vs Technomancy: Resonance, Divination and Gilbert Simondon's Thought" by David Fancy and "Nietzsche Apologizes for the Weather: A Storm Chaser's Report" by Avital Ronell, though interesting, struggle to clearly articulate their connection to the main theme of the collection. These minor issues, however, should not dissuade anyone from engaging with the important contributions of this collection.

Overall, this collection is a valuable addition to posthuman theory, offering exciting new possibilities for how to think about the role of humans in symbiotic ecologies without necessarily centering the human. These interdisciplinary approaches would be helpful across many different fields including posthumanism, critical theory, ecohumanism, ecology, literature, art, philosophy, and more.

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Book Review



Baber, W.F. & May, J.R. (eds.). (2023) *Environmental Human Rights in the Anthropocene: Concepts, Contexts, and Challenges*. Cambridge University Press.

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In 1972, the UN Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment declared that it recognised a human right to the environment. Fifty years later, in 2022, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution recognising “a human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment” (United Nations General Assembly, 2022). In parallel, the Anthropocene is a term that describes a geological epoch from when human activities began to significantly impact the planet’s ecosystems (Krutzen, 2002). The further humans progressed and developed, the greater the environmental pollution and destruction they caused. As societies witnessed the ecological collapse of the planet, the importance of advocating for and protecting environmental human rights increased. However, without a legally binding global treaty, the recognition and enforcement of environmental human rights are in the hands of governments, which are major drivers of systematic failures in environmental protection (Hausknot, 2020). Moreover, corporations prioritising economic growth, have little duty to stop their environmentally destructive activities (Lynch & Long, 2022).

Against this backdrop, what does recognising environmental human rights mean? Should environmental human rights be prioritised over other types of preceding human rights? Whose environmental rights should be prioritised and protected, and for what reasons? Is the human being the only subject of rights? What opportunities do environmental human rights create for scholars, activists, citizens, and policymakers concerned with the planet’s ecosystems and climate?

The book *Environmental Human Rights in the Anthropocene* addresses these questions by analysing political opportunity structures for environmental human rights at the global, national, and local levels. Essentially, environmental human rights address human interests in environmental matters. However, our planet cannot be sustained if only human interests are pursued. How should we promote and protect environmental human rights while respecting nature and non-human beings and maintaining the planet’s sustainability in the Anthropocene? What opportunities and challenges should our societies address? Ten chapters in this book address these questions by engaging readers with the present-day debates on environmental human rights. The authors of the chapters provide intellectual insights into the complex challenges and dilemmas we face in protecting and promoting environmental human rights.

Michelle Scobie opens a discussion by defining environmental human rights and unfolding a recent trend in the recognition of environmental human rights. The most interesting point in this chapter

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is the socio-political implications of using the term Anthropocene within the context of human rights issues. Environmental human rights are important in protecting the planet and empowering vulnerable communities. However, environmental human rights in the Anthropocene should be sensitive to existing social inequalities and power asymmetries. Scobie argues, “linking the Anthropocene to human rights places equal legal obligations on all societies rather than focusing on the affluent Western societies that created and benefit from the more destructive, exploitative, imperialist, capitalist-related socio-historical processes that have dominated global systems and human–environment interactions over recent centuries” (p. 14). Thus, integrating human rights and environmental law and policy should clarify the differentiated level of responsibilities among individuals and social groups in environmental protection. Moreover, environmental human rights should imagine the world beyond the international order dominated by (powerful groups in) Western countries.

Next, Bridget Lewis expands the scope of environmental human rights in the context of future generations. To date, environmental and climate justice movements have mobilised discourses on future generations. However, according to Lewis, global instruments on environmental human rights have significantly neglected future generations. Lewis notes how human rights law typically addresses “imminent” harms or risks to human life. This logic precludes the environmental rights of unborn future generations. Given that the impacts of environmental contamination are often cumulative and persist long-term over generations, a more refined set of principles that considers anticipated harm and embeds existing principles such as intergenerational equity and the precautionary principle are needed for defending the interests of future generations. Lewis then explains some political changes towards recognising environmental rights from an intergenerational perspective through the concept of “institutional receptiveness”. The increasing judicial receptiveness of future generations’ environmental rights is interconnected with the political receptiveness of more post-anthropocentric laws and norms. For Lewis, promoting the former would create a political opportunity structure for future generations’ environmental rights. The author concludes that “Achieving long-term structural change will require political receptiveness, but in the short term, much can be achieved through grassroots advocacy to encourage judges to recognise and address the longer-term impacts of environmental harm on human rights” (p. 44).

Peter Gottschalk approaches biodiversity from an “environmental rights” perspective – diverging from the traditional approach to biodiversity issues heavily informed by theories of environmental economics. What is most intriguing in this chapter is Gottschalk’s discussion on biodiversity conservation in the context of the “rights of nature”. While environmental human rights are essentially an anthropocentric construct, nature’s rights, in contrast, are underpinned by ecocentric principles. As Gottschalk suggests, global documents on biodiversity, like the Convention on Biodiversity (CBD), tend to lack (and usually avoid) rights-based language. Focusing on Access and Benefit-sharing as the third pillar of the CBD and provision of the Nagoya Protocol, Gottschalk explains how the Nagoya Protocol could be extended to protect and promote environmental human rights. From a rights perspective, the Nagoya Protocol contributes to recognising participatory rights and indigenous

peoples' rights. Gottschalk notes that “environmental rights are one possible way” to recognise the intrinsic value of nature. However, neither the CBD nor the Nagoya Protocol are sufficient for protecting and promoting the “rights of nature” as they are rather designed to recognise indigenous peoples' rights to the environment. Hence, the recognition of nature's rights needs to be preceded by a broader reassessment of the human–nature relationship.

Noting the absence of an international agreement on environmental human rights, in the fourth chapter of this book, José Juste Ruiz and Maria del Mar Requena Quesada draw attention to the Global Pact for the Environment (GPE). On 10 May 2018, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution to initiate the negotiation to arrange an international treaty for environmental rights (the so-called GPE) (see UNGA Resolution 72/277). However, as the authors mention, the process to finalise a draft GPE has been slower than expected. The authors' analysis of a draft version of the GPE shows the potential for the global society to move forward towards promoting and protecting environmental human rights through legally binding mechanisms. The process to negotiate the GPE has been led by UN agencies, mainly the UN Secretary-General and the United Nations Environment Programme. However, facing oppositional voices from some countries, the current negotiation regarding the GPE is in a political deadlock. For instance, the United States, Russia, Syria, Turkey, and the Philippines voted against the resolution for the GPE (UNGA Resolution 72/277) at the UN General Assembly. Ruiz and Quesada provide a critical appraisal of progress and limitations in the making of the GPE, which helps the reader understand the complexities and power asymmetries involved in global environmental politics. To summarise, the political opportunity structure for making an international treaty for environmental human rights is not closed but remains fragile.

In Chapter 5, James R. May attempts to reinterpret socioeconomic and cultural rights beyond the Anthropocene. Anthropogenic environmental changes have eroded public infrastructure and worsened socioeconomic inequalities. As May suggests, “An unhealthy environment can lead to physical disease and cognitive impairments that in turn can affect education and employment opportunities, which in turn may impair the right [and] the ability of people to exercise their civil and political rights” (p. 96). In addition to the interconnectedness between socioeconomic and cultural rights (SECRs) and environmental rights, May finds the usefulness of addressing environmental challenges through mechanisms that protect and promote SECRs. May writes, “SECRs are here and now, standing at the ready to address Anthropocentric challenges. And, often, the harms of environmental degradation and climate are experienced by people as SEC injuries” (p. 97). May also aptly points out that SECRs are intrinsically anthropocentric because they promote the well-being of human beings. Yet, based on the existing SECRs, environmental rights can be more appealing to duty-bearers and judges in protecting nature. With this intersection as a point of departure, much work is needed to embrace the rights of non-nature and non-human beings in environmental governance and jurisprudence.

Although global-scale responses to environmental pollution are necessary, local participation is also essential for environmental protection. Martha F. Davis explores different local initiatives that promote climate resilience and sustainability at the local level. Among various examples, Davis focuses

on cities where population, resources, and infrastructure are concentrated (i.e., where most environmental pollution is caused). Local governments can lead social transformation towards sustainability by incorporating human rights norms into planning and local governance. Human rights can complement loopholes in many cities' climate actions, which are not committed to human rights obligations and thus only entail technical issues (e.g., the amount of carbon emissions reduction without reference to social justice and equality).

Margot Hurlbert's contribution to the book explores the intersection of environmental rights and indigenous rights, focusing on the role of the latter in promoting and protecting the former. International legal instruments on indigenous peoples' rights have advanced significantly over the decades. The UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, adopted in 2007, opened political opportunities for indigenous groups to engage in decision-making processes more meaningfully by recognising their power of consent. Hurlbert's case study of Canada suggests that promoting and protecting indigenous rights through constitutional and legal mechanisms contribute to respecting different human-nature relationships. Canada has constitutionalised indigenous rights and introduced national bills that ensure duty to consult, self-determination, and transparency in decision-making processes. Hurlbert notes the distinction between indigenous rights and human rights, which originate from different roots. The former is driven by cultural diversity and the dignity of indigenous peoples, while the latter is driven by Western norms and the logic of universality that risks assimilation. Hurlbert writes, "universal human rights are regarded as totalising rights, erasing Indigenous' cultural differences, and thus risk or imply assimilation" (p. 138). On the other hand, Indigenous rights pluralise values, norms, and approaches to environmental protection. As per the author of this chapter, "Honouring Earth, and advancing human and ecological community and relations are foundational to Indigenous rights and offer new framings for advancement of environmental rights" (p. 145).

Ottavio Quirico analyses contestation and power dynamics over global obligations to curb carbon emissions in Chapter 8 of this book. In the Anthropocene, the human species has become the largest carbon producer. Responsibility for carbon reduction should be proportionate to carbon emissions that each state causes. At the global level, this principle is institutionalised "on the basis of equity and in accordance with their common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities" in the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (United Nations, 1992, p. 4). In this sense, transnational corporations, and state institutions, such as the military, should be most responsible for carbon reduction. Yet, without effective enforcement tools, carbon reduction is a voluntary promise rather than a duty. Quirico writes that under the existing international law, duties for carbon reduction are not conceptualised from a human rights perspective. Yet, there is room for manoeuvre where the duty to curb carbon emissions is to be placed in the context of peremptory norms.

In the ninth chapter, Emily Reid leads a discussion on environmental human rights in the context of sustainable development. Among sustainable development goals (SDGs), SDG17 calls for a global partnership for sustainable development. However, Reid notes that international environmental laws are fragmented and there "is no single overarching legislative structure framing international law"

(p. 182). The fragmentation of international law is complicated by power asymmetries between different international legislations. For instance, “whereas some rules of international law are recognised as comprising “hard law”, others, including the Rio Convention and the SDGs themselves carry elements of “soft law”.” (p. 183). International human rights law can exercise its capacity for enforcement to some extent. Still, much more attention has been paid to promoting and protecting civil and political rights than to socio-environmental rights. Reid sees political opportunities for strengthening environmental human rights through implementing SDG17 in this milieu. SDG17 has its limitations rooted in the anthropocentric orientation of economic development. Yet, as the concept of sustainable development has evolved, how the global society achieves development for humans and nature is “in the hands of stakeholders to drive the partnerships and shape the direction of travel from here” (p. 192).

In the final chapter, Walter F. Baber questions how environmental human rights vis-à-vis environmental justice movements “can advance the larger cause of human rights and the environment” (p. 199). According to Baber, environmental rights opportunity structures, which are the foci of this publication, involve normative, institutional, and social domains. Each domain operates based on its own logic, norms, and processes. The question remains around the means by which normative, institutional, and/or societal changes can be driven. For Baber, it seems that advocacy-research and research-advocacy can play a pivotal role in advancing environmental human rights. The former refers to “the extension of scientific understanding of rights-relevant natural and social phenomena through research structured to meet the needs, evidentiary and otherwise, of environmental human rights advocacy”, while the latter means “evidence-based intervention in regulatory/judicial processes in defence of environmental rights” (p. 209). Environmental mobilisation in the social domain should be augmented and supported more rigorously.

A clean, healthy, and sustainable planet is a prerequisite for human survival. Emphasising this critical fact, this book concludes that human rights can address the Anthropocene if they go beyond anthropocentric logics and siloed approaches to human rights at global, national, and local levels. Overall, this book is informative and inspirational. It contains chapters that effectively overview current issues and debates in environmental rights, global governance, and the politics of sustainability in the Anthropocene. It is a worthy read for academics, policymakers, campaigners, and students interested in reconceptualising environmental human rights from different socio-political perspectives.

This book could have been more readable if the ten chapters had been thematically grouped into three sections. The first thematic section could explore theories of environmental human rights – Chapter One by Michelle Scobie, Four by José Juste Ruiz and Maria del Mar Requena Quesada, Five by James R. May, and Ten by Walter F. Baber. Readers interested in this topic are encouraged to read these chapters first. Chapter Two by Bridget Lewis and Seven by Margot Hurlbert could be grouped to explore subjects of environmental human rights in the Anthropocene: Present generations, future generations, indigenous rights, and rights of nature. The final thematic section could focus on actions to promote and protect environmental human rights, which includes Chapter Three by Peter Gottschalk, Six by Martha F. Davis, Eight by Ottavio Quirico, and Nine by Emily Reid.

This realignment of chapters suggests that one or two chapters could be added to the second thematic section on environmental human rights. If there was a chapter dedicated to the rights of nature, readers could better understand why some authors in this book distinctively discuss environmental human rights and the rights of nature. Another chapter could overview issues on environmental human rights defenders: who they are, how they are organised, and why their activism requires human rights protections. If there is a second edition, it would be more inclusive and diverse to have voices from non-Western authors to showcase different ontologies and epistemologies of environmental human rights and human-nature relations discussed in this book.

Promoting and protecting environmental human rights has become much more important than ever for surviving on our burning planet. Environmental human rights have opened new opportunity structures for environmental movements and empowered marginalised communities. However, as we live in the Anthropocene, environmental human rights are barely justifiable if only the human dimension of environmental rights is considered. While our planet is burning, the sustainability of anthropocentric institutions, norms, and policies has been questioned. Against this backdrop, how can environmental human rights open a new opportunity for human survival and coexistence with nature? This book is a good starter for those who are interested in this question.

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