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Dreams of a Therapeutic Planet:

(Dis)entangling Narratives of Post-Human Care in Anglo-American Speculative Literature

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in English

by

Sarah Sydney Lane

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December 2022

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December 2022

Dreams of a Therapeutic Planet: (Dis)entangling Post-Human Narratives of Care in Anglo-
American Speculative Literature

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by

Sarah Sydney Lane

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Portions of an earlier version of Chapter 5 are published as “The Horror of Interdependence: Climate Migration Anxiety by the Radical Right in Pella Kågerman and Hugo Lilja’s *Aniara* (2018) and Ari Aster’s *Midsommar* (2019)” in *Philosophy, Film, and the Dark Side of Interdependence*, edited by Jonathan Beever (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2020), 83-101. An earlier version of Chapter 8 is published as “‘Love Your Monsters’: Anthropocene Discourse and Green Psychoanalysis in Jeff VanderMeer’s *Borne* (2017) and *The Strange Bird* (2018)” in *Surreal Entanglements: Essays on Jeff VanderMeer’s Fiction*, edited by Louise Economides and Laura Shackelford (London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2021), 80-104.

“Dreams of a Therapeutic Planet” is a response to those who help woman-identifying people learn as wild girls how to dare to imagine that both their own “nature” and the “world” are “greater” than what their “native town” may or may not “allow.” To Ms. Ziegenmeyer who taught me that I could create my own prodigal summer by wildly reading, writing, and roaming around in nature. To Louise Economides who introduced me to all the Romantic Natures and the wonder within things waiting for my senses to grow stronger. To my wonder-full and matrixial committee, Aranye, Julie, and Melody, whose faith and feedback brought forth and kept alive the proud wildness at the heart of this project. Most of all, thanks to Julie, who has care-fully and unwaveringly guided my wild process of unbecoming in the passageway to newborn-ness.

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Lane, Sydney. “The Horror of Interdependence: Climate Migration Anxiety by the Radical Right in Pella Kågerman and Hugo Lilja’s *Aniara* (2018) and Ari Aster’s *Midsommar* (2019).” In *Philosophy, Film, and the Dark Side of Interdependence*, edited by Jonathan Beever, 83-101. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2020.

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ABSTRACT

Dreams of a Therapeutic Planet: (Dis)entangling Post-Human Narratives of Care in Anglo-American Speculative Literature

by

Sarah Sydney Lane

“Dreams of a Therapeutic Planet” draws on psychoanalytic theory, intersectional gender and sexuality studies, radical Black theorizing, and ecocriticism to investigate how readers are made aware of and feel trans-species, matrixial trans-subjectivity through speculative literature and what creative and ethical practices of care ensue from these aesthetic experiences. I argue that select Romantic-era and contemporary Anglo-American eco-speculative writers analogously construct defamiliarizing, post-Human narratives and models of quotidian practices of care to foreground the planetary-scale significance of the erotic ecologies of diverse human psychosocial lifecycles. I show how the texts in this study move toward the theoretical, aesthetic, and narrative convergence of ecology and psychosexuality as a viable other-worldly site of psychoanalytic care. That is, “Dreams of a Therapeutic Planet” explores how Anglo-American speculative writers focus on scenes of post-Human caregiving between non/human characters to argue that these wildly caring, creaturely m/other figures (dis)entangle the un/conscious thinking and feeling of both adult characters and undeveloped/immature presubjects (i.e., literal and figurative children & newborns) as well as the actual readers who identify with such protagonists. My project proposes that particular articulations of Anglo-American eco-literary speculation explore

and enact the revitalization of the wild and matrixial qualities of mind that have been long repressed, denied, and/or foreclosed by the anti-Black, biophobic, and phallogocentric logics, narratives, and aesthetics of “monohumanist Man2,” to invoke Sylvia Wynter’s formulation.

As cultural responses to the Romantic Anthropocene, to use a conceptualization inspired by Kate Rigby’s work, I argue that my archive of texts together construct an aesthetic of *wonder*-full wildness for their post-Human, transformational quest narratives that trace the development of presubjects into matrixial trans-subjects. Matrixial trans-subjects are non/human entities capable of approaching the unknown in the self and other in a mode of “positive” epistemophilic wonder. Thinking with Alexis Pauline Gumbs and bell hooks, respectively, gives me insight into how these matrixial figures also engage with m/other natures via the related ethical praxis of “revolutionary mothering” within “homeplaces” of interdependency that I identify in these texts as scenes of “developmental entanglements of care.” I therefore show how these authors speculate about the developmental mechanisms and aesthetic forms behind the cultivation of this post-Human subjectivity that “is always-already full of other beings and ways of being,” to call on L.O. Aranye Fradenburg Joy’s words. Overall, I show how these Romantic eco-speculative writers imagine the post-Human mind as potentially creatively equipped with and enriched by the intersubjective, interspecies, and trans-species psychological capacities for care/curiosity/concern, dialogic communication, and mutual transformation—psychic modes of approaching the self and other that exist in both conscious/cognitive and unconscious dimensions. My argument shows how this matrixial aesthetic of developmental entanglements of care manifests in representations of intersubjective sites, processes, and practices that might be said to effect the green and blue “dreams of a therapeutic planet.”

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Preface

Percy Bysshe Shelley's most developed theory of the relationship between love, melancholia, and knowledge appears in *Epipsychidion*, especially when he declares, "Narrow" is the "heart that loves, the brain that contemplates, / The life that wears, the spirit that creates / One object, and one form."¹ Because the "'self' that gives and the 'other' who receives are dynamic, co-constructing processions of states of mind with histories and geographies that go far beyond the individual," the human mind circumscribed by fixed and singular identities, communities, and narratives, according to Shelley, "builds thereby / A sepulchre for its eternity."² To my mind, Shelley's lines emphasize the importance of a fundamental, vitalizing cognitive/affective curiosity about m/other natures ("positive" epistemophilia).³ Additionally, the line that makes reference to the "life that wears" suggests it is also crucial to turn that curiosity/epistemophilia toward the self by exploring diverse and ephemeral modes of sociosexual performativity throughout the human lifecycle. But

¹ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Epipsychidion*, in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose: A Norton Critical Edition* 2nd ed., eds. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company: 2002), 397, lines 169-172. All references to Shelley in this dissertation are to this anthology unless otherwise noted.

² L.O. Aranye Fradenburg Joy, "Care of the Wild: A Primer," in *Ecosophical Aesthetics: Art, Ethics and Ecology with Guattari*, eds. Patricia MacCormack and Colin Gardner (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 68; Shelley, *Epipsychidion*, 397, lines 172-173.

³ I associate positive expressions of epistemophilia with what Peta Cox calls "psychic strength" or the "will to look actively for new knowledge" and "the state of engaging with knowledge without such engagement threatening the sense of self." Positive expressions of epistemophilia do not seek to deny, master, or control the m/other subject/object in fantasy or reality. Being mentalized by secure attachment figures leads to a sense of psychic safety that stems from having epistemic trust in and respect for the m/other as a separate being and an individuated selfhood. Such psychic safety allows for the psychic strength to engage with the world in a mode of positive (receptive/open/creative) epistemophilia. Positive epistemophilia is "the ability to endure not knowing, to change opinions without overwhelming psychic distress and to take on new perspectives without panic." On the other hand, those with insecure attachment styles are often solely in search of psychic safety as a "protection of the psyche through the use of knowledge or ignorance. It is a protection against anxiety through an attempt to master the environment in order to control a perceived threat." See Peta Cox, "Epistemophilia: Rethinking Feminist Pedagogy," *Australian Feminist Studies* 25, no. 63 (2010), 80-81.

Shelley also stresses the important capacity of desire for a *collaborative transformation* in fixed identity and creative/critical knowledge production, specifically through encounters with difference—through entering into multiple kinds of intimate engagements with non/human partners. As the liberation psychologists Mary Watkins and Helene Shulman put the matter: “If relatedness and interdependence are the foundational reality, then biodiversity is the fundamental challenge. This heterogeneity will be found among individuals, families, species, cultures, and religions creating an array of local tapestries, each different from the other.”⁴ But as they also note, because extinction is often the result of homogenized natures and imaginaries, no single human entity can or should “regulate or dictate” how “we are forever in the process of co-creating a world together.”⁵ Relatedly, Shelley’s notion above is an endorsement, not so much of so-called selfish “free” love aimed at the wholesale rejection of the monopoly and monotony of the institution of monogamous, heterosexual marriage and compulsory reproduction (one standard reading of the poem), but of subjectivity-as-encounter, of the reverential witnessing and compassionate holding of wild m/other natures (and of letting oneself receive care to be transformed in turn).

Along this wild line of thinking, this dissertation joins with speculative writers and eco-psychoanalytic theorists who implicitly and explicitly argue in favor of re-appropriating the term “wild” to positively designate an ethical caregiving technique, analytic technique, and “reading” practice that is an analogue to the Romantic emphasis on the “actualization of self potential.”⁶ According to the psychoanalyst Frank Summers, “Romantic” analysis

⁴ Mary Watkins and Helene Shulman, *Toward Psychologies of Liberation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 153.

⁵ Watkins and Shulman, *Toward Psychologies of Liberation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 153.

⁶ Frank Summers, “Psychoanalysis: Romantic, Not Wild,” *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, 28, no. 1 (2011): 18.

consists of an analyst “attendant” (as opposed to what Lacan critiques as the “subject supposed to know”) who facilitates the patient’s “realization of latent and inhibited psychic capacities.”⁷ This idea resembles psychoanalyst and literary scholar L.O. Aranye Fradenburg Joy’s commitment to the preservation of wildness and is also connected to the artist and psychoanalyst Bracha L. Ettinger’s argument about the importance of wit(h)nessing the trauma of lost “non-I(s)” in the self and other. Ettinger’s concept of the “non-I” refers to foreclosed or distanced modes of mind and identity that could have been performed/embodied in less toxic, homogenized developmental conditions. Such conditions create psychopathology by foreclosing or stifling wild potential via impingements on the self from coercive childhood socialization, anti-Black, mono-gendered/cultured narrative frameworks and aesthetics, authoritarian therapeutic experience, and/or the oversaturation of reality by scientific-technological, cultural, theoretical enframing.⁸ If this is indeed true, then we need “post-Human/post-Man2” interpersonal, critical, and analytic modes of care of self, other, text, reader, and patient that might be best understood as “care of the wild.”⁹ This kind

⁷ Summers, “Psychoanalysis: Romantic, Not Wild,” 13.

⁸ I capitalize “Black” throughout this dissertation in solidarity with Alexis Pauline Gumbs’ reasoning for capitalizing “Black” throughout her text: “The word ‘Black’ is capitalized throughout this text. Thanks to the work of Black writers and editors over decades the convention is that usually the word Black is capitalized when it refers to Black people and lowercase when it refers to Black as a color or adjective. But Blackness is more expansive than the human. And there is no symbolic or descriptive reference to the term Black in this society that does not also impact Black lives. So Black is Black.” Gumbs, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals* (Chico and Edinburgh: AK Press, 2020), 13-14.

⁹ Fradenburg Joy, “Care of the Wild,” 70. I use the term post-Human here and throughout this dissertation in the sense of post-Man2, in Sylvia Wynter’s formulation. Wynter describes the “struggle of our new millennium” as the attempt to survive and flourish at “being human” within the anti-Black “terms of our present ethnoclass Man’s overrepresentation” as white, western, and bourgeois [and masculinist]. Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 260 & 262. But I also use the term “post-Human” to include the sense that Cary Wolfe theorizes as “posthuman” in his book *What is Posthumanism?* (2009). Wolfe tries to reposition the human beyond western humanist and anthropocentric, speciesist cultural practices and traditions that have historically

of Romantic wild analysis is an appropriate term for the practices and methods of holding, “reading,” and caring for non/human minds, bodies, and hearts explored in this dissertation; practices and methods that try to remain loyal to the “spirit of Wilfred Bion’s interpretation of the analytic stance as openness to the unknown.”¹⁰ Despite (or rather because of) the fact that “[c]are can be frightening because it so often *is* an encounter with a difference of vital import,” the goal of wild analytic care (whether pursued by the writer, artist, reader/critic, psychoanalytic theorist or clinician, everyday caregiver, etc.) is to make oneself receptive to contact with traumatically foreclosed, never-having-existed-before, and pre-existing meaning/being to facilitate its becoming, its creative expansion and wild growth.¹¹

As I will develop in Chapters 1 and 2, this “Romantic analysis” of “wild wander/wonder/ing” is simultaneously a mindset/mood, epistemic-aesthetic-analytic style (e.g., positive epistemophilia), and careworking artform of eternal *unbecoming in the passageway to newborn-ness*. I build this idea from Ettinger’s reappropriation of intrauterine fantasies as expressive of a creative aspiration toward the freedom of “non-life” within the “matrix” that can also feel darker and more shattering than “progressive” narratives of increasing ego consolidation and stability while also being essential to subjective wellbeing. This “unbecoming” component of matrixial trans-subjectivity provides a useful metaphor that enables the recognition of at least some speculative fantasies of environmental apocalypse and narratives of merging with nature as psychosocially important, rather than as mere expressions of death driven masculinist aggression, in so much as they contain

constructed value-hierarchical divisions between man and woman, whiteness and Blackness, mind and body, human and animal, and culture and nature.

¹⁰ Summers, “Psychoanalysis: Romantic, Not Wild,” 20.

¹¹ Fradenburg Joy, “Care of the Wild,” 88.

publicly unacknowledged latent creative desires for radical individual and collective metamorphosis. In the same vein, patriarchal myths of necessary matricide for proper hyper-individuation and other associated xenophobic and/or misogynistic “mother-monster myths” produce real suicidal desires and death wishes in art, fantasy, and reality that reflect the tragic unconscious aching for matrixial borderlinking and a fatal inability to see how “the foreclosed and immemorial space of non-life-coming-into-life is *different* from the space of death.”¹² The matrixial gaze *touches* each of us (in different ways) and *desires* us into redressing and addressing these mis/un-recognized fantasies of wildness and wonder by “ethically wit(h)nessing” the other in “compassionate hospitality,” as Ettinger formulates it. Enacted in coordination, these several modalities of matrixial wildness and wonder avoid the master narrativization techniques that universalize their “objective” observations and that are linked to “forms of epistemological, ideological, and ethical violence that seek to reduce the multiplicity and ambiguity of psychic realities into one overarching paradigm of unitary subjectivity.”¹³

Shelley’s wild ideas about caring, growing, and (un)becoming throughout his wonderful and wandering oeuvre, but especially from *The Witch of Atlas* (ca. 1820) and *Epipsychidion* (1821), alongside Fradenburg Joy’s fealty to “wildness” as the “principle of resistance...to the loss of specific ways of becoming,” combine to inform the overarching rubric of this dissertation project.¹⁴ Shelley’s poems indeed pose both problems and promises as they struggle and (sometimes) succeed in discovering and articulating this

¹² Bracha L. Ettinger, “Demeter-Persephone Complex, Entangled Aerials of the Psyche, and Sylvia Plath,” *English Studies in Canada* 40, no. 1 (2014): 143.

¹³ Mari Ruti, “From Melancholia to Meaning: How to Live the Past in the Present,” *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* 15, no. 5 (2005): 652.

¹⁴ Fradenburg Joy, “Care of the Wild,” 88.

reciprocal process of embodied cognitive, affective, and spiritual becoming and unbecoming in collaboration with m/others as a caring life practice (i.e., “co-emergence-in-differentiation”), wherein any moving on from an engagement with wild difference(s) also involves moving with wild difference(s).¹⁵ In other words, Shelley specifically embraces the never-ending reverential, revelational practice of (un)learning-as-mourning, of weaving and unweaving tapestries, an ethical and positively epistemophilic comportment towards the overwhelming, the uncertain and unknown, in the self, other, and nonhuman life. His poems represent the human mind as a feminine/matrixial trans-subjectivity that participates in a melancholic and nomadic way of questing/living that wonders at/wanders in the “wild[er]ness” along the “matrixial trail” that bypasses “Man” in the passageway to ephemeral “homeplaces” of “queer plenitude.”¹⁶ Shelley’s insistence on perpetual

¹⁵ I explicate the terms “co-emergence-in-differentiation” and “matrixial trans-subjectivity” in Chapter 2. The term comes from Bracha L. Ettinger’s theory that subjectivity is multiple, that beings that appear separate rather co-construct one another as opposed to existing as hyper-individuated master subjects. Matrixial trans-subjectivity, however, is not infinite in composition, and is rather defined relationally as an “encounter between I and [an] un-cognized yet intimate non-I neither rejected nor assimilated.” Ettinger understands this “matrixial subjectivity-as-encounter” also as a “transgressive psychic position in which the co-emergence and co-fading is prior to the I versus others.” At the most basic level, the metaphor of matrixial trans-subjectivity promotes an image of two partial subjects, who are each comprised of multiple “co-emerging” and “co-fading” I(s) and non-I(s), and that are enveloped in a “mutating copoietic net” held together by what Ettinger calls “fascinace.” Fascinace is very similar to wonder as Ettinger defines it as “an aesthetic affect that operates in a prolongation and delaying of the duration of an encounter-event, which allows matrixial transference and copoiesis.” Copoiesis signifies the creative interdependency of the matrixial multitude, the mutually transforming influence that the partial “I(s)” and the becoming-m/Other “non-I(s)” have on one another. The becoming-maternal trans-subject and the becoming-newborn presubject caringly, ethically wit(h)ness or compassionately care for one another in their mutual co-emergence-in-differentiation: “The presubject that thus emerges in jointness develops primal trans-subjectivity before being a ‘separate’, ‘whole’ subject. Later, alongside one’s identity as a whole subject, I(s) and non-I(s) continue to interlace their borderlinks in metamorphosis on the matrixial resonance field.” Bracha L. Ettinger, “Matrixial Trans-subjectivity,” *Theory, Culture, & Society* 23, no. 2-3 (2006): 218 & 220-221.

¹⁶ I will explore the theorists, theories, and definitions behind these terms in detail in Chapters 1 and 2, and then build upon and apply them throughout each chapter of the dissertation. But, in brief for the present purposes, above I critically refer to “Man” in Sylvia Wynter’s sense of the term, as the “title of the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom.” I also refer to this figure as the “master subject” (Val Plumwood’s term), or a category of being Human/Man² that Wynter suggests “overrepresents itself as if it were the human itself” and, in so doing, limits “the well-being, and therefore the full cognitive and

melancholic mourning emphasizes the importance of the choice to acknowledge and ethically respond to the fact that self and other are founded upon ruin, mutual vulnerability, and loss, but also on caring and pleasurable metamorphosing encounters. Like Shelley represents his vision of human trans-subjectivity as forever incomplete and contingent upon transformations by unspeakable losses and wondrous revelations that arise when we come into caring contact with myriad wild and alien m/other natures, Fradenburg Joy argues that “[c]are experience has profound effects on the mind, in the forms of excitement, absorption, reverie, dream. This is because care experience is the matrix in which embodied minds are shaped.”¹⁷

The title of my dissertation, “Dreams of a Therapeutic Planet: (Dis)entangling Narratives of Post-Human Care in Anglo-American Speculative Literature,” thus takes a cue from Fradenburg Joy’s vision of a “therapeutic planet,” wherein, I imagine, post-Human, matrixial trans-subjects care for/in “queer plenitudes” of wild[er]ness.¹⁸ In Fradenburg Joy’s essay “Care of the Wild,” she asks the following question that simultaneously inspires

behavioral autonomy of the human species itself/ourselves.” Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 260. I understand bell hooks’ concept of “homeplace” as a site of radical psychosocial refuge and political resistance. For more information see bell hooks, “Homeplace (a site of resistance),” in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (New York and London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2015); Matrixial refers to Bracha L. Ettinger’s psychoanalytic theory for the foreclosed, under-represented subjectivizing stratum/sphere of the matrix/womb that is overlooked in part due to the over-privileging of oedipal myths in psychoanalytic and humanities approaches to literature. The “matrixial trail” is a kind of transformative quest taken up by subjects in search of foreclosed “wild” (e.g., pre-reified/ordered) modes of being via verbal anamnesis vis-à-vis a caring m/otherly witness. See Bracha L. Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, ed. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2006), 149.

¹⁷ Fradenburg Joy, “Care of the Wild,” 69.

¹⁸ I understand Zakiyyah Iman Jackson’s concept of “queer plenitude” to refer to potential modes of being denied/foreclosed by anti-Black, misogynist, homophobic, biophobic, etc. (i.e., toxic) milieus. I explore this concept in detail in Chapter 2 and 3. For more information see Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiracist World* (New York: New York University Press, 2020).

this project and problematizes (to my mind) postmodern academia's aversion to utopian-inflected speculative thinking, narrative, and aesthetics:

Is there no point in dreaming of a therapeutic planet, in which we might do all we could to support all life forms and their freedoms? Biopower, some will say; but I am speaking of the open-endedness of community, and of the ecological thought that enacts, extends, and protects it, and specifically *not* of yielding to the family or the state or the commodity-makers the authority to give me my *life* or my way of living it, including my way of dying. The value of care is indeed unsettled.¹⁹

Shelley's above lines resonate with Fradenburg Joy's point that vibrant non/human minds require the "freedom of movement" to enter into matrixial homeplaces of queer wildness that are full of "complexes of sensations, affects, desires, and ideas" in order to do one's part in the caring "work of intersubjectivity and the larger ecologies in which intersubjectivity participates."²⁰ Theorizing alongside Shelley, Fradenburg Joy, and other Anglo-American writers of speculative literature and eco-psychoanalytic theory, I work to foreground onto-epistemological and literary practices and methods of care that are able to revitalize the wild potentials of being post-Human embodied minds (i.e., matrixial trans-subjectivities) entangled in inter-human, cross-species, and trans-species kinship networks.²¹

¹⁹ Fradenburg Joy, "Care of the Wild," 68 & 87.

²⁰ Fradenburg Joy, "Care of the Wild," 90.

²¹ The term trans-species is meant to invoke the "overwhelming evidence for continuity and shared capacities across species." Lori Marino, "A Trans-Species Perspective on Nature," *On the Human: A Project of the National Humanities Center* (2010), <https://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/on-the-human/2010/11/trans-species-perspective/>. According to the psychologist and ecologist Gay Bradshaw who coined the term trans-species, "*Trans* re-embeds humans within the larger matrix of the animal kingdom by erasing the 'and' between humans and animals that has been used to demarcate and reinforce the false notion that humans are substantively different cognitively and emotionally from other species."

“Dreams of a Therapeutic Planet” draws on psychoanalytic theory, intersectional gender and sexuality studies, radical Black theorizing, and ecocriticism to investigate how readers are made aware of and feel trans-species, matrixial trans-subjectivity through speculative literature and what creative and ethical practices of care ensue from these aesthetic experiences. I argue that select Romantic-era and contemporary Anglo-American eco-speculative writers analogously construct defamiliarizing, post-Human narratives and models of quotidian practices of care to foreground the planetary-scale significance of the erotic ecologies of diverse human psychosocial lifecycles. I show how the texts in this study move toward the theoretical, aesthetic, and narrative convergence of ecology and psychosexuality as a viable other-worldly site of psychoanalytic care. That is, “Dreams of a Therapeutic Planet” explores how Anglo-American speculative writers focus on scenes of post-Human caregiving between non/human characters to argue that these wildly caring, creaturely m/other figures (dis)entangle the un/conscious thinking and feeling of both adult characters and undeveloped/immature presubjects (i.e., literal and figurative children & newborns) as well as the actual readers who identify with such protagonists. My project proposes that particular articulations of Anglo-American eco-literary speculation explore and enact the revitalization of the wild and matrixial qualities of mind that have been long repressed, denied, and/or foreclosed by the anti-Black, biophobic, and phallogocentric logics, narratives, and aesthetics of “monohumanist Man2,” to invoke Sylvia Wynter’s formulation.²²

Gay Bradshaw, “Trans-species Living. An Interview with Gay Bradshaw,” *Animal Visions* (2010), <https://animalvisions.wordpress.com/2010/09/17/trans-species-living-an-interview-with-gay-bradshaw/>.

²² Sylvia Wynter, “Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species? Or, to Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations,” in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, ed. Katherine McKittrick (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015), 22.

As cultural responses to the Romantic Anthropocene, to use a conceptualization inspired by Kate Rigby's work, I argue that my archive of texts together construct an aesthetic of *wonder*-full wildness for their post-Human, transformational quest narratives that trace the development of presubjects into matrixial trans-subjects.²³ Matrixial trans-subjects are real and imagined non/human entities capable of approaching the unknown in the self and other in a mode of "positive" epistemophilic wonder. Thinking with Alexis Pauline Gumbs and bell hooks, respectively, gives me insight into how these matrixial figures also engage with m/other natures via the related ethical praxis of "revolutionary mothering" within "homeplaces" of interdependency that I identify in these texts as scenes of "developmental entanglements of care."²⁴ I therefore show how these authors speculate about the developmental mechanisms and aesthetic forms behind the cultivation of this post-Human subjectivity that "is always-already full of other beings and ways of being."²⁵ Overall, I show how these Romantic eco-speculative writers imagine the post-Human mind as potentially creatively equipped with and enriched by the intersubjective, cross-species, and trans-species psychological capacities for care/curiosity/concern, dialogic communication, and mutual transformation—psychic modes of approaching the self and

²³ See Kate Rigby, *Reclaiming Romanticism: Towards an Eco-poetics of Decolonization* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020). In general, however, throughout this dissertation I use the term "Anthropocene" in the mode articulated by Anna Tsing, et al.: "Our use of the term 'Anthropocene' does not imagine a homogenous human race. We write in dialogue with those who remind readers of unequal relations among humans, industrial ecologies, and human insignificance in the web of life by writing instead of Capitalocene, Plantationocene, or Chthulucene...Our use of 'Anthropocene' intends to join the conversation—but not to accept the worst uses of the term, from green capitalism to technopositivist hubris." Anna Tsing, Heather Swanson, Elaine Gan, Nils Bubandt, "Introduction: Haunted Landscapes of the Anthropocene," in *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2017), G3.

²⁴ The term "revolutionary mothering" comes from Alexis Pauline Gumbs, China Martens, and Mai'a Williams, *Revolutionary Mothering: Love on the Front Lines* (Oakland: PM Press 2016).

²⁵ Fradenburg Joy, "Care of the Wild," 67.

other that exist in both conscious/cognitive and unconscious dimensions. My argument shows how this matrixial aesthetic of developmental entanglements of care manifests in representations of intersubjective sites, processes, and practices that might be said to effect the green and blue “dreams of a therapeutic planet.”

The structure of the dissertation is divided into three sections that showcase the scaffolding and order of procedure. The Introduction, Chapter 1, and Chapter 2 are grouped under Section I, which is titled “Theoretical Paratexts: Theory as Speculative Narratives.” I intend “paratexts” to indicate “beside” or “alongside,” and thus to suggest the theoretical explanations of these first few chapters function more like a companion to rather than a precondition for understanding the literature included in this archive. Grouping three chapters’ worth of theoretical discussions is meant to emphasize how the careful and comprehensive scaffolding of theories of subjectivity that I offer is not a precondition to the readings or a framework for interpreting the literary texts, but a major accomplishment of speculative narrative co-created through reading them. In other words, the first section gives the theoretical exposition its due as an argument in itself, devised in concert with the literary texts. The chapters that fall under Section II, “Nineteenth-Century Speculative Treatments of Subject (Re)formation,” discuss how, to different degrees of success and failure, a selection of nineteenth-century writers (wittingly or unwittingly) reproduce and/or critically grapple with and subvert misogynist, anti-Black, bio-geo-phobic myths *and* sublime aesthetics that foreclose subjectivities with the epistemophilic ability to wonder at/wander in wildness. The second section focuses on showing how these authors elaborate new “modes of being/knowing/feeling that gesture toward the overturning of Man.”²⁶ Finally, in Section III,

²⁶ Jackson, *Becoming Human*, 4.

“Shelleyan Afterlives: Contemporary Speculative Treatments of Cross-Species

‘Homeplaces,.’” I explore the legacy the novels of Mary Shelley and the poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley have left on the wider cultural landscape of eco-literary speculation and fantasy. I suggest that the post-Human representations of queer, multiethnic, and multispecies kinship networks in N.K. Jemisin’s and Jeff VanderMeer’s novels foreground the matrixial and mentalizing epistemophilic sensibilities that could create the psychological grounds for more salutary environmental politics and a wider, cross-species understanding of social justice. In this third section, I analyze these novels ultimately to explore the question of to what extent adult “therapeutic” experiences of sustained matrixial wit(h)nessing and mentalization, both given and received, can rupture and transform unproductive epistemophilic orientations, attachment styles, and narrative frameworks regarding all types of (dis)entangled love between human groups and across species.

Far beyond the universe of imperial law that grants “master” subjects real and imagined “protection” from the precarities of (dis)entanglement, all of the chapters collectively clear a “homeplace” for wondering to pose the question of whether there could exist a real and imagined “therapeutic planet” of “queer plenitude.” From the vantage of that planetary borderland—the matrixial borderspaces, homeplaces of fugitive/nomadic refuge, and the liminal spaces of wild[er]ness—one can see how our “capacities for self-delusion and amnesia, apathy and numbness, even collusion” with the “certain and the familiar” of “master narratives” are “a kind of exile from which one awakens to return home” and enact the “transformations...needed in thinking, symbolizing, relating, and imagining.”²⁷

Conventionally such borderspaces are both the domain and creation of literature and,

²⁷ Watkins and Shulman, *Toward Psychologies of Liberation*, 28 & 152.

arguably in particular, speculative literature. The fact that speculative fiction intensifies desires to know, to discover, to seek the before-unapprehended via matrixial encounters, or what Watkins and Shulman call “centripetal encounters in liminal space,” is why I see this type of literature as crucial to reformulating the desires and desirability of readers/subjects. I argue that this latent but crucial goal shared across the speculative works I examine in this dissertation indeed succeeds:

The goal of centripetal encounters in liminal space is the critical turn of each subject toward experiences of resymbolization and renarrativization.

Sometimes this can involve mourning past losses and failures, but more often it is about surprising and unexpected images and insights arising spontaneously, a process that leads toward regeneration of life energies. This is less about recollection and more about making creative spaces for new visions, while letting go of rigid formulations that no longer serve.²⁸

(Dis)entangled with care within the pages of my archive of speculative literature is “a hope for an intrapsychic dimension of democracy where the conflicts inherent in pluralism can begin to be encountered, tolerated, and symbolized within the subject.”²⁹

²⁸ Watkins and Shulman, *Toward Psychologies of Liberation*, 150.

²⁹ Watkins and Shulman, *Toward Psychologies of Liberation*, 150.

Section I. Theoretical Paratexts: Theory as Speculative Narratives

Introduction. (Dis)entangling Narratives of Post-Human Care in Romantic Speculative Literature

Toward an Ecological Psychoanalysis: Reimagining Post-Human Kinship Under Late-Capitalism in the Western Global North

Scholars writing at the “posthuman turn” in the fields of literary and cultural studies have long emphasized the need to move beyond the western humanist tradition that defines what it means to be human in distinction from “the animal.” But scholars writing at the “post-Human turn” argue that this formulation of “human” subjectivity is not universal to the human species. Furthermore, post-Human theorists argue that the myth of Man not only obscures the kinship between humans and nonhuman animals—it is also used to homogenize, exploit, and discriminate against people of color, disabled people, women, nonhuman species, and others outside of white male heteronormative structures of desire specific to western countries of the global north.³⁰ Environmental humanities scholars have also taken up ecofeminist critiques of humanism to study the ways that literary and visual art help us understand how the interconnected constructed distinctions between inter-human groups and humans versus animals (and “nature” broadly construed), are at the root of both ecosystem collapse and social and environmental injustice.³¹ However, while posthumanist

³⁰ Cary Wolfe, *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourses of Species, and Posthumanist Theory* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 37. Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiracist World* (New York: New York University Press, 2020).

³¹ Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Rosi Braidotti, “Four Theses on Posthuman Feminism,” in *Anthropocene Feminism*, ed. Richard Grusin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 23.

and environmental humanities thinkers have illuminated the violence that arises from these distinctions, relatively little attention has been given to literature that explores the anti-Black, misogynist, and bio-geo-phobic psychosocial mechanisms (and their associated practices, myths, and aesthetics) that arguably produce these distinctions in the first place.

In “Dreams of a Therapeutic Planet,” I join with other contributors attempting to fill that “psychological” gap in posthumanist environmental approaches to the study of literature. A “green” or ecological psychoanalytic tradition is emerging called “eco-psychoanalysis.” Eco-psychoanalysis is a field born of the growing consensus that psychoanalytic thinking and psychology more broadly cannot continue to ignore the impact of the socioeconomic milieu and the nonhuman environment on the individual psyche and vice versa.³² I join in this consensus while contributing the argument that eco-psychoanalysis would benefit by adding the gendered, queered, and racialized swirl of lifeforms and other “animated objects” within the non/human environment to its list of constructed and significant intrapsychic and intersubjective subjects/objects of study.³³ If individuals indeed construct, perceive, and project onto such subjects/objects as animated in these marked ways, I argue that those objects therefore have an effect on psychic

³² See Joseph Dodds, *Psychoanalysis and Ecology at the Edge of Chaos: Complexity Theory, Deleuze/Guattari and Psychoanalysis for a Climate in Crisis* (New York: Routledge, 2011); Donna M. Orange, *Climate Crisis, Psychoanalysis, and Radical Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

³³ This part of my argument is inspired by Mel Y. Chen’s claim that “Animacy is built on the recognition that abstract concepts, inanimate objects, and things in between can be queered and racialized without human bodies present, quite beyond questions of personification.” Mel Y. Chen, “Toxic Animacies, Inanimate Affections,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 17, no. 2-3 (2011): 265. Relatedly, to better understand the psychosocial material represented in the literature under review in this dissertation, I also use eco-psychoanalytic terms to explore E.O Wilson’s concept of “biophilia,” the human attraction to other lifeforms, and Yi-Fu Tuan’s concept of “topophilia,” which he “define[s] broadly to include all of the human being’s affective ties with the material environment.” Yi-Fu Tuan, “topophilia and environment,” *Topophilia: A study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), 93.

functioning in terms of affective, cognitive, and ethical affordances and limitations, and that this is a “speculative” exploration and enactment of the literature under study in this dissertation. In other words, the eco-literary speculative writers that I explore in this dissertation share an affinity for sketching visionary (and critical) models of the development of a “post-Human” mind that quite radically suggest the structuring potential of multispecies erotic ecologies composed of nonhuman animals, plants, and environments, alongside more common understandings of minds formed out of interpersonal influences. My understanding of the literary representations of the formation of these post-Human minds is energized by Harold F. Searles’ largely neglected study of the developmental role of the nonhuman environment in human psychological experience.³⁴ But I also build upon anthropologist Anna Tsing’s aphorism that “human nature is an interspecies relationship,” in order to discuss how these texts’ representations of the unconscious and conscious dimensions of the post-Human mind break new ground into the strange borderland territories of the ecological future.³⁵ “Dreams of a Therapeutic Planet” thus raises crucial questions about the historical and future impacts of the field of psychoanalysis on cross-species and multispecies meaning and being today by exploring texts that speculate on the possibilities of the transferability of interpersonal human modes of subjectivity, unconscious mentation, and cognition to human/nonhuman relationships and environmentally sound practices.

³⁴ Harold F. Searles, *The Nonhuman Environment: In Normal Development and in Schizophrenia* (Madison: International Universities Press, Inc., 1960).

³⁵ Anna Tsing, “Unruly Edges: Mushrooms as Companion Species,” *Environmental Humanities* 1 (2012): 141.

I suggest that the most innovative contemporary psychoanalytic theory and clinical research can help to illuminate the post-Human eco-psychological terra incognitas of these texts. To do this I consider the as-yet unexplored queer ecofeminist theoretical potential of Christopher Bollas' theory that the unconscious is structured by a maternal "aesthetic of transformation" leading to a lifetime of "transformational-object seeking," which might also be thought of as an "epistemophilic instinct" drawn to specifically styled aesthetic objects.³⁶ In this context, I also explore Bracha L. Ettinger's theory of the "matrixial borderspace" as the original, prenatal unconscious dimension, which is also conceived as a creative and ethical resource that continues to exist throughout life alongside developmentally later phallic psychic organizations.³⁷ I also consider how these "earlier" unconscious dynamics play a foundational and creative role in the important "later" developmental achievement of mentalization. I will return to this concept later, but for the sake of brevity now, mentalization is defined as a form of "imaginative mental activity" that allows for a reflexive, empathetic understanding of the mental states of oneself and others; mentalization is a mode of thinking "in the service of building realistic models of why [self and other] behave, think, and feel as they do."³⁸ I then explore moments in these texts that show how these matrixial and mentalizing capacities are essential for the active and receptive

³⁶ Christopher Bollas, "The Aesthetic Moment and the Search for Transformation," in *Transitional Objects and Potential Spaces: Literary Uses of D.W. Winnicott*, ed. Peter L. Rudnytsky (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 44.

³⁷ Bracha L. Ettinger, "Matrixial Trans-subjectivity," *Theory, Culture, & Society* 23, no. 2-3 (2006): 220.

³⁸ Peter Fonagy and Elizabeth Allison, "What is Mentalization? The Concept and its Foundations in Developmental Research," in *Minding the Child: Mentalization-Based Interventions with Children, Young People and their Families*, eds. Nick Midgley and Ioanna Vrouva (New York: Routledge, 2013), 11; Marc-André Bouchard et al., "Mentalization in Adult Attachment Narratives: Reflective Functioning, Mental States, and Affect Elaboration Compared," *Psychoanalytic Psychology* 25 (2008): 48, quoted in Elisa Galgut, "Reading Minds: Mentalization, Irony, and Literary Engagement," *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 91, no. 4 (2010): 916-917.

perception and cognition characteristic of ecologically-relevant and methodologically interconnected ethical artistic and scientific practices like Ettinger's "metramorphic wit(h)nessing" and E.O. Wilson's biophilic knowing, respectively.

However, I also emphasize that harmful *and* healthful psychosocial mechanisms and practices are themselves as diverse as they are contingent upon historically and geographically specific cultures and kinship networks. In other words, the eco-psychoanalytic questions of intervention and transformation are also questions about whether and how proposed methods of intervention and calls for transformation reflect and/or nurture the values and assumptions of certain communities over others both real and imagined. For example, prior psychoanalytic theorizations implicitly equate "white" with "human," an equation that cannot be presumed in the history of subject formation or of treatment of non-white infants and adults. Additionally, contemporary psychoanalytic attention to prenatal conditions and their ongoing influence on development significantly qualifies any overstatements of the impact of postnatal practices of recognition on subjectivity. The different contexts beyond and within the textual worlds under study in this dissertation contain currently-existing "minoritarian" as well as new utopian models of psychosocial development within post-Human kinship circles that come in forms that are sometimes salutary and other times reactionary and with varying degrees of affective, cognitive, and ethical affordances and limitations.³⁹ In this way, "Dreams of a Therapeutic Planet" also adopts the theoretical stance elaborated by Charlotte Kroløkke et al., in her field-defining anthology *Critical Kinship Studies*:

³⁹ I use the term minoritarian to refer to the sense of the virtual potential of becoming as a strategy of posthuman politics, as theorized by the psychoanalyst Félix Guattari and philosopher Gilles Deleuze in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980).

Reimagining kinship takes different forms: from identity-based claims to reproductive rights and inclusion, to new formations of trans and extended kinship. Reimagining kinship, however, is not reducible to a simple question of how subjects (are forced to) transgress or assimilate into normative models of kinship, nor do we suggest that reimagining is either negative or positive. Rather, we deploy reimagining as a concept for the subjective processes and political movements that aim to change, negotiate, and/or resist the limits and conditions of kinship by reassembling relations, bodies, identities, histories, and materialities. This is, for example, ...when kinship is understood not only as a matter of biology or sociality but becomes contextualized as a web involving other forms of relatedness and nonhuman species.⁴⁰

Therefore, this project builds upon eco-psychoanalytic discourse that seeks to identify loci of individual psychic intervention in the structural links between western European and American subject development in kinship circles in the context of late-capitalism, epistemes of violence, and ecological destruction. This project thinks through these multiple bodies of knowledge to contribute to the development of eco-psychoanalysis as a novel and important humanistic approach that adds to debates about how the cultural/literary artifacts born of the material conditions of the “Anthropocene” reflect and shape minds, natures, and political societies in the western global north.

Romantic Speculative Fantasy: (Dis)entangling British Romantic and American Eco-Literary Speculative Fantasy

⁴⁰ Charlotte Kroløkke, Lene Myong, Stine Willum Adrian, and Tine Tjørnhøj-Thomsen, *Critical Kinship Studies* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, Ltd., 2016), 9-10.

I make a transhistorical and trans-theoretical argument in “Dreams of a Therapeutic Planet” by bringing into dialogue two different periods of eco-literary speculative fantasy. I focus on Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822), while touching on Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley (1797-1851) and William Wordsworth (1770-1850), as distinctive voices within the broader tradition of British Romantic ecological poetics and philosophy of mind. I compare Percy Bysshe Shelley’s specific strain of Romantic eco-literary speculation and fantasy to the twenty-first-century “eco-psychoanalytic” speculative fictions of the contemporary American writers N.K. Jemisin and Jeff VanderMeer. To argue that this new literary genealogy shares what I term an “eco-psychoanalytic poetics,” I focus on how P.B. Shelley’s matrixial, melancholy poetic project, as represented in *Queen Mab* (1815), *Alastor; or, the Spirit of Solitude* (1816), *The Witch of Atlas* (ca. 1820), and *Epipsychidion* (1821), are taken up, updated, and revised by N.K. Jemisin in her *Broken Earth Trilogy* and Jeff VanderMeer in his *Southern Reach Trilogy* (2014) and his novels *Borne* (2017) and *The Strange Bird* (2017). I also briefly discuss the problematic aspects of the ongoing influence of this genealogy, especially as they derive from William Wordsworth’s “Intimations Ode” (ca. 1802-1804) and selections from *The Prelude* (1805/1850), as well as Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) and *The Last Man* (1826). I explore evidence of the more “negative” strains of Romantic speculation and fantasy that live on in H. Rider Haggard’s Victorian novel *She* (1886) and two popular speculative horror films: Pella Kågerman and Hugo Lilja’s *Aniara* (2018) and Ari Aster’s *Midsommar* (2019). I justify this transhistorical pairing on the grounds that the representational techniques developed by this group of writers under the pressure of similar environmental, political, and economic conditions produce “dreams of a therapeutic planet” that are based on reforming our developmental

entanglements of care, an intersubjective and collective process that begins by (dis)entangling narratives of post-Human care from the monocultural, paranoid/manic fantasies of Man2.

“Dreams of a Therapeutic Planet” traces a genealogy of texts from the nineteenth century into the present that explore and enact the Romantic eco-literary speculations and fantasies necessary for their shared era of the Romantic Anthropocene. This dissertation therefore identifies in a selection of contemporary American speculative fictions evidence of an “afterlife” of British Romantic eco-literary thought that aims to reshape human subjectivity through defamiliarizing aesthetic techniques, like representing the “matrixial milieu” that I also describe as processual scenes of “developmental entanglements of care.” In other words, “Dreams of a Therapeutic Planet” frames the writers from these parallel periods as uncanny historical doppelgängers that populate the “Messianic time” of our Romantic Anthropocene era. I consider how the Romantic speculative poetry and fiction spanning these two periods display an analogous aesthetic and ethical focus on the development of the post-Human mind as a way of responding to the traumas they share in common: the social and environmental injustices brought on by “plague,” mob violence rooted in anti-Black racism and anti-science discourses, and industrial destruction of earth others and ecosystems. Comparing these literary periods is key to achieving an important goal of this dissertation: to identify which cultural expressions are doomed to repeat dangerous imperial politics, extractive logics, and other forms of violence that precede the British Romantic period, and which present cultural expressions that productively resurrect unfinished Romantic revolutionary projects well-suited for the Romantic Anthropocene. I am compelled to distinguish between promising and damaging strains of Romantic eco-

literary speculation because of the susceptibility of the British Romantic period to indiscriminate charges of violence. Put another way, such Romantic eco-speculative “afterlives” take the form of reformatory, emancipatory, and critical literary representations of the psychosocial mechanisms and practices that produce the hegemonic figure of the “Man2” by violently effacing knowledge of *Homo sapiens*’ deep interdependencies with myriad non/human lifeforms.

Defining Speculative Fiction, Science Fiction, and Fantasy as Romantic

I define all of the literature under study in this dissertation as “speculative” literature, broadly understood through Rjurik Davidson’s definition of “speculative fiction” as “an umbrella term for science fiction, fantasy, horror, and other non-realist forms...[that] investigat[e] a world that is ‘other’ to our own, a world which is in some way changed or altered” in a way that asks the reader to critically reflect on the conditions of their own society.⁴¹ All of the texts under study in this dissertation also contain elements from the related genres of science fiction and fantasy. However, debates about the definitions and distinctions between science fiction, fantasy, and speculative fiction fill entire libraries and I want to acknowledge at the outset that genre rules are always violated to some degree and that there are no universally agreed upon definitions of science fiction, speculative fiction, horror, or fantasy. For example, some scholars have suggested that soft and hard science fiction are defined with respect to their scientific counterparts. Whereas hard science fiction texts draw primarily from the “hard sciences” (e.g., physics, chemistry, engineering, etc.) to imagine future technological developments, soft science fiction texts draw from the “soft sciences” (e.g., psychoanalysis, sociology, ecology, psychology, anthropology, etc.) to

⁴¹ Rjurik Davidson, “Writing Against Reality,” *Overland* 188 (2007): 38.

supposedly develop themes on the relations between the individual mind and social and nonhuman environments. While I remain skeptical about the validity of this binary, the speculative texts in this archive generally fall under at least one of these two definitions of science fiction.

In his book *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1979), Darko Suvin argues that science fiction should be thought of as the art of cognitive estrangement, a genre deft at crafting an aesthetic of defamiliarization put to the test of contemporary scientific logic, to transport us to other worlds and rupture the status quo. Suvin elaborates that what causes the genre's production of a sense of estrangement in readers is what he defines as the "novum," or "the fictional device, artefact or premise that focuses the difference between the world the reader inhabits and the fictional world of the SF text."⁴² For Suvin, successful science fiction balances the sense of estrangement provoked by the radical alterity represented by the novum, like, for example, when depicting a new form of sexuality, with a "degree of familiar sameness" so that "by imagining strange worlds we come to see our own conditions of life in a new and potentially revolutionary perspective."⁴³ Suvin also describes the "aliens—utopians, monsters, or simply differing strangers"—that populate the worlds of the science fiction genre as metamorphosing mirrors: These creatures are the "mirror to man just as the differing country is a mirror for his world. But the mirror is not only a reflecting one, it is also a transforming one, virgin womb and alchemical dynamo: the mirror is a crucible."⁴⁴ He adds to this definition of mirror as crucible that "this genre has

⁴² Adam Roberts, *The History of Science Fiction* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 1.

⁴³ Roberts, *The History of Science Fiction*, 1.

⁴⁴ Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*, Ed. Gerry Canavan (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2016), 5.

always been wedded to a hope of finding in the unknown the ideal environment, tribe, state, intelligence, or other aspect of the Supreme Good (or to a fear of and revulsion from its contrary). At all events, the possibility of other strange, covariant coordinate systems and semantic fields is assumed.”⁴⁵ In other words, one might say that science fiction dares to think the utopian as a way to avoid dystopian realities (however naïve that goal). And furthermore, science fictional texts do not aspire *only* to reflect a hoped-for possible reality in a prescriptive blueprint that applies and extends current scientific logic. Such texts are also often a form of fantasy, in the sense of “somebody’s interest in a better world,” or somebody’s interest in preventing a worse world and averting the conditions that give rise to worlds “built on a fault line of pain, held up by nightmares...built doomed in the first place.”⁴⁶

All of the Romantic speculative fantasies that comprise this dissertation’s archive are unified by their interest in a better world, or what Suvin calls a “revolutionary anticipation” that “focuse[s] on prophetic visions of immediately attainable human possibilities” that are imagined as manifesting in an “alternative time...situated in an anticipated future.”⁴⁷ Suvin suggests that many of the Romantic utopias and dystopias (1770-1820) are united with modern science fictions in depicting the creative impulses of the socially oppressed who in the midst of their discontent employ the aesthetic of defamiliarization, tempered by a reality principle/scientific logic, in an attempt to undergo a never-ending program of social improvement through the excavation of existential “wild” possibilities latent in individual

⁴⁵ Suvin, *Metamorphoses*, 5.

⁴⁶ Darieck Scott, “Introduction: Fantastic Bullets,” *Keeping It Unreal: Black Queer Fantasy and Superhero Comics* (New York: New York University Press, 2022), 10 and N. K Jemisin, *The Stone Sky, The Broken Earth: Book Three* (New York: Orbit Books, 2017), 7.

⁴⁷ Suvin, *Metamorphoses*, 137.

psychology, society, and “nature” or “wilderness.” As Margaret Atwood puts it, creatures like “dragons and manticores” and “backgrounds that contain volcanoes or atomic clouds, or plants with tentacles, or landscapes reminiscent of Hieronymous Bosch” as well as some “actual science” show up across the speculative fantasies of poetry, fiction, and film under study in this archive.⁴⁸

Indeed, Atwood has suggested that speculative fiction also reorients our present by articulating and envisioning possible utopian and dystopian futures.⁴⁹ In identifying the genre of her own works, she restricts her utopian and dystopian inflected speculative fiction to texts that have “no Martian[s]” but rather contain elements and events that “really could happen.”⁵⁰ In other words, Atwood uses the term “speculative fiction” rather than “science fiction” because her fiction explores things that really could happen whereas science fiction explores “things that could not possibly happen.”⁵¹ To further complicate genre matters, texts that might fall under Atwood’s rendering of science fiction Ursula K. Le Guin would likely refer to as “fantasy.”⁵² However, in “From Elfland to Poughkeepsie” Le Guin formulates fantasy in the following psychological terms:

[I]ts affinity is not with daydream, but with dream. It is a different approach to reality, an alternative technique for apprehending and coping with existence. It is not antirational, but pararational; not realistic, but surrealistic, superrealistic, a heightening of reality. In Freud’s terminology, it employs

⁴⁸ Margaret Atwood, “Introduction,” *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination* (New York: Anchor Books, 2012), 2.

⁴⁹ Margaret Atwood, “Margaret Atwood: the road to Utopia,” *The Guardian* (2011), <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/oct/14/margaret-atwood-road-to-utopia>.

⁵⁰ Atwood, “Introduction,” 6-7.

⁵¹ Atwood, “Introduction,” 7.

⁵² Atwood, “Introduction,” 7.

primary, not secondary process thinking. Dragons are more dangerous, and a good deal commoner, than bears. Fantasy is nearer to poetry, mysticism, and insanity than naturalistic fiction is. It is a real wilderness, and those who go there should not feel too safe. And their guides, the writers of fantasy, should take their responsibilities seriously.⁵³

Le Guin's insights into the psychological functions of fantasy playfully emphasize the exhilarating yet risky nature of the genre.

At the same time, Le Guin's above formulation has much in common with the perspective on fantasy held by Darieck Scott, theorist and novelist of Black speculative fictions. Writing expressly out of a Black Radical Tradition, Scott studies the positive potential of "artistic works...bound to fantasies in our minds—what we might call psychic fantasy or psychological fantasy."⁵⁴ In particular, Scott theorizes "how fantasies of Black power and triumph fashion theoretical, political, and aesthetic challenges to—and respite from—white supremacy and antiblackness."⁵⁵ He also claims that "Artistic works are the products of psychic fantasies of the artist, distributed and shared, entered into and contributed to, and in immeasurable, countless ways changed by, the audiences of the works. These works stimulate, influence, shape all the various individual minds and psyches that encounter them."⁵⁶ Judith Butler's understanding of fantasy brings all of these definitions together in a compelling way:

⁵³ Ursula K. Le Guin, *From Elfland to Poughkeepsie* (Portland, Oregon: Pendragon Press, 1973), 145.

⁵⁴ Scott, "Introduction," 9.

⁵⁵ Scott, "Introduction," 2.

⁵⁶ Scott, "Introduction," 9.

Fantasy is not the opposite of reality; it is what reality forecloses, and, as a result, it defines the limits of reality, constituting it as its constitutive outside. The critical promise of fantasy, when and where it exists, is to challenge the contingent limits of what will and will not be called reality. Fantasy is what allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise; it establishes the possible in excess of the real; it points elsewhere, and when it is embodied, it brings the elsewhere home.⁵⁷

I consider all of the texts under study within this archive as speculative fantasies that desire and theorize possible other embodiments and inhabitable worlds, both the previously unthought and those that are foreclosed. To do so, these writers of speculative fantasy invent new, defamiliarizing onto-epistemological paradigms based in post-Human, matrixial trans-subjectivity that destructure and rebuild the toxic thinking patterns of the characters and readers of their story worlds.

A major focus of this dissertation therefore is to look at how the texts in this archive create a defamiliarizing effect by strangely combining the aesthetic/epistemophilic mode of wonder with melancholic states of mind. These speculative writers do this in order to represent presubjective characters undergoing stages of metamorphosis as they engage with m/other natures who they perceive as overwhelming and new sources/forces of before-unapprehended knowledge. These m/other natures function as metaphorical “matrixial resonance chambers,” and as such, take the literary forms of caves and engulfing landscapes, etc. But such “matrixial resonance chambers” are also figured as the overwhelming

⁵⁷ Judith Butler, “Beside Oneself: On the Limits of Sexual Autonomy,” *Feminist Theory: A Reader*, 3rd ed., eds. Wendy K. Kolmar & Frances Bartkowski (New York: McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc., 2010), 552.

attractive pull of the oceanic eye of the matrixial trans-subject it/herself—the way the matrixial gaze fragilizes the presubject’s world until s/they/he fall through the cracks into a whole new world/sphere/enveloping, matrixial homeplace, so to speak. In other words, these texts strategically place characters in scenes of “developmental entanglements of care” meant to affect readers by shaking them from their complacency in habituated narratives of patriarchal “mothering” and human development in the western global north. I argue that these authors defamiliarize readers by foregrounding in their texts the aesthetics, ethics, and onto-epistemologies of the unnoticed matrixial sphere. They highlight the matrixial potential of human life because they take issue with the fact that too many cultures across the globe share intersubjective relational styles and practices with major psychological and ecological implications that are specifically rooted in traditions of anthropocentrism, racism, xenophobia, misogyny, and imperial conquest. “Dreams of a Therapeutic Planet” focuses on Anglo-American speculative writers’ representations of how diverse kinds of Romantic Anthropocene minds begin with “mothering carework” at the local level of the domestic sphere/matrixial homeplace experienced as embeddedness in developmental entanglements of care.

Defining British Romantic Eco-Literary Speculation: Goals and Limitations

To define the goals and limits of the British Romantic eco-literary speculation under review in this dissertation, my argument takes as a point of departure ecocritic Timothy Gilmore’s claim that P.B. Shelley’s critique of William Wordsworth foregrounded “the wild” and “wilderness” rather than “nature” as a start toward at once recognizing the alterity of the ecological environment and proposing/modelling less exceptionalist interactions with

it.⁵⁸ I suggest that Wordsworth's sublime shares a very different "afterlife" from Shelley's "care of the wild," the former concept having more in common with modern narratives of manic control and technological transcendence and the latter having more in common with queer ecofeminist, Black studies, and postcolonial inquiries into collaborations between posthumans, nonhumans, and environments. Furthermore, I claim that the Shelleys are especially concerned with the psychological "care of the wild" and that they are appropriately characterized as speculative fantasy writers because they use psychological discourse broadly understood in a way that resonates with psychoanalytic discourse to construct defamiliarizing novums that "alienate taken-for-granted features of our social life, which then are perceived, in the ideal case, as contingencies that may be open to historical praxis."⁵⁹ Therefore I characterize both Percy and Mary Shelley as speculative fiction writers given their interests in "speculation" and "fantasy" in the above senses of the terms. In light of Mary Shelley's famous claim that *The Witch of Atlas* contained "no human interest," I further suggest that his work is less immediately concerned about representing dystopian settings and is instead primarily focused on speculating about, and bringing-forth into reality, other, more humane and fulfilling ways of becoming and being human distinct from those practiced by the figure of "universal" Man—the mythological hero of the western global north.⁶⁰ In the sense of "bringing-forth" post-Human realities, surely Shelley

⁵⁸ Timothy Brendan Gilmore, "Biophobia: Anxiety, Wildness, and the Horror of Nature," in *University of California, Santa Barbara ProQuest Dissertations Publishing* (2013), <https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/biophobia-anxiety-wildness-horror-nature/docview/1468678523/se-2>.

⁵⁹ Gavin Miller, *Science Fiction and Psychology* (Liverpool University Press, 2020), 30.

⁶⁰ Percy Bysshe Shelley, Dedication "To Mary" in *The Witch of Atlas*, in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose: A Norton Critical Edition* 2nd ed., eds. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company: 2002), 367. All references to Shelley in this dissertation are to this anthology unless otherwise noted.

is most remembered for his claim that the poetic persona unifies the roles of “legislators” and “prophets” because the poet “not only beholds intensely the present as it is, and discovers those laws according to which present things ought to be ordered, but he beholds the future in the present, and his thoughts are the germs of the flower and the fruit of the latest time.”⁶¹ It is in this sense that I claim P.B. Shelley’s work is just as speculative as Mary Shelley’s “ur-texts” of apocalyptic science fiction.

In “Dreams of a Therapeutic Planet” not only does my argument draw connections between P.B. Shelley’s eco-literary speculative thought and American speculative fiction, but I also take up Joel Faflak’s claim that Romantic poetry invents psychoanalysis via its self-reflexive “concern with the trauma of self-identity.”⁶² In this way, I use contemporary psychoanalytic theory to re-read the Romantic past in an effort to identify the philosophies and aesthetics of “revolutionary mothering” within “developmental entanglements of care” that gave rise to the psychoanalytic imaginary in the first place. The goal here is not to reduce psychoanalytic discourse to Romantic ideology or vice versa, but rather in part to show that past and present forms of “Romantic psychoanalysis” are rooted in past and present unacknowledged, minoritarian matrixial and Black mater(nal) imaginaries. As the British Romantic scholars Paul Youngquist and Frances Botkin put the issue, “The whiteness of Romantic studies is a symptom of amnesia. It bespeaks a massive act of forgetting on the part of contemporary scholarship, an institutional disavowal of the economic conditions [and creative maternal practices in the domestic sphere] that help make

⁶¹ Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*, 513.

⁶² Joel Faflak, *Romantic Psychoanalysis: The Burden of the Mystery* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 5.

cultural production during the Romantic Era possible.”⁶³ For example, according to Alexine Pauline Gumbs it was the forced “labor of mothering through which slavery was reproduced” or “the exploited labor of racialized mothers both in the homes, kitchens, hotel laundry rooms of the privileged” that I am arguing provided the imaginary and concrete materials for the conditions wherein “Romantic psychoanalysis” could emerge.⁶⁴ In making this point I am also attempting to relate it to Anne Mellor’s critique of “masculine Romanticism” as an archive of poets that appropriate the resources of the “feminine” for their creative purposes. According to Mellor, such poets “often subtly regender both the subject and the object as male [and white] and in the process erase the female from discourse.”⁶⁵ In displacing the feminine, I argue these poets also erase the labor of mothering as developmental entanglements of care and in so doing delay the enactment of the dream of a therapeutic planet.

Thus, I also show how Romantic eco-literary speculation deeply resonates with what queer Black feminist Alexis Pauline Gumbs describes as a radical form of mothering that also provides a revolutionary pedagogical/salutary educational function:

We are looking at mothering as an investment in the future that requires a person to change the status quo of their own lives, of their community and of the society as a whole again and again in the practice of affirming growing, unpredictable people who deserve a world that is better than what we can imagine.⁶⁶

⁶³ Paul Youngquist and Frances Botkin, “Introduction: Black Romanticism: Romantic Circulations,” in *Romantic Circles*, <https://romantic-circles.org/praxis/circulations/HTML/praxis.2011.youngquist.html>.

⁶⁴ Alexis Pauline Gumbs, “‘We Can Learn To Mother Ourselves’: *The Queer Survival of Black Feminism*” (Dissertation, Duke University, 2010), 54. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/10161/2398>.

⁶⁵ Anne K. Mellor, *Romanticism & Gender* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 19.

⁶⁶ Gumbs, Martens, and Williams, *Revolutionary Mothering*, 115.

The Romantic eco-literary speculations and fantasies within these texts, as themselves one form of the many transformational maternal milieus they purport to describe, are arguably meant to promote a more epistemophilic, ecological-community attuned post-Human matrixial trans-subjectivity for a better, more “queer” future outside of “a capitalist system that turns difference into profit through violence.”⁶⁷ This project is therefore invested in the cultural critic José Esteban Muñoz’s use of the term queer to signify the ethical imperative of “educated hope” that “we must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds.”⁶⁸ It is in Muñoz’s sense of queerness as utopia that I argue that the distinct yet analogous nineteenth-century British Romantic and contemporary American eco-literary speculations, represented in this dissertation’s archive of texts, imagine scenes of “queer mothering,” where in Gumbs’ terms “mothering is a queer practice of transforming the world through our desire for each other and another way to be.”⁶⁹ I show how these texts’ eco-speculations and fantasies represent the sociological theories and aesthetic forms of the experience of the dialectical/developmental interface between the metaphoric and concrete “matrixial milieu” and the figure of the presubject (typically represented as an infant/child-like figure, but not always). I show that the different versions of the subversive subjectivity produced at this intersubjective interface in the literary and psychoanalytic texts under study here share affinities with those explored in Gumbs’ concept of revolutionary mothering. The developmental entanglements of care explored in the chapter on N.K. Jemisin’s *Broken Earth Trilogy* especially resonate with

⁶⁷ Gumbs, “*We Can Learn To Mother Ourselves*,” 51.

⁶⁸ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2009), 1-3.

⁶⁹ Gumbs, Martens, and Williams, *Revolutionary Mothering*, 116.

Gumbs' elaboration of and contribution to the long historical tradition in Black feminist writing of theorizing the interhuman and cross-species political significance of "revolutionary mothering." Gumbs argues that revolutionary mothering is always already subversively modeled and creatively practiced by gestational and "other-than-gestational mothers" within queer families of diverse colors and kinds.⁷⁰ As Gumbs demonstrates, such wild, revolutionary m/others who can teach us how to evolve include nonhuman individuals from *at least* "every major mammalian taxon."⁷¹ Diverse caregivers who model mindfulness about the mental states of the presubjects with whom they are entangled can improve our sense of attachment and reflective capacities as well as promote our transformation.⁷² But such matrixial m/other natures also need our recognizing care to preserve their wild modes of being.

In the same way that the British Romantic texts under study in this project focus on the ecologies of the early emotional environment, the selected contemporary speculative fictions also deploy the very old analytic unit of the "myth of the family" to imagine how gendered, racialized, sexualized, and species-differentiated being has emerged from a history that is bound up with social and ecological violence and depletion, and how subjectivity might emerge differently through alternative kinship practices of revolutionary mothering. I argue that psychoanalytic-oriented utopian models of post-Human development throughout the lifespan in Romantic literature and speculative fictions have an important

⁷⁰ Gumbs, Martens, and Williams, *Revolutionary Mothering*, 115-116; "And the so-called interpersonal is as political as the interspecies." Gumbs, *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals* (Chico and Edinburgh: AK Press, 2020), 162.

⁷¹ Gumbs, *Undrowned*, 162.

⁷² Marc-André Bouchard, Mary Target, Serge Lecours, Peter Fonagy, Louis-Martin Tremblay, Abigail Schachter, and Helen Stein, "Mentalization in Adult Attachment Narratives: Reflective Functioning, Mental States, and Affect Elaboration Compared," *Psychoanalytic Psychology* 25 (2008), 48-49.

role to play in the articulation of social interdependence in queer, multi-cultural, multispecies kinship networks—that a careful, visionary attention to the models of identity formation in Anglo-American literatures of eco-speculative fantasy is in the service of social justice and key to any truly salutary green politics.

Representing Positive Epistemophilia in “Life Stories” and Negative Epistemophilia in Narratives that “Kill” via the Aesthetics of Wonder and the Sublime

The final important context that I explore in “Dreams of a Therapeutic Planet” is the theoretical function of the epistemophilic impulse in the formation of matrixial trans-subjectivity. I argue that the texts in this project are unified by their analogous theorizations of a fundamental “positive” “epistemophilic impulse” or capacity for wonder—a biophilic love for and curiosity about the uncontainable wildness of the vitality of m/other natures, where “m/other natures” encompass the virtual and actual materials, spirits, and lifeforms that populate the world that exceed the dominant grammars of Eurocentric human being. Such an epistemophilic impulse manifests in the quotidian practices of care embedded in the erotic ecologies of early emotional life in infant and childhood development. I read these literary representations of nurturing moments of care work as well as horrifying and destructive webs of kinship and family relations as productive sites at which to identify and resist structural conditions of misogynist, speciesist, ableist, and racialized physical and psychological harm as well as to reimagine the dynamics of difference as vulnerable, interdependent coexistence across scales—environmental, psychic, local and global.⁷³ The

⁷³ This project is inspired by and aims to build upon Julie Carlson’s important point that Mary Shelley’s novels are absorbed with portraying the “almost always incestuous, usually necrophilic and, in the early days, homoerotic” “perversity of family relations.” I also highlight P.B. Shelley’s related exploration of how these horrific instances of interdependence are contingent upon toxic patriarchal kinship and give rise to a “homicidal and suicidal” type of “family feeling” that “often produce the melancholic going-it-alone that [Mary] Shelley calls life.” However, the other main objective of my

purpose of this is to foreground the subject's *potentially* positive *and* certainly damaging early experiences of embeddedness in a non/human aesthetics of care—experiences with major consequences for the later development or impairment of a social and environmental method of ethically approaching our desire to *know* the “other” throughout the adult life cycle. Ultimately, I explore how Romantic eco-literary speculation and fantasy imagine negative and positive forms of epistemophilia framed in terms of the aesthetics of the sublime and wonder, respectively. More specifically, I explore how positive epistemophilia and the aesthetics of wonder show up in texts organized around matrixial quest narratives of self-other metamorphosis—what Ursula K. Le Guin calls “life stories.”⁷⁴ In contrast, negative epistemophilia is associated with the sublime and the “killer stories” familiar from “oedipal” narratives.⁷⁵

In other words, this project positions the negative forms of epistemophilia represented in these texts within a long tradition concerned with deconstructing western scientific and technological development as culminating in what Donna Haraway terms the “informatics of domination,” a rapidly globalizing techno-imperialist white-supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy.⁷⁶ Evelyn Fox Keller argues that this phenomenon stems from the modern mythos of the nature-dominating, “penetrating” power of disembodied, autonomous reason and the heteropatriarchal family conditions that make such a widely cathected belief

project is concerned with investigating the more hopeful and queer models of subjectivity and post-Human kinship relations envisioned in the Shelleys' texts, but models that also emphasize the importance of melancholy and (dis)entanglement. Julie Ann Carlson, *England's First Family of Writers: Mary Wollstonecraft, William Godwin, Mary Shelley* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 93.

⁷⁴ Le Guin, “The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction,” in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, eds. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1996), 152.

⁷⁵ Le Guin, “The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction,” 152.

⁷⁶ Donna Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto,” in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Woman: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

possible.⁷⁷ In contrast to the idealization of this toxic-masculinist, instrumental form of reason, on one level, these texts represent how the capacity for ecological thinking and the ethical “ability to receive and demonstrate care” are mutually dependent; cognitive analytic capacities and emotional sensitivity are imagined as symbiotic psychological faculties.⁷⁸ On another level, these texts show how both of these “developmental achievements” are inextricably linked to the subject’s embodiment and embeddedness in (dis)entangled webs of kinship and family that are reimagined beyond the exclusions wrought by naturalized illusions of human exceptionalism, white supremacy, and heteronormativity.⁷⁹

In sum, “Dreams of a Therapeutic Planet: (Dis)entangling Post-Human Narratives of Care in Anglo-American Speculative Fiction” explores how the literary “arts ‘care’ in part by changing (embodied) minds.”⁸⁰ I suggest that this literary archive can be understood as culturally intervening in the reproduction of some traumatized subject formations and their resulting styles of (non)care in the context of the Romantic Anthropocene, an era now marked by the rise of a novel virus that has heightened the damaging and traumatic symptoms of late-capitalism: systemic racism, gender inequality, and environmental collapse. Inspired by Ettinger’s aesthetic theory for the visual arts of the dynamic of “co-poietic wit(h)nessing” at work between the viewer and painting, I explore how these texts often perform analogous forms of care for readers. I explore how these texts perform forms of care for readers by representing the minds of presubjects in the process of forming during

⁷⁷ Evelyn Fox Keller, *Reflections on Gender and Science* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985), 70-72.

⁷⁸ Elisa Galgut, “Reading Minds: Mentalization, Irony, and Literary Engagement,” *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 91, no. 4 (2010): 919.

⁷⁹ Wendy Hollway, *The Capacity to Care: Gender and Ethical Subjectivity* (London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2006); Damien W. Riggs and Elizabeth Peel, *Critical Kinship Studies: An Introduction to the Field* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

⁸⁰ Fradenburg Joy, “Care of the Wild,” 72.

infancy, childhood, and throughout adulthood via participation in interspecies and interpersonal caring relationships. I make a case that psychoanalytic concepts from the object relations discourses of care and attachment, such as the maternal function, the transformational object, the matrixial borderspace, and mentalization, help illuminate the potential psychological and eco-ethical benefits of reading the kind of literature under review in this study.⁸¹ While this may ultimately be an exciting empirical question, I suggest that imagining maternal function “holding,” borderlinking, transformational object influence, and mentalization experience between characters (and the narrator and implied listener) may extend to the text/reader interface to have as-yet unmeasured “therapeutic” effects in terms of ethical methods of knowing and perceiving others across differences of species, race/ethnicity, nation, gender/sexuality, and embodied neurological diversity.

This kind of dialogical poetry and prose found both in the selections of British Romantic eco-literary speculation and contemporary American speculative fiction, that both protests social ills and enacts an intimate intersubjective encounter in words and affect, can connect the reader to different minds in such a way that jars them awake to newfound universal kinships. Accordingly, this project follows the lead of Bollas to explore this archive for transformative “moment[s] when reader and text are arrested from the movement of their independent thematic, when the reader is captured by and held within a moment of wonder, reverie, or rapport with the text.”⁸² In other words, I look for moments in this archive of developmental entanglements of care when this literary “holding” of the reader’s

⁸¹ I will review these concepts in more detail below. In the order the terms appear above, they belong to Donald Winnicott, Christopher Bollas, Bracha L. Ettinger, and the mentalization school of psychoanalysis.

⁸² Bollas, “The Aesthetic Moment,” 47.

mind can be said to occur via the imaginative embodiment of a narrator or a character experiencing transformational “care” by the matrixial gaze. I argue that there is evidence to suggest that the effect of vicariously “witnessing” such eco-psychological holding is the facilitation of the formation of something like an “extended ecological imagination” endowed with the capacity for “becoming-with”—a capacity that allows for the possibility of new forms of contagious post-Human matrixial trans-subjectivity and multispecies community to emerge.⁸³ The poetry and prose in this archive modestly strives to reflexively reform problematic and/or painful states of mind held by the reader while also promoting a surprising sense of non/human community and a modicum of inspiration to keep enduring for positive change.⁸⁴ Ultimately, this project shows how Romantic eco-literary speculation, and its aesthetic of developmental entanglements of care, has historically played promising and problematic discursive roles in the literary articulation of the material, creative (artistic/scientific), and ethical practices of interdependence in environmentally-embedded queer, multiethnic, multispecies kinship networks, and continues to do so in the ecological imaginaries of contemporary American speculative fiction and film.

Chapter Descriptions

There are roughly two main analytic “grammars” around which the chapters of this dissertation are organized. On the one hand, this project aims to identify representations of the environmental anthropologist Anna Tsing’s aphorism that “human nature is an interspecies relationship” and that as such different varieties of multispecies “revolutionary

⁸³ Kate Wright, “‘Becoming-With’: Living Lexicon for the Environmental Humanities,” *Environmental Humanities* 5 (2014): 277-281.

⁸⁴ The writers themselves might be understood as also trying to use the creative outlet of the novel or poem to help digest various kinds of trauma and reform their own problematic states of mind.

mothering” have always already existed in taken-for-granted minoritarian and mainstream kinds of kinship circles. On the other hand, my dissertation argues that these moments of revolutionary mothering include a set of performative fantasies and practices that if appropriately credited, self-consciously emulated, and more widely adopted may have salutary benefits. In other words, I investigate literary calls for new, salutary forms of revolutionary mothering that specifically resonate with what Fradenburg Joy calls the “care of the wild” and Rachel Adams calls “care beyond the human” and “the art of interspecies care.”⁸⁵ My dissertation therefore is structured by representations of utopian and dystopian sites of developmental entanglements of care that foreground the production and the existential enjoyment/suffering of inhabiting in body a post-Human mind (dis)entangled from/within maternal, “matrixial resonance chambers.”

The chapters are roughly divided between the interplay between how depictions of nature represent first subject (re)formation in human species and then cross-species and trans-species homeplaces in speculative fantasies spanning from the nineteenth century into the present. In the first two literary-analysis chapters that focus on literary representations of the human, then, my argument concerns the interconnection between masculinist and sublime approaches to nature, and their distinct and different occlusions of “knowing” feminine/matrixial and non-white being. The other several chapters arrive at the end of this focus on “sedimented” human identities as mediated through sublime aesthetics, and its narrative and epistemophilic logic of domination. In most of the chapters I turn to treatments of alternative formations of un-binarized, fluid subjectivities in aesthetic modes of wildness and wonder (whether male/female; white/Black; human/animal; human/plant-vegetation)

⁸⁵ Rachel Adams, “The Art of Interspecies Care,” *New Literary History* 51, no. 4 (2020): 695-716.

that follow a “nomadic” or matrixial narrative trail to unfamiliar homeplaces to witness and engage in the transformational processes of mourning and radical intimate knowing, or, following Ettinger, what I name metramorphic melancholia and matrixial epistemophilic love.

Chapter 1 focuses on the “method” of “wild” analysis before sketching a brief genealogy of the major psychoanalytic theorists I will be thinking with in terms of their variations on theories of how the concept of the “epistemophilic impulse” relates to melancholy processes of ambivalent loss under the socialization processes instituted by “monohumanist Man2,” in Sylvia Wynter’s formulation. The aim of this brief overview is to give a sense of the conditions of emergence for contemporary psychoanalytic formulations of the epistemophilic impulse that gives rise to the earliest stages of the development of thought and the drive for knowledge in the pre-subject. Particularly important are the mentalizing and matrixial theories of self-other relations that investigate and perhaps enact real and imaginary sensory, affective, and cognitive faculties that desire to “know” the other in ways potentially more anti-anti-Black and post-Man2. Matrixial theory is key for the “wild” analysis of the texts under study in this project because of its adoption of a melancholic/mourning aesthetic praxis of wondering at/wandering in wild[er]ness—as opposed to masculinist, anti-Black aesthetics and philosophies of the sublime that attempt to permanently deny and avoid alterity/reality. Ultimately, I suggest that the speculative literature in this archive functions as a later container and source of, as well as resource for, mentalization and matrixial trans-subjectivity.

Chapter 2 sets up the overarching theoretical framework for the dissertation. This framework associates the internalization of matrixial identifications as enabling creative,

interminable, and productive melancholia and mourning. I also suggest that this matrixial trans-subjective “quest” to reflect on the past and meet the new with strategies of caring wit(h)nessing or “hospitality,” so to speak, is influenced by the aesthetic paradigm of wondering at/wandering in wildness as opposed to the symbolic of the sublime. This framework is rooted in the hope that a dialogue between Romanticism studies, psychoanalysis, Black radical theorizing, and ecocritical aesthetic theory will illuminate how the “nomadic” or “wild” desire to know the m/other—as a form of matrixial, creative self-dissolution and/or “holding”—relates across different speculative representations, investigations, and enactments of the positive (non-dominating) expressions of the epistemophilic impulse.

To address how, or in what respects, psychoanalytic thinking aids in explicating or space-opening for non-white subjectivities, Chapter 2 also introduces Zakiyyah Iman Jackson’s argument that imperial, master subjects’ faculties and sensorium are socially conditioned by anti-Black binary logics into particularly violent epistemic styles and modes based on the aesthetics of sublime domination. Jackson suggests that the “black *mater*(nal)” is the structuring constellation of signification that names what the “human” forecloses. In other words, Jackson argues that the being foreclosed to “human” belonging is expressed in the terms of a “black feminine sublime,” and is mobilized by an antiblack imagination (constitutive of the “human”) whenever the human needs to be stabilized, shored up, and/or “protected” from difference.⁸⁶ While the above terms call to mind a Lacanian concern with the symbolic, Jackson emphasizes that her primary contribution to the “studies of the *longue*

⁸⁶ Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World* (New York: New York University Press, 2020); Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, “‘Theorizing in a Void’: Sublimity, Matter, and Physics in Black Feminist Poetics,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 117, no. 3 (2018): 617-648.

durée of antiblackness and the ‘afterlife of slavery’” is in providing a materialist theory of the “autopoiesis of racialization.”⁸⁷ My aim is to combine Jackson’s materialist account with psychoanalytic accounts, the latter of which have been historically blind to Black and other subordinated subjectivities but also methodologically important for foregrounding how psyche and socius interact.⁸⁸

Overall, Chapter 2 stakes the overarching claim of the bulk of the chapters of the dissertation collectively; namely, that in different degrees of success, Bracha L. Ettinger, N.K. Jemisin, P.B. Shelley, Mary Shelley, Jeff VanderMeer, and William Wordsworth’s distinct artistic and speculative approaches to the connections between mind and wild natures all grapple with the problematic ways that misogynist, anti-Black, bio-geo-phobic myths and sublime aesthetics foreclose matrixial epistemophilia, which is in part the capacity to wonder at/wander in wildness. These authors promote a vision of being human based on the embodied mind freely developing by following improvisational, virtual lines of flight to unknown, fantastic destinations of “queer plenitude,” to borrow one of Jackson’s phrases. The strengths and weaknesses of these different writers’ post-Human and anti-anti-Black treatments of femininity, sexuality, and nature expose the potentialities of epistemophilic wonder and/in matrixial borderlinkages.

In Chapter 3, I extend Jackson’s critique of discourses of the sublime in western philosophy and aesthetics to what Keats famously but reductively referred to as the

⁸⁷ Jackson, *Becoming Human*, 5.

⁸⁸ For an analysis of the colonial history of psychoanalysis see Ranjana Khanna, *Dark Continents: Psychoanalysis and Colonialism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003). And for an account of psychoanalysis as a tool both historically flawed and useful, see Badia Sahar Ahad, *Freud Upside Down: African American Literature and Psychoanalytic Culture* (Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 5.

“wordsworthian or egotistical sublime; which is a thing per se and stands alone.”⁸⁹ To do so, first I explore monohumanist Man’s treatments of wild nature(s), sublimity, matrixial femininity, and queer plenitude by William Wordsworth in his “Intimations Ode” (ca. 1802-1804) and *The Prelude* (1805/1850) and P.B. Shelley in *Alastor* (ca. 1815). In these analyses I foreground a) why these treatments are inadequate because anti-Black, anti-matrixial, and bio-geo-phobic, and b) how they expose their own melancholic, manic, and/or phobic thinking in their depictions of maternal, matrixial, feminine, and/or “black(ened)” figures and constellations. Chapter 3 also explores how Judith Butler’s notion of “melancholy,” as a “desirable” reaction to western subject formation into the “master identity,” may be extended to feelings of lost or disappearing potentialities in terms of the environment, wild m/other natures, and each individual’s “queer plenitude.”⁹⁰ I then go on to argue that each of these separate lines of argument and affective attachment is constitutive of the rigidly binary masculine and feminine subject positions mandated by “monohumanist Man2,” and of William Wordsworth and P.B. Shelley’s complicity in and critique of them in “Nutting” and the “Intimations Ode” and *Queen Mab* (1815) and *Alastor; or, The Spirit of Solitude* (ca. 1815). To different degrees of success, Wordsworth and Shelley critically grapple with and subvert misogynist, anti-Black, bio-geo-phobic myths and sublime aesthetics that foreclose the epistemophilic ability to wonder at/wander in wildness. In different ways, both authors

⁸⁹ John Keats, “Letter to Richard Woodhouse, October 27, 1818,” *Keats’s Poetry and Prose*, ed. Jeffrey N. Cox (New York and London, W.W. Norton & Company, 2009), 295. All references to Keats in this dissertation are to this anthology unless otherwise noted.

⁹⁰ My analyses throughout this dissertation apply the terms “queer plenitude” by Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, “therapeutic planet” by L.O. Aranye Fradenburg Joy, and “revolutionary mothering” by Alexis Pauline Gumbs to better understand the matrixial/eco-psychoanalytic poetics at work in the texts under study in this archive.

elaborate new “modes of being/knowing/feeling that gesture toward the overturning of Man.”⁹¹

In Chapter 4 I show how H. Rider Haggard’s imperial romance *She* (1886) includes Orientalized constructions of the “black *mater*(nal)” figure in terms of an “imperial” (paranoid/manic) sublime for his racialized apocalyptic narrative of reverse colonization, a narrative popular during the Victorian era of heightened anxiety of empire. I argue that Haggard’s novel *She* “Orientalizes” a version of Jackson’s critique of the “black feminine sublime” as a function for violently disciplining wild natures who remind western “master” subjects of their vulnerable entanglements. I further suggest that the sublime in this mode facilitates what depth psychologists Mary Watkins and Helene Shulman describe as “[m]eeting the new through strategies or renormalization.”⁹² In so doing, the sublime “places us at odds with ourselves and the world, requiring structures of dissociation and the expenditure of ever-greater energy to maintain order and a comfortable authority over uncomfortable ruptures.”⁹³ At the same time, I show how this Orientalized Black feminine sublime works to erode the oppressive institutionalized norms that structure the novel. Specifically, I argue that this text’s racial fantasy, that relies on the Orientalized Black feminine sublime, dissolves hegemonies of disaster by dreaming toward the possibility that there are “other worlds.”

Chapter 5 argues that Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man* (1826) critically represents the xenophobic expression of far-right anxieties about the future collapse of western white

⁹¹ Jackson, *Becoming Human*, 4.

⁹² Mary Watkins and Helene Shulman, *Toward Psychologies of Liberation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 141.

⁹³ Watkins and Shulman, *Toward Psychologies of Liberation*, 141.

“civilization” to foreground the psychological problem of a socialized fear of radical interdependency. The bulk of Chapter 5 focuses on the legacy of Mary Shelley’s alien and domestic “contagions” of “destructive plasticity” in Ari Aster’s folk horror film *Midsommar* (2019) and Pella Kågerman and Hugo Lilja’s science fiction film *Aniara* (2018). I argue that both films represent the ecofascist ideologies, white melancholia, and climate migration anxiety of far-right groups of the western global north who fear the end of the “genre-specific orders of truth” of monohumanist Man.⁹⁴ I argue that the films belong to a subgenre of climate-oriented, speculative horror films that have arisen to critically represent the white, masculinist melancholia and emerging ecofascist political unconscious of the far right. As such, these films work to identify and deconstruct the nostalgic narratives of a lost “golden age” that the far right uses to defend against their climate migration anxiety. I propose that this anxiety is rooted in an earlier dread over the interdependent proximity of the “other.”

The concluding remarks of this chapter include a brief consideration of the perils and

⁹⁴ Sylvia Wynter, “Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species? Or, to Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations,” in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, ed. Katherine McKittrick (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015), 32. White melancholia is a term coined by the Swedish postcolonial and feminist scholars Tobias Hübinette and Catrin Lundström to describe “white regression and aggression” as well as the delusional, fascist “dream of a white homogenous past.” Hübinette and Lundström argue that white melancholia stems from “not being in full control anymore, and therefore yearning to return to the safe days of white homogeneity when it was easier to be a racist.” Tobias Hübinette and Catrin Lundström, “Sweden after the Recent Election: The Double-Binding Power of Swedish Whiteness through the Mourning of the Loss of ‘Old Sweden’ and the Passing of ‘Good Sweden,’” *NORA—Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, 19, no. 1 (2011): 43. I see white melancholia and “everyday” fascism as combining in ecofascist rhetoric that falsely equates immigration with “ecological disaster” and promotes strong borders against the climate migration crisis. Oliver Milman, “Climate denial is waning on the right. What’s replacing it might be just as scary,” *The Guardian* (2021), <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/nov/21/climate-denial-far-right-immigration>. Ecofascism is defined as “environmentalism that 1. Advocates or accepts violence and 2. Reinforces existing systems of power and inequality.” Because ecofascism suggests that “certain kinds of people are naturally and exclusively entitled to control environmental resources” ecofascist myths “fuel white supremacy, ultra-nationalism, patriarchy, ableism, authoritarianism, and mass murder.” April Anson, Cassie M. Galentine, Shane Hall, Alexander Menrisky, and Bruno Seraphin, “Against the Ecofascist Creep: Debunking Ecofascist Myths,” *Anti-Creep Climate Initiative* (2022), 12, <https://www.asle.org/wp-content/uploads/Against-the-Ecofascist-Creep.pdf>.

promises of Catherine Malabou's theories of destructive plasticity for environmental and social justice, and lead into my discussion in the next chapter of the post-Human practices of care implicitly proposed in N.K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth Trilogy*. Rather than simply rehearsing the xenophobic violence of the white melancholic subject or the nihilism of some survivor identities, Jemisin uses her traumatized protagonist to explore and enact how matrixial trans-subjects can mobilize the drives underlying destructive plasticity and "racial melancholia" to form queer, multiethnic, cross-species practices of care organized around the collective and individual "anamnesis" of inherited trauma.⁹⁵

Chapter 6 argues that P.B. Shelley's *The Witch of Atlas* (ca. 1820) deeply resonates with the way that N.K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth Trilogy* (2015, 2016, 2017) implicitly critiques naively utopian developmental narratives of posthuman subjectivities. Instead of the naïve optimism evident within the structure of much Romantic and posthuman thought, this pairing of texts offers important representations that fully acknowledge the role of animalization of race and gender. Both Shelley and Jemisin's post-Human narratives parallel Jackson's deconstruction of the sublime aesthetics of the "black *mater*(nal)" as a subject-forming function that produces neoliberal monohumanist genealogies of being and belonging that naturalize illusions of human exceptionalism, white supremacy, and heteronormativity. In Chapter 6, however, I also add to another of Jackson's arguments from *Becoming Human*, namely, that African diasporic writers and artists do not only critique the racialized and sexualized animalization of Blackness, "but also exceed critique by overturning received ontology and epistemic regimes of species that seek to define

⁹⁵ David L. Eng and Shinhee Han, *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation: On the Social and Psychic Lives of Asian Americans* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2019).

blackness through the prism of abject animality.”⁹⁶ In particular, I focus on the unforeseen generative capacities of Jemisin’s “wonderful” updates to this figure that give a fuller account of racialization but which also share more in common with P.B. Shelley’s epistemophilic attunement to the “wild” potential of matrixial “natures” than with Wordsworth’s self-consolidating approach to nature and m/others. While these texts depict wild and wondrous moments of “revolutionary mothering,” of multispecies and of multi-cultural “queer futurity,” they remain firmly grounded in the reality of structural social antagonisms.⁹⁷ I explore how these texts represent the power asymmetries that continue to unevenly haunt developmental entanglements of care across the terrains of the global north and south in the terms from David L. Eng and Shinee Han’s theory of “racial melancholia.”⁹⁸

In Chapter 7, I argue that Jeff VanderMeer’s *Southern Reach Trilogy* (2014) envisions matrixial epistemophilia as a subversive and transformative technology of perception and dialogical engagement that enables better interspecies communication. Parallel to what Kate Rigby has identified as Wordsworth’s “contemplative ecopoetics,” VanderMeer depicts the practice of consciously considering and contemplating the nonhuman world in a mode of epistemophilic, affective attunement. This contemplative attunement is presented as a strategy for discerning the “mindful,” signifying, and intentional properties of wild natures. The trilogy presents these perceptive imaginaries as important alternatives to the violent gender politics and ecological ramifications behind a

⁹⁶ Jackson, *Becoming Human*, 34.

⁹⁷ The term “queer futurity” comes from José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2009).

⁹⁸ David L. Eng and Shinhee Han, *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation: On the Social and Psychic Lives of Asian Americans* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2019).

distortion of matrixial epistemophilia into the drive towards mastery—a distortion that has shaped the development of western technoscience into what Donna Haraway refers to as a patriarchal “informatics of domination.”

Chapter 8 concludes the dissertation by comparing Victor’s creature in *Frankenstein* to the more-than-human “children” in Jeff VanderMeer’s *Borne* novels to argue that increased reflexive mentalization, secure attachment, and interpersonal resilience can extend to human relations with nonhumans. I suggest that the novels’ representations of multispecies kinship networks foreground the matrixial and mentalizing epistemophilic sensibilities that could create the psychological grounds for more potentially useful and salutary environmental politics. I analyze these novels ultimately to explore the question of to what extent adult “therapeutic” experiences of sustained matrixial wit(h)nessing and mentalization, both given and received, can rupture and transform unproductive epistemophilic orientations, attachment styles, and narrative frameworks regarding all types of (dis)entangled love between human groups and across species.

Chapter 1. Positive and Negative Expressions of the Epistemophilic Impulse: Applied Psychoanalysis, Mourning/Melancholia, and Unlearning Sublime Knowledge

The first section of this chapter elaborates on the methodological choice to apply “wild” psychoanalysis to the field of speculative fantasy fiction studies. The internal sections focus on the origin and history of the concept of the “epistemophilic impulse” and its function in subject formation, first according to Sigmund Freud’s early formulations and as later explicitly conceived and coined by the British object relations theory of Melanie Klein. I then go on to investigate how Wilfred Bion updates this concept to imagine a more emancipatory psychoanalysis that theorizes the developmental achievement of the ability to think (as opposed to split, project, and/or deny). Bion suggests that thinking about reality and fantasy is central to the capacity for productive and ethical forms of the desire for knowledge and the possibility of learning from m/others, what I refer to as positive epistemophilia as distinct from negative epistemophilia.⁹⁹ In order to foreground the importance of epistemophilia for Romantic eco-literary speculation, the last sections of this chapter also discuss how Bion’s theoretical descendants in contemporary mentalizing psychoanalysis build upon his ideas that link the capacity to think and learn with capacity to tolerate deprivation and frustrated desire. Mentalization theory, for example, proposes that

⁹⁹ I associate positive expressions of epistemophilia with what Peta Cox calls “psychic strength” or the “will to look actively for new knowledge” and “the state of engaging with knowledge without such engagement threatening the sense of self.” Positive expressions of epistemophilia do not seek to deny, master, or control the m/other subject/object in fantasy or reality. Being mentalized by secure attachment figures leads to a sense of psychic safety that stems from having epistemic trust in and respect for the m/other as a separate being and an individuated selfhood. Such psychic safety allows for the psychic strength to engage with the world in a mode of positive (receptive/open/creative) epistemophilia. Positive epistemophilia is “the ability to endure not knowing, to change opinions without overwhelming psychic distress and to take on new perspectives without panic.” On the other hand, those with insecure attachment styles are often solely in search of psychic safety as a “protection of the psyche through the use of knowledge or ignorance. It is a protection against anxiety through an attempt to master the environment in order to control a perceived threat.” See Peta Cox, “Epistemophilia: Rethinking Feminist Pedagogy,” *Australian Feminist Studies* 25, no. 63 (2010), 80-81.

secure, mentalizing attachment relationships are essential to the development of “epistemic trust,” the belief that m/others are trustworthy sources of knowledge. Epistemic trust provides both the psychic safety and strength necessary for social learning in “constantly changing environments.”¹⁰⁰ In the totally destabilizing and disorienting age of climate crisis and political polarization, I argue that it is important to understand the capacity of epistemic trust because I think it is central to forming the positive epistemophilia characteristic of resilient, adaptable, and curious knowers/learners who can both tolerate and enact the melancholy pains and pleasures of eco-(dis)entanglement.

In this chapter I map the theoretical roots of the concept of epistemophilia to argue in later chapters that narratives and aesthetics that unconsciously or consciously explore/represent and thereby enact/advocate for certain developmental conditions provide models for engaging the world in both modes of positive (matrixial/melancholy) and negative (oedipal/manic/dominating) epistemophilia. For example, I associate oedipal narratives and sublime aesthetics with negative epistemophilia and the strategies of epistemic hypervigilance—that is, the “cognitive closure, dogmatism, and conservatism” that provides a “safeguard” for the “inadequately individuated self.”¹⁰¹ In this sense, one could have an insecure attachment style and no epistemic trust but still be driven by an intense desire for knowledge that gives one control and mastery over m/others. By contrast, I associate positive epistemophilia and epistemic trust with Bracha Ettinger’s narrative of the matrixial quest and the aesthetics of wonder: “[T]he greater confidence of secure

¹⁰⁰ Peter Fonagy, Patrick Luyten, Elizabeth Allison, and Chloe Campbell, “Reconciling Psychoanalytic Ideas with Attachment Theory,” in *Handbook of Attachment: Theory, Research, and Clinical Applications*, eds. by Jude Cassidy and Phillip R. Shaver (New York and London: The Guilford Press, 2018), 793.

¹⁰¹ Fonagy, et al., “Reconciling Psychoanalytic Ideas,” 795.

individuals that they will be able to recover from dysregulation also enables them to be less defensive and more able to open their minds to information that may challenge their assumptions.”¹⁰² However, my understanding of Klein leads me to consider how negative epistemophilia (that manifests as the desire to impose oneself on wild m/other natures and/or to shutdown cognitively and deny reality), is arguably many presubjects’ initial defense against “sublime” infantile experiences such as the m/other’s overwhelming enigmatic messages, a caregiver’s “failure” to relieve a moment’s hunger, and/or fantasies of oedipal rivalry/ incestuous desire, etc. In other words, learning can feel like dying and becoming an orphan at the same time. As a result, presubjects (and adults alike) sometimes understandably have temporary recourse to “comforting” defenses like denial, omnipotence, idealization, etc. Therefore, I am more concerned with how certain conditions solidify negative epistemophilic expressions into the “historical amnesia, manic defense, and normative deafness” that becomes “central to the way one knows the world.”¹⁰³ This can happen, for example, as Klein suggests, if negative epistemophilic expressions of sadistic imposition, cognitive closure, and/or play inhibition are left carelessly unchecked. This kind of psychic impoverishment can also solidify if caregivers violently prohibit or unintentionally discourage the presubject’s intellectual and sexual curiosities by leaving their own intellectual intolerances and insecurities unexamined. Under such adverse conditions, Klein observes that the presubject’s general and genuine desire for diverse kinds of knowledge about the wondrous (and terrible) world distorts into the inability to think, learn, play, or create.

¹⁰² Fonagy, et al., “Reconciling Psychoanalytic Ideas,” 795.

¹⁰³ Watkins and Shulman, *Toward Psychologies of Liberation*, 129.

While there is no panacea for all distortions in epistemophilic expression caused by un/conscious, un/intentional parental prohibitions/messages, Klein suggests that there is still hope in the very fact that “good-enough” caregivers are the presubject’s “unconscious treasure-house of everything desirable,” including knowledge.¹⁰⁴ In other words, presubjects deeply desire to know about themselves, their m/others, and their environments despite the pain that often comes with “enlightenment.” And presubjects’ psychic health depends upon being able to freely pose questions and offer speculations to the supportive caregivers about pleasurable and distressing fantasies and/or perceptions. Therefore, if the presubject is ensured that they will not destroy the caregiver when they desire to “take food for the mind” from that parental treasure-house, then the caregiver fosters the conditions of psychic safety for that individual to work-through and know formerly denied/repressed knowledge—to enjoy a more “realistic,” playful, and creative relation to reality, the self, and m/other natures.¹⁰⁵ Indeed, the liberatory potential of Klein’s research is stressed in her opinion that it is an “upbringing” and/or therapeutic environment wherein “all questions” are “permitted” and honestly and “gladly answered” that allows the child/patient to find once “horrid” things “pleasant” again: “He also says that he is not afraid any more of the things that have been explained to him even when he thinks of them.”¹⁰⁶ As I discuss in more detail in the third section of this chapter, Bion’s theory of the “alpha-function” similarly suggests that effectively “metabolizing” caregivers can in some cases help guide the presubject’s “sublime” experiences away from expressions of manic melancholia and paranoid-schizoid

¹⁰⁴ Melanie Klein qtd. in Margaret Rustin and Michael Rustin, “Epistemophilia: The love of understanding and its inhibition,” in *Reading Klein*, eds. Margaret Rustin and Michael Rustin (London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2017), 37.

¹⁰⁵ Klein qtd. in Rustin and Rustin, “Epistemophilia,” 37.

¹⁰⁶ Melanie Klein, “The Development of a Child,” in *Love, Guilt, and Reparation and Other Works 1921-1945* (London: Vintage, 1998), 42 & 45.

projective fear and idealization, and toward the increased mental integration of the Kleinian “depressive position” or what I theorize in later chapters as the mindset of matrixial melancholia that allows for the tolerance of more open, troubling, and complex thinking and learning.¹⁰⁷

In other words, looking for and acquiring new knowledge does not necessarily and/or always come from or lead to pleasure or increased happiness, a point that is important to stress in a culture that rejects all difficult emotions and complex problems for falsely-positive façades and self-aggrandizing solutions. (Un)learning and (dis)entanglement are experiences often just as painful as they are pleasurable, just as self-expanding as they are potentially self-annihilating. It is a painful and melancholy task to take apart, disentangle, unlearn, and unbind destructive modes of being and knowing in which we are entangled, while sewing back together that which gives sustenance in the fabric of interdependence. Thus, this chapter introduces the foundations of my interest in thinking about how matrixial melancholia can become a consciously adopted stance/life practice that can tolerate deprivation and promote further (un)learning (and therefore growth-inspiring loss) via creative and ethical engagements with the world. Much like Klein theorizes that the creative, sublimating motive of reparation and a more realistic relationship to the external world are both established with the achievement of the depressive position, I conceive of melancholy as productively/recursively matrixial and interminable. In other words, the tolerance and acknowledgement of melancholic loss as constitutive of being and becoming can enable positive epistemophilic approaches to the m/others of our realities and fantasies. Positive expressions of epistemophilia in the mode of matrixial melancholia can give us the energy,

¹⁰⁷ Ecclesiastes 1.18: “For in much wisdom is much grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow.”

motive, and ethical capacity to face the difficult challenges inherent to the (un)learning process that entails perpetual cycles of psychic/symbolic death and new life/growth.

Therefore, near the end of this chapter I argue that the epistemic trust that allows for positive epistemophilia is key to tolerating, enduring, and navigating intense anxiety and melancholic pain related to the loss, contradiction, and uncertainty that accompanies learning from rupturing encounters with difference. Individuals who are successfully mentalized can more realistically judge when it is appropriate to temporarily suspend their “natural epistemic vigilance” against “potentially damaging, deceptive, or inaccurate information” in order to appreciate “another person’s communication of new knowledge as [potentially] trustworthy, generalizable, and relevant to the self.”¹⁰⁸ Epistemic trust enables the subject’s psyche to learn about the environment and secure a differentiated sense of self vis-à-vis the external m/other. Learning in this sense means that the subject can engage with reality rather than avoid or deny painful new knowledge that challenges their assumptions. Successful learning then is dependent on the subject’s ability to tolerate the uncomfortable, ambivalent feelings of hatred/pain, love/pleasure, and melancholia that come with acknowledging and accepting the dissolution and revision of former beliefs about objects, knowledge systems, and patterns of thinking.

Along this line of thinking, I also suggest at the end of this chapter that mentalization theory foregrounds how all of the texts I examine implicitly and explicitly explore how “[w]hen we are attentive to the infantile and unconscious sources of our propositions—and especially to our dangerous wishes to seductively impose ourselves on reality—and when we can therefore distinguish a stance of openness to reality, we can meet reality more

¹⁰⁸ Fonagy, et al., “Reconciling Psychoanalytic Ideas,” 793.

realistically and more truthfully, and we can then better trust what we know” as well as what non/human m/other natures know.¹⁰⁹ In other words, the entire set of writers that I examine explore how the breakdown or restoration of epistemic trust shapes subjectivities that relate to m/other natures via stances of (negative) epistemophilic imposition and fixity or (positive) epistemophilic openness and fluidity. Indeed, all the authors I study interrogate western origin stories and their models of subject formation to foreground in different ways the importance of epistemic trust for more positive expressions of epistemophilia that encourage an openness to revelations presented by reality (experienced as both pleasurable and painful).

I conclude this chapter by introducing the discussion I will develop in the last two chapters of the dissertation. The penultimate chapter and the last chapter of the dissertation mark a shift in focus from more human-oriented to trans-species accounts of the development of matrixial trans-subjectivity and metamorphic/melancholic epistemophilia. In other words, these chapters move from human entanglements to discerning, deconstructing, and (re)forming trans-species embodiment and community, and the eco-phenomenology that the comprehension (as well as construction) of such bodies and environments involves. In these last two chapters I argue that the mentalization concepts of epistemophilia, epistemic trust/vigilance, and (mis)recognition/(un)learning/(re)educating illuminate the limitations and affordances of eco-entanglement thinking as represented in Jeff VanderMeer’s *Southern Reach Trilogy* (2014), *Borne* (2017), and *The Strange Bird* (2018). For example, the content of VanderMeer’s novels is congruent with Donna Haraway’s suggestion that we must “honor” the “state of ‘entanglement’ in multispecies

¹⁰⁹ Rachel B. Blass, “The Quest for Truth as the Foundation of Psychoanalytic Practice: a Traditional Freudian-Kleinian Perspective,” *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 85, no. 2 (2016): 317.

kinship networks or what Timothy Morton calls the ‘mesh’ of our ecological relationships.”¹¹⁰ However, as P.B. Shelley suggests in the dying figure of *Alastor*, VanderMeer’s novels also suggest that parts of ourselves should individuate and acknowledge the unknown difference of the non/human m/other—preserve and respect m/others as separate beings. Additionally, his novels suggest that aspects of our individuated selves do/should die and disentangle, fall away as old knowledges, systems, and identities, as the Magician and Mord represent in *Borne*, and Lowry from *The Southern Reach Trilogy*. At the same time, parts of our individuated selves do/should disentangle to live, to wander away to new homeplaces, as the Strange Bird, Rachel, Borne, and the biologist enact across the different novels under study in these last two chapters.

It is in this sense that I argue that these several novels represent how the melancholy art of caring for the matrixial wildness in the self and m/other natures requires (un)learning and (dis)entangling from the “killing” narratives, logics, and aesthetics of western white Man. In the same way that we might gain “epistemic trust” in the warm face of the recognizing m/other as the Strange Bird does vis-à-vis her lover Sanji, we must also have epistemic trust in the first “stage” of uncomfortable dissolution, as demonstrated by the biologist, Rachel, and Borne. It is significant that these characters show how our diminution, our “partial disappearing to allow jointness” is not the same as the “sacrifice of [the] self in a disappearing for the sake of the Other.”¹¹¹ While entanglement (i.e., trans-species interdependence) may be the condition upon which our existence is based, VanderMeer’s

¹¹⁰ Louise Economides and Laura Shackelford, “Introduction: Weird Ecology: VanderMeer’s Anthropocene Fiction,” in *Surreal Entanglements: Essays on Jeff VanderMeer’s Fiction*, eds. Louise Economides and Laura Shackelford (New York and London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2021), 2.

¹¹¹ Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, 145.

novels show how psychic disentanglement is perhaps the first step toward mutually beneficial forms of intimate entanglement. That is, disentanglement—in the sense of salutary individuation and deconstructive dissolution of damaging systems of thought and being—helps to sustain and mend our entangled psychic and material ecologies.

VanderMeer's *Borne* novels and *The Southern Reach Trilogy* together envision and enact exactly this phenomenon but with a particular focus on human considerations of nonhuman species. That is, the novels offer different examples of how matrixial wit(h)nessing and mentalizing recognition at any point in life could lead to positive epistemophilic styles that enable trans-subjects to care about/sustain (dis)entanglements with the wild aliveness of non/human m/others. For example, the novels feature transgenic protagonists, at various levels of psychic development, who need to both find and *learn to be* "an object with a lively mind—someone who can ask questions, take risks in suggesting links, hold on to the idea that behavior has meaning, and refuse to be put off by repetitive resistance and avoidance."¹¹² In particular, the biologist, Rachel, and Borne's metamorphic/melancholic epistemophilia demonstrates how the desire for transformation through encounters with difference both entails new knowledge and ruptures and transforms their conventional patterns of thinking into surprising modes of care. Their epistemophilic sensibilities help them to maintain the resilience they need to engage wonderful and destabilizing non/human m/others throughout the lifecycle to form diverse, multispecies kinship networks.

Applied Psychoanalysis and Literary Studies: The Question of "Wild" Analytic Methods

While my method of reading this archive of texts is informed by a combination of queer ecofeminist theory, multiple schools of psychoanalysis, radical Black theorizing, and

¹¹² Rustin and Rustin, *Reading Klein*, 35.

critical kinship studies, I aim to remain faithful to the unique languages, theories, and thoughts of the literary texts in themselves. That is, I try to model the method of approach taken by the literary critic Sami Schalk in her study of Black women's speculative fiction. Schalk makes the important point that "literary critics do not have to find or create theories to apply to literature, but instead should try to understand the theories being expressed or embodied in the texts themselves through close reading."¹¹³ Like Schalk, I also see the literary texts of my study as "productions of theories which will aid in understanding their representations" of the development of the posthuman mind and its caring capacities.¹¹⁴ Sigmund Freud approaches the study of literature in a similar way: "...[C]reative writers are valuable allies and their evidence is to be prized highly, for they are apt to know a whole host of things between heaven and earth of which our philosophy has not yet let us dream. In their knowledge of the mind they are far in advance of us everyday people, for they draw upon sources which we have not yet opened up for science."¹¹⁵ P.B. Shelley likewise expresses a similar idea in his *A Defense of Poetry* (1821) when he claims that "poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world."¹¹⁶ And William Wordsworth anticipates Freud's celebration of potential fruitful collaborations between scientists and creative writers in the "Preface" to *The Lyrical Ballads* (1798): "If the time should ever come when what is now called Science, thus familiarized to men, shall be ready to put on... a form of flesh and blood, the Poet will lend his divine spirit to aid the transfiguration, and will welcome the

¹¹³ Sami Shalk, *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2018), 7.

¹¹⁴ Schalk, *Bodyminds*, 7.

¹¹⁵ Sigmund Freud, "Delusions and Dreams in Jensen's 'Gradiva,'" in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: Volume 9 (1907)*, trans. James Strachey (London: Vintage Books, 2001), 8.

¹¹⁶ Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*, 535.

Being thus produced, as a dear and genuine inmate of the household of man.”¹¹⁷ In contrast to a one-way replacement of art with theory and as opposed to perspectives that privilege only the clinical setting as the source of psychoanalytic data par excellence, Freud originally conceived of psychoanalysis as an interdisciplinary dialogue with other fields with the effect that they mutually enhance one another. He did not consider psychoanalysis as able to provide an independent *Weltanschauung*, which he defined as “an intellectual construction which solves all the problems of our existence uniformly on the basis of one overriding hypothesis.”¹¹⁸ Rather, he originally conceived of psychoanalysis, that many claim he discovered in the analytic setting, as an *applied* science: “Psychoanalysis has never claimed to provide a complete theory of human mentality in general, but only expected that what it offered should be applied to supplement and correct the knowledge acquired by other means.”¹¹⁹ Therefore, my reading approach here prioritizes this view of the transformational world-building capacities of creative writing itself, while simultaneously promoting a cross-pollination between “psychoanalysis and the [literary] arts in such a way as to stimulate fresh development and learning on both sides.”¹²⁰

¹¹⁷ William Wordsworth, “Preface,” in *Wordsworth’s Poetry and Prose*, ed. Nicholas Halmi (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company: 2014), 89. All references to Wordsworth in this dissertation are to this anthology unless otherwise noted.

¹¹⁸ Sigmund Freud, “The Question of a *Weltanschauung*,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: Volume 22 (1933)*, trans. James Strachey (London: Vintage Books, 2001), 195.

¹¹⁹ Sigmund Freud, “On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: Volume 14 (1914)*, trans. James Strachey (London: Vintage Books, 2001), 50.

¹²⁰ Adela Abella, “Psychoanalysis and the Arts: The Slippery Ground of Applied Analysis,” *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 85, no. 1 (2016): 112.

So, to sum up, my interdisciplinary reading method is an assemblage of what from a certain angle are historically clashing theories of literary interpretation.¹²¹ On the one hand, I draw from (historically contingent) contemporary knowledges in the humanities, social sciences, and life sciences to interpret literature through a hermeneutic of suspicion—using art forms to “diagnose” social and cultural practices that limit wellbeing. On the other hand, these frameworks also inform my more restorative/utopian approach to the interpretation of “eco-psychological” speculative poetry and prose as a catalyst of potentially beneficial transformation. Additionally, beyond reducing texts to mere discourse or viewing them as purely determined by cultural, biological, ecological, or historical/evolutionary forces, occasionally I find it productive to incorporate fragments of biographical information into questions of meaning shaped by context-dependent authorial intention. I also openly acknowledge and celebrate that textual interpretations are active constructions by a flesh-and-blood critical reader. That is, interpretation is never an anonymous activity, and such interpretations inevitably showcase the critic’s subjectivity, often in the form of “a set of personal-recreations through projection onto the text of the individual’s conflicts and unconscious fantasies.”¹²² Any meaning the critic brings forth from the text is mediated by the larger cultural and disciplinary assumptions in which they are embedded but also their related personal professional interests, theoretical investments, individual history, emotional background conditions, etc.

I combine the above understanding of texts as hybrid products informed by authors’ sociohistorical, context-dependent biographical experiences with Schalk’s argument about

¹²¹ Annabel Patterson, “Chapter 10: Intention,” in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, edited by Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 135-146.

¹²² Adela Abella, “Psychoanalysis and the Arts,” 105.

texts. Schalk helps me to understand that these texts are a “form of theorizing” about the posthuman mind in relation to the nonhuman environment “which operates in conversation with existing theories rather than replicating theory wholesale or being pure expression that must be theorized by the critic.”¹²³ While I agree that texts cannot and should not be reduced to the discourses by which they are surrounded, I also agree with the science fiction scholar Gavin Miller that “psychological knowledge pervades contemporary Western culture” and that “we are thoroughly psychologized subjects, who think and act in ways shaped by the claims of varied, and competing, psychological schools.”¹²⁴ And as Suzanne R. Kirschner has shown, many of us (clinicians, scholars, and laypersons) continue to consult specifically Freudian and post-Freudian psychoanalytic discourses to “tell us the truth about ourselves,” and as she argues, for the interesting reason that psychoanalytic thinking shares affinities with Romantic spiritual and cultural values.¹²⁵ However, I believe that employing a method that simultaneously draws from multiple modes of reading, such as those discovered through strategic biographical research, reader responses, deconstructive methods, cultural studies, and discourse analysis, prevents any one perspective from becoming too all-pervasive. This keeps alive the “zones of opacity, density, and impenetrability that are essential in a work of art,” and which stimulate “fresh thinking, personal re-creation, and transformation”—the “mental work that art is meant to allow.”¹²⁶

Nevertheless, there is a large degree to which this study is an example of applying psychoanalytic methods and concepts to the study of literature, although there are better and

¹²³ Schalk, *Bodyminds*, 7.

¹²⁴ Gavin Miller, *Science Fiction and Psychology* (Liverpool University Press, 2020), 1.

¹²⁵ Suzanne R. Kirschner, *The Religious and Romantic Origins of Psychoanalysis: Individuation and Integration in Post-Freudian Theory* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 1.

¹²⁶ Abella, “Psychoanalysis and the Arts,” 111-112.

worse ways to go about doing this which I will discuss below. Such applied studies are usually followed with skepticism about whether applied psychoanalysis is inevitably an illegitimate or “wild” intellectual enterprise. This question assumes that the clinical encounter alone can generate valid psychoanalytic knowledge and that case studies are the source of objective facts drawn from empirical observations. According to this perspective, every use of psychoanalysis outside of the consulting room is merely “applied,” and therefore “wild” (i.e., highly speculative and a non-contributor to the development of the scientific field of psychoanalysis “proper”). A parallel debate on the legitimacy of applying the ecological sciences and evolutionary theory to interpretations of literature is alive and well, as in the fields of ecocriticism and literary Darwinism respectively. But if psychoanalysis is triply defined as a “body of knowledge about the mind, a research activity, and a form of treatment for psychological disturbance,” then one can see that “psychoanalytic treatment, is from this perspective, an application of psychoanalysis and is not coextensive with it.”¹²⁷ In other words, from this point of view all psychoanalysis is applied; there is no privileged set of psychoanalytic activities or methods that might be said to have access to more legitimate forms of knowledge.

Central to the methodological choices made in this dissertation is a letter written by Freud to Hendrik de Man on December 13, 1925. This letter states that clinical applications of psychoanalysis are equal in value to the applications of psychoanalytic ideas and hermeneutic methods to entities outside of the consulting room: “I have always been of the opinion that the extramedical applications of psychoanalysis are as significant as the medical ones, indeed that the former might perhaps have a greater influence on the mental

¹²⁷ David Bell, “Introduction: Psychoanalysis, a Body of Knowledge of Mind and Human Culture,” in *Psychoanalysis and Culture: A Kleinian Perspective*, ed. David Bell (London: Karnac Books, 1999), 3.

orientation of humanity.”¹²⁸ These lines reveal Freud’s belief that applications of psychoanalysis outside of the clinic may lead to substantial cumulative transformations in the constitution of human psyches, if we extrapolate “the single human individual” to “mankind as a whole.”¹²⁹ Freud claims that many disciplines would benefit from applying a psychoanalytic approach to the study of their specific objects of study: “As a ‘depth-psychology,’ a theory of the mental unconscious, [psychoanalysis] can become indispensable to all the sciences which are concerned with the evolution of human civilization and its major institutions such as art, religion and the social order.”¹³⁰ He goes on to describe the use of psychoanalytic theory within the clinical setting as itself only one type of applied psychoanalysis among many others: “The use of analysis for the treatment of the neuroses is only one of its applications; the future will perhaps show that it is not the most important one.”¹³¹ He is very clear that, “it would be wrong to sacrifice all the other applications to this single one, just because it touches on the circle of medical interests.”¹³² For Freud, medical and scientific approaches to knowledge are only two among many other valuable methods for apprehending useful models of reality.

Many see Freud’s “‘Wild’ Psycho-Analysis” paper of 1910 as where he first “introduced and sanctioned” the devil of “psychoanalytic orthodoxy.”¹³³ While importantly

¹²⁸ Freud to Hendrik de Man, December 13, 1925, quoted in Peter Gay, *Freud: A Life for Our Time* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1998), 310.

¹²⁹ Sigmund Freud, “Constructions in Analysis,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: Volume 23 (1937)*, trans. James Strachey (London: Vintage Books, 2001), 269.

¹³⁰ Sigmund Freud, “The Question of Lay Analysis: Conversations with an Impartial Person,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: Volume 20 (1926)*, trans. James Strachey (London: Vintage Books, 2001), 248.

¹³¹ Freud, “The Question of Lay Analysis,” 248.

¹³² Freud, “The Question of Lay Analysis,” 248.

¹³³ Martin S. Bergmann, “The Historical Roots of Psychoanalytic Orthodoxy,” *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 78 (1997): 75.

the paper uses the term “wild” to denote and “discus[s] a distortion of psychoanalytic technique,” the term has increasingly been used to police the discipline by defensively slandering as “wild analysis” different forms of applied analysis and any novel or unique technique or theory that one finds professionally and personally threatening.¹³⁴ It therefore is essential to distinguish between the pejorative and potentially salutary senses of “wild analysis” or “wild interpretation” to further articulate how certain kinds of applied psychoanalysis are compelling modes of knowledge production.

In the paper “‘Wild’ Psycho-Analysis” Freud paints a picture of the “wild analyst.” The “wild analyst” is a young physician who is formally untrained in the field of psychoanalysis yet armed with a shallow and popular understanding of the subject, which he applies to a young woman suffering from anxiety after divorce from her husband. His “wild” psychoanalytic intervention consists of the advice to return to her husband, take a lover, or masturbate. For Freud, the most glaring “scientific errors” of the wild analyst consist in his simplistic insistence that sexual satisfaction will relieve the woman’s neurotic symptoms alongside his ignorance of the concept of “*psychosexuality*,” or the psychoanalyst’s “stress on the point that the mental factor in sexual life should not be overlooked or underestimated.”¹³⁵ Furthermore, for Freud, psychoanalysis is not an authoritatively prescribed solution to the neurotic symptom as though the patient would simply recover after the discovery of their ignorance “about the causal connection of this illness with his life, about his experiences in childhood, and so on.”¹³⁶ Instead Freud finds the root of the

¹³⁴ Emanuel Berman, “Call of the Wild,” *The American Journal of Psychoanalysis* 67, no. 3 (2007): 211.

¹³⁵ Sigmund Freud, “‘Wild’ Psycho-Analysis,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: Volume 11 (1910)*, trans. James Strachey (London: Vintage Books, 2001), 223.

¹³⁶ Freud, “‘Wild’ Psycho-Analysis,” 224.

ignorance in the patient's resistance to recalling the repressed material of his or her childhood. Analytic intervention in the form of enlightening information will only produce a therapeutic result after a "fairly long period of contact with the patient" and if the patient has independently "reached the neighbourhood of what he has repressed, and...formed a sufficient attachment (transference) to the physician."¹³⁷ Freud believes that rushing patients by force feeding them clever interpretations will only be met with rejection, and furthermore, that the "real analyst" must be comfortable with making wrong interpretations because one is "never in a position to discover the whole truth."¹³⁸

Freud's paper "Constructions in Analysis" further distinguishes between better and worse analytic techniques by explaining that the activity within the therapeutic space should entail a co-creative "building" up of interpretations and constructions in the dialectical dynamic between the analyst and the patient: "...we are not at all inclined to neglect the indications that can be inferred from the patient's reaction when we have offered him one of our constructions. The point must be gone into detail. It is true that we do not accept the 'No' of a person under analysis at its face value; but neither do we allow his 'Yes' to pass."¹³⁹ The therapeutic success of analysis is built upon the bedrock of listening carefully to the patient. In his effort to mitigate against the dominating imposition of the analyst's meaning upon the patient, Freud suggests that the best early policy is for the analyst to use open-ended, obscure phrases that promote free, creative thinking (rather than coercive

¹³⁷ Freud, "'Wild' Psycho-Analysis," 226.

¹³⁸ Freud, "'Wild' Psycho-Analysis," 226.

¹³⁹ Freud defines a "construction" as a narrative portion of the patient's early history that they have forgotten as opposed to the "interpretation" of a "single element of the material, such as an association or a parapraxis." Sigmund Freud, "Constructions in Analysis," 261-262.

rhetoric masquerading as facts, for example) to keep “a single answer on his lips to every question or objection: ‘It will all become clear in the course of future developments.’”¹⁴⁰

In addition to using the label “wild psychoanalysis” as an instrument of boundary-work to make certain knowledge practices illegitimate, the term was originally used by Freud to critically and appropriately signify a problematic style of top-down analytic practice consisting of the cold imposition of laws onto the patient’s psyche. However, there are other examples of “wild” applications of psychoanalysis that, if not used carefully, “oversaturate” the text with theory and thereby destroy the “specific contribution of art to mental growth.”¹⁴¹ For example, according to the psychiatrist and training analyst Adela Abella, Freud approached literature from a psychoanalytic perspective using three main paradigms. He used literature as an opportunity to construct psychobiographies of the authors and case-studies via character analyses *as if* the characters were patients. He also used literature as a tool for illustrating psychoanalytic theories and concepts. Abella claims that Freud employed these strategies to defend the value and legitimacy of his new science, and later in his career for the purposes of explaining the “nature and workings of the mind of the creative artist.”¹⁴² Abella suggests that contemporary interpretive strategies often still draw from these methods without qualification or transparency, and that these methods have been criticized as examples of “wild analysis” or as producing “wild interpretations.”¹⁴³ For my purposes here, the most important criticism of these interpretative strategies is that they risk imposing one-way projections of what the analyst is looking for onto the text. This

¹⁴⁰ Freud, “Constructions in Analysis,” 265.

¹⁴¹ Abella, “Psychoanalysis and the Arts,” 111.

¹⁴² James Strachey, “Editor’s Note” to *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: Volume 11 (1910)*, trans. James Strachey (London: Vintage Books, 2001), 62.

¹⁴³ Abella, “Psychoanalysis and the Arts,” 101.

approach to reading literature is comparable to “reading” the “narrative” of a patient’s symptoms as a way of accessing the quickest means by which to guide the patient to a presupposed outcome of psychic normativity. In opposition to this “wild” kind of essentialist enforcement of a normative psychoanalytic theory onto a patient’s potential unfolding, the self-identified “process-oriented” analyst Frank Summers explains that here the “issue is not whether one uses theory, but whether theory is deployed as a Procrustean bed into which the patient’s experience is fit or as a means to illuminate and extend the possibilities of that experience.”¹⁴⁴ The problem is when the critic or analyst arms themselves with theory to defend against the supposed fearsome “wildness in ourselves as well as in our patients [and reading materials]; we fear ‘wild psychoanalysis.’”¹⁴⁵ In this latter sense, it is odd how Freud’s usage of “wild” runs in the direction of disciplining, normative, and essentialist formulations.

Along this line of thinking there is a case to be made for re-appropriating the term “wild” to positively designate an analytic theory and technique that is an analogue to the Romantic emphasis on the “actualization of self potential.”¹⁴⁶ According to Summers, “Romantic” analysis consists of an analyst “attendant” (as opposed to the Lacanian “subject supposed to know”) who facilitates the patient’s “realization of latent and inhibited psychic capacities.”¹⁴⁷ This idea resembles Fradenburg Joy’s fealty to wildness as the “principle of resistance...to the loss of specific ways of becoming.”¹⁴⁸ The idea of resisting the loss of potential ways of becoming is connected to Ettinger’s argument about the importance of

¹⁴⁴ Summers, “Psychoanalysis: Romantic, Not Wild,” 18.

¹⁴⁵ Fradenburg Joy, “Care of the Wild,” 88.

¹⁴⁶ Frank Summers, “Psychoanalysis: Romantic, Not Wild,” 13.

¹⁴⁷ Frank Summers, “Psychoanalysis: Romantic, Not Wild,” 13.

¹⁴⁸ Fradenburg Joy, “Care of the Wild,” 88.

wit(h)nessing the trauma of lost “non-I(s)” in the self and other. Ettinger’s concept of the “non-I” refers to foreclosed or distanced modes of mind and identity that could have been performed/embodied in less toxic developmental conditions. If psychopathology results from the foreclosure or stifling of wild potential via impingements on the self from coercive childhood socialization, authoritarian therapeutic experience, and/or the oversaturation of reality by scientific-technological, cultural, theoretical “enframing,” then the important interpersonal, critical, and analytic modes of care of self, other, text, and patient might be best understood as “care of the wild.”¹⁴⁹ This kind of Romantic wild analysis is an appropriate term for the method of literary interpretation explored in this dissertation; one that tries to remain loyal to the “spirit of Bion’s interpretation of the analytic stance as openness to the unknown,” a treatment of the “analytic hour without desire or memory.”¹⁵⁰ Bion’s idea here is that one ethically tries (without even near-perfect success of course) to hold back the impulse to project onto the other the comfortable assumptions and understandings built from one’s personal life history as a way to safely control the other—to defend against the dangerous wildness of difference. Bion’s position is coincident with Keats’ concept of negative capability, or the idea that “the poet should be a kind of negative force—that only by remaining himself negative, or in some way empty, is the poet able to fill himself with an understanding of, or sympathy for, or empathy with, the subject of his poem.”¹⁵¹ Despite the fact that “[c]are can be frightening because it so often *is* an encounter with a difference of vital import,” the goal of wild analysis, of analytic care (whether pursued by the poet, critic, psychoanalytic theorist or clinician) is to make oneself receptive

¹⁴⁹ Fradenburg Joy, “Care of the Wild,” 70.

¹⁵⁰ Summers, “Psychoanalysis: Romantic, Not Wild,” 20.

¹⁵¹ Mary Oliver, *A Poetry Handbook: A Prose Guide to Understanding and Writing Poetry* (Orlando: Harcourt Publishing Company, 1994), 82-83.

to contact with traumatically foreclosed and pre-existing meaning/being to facilitate its becoming, its creative expansion and wild growth.¹⁵²

Therefore, my method of reading texts in this project is informed by the above non-dominating form of psychoanalytic encounter advocated by Summers and Fradenburg Joy, which aims to preserve otherness and remain open, receptive, and nurturing of the nascent potential in the object of analysis, whether a living being or a literary text. According to Abella, one way of doing this in terms of a concrete literary practice of critical reading is to “consider the nature of the psychic work that a given piece of art demands of the audience, while comparing this psychic work with what is required by the psychoanalytic encounter.”¹⁵³ As mentioned above, Summers suggests this might be executed in the style of “Romantic” analysis which attempts to “remake the very perception of the world” by stimulating a “revolution” within the individual and thus expanding their “ways of being.”¹⁵⁴ As one example of this kind of interpretation, this dissertation looks carefully at how the texts under study guide the reader through the “deconstruction of old ideas and relational paradigms in order to stimulate new thinking.”¹⁵⁵ In this way, the texts might be said to function toward the reader in a mode like the “attendant” psychoanalyst who helps foster the patient’s development beyond the horizon of known theoretical constructs. Again, this method of open inquiry and dialogue does not mean that the analyst or critic finally succeeds at the “god-trick” and “escapes” their personal fantasies or theoretical choices, but it does modestly help keep alive the possibility for new discoveries (albeit such possibilities are obviously still *creatively* constrained to the affordances available to specific theoretical

¹⁵² Fradenburg Joy, “Care of the Wild,” 88.

¹⁵³ Abella, “Psychoanalysis and the Arts,” 113.

¹⁵⁴ Summers, “Psychoanalysis: Romantic, Not Wild,” 20.

¹⁵⁵ Abella, “Psychoanalysis and the Arts,” 113.

inclinations and backgrounds).¹⁵⁶ I argue that it is this very kind of open stance of receptive recognition toward the reader/patient that the text/analyst attempts to ultimately facilitate in the readers/patients themselves. Once one experiences the emotionally regulating sensation of being properly “contained,” one can internalize the containing capacity of the “maternal reverie” to “contain” the wildness of self and others in turn, to use the combined logic of Bion and Winnicott.¹⁵⁷

My reading method is overall informed by the assumption that basic theory-construction or model-building are methodological activities foundational to exploring and understanding the complexities of our natural and existential contexts, and are shared across the scientific, humanistic, and artistic disciplines. For example, psychoanalysis, literary criticism, romantic poetics, and speculative fiction all ask whether we could live and think otherwise than via our current habitual styles, and also all share in the motivation to theorize the conditions of this world in the search for better worlds. Mary Shelley and P.B. Shelley’s work as well as N.K. Jemisin and Jeff VanderMeer’s novels are such sites of knowledge production or “knowledge stimulants,” of thinking with popular ideas about the human mind, ecological connectivity, and intimate communities. And all of this work combined resonates particularly well with contemporary psychoanalytic theory that still includes but

¹⁵⁶ I have in mind Katherine Hayles’ concept of constrained constructivism here: “The basic idea is that reality is never present to us as such; rather, our sense perceptions are self-organizing processes that construct the world we know from the unmediated flux, unknowable in itself. We can never know if these models are identical with reality, because we cannot occupy a position from which we could encounter reality independent of our perceptions. Rather, the best we can do is determine if our models are consistent with the unmediated flux as we experience it, a proposition that indexes our observations to the range over which we observe phenomena, the nature of our sensory and perceptual apparatus, the languages available to us, and so forth.” N. Katherine Hayles, “Desiring Agency: Limiting Metaphors and Enabling Constraints in Dawkins and Deleuze/Guattari,” *SubStance* 30, no. 1/2 (2001): 144-59.

¹⁵⁷ I acknowledge that the term “contain” is a counterintuitive word choice given its associations with limiting circumscription, the opposite of liberty and wildness. But the term refers to the self’s metabolizing assistance vis-à-vis the other of bringing wild emotions to productive expression. I will discuss these ideas in more detail in Chapter 2.

“no longer confines itself to the psychodynamic unconscious...” and “that is still very much in process of taking the measure of the many more nonhuman, ‘undomesticated’, ‘common ancestor’ forms of experience that accompany...the specialized functions of the human brain.”¹⁵⁸ In addition to sharing mind-oriented concerns, the writers and the psychoanalysts explored in this dissertation share distinct historical moments with many comparable social, political, and environmental issues. Therefore, I see them as also sharing a set of theoretical concerns about the nature of the human mind in relation with its ecologically-embedded kinship circles and natural environment under duress. While in many ways these works are reflections of one another’s concerns, when read in parallel they also invigorate their partner period and/or discipline’s constructs by multiplying perspectives and significance. I try to model Freud’s own belief that creative writing (in this instance, Romantic speculative literatures) can inspire fresh psychoanalytic constructs and open new avenues for psychoanalytic research alongside my belief that the reverse is also true—that psychoanalytic ideas as speculative myths galvanize and populate Romantic and contemporary speculative literary artefacts.

It is my hope that, in deploying an “applied” method to bring these literary works in dialogue with psychoanalytic accounts, this dissertation succeeds in highlighting important social and political theories about how the development of the self and subjectivity are sensitive and complex biocultural creations, and amenable to responsible re-creation for revolutionary purposes. Contemporary psychoanalysis and the texts that form this archive of developmental entanglements of care implicitly and explicitly theorize about the possibility and effects of transformations in our kinship practices and subjectivities within the context

¹⁵⁸ Fradenburg Joy, “Care of the Wild,” 87.

of ecological dislocation. Overall, this dissertation shows how these texts suggest that a caring capacity for ethical curiosity and intimacy is necessary for the re-imagination of the meanings and possibilities of the “self” within the contemporary non/human “family.” To summarize, I want to think metaphorically alongside Emily Dickinson’s “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain.”¹⁵⁹ It may be “evident that there is much slippery ground in many of our applications from psychoanalysis to biography and literature.”¹⁶⁰ And it is equally true for the wild analyst that it is unforgivable to impose the “Bell” of the “Heavens” on “Being,” which is a vulnerable, open “Ear.”¹⁶¹ We might instead choose the latent potential of dwelling on the unrepresentable outside of the dominant onto-epistemologies of “universal Man” with the “I, and Silence, some strange Race, / Wrecked, solitary, here - ” because when “Reason” breaks we will finish that necrophilic mode of “knowing.”¹⁶² And as we “hit a World, at every plunge,” as Dickinson puts it, we might find what Jackson refers to as some “other relation of being to knowing to feeling to sensing than what organizes our antiblack present,” an anti-Black present that destroys the matrixial and queer plentitudes of all wild nature(s) to greater and lesser degrees.¹⁶³

Sigmund Freud and Melanie Klein’s Concept of the Epistemophilic Instinct

Sigmund Freud’s first psychoanalytic treatment of a child struggling with phobia was documented in the 1909 case study entitled “Analysis of a Phobia in a Five-Year-Old Boy (Little Hans).” Many accounts of this case study focus on its role in legitimizing Freud’s

¹⁵⁹ Emily Dickinson, “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,” in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature, Volume C: 1865-1914*, 17th ed., edited by Nina Baym (New York and London: W W Norton & Company: 2007), 84.

¹⁶⁰ Sigmund Freud and Ernest Jones, *The Complete Correspondence of Sigmund Freud and Ernest Jones, 1908-1939*, edited by R. Andrew Paskauskas (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1995), 408.

¹⁶¹ Dickinson, “Funeral,” lines 13-14.

¹⁶² Dickinson, “Funeral,” lines 15-17, 20.

¹⁶³ Dickinson, “Funeral,” line 19; Jackson, *Becoming Human*, 92.

hypothesis of the existence of childhood sexuality generally and the therapeutic success of the psychoanalytic method for the treatment of phobias. However, for the purposes of this dissertation, the “Little Hans” case study functions as the original source for a particular psychoanalytic tradition focusing on the desire for knowledge in the construction of a unified sense of self and integrated identity. In other words, the launch pad for the concept of the epistemophilic instinct is *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905) and the case of “Little Hans.” It then is picked up by Klein, innovated upon by Bion, and further revised and utilized in mentalizing-based and post-Lacanian psychoanalysis.

In a subsection of *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, which he entitled “The Sexual Researches of Childhood,” Freud identifies the desire for knowledge or the impulse to conduct research activity as a kind of component instinct of the sex drive but not an instinct “proper” in the sense of the death and life drives. Freud believes that “the instinct for knowledge in children is attracted unexpectedly early and intensively to sexual problems and is in fact possibly first aroused by them.”¹⁶⁴ Yet, Freud suggests that the knowledge instinct is also stimulated by the competitive need for domination and mastery over the threatening situation of the introduction of a new sibling. According to Freud, the instinct for knowledge is stimulated into being by murderous sibling rivalry and first manifests as a “clear-sighted” thoughtfulness about the origin of the hated infant sibling. For example, upon Hans’ entrance into the world, his older brother announces that “The stork can take him away again,” and Hans expresses a similar wish regarding his new sister: “[T]he stork should bring no more babies and ... we should pay him money not to bring any more ‘out of

¹⁶⁴ Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on Sexuality*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: Volume 7 (1901-1905)*, trans. James Strachey (London: Vintage Books, 2001), 194.

the big box' where babies are."¹⁶⁵ This thoughtfulness organizes into "infantile sexual theories" that are defined as the fantasies of children that reflect their unconscious sexual organization and the way in which they imagine interpersonal relations in their kinship circles. For example, Freud describes several infantile sexual theories including that there is only one organ which determines the difference between the sexes: boys have a penis, girls are deprived of one, babies are born through the bowel like a discharge of fecal matter, and sexual intercourse is assault or "a sort of ill treatment or act of subjugation."¹⁶⁶

Freud states that the problem of the distinction between the sexes, however, comes later for "the existence of two sexes does not to begin with arouse any difficulties or doubts in children."¹⁶⁷ For Freud, boys form sexual theories that involve the projection of their own morphological conditions onto all human bodies universally and deny contrary beliefs attesting to the "absence" of the penis in other human forms. Freud's idea of "research activity" in boys seems in fact to be the impulse of denial, which leads to the construction of false mythologies of the world in the attempt to ward off anxiety. He suggests that empirical observations that contradict the theory of a universally penis-endowed human species are only reluctantly accepted at the resolution of the oedipal complex, which relieves the fear of castration. The complete oedipal complex is dissolved via acceptance of the incest and murder taboos. The resolution of the complete oedipal complex involves the relinquishment of the murderous rivalry and desire for the father and mother associated with the "natural" bisexual psychic disposition present in all human beings, according to Freud. "Little girls"

¹⁶⁵ Sigmund Freud, "Analysis of a Phobia in a Five-Year-Old Boy," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: Volume 10 (1909)*, trans. James Strachey (London: Vintage Books, 2001), 11 & 68.

¹⁶⁶ Freud, *Three Essays*, 196.

¹⁶⁷ Freud, *Three Essays*, 194.

are apparently more receptive to the “truth” of their castrated condition, and the energy acquired/gained from such a loss is channeled into the wish to become a boy. The girl’s castration complex resolves via the substitution of the desired penis for a future baby and the relinquishment of desire for the mother and aggression against the father. Importantly, the style or configuration through which the oedipal conflict becomes resolved persists as a newly-formed unconscious psychic structure. This structure becomes the fundamental organizer of the individual’s mental life, interpersonal relations, and epistemological openness or closure toward the external world as sources of benevolent information and experience.

In sum, Freud suggests that the knowledge instinct derives from feelings of aggressive rivalry and the desire for omnipotent, possessive domination. These feelings spin the webs of thought into inaccurate, self-serving fantasies and mythologies or theories about the self, external world, and interpersonal relations. It is only out of self-preservation in the face of paternal prohibition that the child reluctantly relinquishes this delusional system of thought. In contrast to this portrayal of the genesis of the knowledge instinct, the “Little Hans” case study suggests an inductive approach—that the knowledge instinct seems to burgeon forth from a native curiosity about the self’s morphological features and the question of their universal application.

Freud reads Hans’ incessant search for the truth behind who indeed has a “widdler” as indicative of the universal human valuation of the penis as superior to the condition of not possessing a penis. But one need not interpret Hans’ refusal to acknowledge the absence of the penis in his female companions from this phallogocentric perspective. On the simplest of levels, it seems that Hans cannot give up the idea of a universal penis because he is thinking

about the organs of girls and boys in terms of their functional similarities and not their structural similarities. For example, Hans does not understand how girls and women “have no widdlers: Mummy has none, Hanna has none, and so on” because this would make it impossible to eliminate urine (as he himself does): “But how do little girls widdle, if they have no widdlers?”¹⁶⁸ His father rather vaguely, and therefore ineffectively, responds to this important question by explaining that “They don’t have widdlers like yours. Haven’t you noticed already, when Hanna was being given her bath?”¹⁶⁹ The combination of his mother’s insistence on her possession of a widdler and his father’s failed attempt at articulating a much-needed taxonomy of widdlers provides an inadequate learning environment in which Hans could digest/process the anxieties stemming from his newfound discoveries.

Furthermore, these particular parental responses create the anxiety over his condition in the first place. One can imagine other parental styles of considering and responding to a child’s anxieties, desires, and hypotheses than his mother’s response to his hand on his penis: “If you do that, I shall send for Dr A to cut off your waddler.”¹⁷⁰ Freud comments that this type of threat is what inaugurates Hans’ castration complex, which unfolds the oedipal situation.

Significantly, Hans’ mistrust of parental information leaves him with no resources with which to process the oedipal situation involving his incestuous attachment feelings towards his mother and his murderous jealousy towards his father. This situation/outcome may be the reason why Freud ends his discussion of the sexual researches of children with the suggestion that, after the oedipus complex is resolved, the child is left with an overall sense of cognitive and affective impotency: “[T]he efforts of the childish investigator are

¹⁶⁸ Freud, “An Analysis of a Phobia,” 31.

¹⁶⁹ Freud, “An Analysis of a Phobia,” 31.

¹⁷⁰ Freud, “An Analysis of a Phobia,” 8.

habitually fruitless, and end in a renunciation which not infrequently leaves behind it a permanent injury to the instinct for knowledge.”¹⁷¹ Moreover, Freud links the expression of the knowledge instinct in early research activity to a sense of alienation. Children’s pursuit of knowledge is an emotionally violent experience of opposition and attempted mastery over mistrusted others: “The sexual researches of these early years of childhood are always carried out in solitude. They constitute a first step towards taking an independent attitude in the world, and imply a high degree of alienation of the child from the people in his environment who formerly enjoyed his complete confidence.”¹⁷² Overall, for Freud, the child’s aggressive instincts and overvaluation of the penis motivate the first expression and frustration of the knowledge instinct.

Melanie Klein’s first paper, read to the Hungarian Psycho-analytical Society in 1919 and entitled “The Development of a Child” (1921), directly and distinctively focuses on the expression of the epistemophilic impulse. She defines the capacity for thinking as dependent on a necessary parental openness to and acknowledgement of children’s sexual interests: “We can spare the child unnecessary repression by freeing – and first and foremost in ourselves – the whole wide sphere of sexuality from the dense veils of secrecy, falsehood and danger spun by a hypocritical civilization upon an affective and uninformed foundation.”¹⁷³ For Klein, parental recognition of childhood enigmas is directly correlated with lifting childhood anxieties and freeing intellectual development. From Klein’s perspective, Hans needed his parents to practice an “unqualified frankness” about sexuality that would have helped to avert pathological expressions of repression and, as a result, could

¹⁷¹ Freud, *Three Essays*, 197.

¹⁷² Freud, *Three Essays*, 197.

¹⁷³ Melanie Klein, “The Development of a Child,” in *Love, Guilt, and Reparation and Other Works 1921-1945* (London: Vintage, 1998), 1.

have had a “decisive influence upon the development of the intellectual powers.”¹⁷⁴ Klein finds that the interactive and detailed interpretations of a child’s conscious and unconscious sexual theories lift the inhibition against phantasy caused by parental withholding of information. For Klein, this parental withholding amounts to enforced “repressed sexual curiosity” that can result in pathological behaviors, but most importantly, often causes the inhibition of curiosity, which destroys creativity/playfulness and arrests intellectual development.¹⁷⁵ In later papers Klein continues to emphasize the importance of the free play of phantasy for cognitive-affective development: “The inhibition and restriction of interests in play leads [sic] to the diminishing of potentialities and interests both in learning and in the whole further development of the mind.”¹⁷⁶

In contrast to Freud, the above findings lead Klein to see the development of the subject as dependent on the child’s early object relations, which are from the start saturated with oedipal impulses. According to Klein, an integrated sense of self in relation to the external world is dependent on a continuous interaction between the child and his or her primary objects (parental figures) in the form of ongoing projective identifications. Projective identification involves pushing parts of the child’s good and bad experiences into the parental figure, and then introjecting or taking in those projected phantasies to build a core self. In contrast to Freud’s notion of primary narcissism, Klein’s early object relations perspective convinced her that the infant actively related and interacted with the parental figure from birth onwards.

¹⁷⁴ Klein, “The Development,” 2.

¹⁷⁵ Klein, “The Development,” 30.

¹⁷⁶ Melanie Klein, “Early Analysis,” in *Love, Guilt, and Reparation and Other Works 1921-1945* (London: Vintage, 1998), endnote 3, 97.

For Klein, at first the child's mental apparatus is capable only of the paranoid-schizoid style of relating to primary objects, and therefore perceives the mother in fragments split into idealized and demonized components rather than as a whole integrated person. During the middle of the first year, the infant enters the depressive position characterized by the melancholic realization of inaccurate and hateful phantasies about the loved object. Earlier, during the paranoid-schizoid position, the child felt there were two separate part-objects: ideal and loved; persecuting and hated. As the child transitions from the paranoid-schizoid mode of relating to his or her primary object to that of the depressive position, the child sees that the simultaneously loved and hated objects are in fact one object who relates to more others (the father) than simply the proto-self. This gives rise to the relinquishment of omnipotent control and a tolerance of the sense that the primary object/parental figure is separate from oneself. The infantile experience of increased integration of internal and external dualities leads to an increase in the ego's capacity for rich and realistic perceptions of the intrapsychic, interpersonal, and external world.

In sum, Klein identified a far earlier onset for oedipal relations which directly lead to the development of the concept of the epistemophilic instinct. For Klein, the epistemophilic instinct is simultaneously activated by curiosity about bodies, the accomplishment of the depressive position, and the rise of oedipal tendencies. Interestingly, Klein suggests that if the epistemophilic impulse is prohibited in the form of unanswered sexual questions or punished phantasies, then the child suffers severe cognitive-affective impairments as a result of the unarticulated and therefore unprocessed guilt associated, in particular, with aggressive phantasies against the parental figures.¹⁷⁷ Early object relations dominated by the

¹⁷⁷ Melanie Klein, "Early Stages of the Oedipal Conflict," in *The Selected Melanie Klein*, ed. Juliet Mitchel (New York: The Free Press, 1986), 72.

mechanism of projective identification can themselves be seen as an early expression of the epistemophilic instinct. Such a mode of interaction is the infant's attempt to avoid annihilating anxiety about intolerable and frustrating sense impressions long enough to reintroject those experiences in a comprehensible form and establish a good internal object around which to organize their subjectivity.

Wilfred Bion's Approach to Knowledge and Desire

Wilfred Bion further develops Klein's concept of the epistemophilic instinct. He suggests that if the infant is faced with a failure in containment in which the parental figure cannot tolerate the introjection of infantile projections or offer the child empathetic, dialogic, and compelling interpretations of his or her phantasies, the child will continue to relate to others and the external world in terms of the paranoid-schizoid mental constellation. This isolates the self within a nightmarish world of persecutory anxiety and epistemological impoverishment.

Bion's approach to the desire for knowledge about self and others in the human species derives from his clinical response to the problems of psychotic patients, who are unable to respond to interpretations as representations and are therefore unable to learn due to a kind of dormant epistemophilic instinct. Working with psychotic patients, Bion discovered that the attempt to uncover and articulate buried unconscious thoughts in an effort to help the patient gain new and health-inspiring knowledge of his or her intrapsychic, interpersonal, and external world becomes impossible if the process of thinking is disturbed. He found that one of the most important factors leading to disturbance in thinking was the maladaptive choice to flee from the reality of an intolerable frustration via the deployment of excessive projective identification. The existence of such disordered thinking in his

patients attuned him to the fact that the process of coming to know reality could not be taken for granted as a simple unfolding of the species' genetic-behavioral potential. Bion posits that the desire for knowledge may be innate to the human condition as a kind of "epistemophilic instinct" but its enactment in the form of coherent thought and cognitive-affective enrichment is a developmental accomplishment. For Bion, if the desire for knowledge is triggered into expression rather than forced into dormancy like a sleeping gene, then the development of a thinking apparatus emerges in coordination with healthy object relations or receptive and tolerant early communications in the form of projective identification between the child and parental figure.

Bion locates the origin of the capacity for thinking in the adaptation of an infantile psychic apparatus that begins paradoxically as "not suited for the purpose," yet is forced to deal with the demands and problems of knowing reality.¹⁷⁸ One of the most important factors that promotes thinking is the dialectical, intersubjective interplay between the infant and mother, which first stimulates the generation of thoughts in the infant. This interaction provides the foundation for and propels the evolution of the immature mental apparatus, meant originally to deal only with "sense impressions relating to the alimentary canal," into an apparatus capable of thinking thoughts.¹⁷⁹ Whereas Winnicott stresses the dominance of maternal influence on infant development, Bion emphasizes that both the environment and individual personality idiosyncrasies affect how the infant will deal with the vicissitudes of thoughts by choosing to evade or modify frustrating experiences.¹⁸⁰ Bion suggests that our ability to cope with dependency (mortality) and our need for love (desire for the other)

¹⁷⁸ W. R. Bion, *Learning from Experience* (London: Karnac Books, 1984), 57.

¹⁷⁹ Bion, *Learning from Experience*, 57.

¹⁸⁰ W. R. Bion, *Second Thoughts: Selected Papers on Psycho-Analysis* (London: Karnac Books, 1984), 114.

depend both on the intensity of an “inborn disposition to excessive destructiveness, hatred, and envy” and relational factors that influence the “use of the mechanisms of splitting and projective identification.”¹⁸¹ For Winnicott, “the function of the mother *at the earliest phase*” is essential to and determining of the formation of the infantile self in terms of a cognitive-affective or epistemological stance toward intimate others and external reality.¹⁸² The “function of the mother” involves her fall into the fog of maternal preoccupation “well-enough” to “enable the infant to reach, at each stage, the appropriate innate satisfactions and anxieties and conflicts.”¹⁸³ In a similar way, Bion depicts “the mother’s capacity for reverie” as a kind of “receptor organ for the infant’s harvest of self-sensation gained by its consciousness.”¹⁸⁴ However, Bion significantly qualifies this formulation to state that the infant’s particular degree of endowed capacity for tolerance or intolerance of frustration is able in some cases to override (for better or worse) the developmental influence of the good maternal “therapeutic response” and/or the rejecting response that makes the mother incapable of “supplying its mental needs.”¹⁸⁵

According to Bion, thinking is dependent on the development of thought, and thought is dependent upon internal and relational factors leading to the toleration of frustration, or the well-adjusted ability to cope with the dependence on and need for “a relationship with live objects.”¹⁸⁶ The primitive form of a “thought” is a pre-conception, which Bion defines as *a priori* knowledge, or instinctual expectations of an external object

¹⁸¹ W.R. Bion, “Attacks on Linking,” in *Projective Identification: The Fate of a Concept*, eds. Elizabeth Spillus and Edna O’Shaughnessy (London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2012), 72.

¹⁸² D.W. Winnicott, “Primary Maternal Preoccupation,” in *Collected Papers: Through Paediatrics to Psycho-Analysis* (London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2001), 301.

¹⁸³ Winnicott, “Primary,” 300.

¹⁸⁴ Bion, *Second Thoughts*, 116.

¹⁸⁵ Bion, *Learning from Experience*, 37.

¹⁸⁶ Bion, *Learning from Experience*, 11.

that can realize or approximate a need to achieve satisfaction. The infant who experiences the coupling of a pre-conception (i.e., the expectation of a breast expressed via the rooting reflex) with its realization (i.e., the milky breast) forms a conception which is always connected to an emotional experience of satisfaction.

Bion reserves the true form of “thought” for the product of a personality able to tolerate the frustration of a pre-conception that is matched with a negative realization (i.e., the experience of a “no-breast” or internally absent breast). Bion’s “thought” is an expectation paired with a representation that encapsulates the infant’s awareness of the discernable absence of the positive realization: “Sooner or later the ‘wanted’ breast is felt as an ‘idea of a breast missing’ and not as a bad breast present.”¹⁸⁷ This “thought” spurs the development of the thinking apparatus by enabling the infant’s ability to understand temporal delay and distinguish between the frustrating experience of a desired expectation and the moment of satisfying action. To form a thought to think the infant must tolerate frustration, which is enabled by the high degrees of receptiveness in the container of maternal reverie. On the other hand, if the infantile personality is unable to tolerate the frustration of the mating of her pre-conception with its negative realization, the “no-breast” is not represented as a frustrating absence but instead becomes a bad object/thing-in-itself fit only for evacuation or aggressive attack. In this case, the thinking apparatus deteriorates into a mere mechanism for purging bad internal objects and attacking the links between self and other. In sum, these differing infantile choices to evade or modify frustration in relation to maternal receptiveness lead to different psychic solutions in the form either of the gradual solidification of a psychotic apparatus for annihilating/impeding thinking or a non-psychotic

¹⁸⁷ Bion, *Learning from Experience*, 34.

apparatus able to think thoughts and engage intellectually with self, others, and the external world.

In normal development, Bion describes this precarious interaction between mother and child as occurring through the communicative channel of “realistic” projective identifications between the contained “rudimentary consciousness” of the infant and the container of maternal reverie.¹⁸⁸ As discussed above, Klein theorizes projective identification as the process whereby an infant entertains an omnipotent phantasy in which she is able to split off a devalued or celebrated aspect of her own personality by inserting it into the objects of external reality. Bion uses her concept of projective identification to articulate the way in which the infant transmits its unwanted affect felt as bad noumena (beta-elements) to the mother, who then metabolizes and converts the unwanted feeling into psychic nutrients felt as good internal objects (alpha-elements) for re-introjection and mental growth via the alpha-function. This “realistic,” communicative projective identification is structural to the possibility of the development and healthy operation of the alpha-function, which promotes thinking. If the mother is unable to tolerate the infant’s “realistic projection” into her, and the infant is unable to tolerate the frustration of the negative realization of a pre-conception that this brings, thinking will be impeded because “alpha-function would be forestalled by immediate evacuation of beta-elements.”¹⁸⁹ The alpha-function is a cognitive mechanism or perhaps epistemophilic structure deriving from the epistemophilic instinct that is responsible for the transformation of beta-elements—sensory impressions and perceptions of sleeping and waking emotional experience—into alpha-elements. Alpha-elements are visual images, auditory patterns, olfactory stimuli, etc. that are

¹⁸⁸ Bion, *Second Thoughts*, 116.

¹⁸⁹ Bion, *Learning from Experience*, 35.

made available for thought, and therefore suitable for learning and psychic storage as “dream thoughts, unconscious waking thinking, dreams, contact-barrier, and memory.”¹⁹⁰

The rudimentary consciousness of the infant develops into the robust thinking apparatus of the adult through the gradual introjection and solidification of the contained and metabolized, intolerable, raw infant feelings and sense data (beta-elements) by maternal reverie into alpha-elements that are then digested for use by the alpha-function. A distorted alpha-function cannot convert beta-elements into alpha-elements for dreaming and thus cannot distinguish between waking or dreaming, reality or hallucination, and is therefore incapable of the discrimination required to form a thought to learn from experience. Instead, the individual is dominated by excessive projective identifications in the form of evacuated beta-elements, and therefore confuses the distinction between self and external world, overwhelmed by the complexity of the Real. In this nightmarish state, the individual “cannot be unaware of any single sensory stimulus: yet such hypersensitivity is not contact with reality.”¹⁹¹

Bion’s apparatus for thinking is also the apparatus for learning from experience as the expression of the desire for knowledge. This apparatus for thinking and knowing as process originates in the successful communicative projective identification of infancy represented by the dynamic feedback that takes place back and forth between the maternal container and the infant contained—that is, if the container has the capacity to “remain integrated and yet lose rigidity.”¹⁹² The activity of knowing, called “K activity,” is only possible through the internalization of the containing capacity of the maternal reverie. To

¹⁹⁰ Bion, *Learning from Experience*, 26.

¹⁹¹ Bion, *Learning from Experience*, 8.

¹⁹² Bion, *Learning from Experience*, 93.

participate in K one must approach a fascinating object through the receptive performance of the state of maternal reverie capable of tolerating shocking infantile projections and “retain[ing] a balanced outlook.”¹⁹³ Bion sees K as a living process where “x is in the state of getting to know y and y is in a state of getting to be known by x” and vice versa.¹⁹⁴ Knowing is not a possession of a piece of knowledge in a final absolute sense. A possessive and rigid sense of the so-called known is a flight from the reality of oftentimes emotionally painful attempts of precarious knowing. This flight betrays an omnipotent personality who is “intolerant of the essential frustration of learning,” and therefore unable to process emotional experience to know reality as anything other than his or her own evacuated beta-elements in the form of persecuting bizarre objects.¹⁹⁵

The Mentalizing Model: A Contemporary Psychoanalytic Approach to Care and the Epistemophilic Impulse

As discussed above, Bion theorizes that the commitment to helping our intimate others develop a secure capacity for thinking, as the healthy expression of the epistemophilic impulse, is an issue of reciprocal communication. Building upon Bion’s insights, a recent extension of attachment theory into psychoanalysis has generated a mentalizing model for development, which highlights the centrality of the capacity of “epistemic trust” for the formation of the individual psyche.¹⁹⁶ Mentalization theory offers a compelling framework for thinking alongside Jeff VanderMeer’s explorations of love and attachment in the Anthropocene era.

¹⁹³ Bion, “Attacks on Linking,” 71.

¹⁹⁴ Bion, *Learning from Experience*, 47.

¹⁹⁵ Bion, *Learning from Experience*, 65.

¹⁹⁶ Peter Fonagy and Elizabeth Allison, “The Role of Mentalizing and Epistemic Trust in the Therapeutic Relationship,” *Psychotherapy* 51, no. 3 (2014): 372.

The mentalizing model develops and integrates evolutionary and ethological perspectives from attachment theory with many concepts from the object relations school of psychoanalytic research to hypothesize a developmental trajectory from secure attachment relations, to “mentalization” and “epistemic trust.” Whereas classical psychoanalysis emphasizes the internal world of the sexual and aggressive “drives” as the primary motives of human behavior, the mentalizing approach prioritizes the mental structures that arise out of early social experiences. Because attachment relationships function to provide a sense of security and regulate emotions in humans, this view sees the subjective experience of the environment from the very beginning of life as crucially shaping our representations of selfhood and the world. Attachment relationships also enable the development of “epistemic trust,” which is structural to the possibility of the expression of positive epistemophilia and therefore general cognitive development and interpersonal/social literacy. As such, the mentalizing model simultaneously “emphasizes the role of gene-environment interplay” while hypothesizing that the “capacity to mentalize emerges in the context of early attachment relationships and is a key determinant of self-organization and affect regulation.”¹⁹⁷

The mentalizing capacity is described as “imaginative mental activity” that on the most basic level allows us to *speculate reasonably* about self/other mental experiences, to reflect upon our own and others’ emotions and behavior in terms of mental states, and so to perceive necessary boundaries between self and other, as well as to distinguish between inner and outer reality.¹⁹⁸ And the acquisition of mentalizing is also key to the further

¹⁹⁷ Fonagy, et al., “Reconciling Psychoanalytic Ideas,” 789.

¹⁹⁸ Peter Fonagy and Elizabeth Allison, “What is Mentalization? The Concept and its Foundations in Developmental Research,” in *Minding the Child: Mentalization-Based Interventions with Children*,

development of the presubject's nascent expressions of epistemic trust, or "an individual's willingness to consider another person's communication of new knowledge as trustworthy, generalizable, and relevant to the self."¹⁹⁹ In short, epistemic trust is the term for "capacity to trust others as a source of knowledge about the world."²⁰⁰ The theory of mentalization challenges the Cartesian assumption that the mind is transparent to itself and that our ability to reflect on our own minds is innate. Instead, the self/other mentalizing capacity is a developmental social achievement, perhaps motivated by the epistemophilic instinct, and triggered into expression as a result of the parent-child intersubjective processes of empathetic mirroring, intuitive understanding, and appropriate emotional response.

Following Bion's notion of the container and contained, in developmental terms, functioning attachment relationships help the infant move from a state of pre-reflection and undifferentiated experience to an ability to reflect on the thoughts, feelings, intentions, and behaviors of a self that is separate and different from the other. Secure, mentalizing and reflexive selfhood is acquired through a co-creative, intersubjective framework composed of interactive observations of the infant's own emotions mirrored by trusted attachment figures. Mentalizing skills develop under conditions in which the attachment figure is able and willing to think about, understand, and respond to the specificities of their infant's unique mind. Crucially, the infant's experience of having his or her mind represented in the mind of the other allows for developmental separation-individuation and an appreciation of the other as a source of different knowledge content. Thus, attachment-figure mentalizing also

Young People and their Families, eds. Nick Midgley and Ioanna Vrouva (New York: Routledge, 2013), 11.

¹⁹⁹ Peter Fonagy, George Gergely, and Mary Target, "The parent-infant dyad and the construction of the subjective self," *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 48 no. 3/4 (2007): 32.

²⁰⁰ Fonagy, et al., "Reconciling Psychoanalytic Ideas," 780.

establishes epistemic trust (trust in the authenticity and personal relevance of interpersonally transmitted information) within the parent-child dyad. Infantile epistemic trust lays the foundation for a curious, open, and confident orientation toward the self and social world as sources of potentially trustworthy and valuable information.

Mentalizing is a developmentally later achievement than earlier emotional constellations and modes of communicating with and relating to attachment figures like excessive projective identification. Projective identification is an unconscious strategy for reducing emotional distress, in which pleasures and anxieties become associated with good and bad aspects of the self, and are defensively inserted into objects in external reality. Good-enough attachment figures mediate the persecutory intensity of “bad” projected external objects by carefully considering, understanding, and responding to the infant’s signals of emotional disequilibrium in the form of “ostensive cues” (e.g., eye contact, contingent reactivity, special vocal tones, etc.). The caregiver’s effort to recover emotional stability allows for the negative emotion to be re-assimilated into the self in a now recognizable, and therefore more tolerable, form. Ostensive cues trigger the sense of self as a center of meaning and stimulate epistemic trust in the infant, both of which promote receptivity to new knowledge and experience in cycles of self-calibration and growth. In other words, attachment figures who consistently succeed in helping the infant to make meaning out of emotionally overwhelming experiences create a sense of stable expectation and thereby instill neural systems that enable an epistemological stance of trust and receptivity toward social others. Imagining early emotional experience in terms of dialectical cycles of projective identification is useful for understanding how the infant communicates/transmits unwanted affect to the attachment figure, who then metabolizes and converts the toxic feeling into

psychic nutrients (i.e., the recognizable and thinkable elements characteristic of reflective functioning) for re-introjection and mental growth.

An individual will struggle developmentally if made to prematurely accommodate the emotional needs of an attachment figure who, because of an unexamined personal history of anxiety, abuse, trauma, etc., is defensively unable or refuses to “know” self or other for fear of being overwhelmed by new and threatening emotional information. Such developing individuals will completely restructure their psychic needs in order to maintain whatever attachment style the attachment figure can offer. This absence of recognition or “chronic misattunement” often results in insecure attachment styles that are then extrapolated onto all realms of social life throughout life, and which have been documented to take the following forms: 1) The avoidant strategy denies the need for a response by the distrusted attachment figure; 2) The anxious strategy desperately focuses on the availability of the attachment figure to the detriment of cognitive or emotional independence and self-understanding; and 3) The disorganized strategy oscillates in extremes of dissociation and intense intimacy with a hypervigilant distrust of self and other. The nascent self learns about its “self” via the type of recognition that is offered by the attachment style of its earliest caregivers. The self thus develops a “self-concept” along the lines laid out by the style of attachment deemed most advantageous to surviving/getting along with its parental figures. In the absence of recognition of the individual by the attachment figure, the potential for intimate interaction and a desire to learn about the world is distorted into the expectation that self-other-world relations are only ever able to result in neglect, abandonment, or disintegration.

If the parent is unable to contain the infant's persecutory fears and anxieties (e.g., responds with overzealous affectedness or neglect), the infant will insecurely attach and generally feel threatened by new information because of the installation of excessively projective relations to external reality. Insecure individuals can display a tendency to populate internal and external reality with nightmarish forms of "undigested" emotional stimuli, or with what Bion calls "bizarre objects" as discussed in the previous section. From this perspective, a lack of attachment-figure mentalizing leads the infant to the projection of threatening or disappointed attachment expectations onto the self, social world, and nonhuman "nature" and a corresponding epistemological impoverishment. Indeed, the concept of excessive projection may help explain why Werner Herzog in his film *Grizzly Man* (2005) can "discover no kinship, no connection, no understanding, no mercy" and "only the overwhelming indifference of nature" instead of being able to mentalize about a population of temperamental, hungry, and rambunctious bears worthy of careful and cautious communicative engagement. Timothy Treadwell of course fares no better in his romanticized attachment fantasy that disguises a deeper mistrust of the social world as attested to in his misanthropic outbursts against civilization and dizzying declarations of idealized animal love: "I'm in love with my animal friends. I'm in love with my animal friends. I'm in love with my animal friends. I'm very, very troubled."

The literature on mentalization theory describes the mentalizing capacity of the attachment figure as a kind of special sensitivity to changes in the frame of mind of the infant. Once the mind of the infant has been assessed, the attachment figure ideally responds in the moment with a social demonstration of their own experience and understanding of that infant's subjective experience. In order to communicate to the infant the

developmentally essential sense of recognition of their experience as understandable and valuable, the attachment figure's mentalizing sensitivity and careful attunement to infantile intentional states are paired alongside the deployment of "ostensive cues."²⁰¹ Ostensive cues signal the parental desire to communicate to the infant about his or her internal experience. These parental affective displays or mirroring performances need to be associated with but slightly different from what the infant is actually feeling and are often importantly executed in a mode of "play-acting." Ostensive cues are meant to communicate to the infant that their emotions are relevant but not apocalypse-worthy (in terms of being capable of permanently destroying the self or other), that s/he/they is recognized as an intentional agent worthy of engagement, and finally that his or her subjective experience has socially generalizable applications that are not necessarily continuous with a universal subjective experience. Playful and ironic imitations of the presubject's subjective experiences rescue them from the isolation of omnipotent solipsism by signaling that s/he/they "must go beyond specific physical experience and acquire information that will be relevant across a range of settings."²⁰²

Mentalizing theory draws upon the theory of natural pedagogy, which argues that these playful performances or communicative signals are an evolutionary adaptation that ensures "a highly effective and efficient transfer of culturally relevant knowledge between human beings."²⁰³ These cues of communicative intent generate a state of attention called the pedagogical stance which primes the infant to receptively think that the "subsequent communication will contain information specifically relevant to them that should be

²⁰¹ Fonagy and Allison, "The Role of Mentalizing," 373.

²⁰² Fonagy and Allison, "The Role of Mentalizing," 374.

²⁰³ Fonagy and Allison, "The Role of Mentalizing," 373.

remembered and encoded with other knowledge relevant to social situations.”²⁰⁴ In other words, secure attachment experiences founded upon a strong structure of playful communicative recognition promote the formation of epistemic trust. In sum, epistemic trust of self, other, and the social world, and the resulting receptive style of learning (e.g., cognitive style or epistemophilic stance) is stimulated in the infant by the “consistent emotional responses of a sensitive caretaker [that] are clearly expressed to the child via ostensive cues such as making eye contact, accurate turn-taking, appropriate and contingent (in time, tone, and content) reactivity, and frequent use of a special communicational tone that addresses the child’s experiential world.”²⁰⁵ This epistemic trust lays the foundation for further knowledge accumulation from the attachment figure about the wider world. In this way, secure attachment promotes the capacity of mentalization or a self-conscious identity, and “opens a channel for information to be used for knowledge transfer between generations.”²⁰⁶ An “adequately individuated self” capable of finding knowledge or communication from the social environment personally relevant and usable “across contexts, independent of the learning experience” as well as tolerating “information that challenges...existing assumptions” can only form in interaction with a mentalizing and responsive attachment figure.²⁰⁷

As such, according to this perspective, mental disorders are conceptualized as impairments in the capacity of the individual for social learning measured in terms of epistemic trust versus epistemic hypervigilance or mistrust of partners, teachers, etc. The mentalizing model suggests that an insecure attachment history creates distinct forms of

²⁰⁴ Fonagy and Allison, “The Role of Mentalizing,” 373.

²⁰⁵ Fonagy and Allison, “The Role of Mentalizing,” 373.

²⁰⁶ Fonagy and Allison, “The Role of Mentalizing,” 374.

²⁰⁷ Fonagy and Allison, “The Role of Mentalizing,” 375.

violent or closed epistemic states/response-styles to new information and objects of study, which often lead to the destruction of reflective functioning, social intelligence, and the “intergenerational transmission of knowledge.”²⁰⁸ Although, it is worth acknowledging that epistemologies of imposition and rigidity can also lead to profitable and/or useful discoveries. But in general, dysfunctional and neglectful care conditions produce insecure attachment formulations and relations to external reality marked by “cognitive closure, a lower tolerance for ambiguity, and a more pronounced tendency for dogmatic thinking.”²⁰⁹ Additionally, from an evolutionary-developmental perspective, an impaired mentalizing capacity could also be an advantage to survival in certain social contexts that require for survival the capacity to oscillate between emotional imperviousness and intense intimacy. However, mentalizing about others and the experience of being mentalized by others is more advantageous because it dramatically increases individual resilience to traumatic circumstances, in terms of self-control, emotion regulation, accurate social understanding, and information receptivity. While mentalization is an ongoing process requiring maintenance and is therefore subject to temporary or permanent disappearance under adverse interpersonal conditions, it is also a capacity that can be developed or reestablished in later life in supportive contexts of “feeling understood,” such as that offered in the therapeutic setting but also potentially offered by other mentalizing companions or mediums like books or artwork.²¹⁰ Being mentalized later in life has been shown to reshape dysfunctional attachment styles and “initiate more trusting interpersonal relationships,”

²⁰⁸ Fonagy, et al., “Reconciling Psychoanalytic Ideas,” 788.

²⁰⁹ Fonagy, et al., “Reconciling Psychoanalytic Ideas,” 795.

²¹⁰ Fonagy and Allison, “The Role of Mentalizing,” 377.

which cause shifts in mental function or epistemophilic expressivity allowing for increased receptivity to challenging knowledge as personally and culturally relevant.²¹¹

Since it is impossible to ever have absolute and fully accurate access to the thoughts and feelings of others, as well as to our “own mental experience, particularly in relation to emotionally charged issues,” mentalizing activity demands sensitive and mature, imaginative and speculative “leaps.”²¹² The mentalizing capacity humbles and calibrates our speculations by enabling us to reflect upon the impulse to excessively project onto external reality and m/others our own image of anxiety and desire. In this way, speculative mentalizing and speculative fiction/poetry intensify our desires to know, to discover, to seek the before-unapprehended in the mode of matrixial epistemophilia, which I think of as a loving “force that pushes toward a meeting of mind and world, an expression of a passionate longing for reality—a loving of it; much as in true love, one wishes to know the beloved as he is, not in some idealized version,” even when this causes us pain.²¹³ In this context, the mentalizing model is indispensable for social and environmental justice projects such as the “post-Cartesian reconstruction of the mind” into a subjectivity able to recognize the intentional, agentic, and communicative capacities of all “earth others.”²¹⁴ Indeed, the mentalizing capacity resembles and could help sharpen our skills in ethical “perspective taking.”²¹⁵ It might then be possible to extrapolate such a capacity to care from the individual to the global scales of collective justice.²¹⁶ The mentalizing capacity to care could

²¹¹ Fonagy and Allison, “The Role of Mentalizing,” 377.

²¹² Fongy and Allison, “What is Mentalization?,” 11.

²¹³ Blass, “The Quest for Truth,” 331.

²¹⁴ Plumwood, *Environmental Culture*, 177.

²¹⁵ Lisa M. Osbeck’s *Values in Psychological Science: Re-Imagining Epistemic Priorities at a New Frontier* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 105.

²¹⁶ Hollway, *The Capacity to Care*, 126-127.

also strengthen practices of “interspecies etiquette,” which involve the “exercise of imaginative embodiment in which one strives to approximate the experience of another being through a keen attentiveness to their gestures and actions.”²¹⁷

If literary and intersubjective forms of speculative mentalizing cultivate an increased understanding of our relationships and our own behaviors and actions, and therein promote a receptive relation to external reality as a rich source of challenging knowledge and experience, then such an epistemophilic sensibility is also crucial to reformulating the desires and desirability of readers. Forms of speculative mentalizing thus open us up to greater “entangled” communion with wild nonhumans and unfamiliar m/other natures as also full of worthy and dynamic learning partners. Some contemporary speculative literature indeed serves this mentalizing function for individuals in Anthropocene times of stress and trauma, which may aggravate and/or activate destructive defenses and dysfunctional interpersonal communication strategies. VanderMeer’s focus on the development of the reflexive mind in his fiction, in the context of the Anthropocene, arguably serves such a mentalizing function for readers. VanderMeer suggests in his novels that we need to be taught how to mentalize and be mentalized by our conspecific and interspecies companions—to communicate carefully with the internal and external monstrous m/other natures who can inspire vitality *and* shatter worlds, and who are all around us from infancy throughout the human lifecycle. In other words, one of the major aims of the dissertation is to prepare the way for an extension of matrixial melancholia/positive epistemophilia and mentalizing theory and practice to our consideration of and engagement with nonhuman creatures and this is part of the accomplishment of the set of writers that I examine.

²¹⁷ Warkenstin, “Interspecies Etiquette,” 119.

Chapter 2. The Wild Analysis of Epistemophilic Wondering/Wandering in “Black Mater” Figures, Maternal/Newborn Fugitivity, and Matrixial Trans-subjects

My theoretical focus on the earliest conditions for tolerating and producing thought and co-creative, participatory approaches to knowledge requires two augmentations to the previous chapter’s discussion of the mentalizing framework: a) Ettinger’s attention to prenatal conditions, and their ongoing influence on thought development, significantly qualifies any overstatements of the impact of postnatal practices of recognition on subjectivity; and b) The prior theorizations implicitly equate “white” with “human,” an equation that cannot be presumed in the history of thought or of treatment of non-white infants. Holding these two qualifications in mind, I speculate that attachment figures with the caring capacity to mentalize and presubjects who successfully internalize the epistemic trust necessary for dialogic learning are able to do so because they draw upon and/or rejuvenate access to the narratives and aesthetics of “primordial” borderlinking capacities of matrixial epistemophilia and metamorphic melancholia. Matrixial modes of engagement are possible to learn and further develop at any stage or place in life, a view that is no doubt influenced by P.B. Shelley’s claim that the “melody in the flowing brooks and the rustling of the reeds beside them” have an “inconceivable relation to something within the soul” that can “awaken the spirits to a dance of breathless rapture, and bring tears of mysterious tenderness to the eye.”²¹⁸

I extend my discussion of the preceding chapter here first to argue that the creation of “mature” matrixial, fugitive/nomadic trans-subjects, who un/consciously cultivate and nurture the positive epistemophilic sensibility, is only possible in conditions wherein the

²¹⁸ Shelley, “On Love,” 504.

“master” subject’s denying/negating defenses against knowing the enigmatic, overwhelming difference in the self and m/other are ruptured. But as previously discussed, it is crucial that newly destabilized, defamiliarized subjects are guided with care away from defensive strategies and narrative logics that renormalize the status quo and deny the melancholy pain of loss and the fear of the “sublime” unknown. If such care is taken, then such subjects can enter into the interminable work of ethical mourning—the “metramorphic quest and the cognition of its anamnesis.”²¹⁹ I argue that such ethical mourning is a kind of “metramorphic melancholia” necessary for (re)fostering the epistemophilic capacity to *wonder* at all that in the m/other and “ourselves remains unconscious and mysterious,” foreclosed or repressed, “all the potentialities for love and attachment that have the potential to surprise us, all of the feelings and reactions that may be called out through new encounters.”²²⁰ Indeed, many of the writers and theorists with whom I engage implicitly and explicitly interrogate the aesthetics of the sublime for the way it normalizes, naturalizes, and further inculcates sadistic and manic defenses against the infantile experiences of sublime experience/melancholic loss by distorting reality into a mirror of western, white, masculinist superiority. By way of contrast, these writers and theorists construct central protagonists whose metramorphic melancholia and epistemophilic sensibilities enable them to wonder at/wander into utopian visions of just, joyful, and queer homeplaces “where past violence and marginalization can be acknowledged and mourned, where conflict can be experienced and resolved, where the diversity of cultures, species, and habitats is appreciated and protected, and where dialogue and love can flourish.”²²¹ Following Mary Watkins and Helene

²¹⁹ Ettinger, “Demeter-Persephone Complex, Entangled Aerials of the Psyche, and Sylvia Plath,” *English Studies in Canada* 40, no. 1 (2014): 124.

²²⁰ Watkins and Shulman, *Toward Psychologies of Liberation*, 152.

²²¹ Watkins and Shulman, *Toward Psychologies of Liberation*, 131.

Shulman’s suggestion that an “ethics and aesthetics of interruption” has “emerged in the last decades in a number of fields,” in this chapter I argue that these texts contain a related matrixial, mentalizing ethics and aesthetics of wonder that has the same effect of encouraging readers to undertake the epistemophilic processes necessary for embodying “psychologies of liberation” that are free to co/in-habit(u)ate in wild, new homeplaces of queer plenitude:

One has to dis-identify and dissociate with fixed understandings of both the self and the other, and sink down into spaces of doubt, questioning, and innovation to articulate the basic uncanniness (*unheimlichkeit*) of one’s own insertion in life. Here one finds the site of forgotten memories and feelings, dreams, gaps in understanding, symptoms and discomforts, shame and reconciliation, which belong uniquely to one’s own place in history. From this perspective, a stance committed to the certain and the familiar is a kind of exile from which one awakens to return home.²²²

Indeed, the theoretical perspective of this dissertation is rooted in the hope that a dialogue between Romanticism studies, psychoanalysis, Black radical theorizing, and ecocritical aesthetic theory will illuminate how the “nomadic” or “wild” desire to know the m/other—as a form of matrixial, creative self-dissolution and/or “holding”—relates across different speculative representations, investigations, and enactments of the positive epistemophilic impulse.

Compared to the quantity of efforts made to recuperate the symbolic of the sublime the aesthetic paradigm of wonder has been largely overlooked. Regarding attempts at the

²²² Watkins and Shulman, *Toward Psychologies of Liberation*, 152.

recuperation of the sublime, an emphasis on the sublime's internal, unforeseen capacity for undermining itself, and the politics for which it stands, via its construction of disenfranchised wild other natures is quite distinct from unconditional, openly celebratory theories of the unrealized promise of various "feminine" sublimines. For example, Joanna Zylynska describes the feminine sublime as a destabilizing experience that does not "capitalize on difference in order to enhance modern self-hood with its founding institutions and economies; instead it constitutes an ethical moment in which absolute and indescribable otherness is welcome."²²³ Constructing inversions and/or value reversals to stage an encounter with an "absolute other" figured as an unqualified revolutionary "antidote" to the "ills of Euro-American cultural values," to borrow Jack Halberstam's formulations, does not in and of itself disappear the genre of Christian-Platonic Humanist Man produced in significant part, at least historically, via egotistical/phallogentric sublime aesthetics.²²⁴ In fact, many critics, including Val Plumwood and Leela Gandhi, among many other anti-colonial thinkers, caution that theorists who "attempt to immerse themselves in the idiom of an imaginary otherness" run the risk of replicating the original, violent "colonial terms of encounter."²²⁵ Along this line of thinking, the continued theoretical use of any derivative of the vast body of critical and creative work in feminine sublime aesthetics should give us pause if that work does not acknowledge and explore Jackson's important findings that the anti-Black, androcentric liberal humanist tradition and its aesthetics are structured via the

²²³ Joanna Zylynska, *On Spiders, Cyborgs, and Being Scared: The Feminine and the Sublime* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2001), 4.

²²⁴ Halberstam, "Wildness, Loss, Death," 139.

²²⁵ Halberstam, "Wildness, Loss, Death," 139. For additional, classic arguments against "inversion," which to be clear, Halberstam does not use explicitly in the essay I quote from above, see Homi Bhabha, Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, etc.

“matrilineal mark of foreclosure ascribed to black mater.”²²⁶ Wittingly or unwittingly, such scholarship reproduces and is complicit by virtue of its silence with the masculinist, anti-Black, imperial strictures of normative truths of power/knowledge interwoven in egotistical/phallogocentric sublime aesthetics.²²⁷ As Louise Economides persuasively demonstrates in her extensive study of wonder as an important alternative to sublime aesthetics for environmental politics, unqualified attempts to recuperate sublimity under the sign of the feminine ignore its “problematic historical manifestations” and do not break with its violent “logic of mastery.”²²⁸

But perhaps there is something of a subversive “wonder” as opposed to a sublime aesthetics/ethics in the theoretical potential of constructs of “queer wildness.” I argue that the aesthetics, ethics, and performances of wonder and queer wildness together have collective psychosocial benefits, despite the fact that the terms “wild,” “wildness,” and “wilderness” are all said to belong to a “terminology that has been represented as exhausted by its imperial function.”²²⁹ Furthermore, to my mind, this wondering queer wildness suggests methods of performative “disidentification” and deconstruction, followed by cautious reconstructions, that are best described as “the mythic subversion of myth.”²³⁰ In this chapter, I explore how Jackson’s concept of the “black *mater*,” Economides’ qualified promotion of wonder as an alternative to sublimity, and Halberstam’s careful account of queer wildness shed light on the non-universalist, post/non-identity, post/non-natural, post/non-Human “minoritarian” performative models of a “feminine” subjectivity that,

²²⁶ Jackson, *Becoming Human*, 108.

²²⁷ Jackson, *Becoming Human*, 108.

²²⁸ Economides, *The Ecology of Wonder*, 18-19.

²²⁹ Halberstam, “Wildness, Loss, Death,” 140.

²³⁰ Michael Taussig qtd. in Halberstam, “Wildness, Loss, Death,” 144.

alongside “her” chosen and strange intimates, make a wild “homeplace,” bell hooks’ term for a site of radical psychosocial refuge and political resistance.²³¹ As examples, I focus on Ursula K. Le Guin’s nomadic-maternal fugitive subjectivities, Joy James’ subjectivity of the maroon philosopher, and Bracha L. Ettinger’s “co/in-habit(u)ating” matrixial trans-subjectivity. My primary focus in this chapter is to set up the theoretical framework that will allow me to put Ettinger’s matrixial theory in conversation with P.B. Shelley’s wild aesthetic of nomadic matrixial wonder in *Epipsychidion* and *The Witch of Atlas* in so far as it acts as a forerunner to the matrixial trans-subjectivities performed by N.K. Jemisin’s wonder-full “black mater” figures in her *Broken Earth* series and Jeff VanderMeer’s maternal fugitives from *The Southern Reach Trilogy*, *Borne*, and *The Strange Bird*.

Thus, this theoretical chapter sets up the framework for this dissertation and gestures toward a larger, future project that answers the following questions: How does P.B. Shelley’s language and imagery create mythical and metaphorical figures to perform and describe the role of the “maternal” and/or “matrixial” trans-subject in gestation, development, and creative co-birth? And how does his legacy influence contemporary speculative literature that features/portrays post/non-Human potential for more wild, caring relations, especially those represented by N.K. Jemisin and Jeff VanderMeer’s work? I also take up and apply to P.B. Shelley and N.K. Jemisin’s work a qualified version of Ettinger’s claim that a paradigm shift is occurring in contemporary aesthetic discourse away from an analysis of the phallic structures that dominated the artworks of past eras to a recognition of the matrixial dimensions of contemporary art. First, I think Ettinger has good reasons to claim that the “matrixial prism mainly concerns contemporary art,” including how “the

²³¹ bell hooks, “Homeplace (a site of resistance),” in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (New York and London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2015).

matrix has taken on urgency for us because artists are working in a world where trauma is no longer an isolated or individual event, but where trauma of the Other and the world infiltrate us from without and with-in.”²³² In this quote Ettinger de-emphasizes the concern over individual psychosexual development and adulthood mental functioning in her own work, but otherwise makes the important point that increased global connectivity may produce a highly traumatic psychic response to such continuous impingements by Others. All that being said, I am in total agreement with her idea that “Now that the matrixial sphere has been discovered, we can similarly find the matrixial gaze in past periods, to different intensities and in different variations. It is just a matter of searching and bringing to light.”²³³ Therefore, as I will argue in Chapter 6, at the level of the psychosexual individual, on the one hand, the wild and roving matrixial figures of P.B. Shelley and N.K. Jemisin’s work do indeed transfix us in their matrixial gaze as if from a painting to “transform the amnesia of lone traumatic events into a memory that can only emerge in sharing with an-other, a memory that can only be glimpsed in languishing com-passion, in relations of separateness-in-jointness.”²³⁴ Images that invoke the sense of a matrixial gaze peering from their texts provoke “affects of wonder and awe, languishing and com-passion, grace and solace, anxiety and fragility—responses that enable one’s own transformation and testify that the painting has opened a new vulnerability.”²³⁵ On the other hand, another significant part of both of their projects is at the level of such social vulnerability where “traces of a buried-alive trauma of the world are reborn from amnesia into co-emerging memory,” an aesthetic-

²³² Bracha L. Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, ed. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2006), 224, endnote 33.

²³³ Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, 224, endnote 33.

²³⁴ Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, 151-152.

²³⁵ Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, 152.

ethical experience that “threatens us with disintegration while linking us and allowing our participation in a drama wider than that of our individual selves.”²³⁶

Therefore, I am especially interested in the question of how P.B. Shelley’s matrixial performances and representations compare to attempts by N.K. Jemisin (and other broadly construed “Shelleyan” contemporary writers of speculative fantasy) to build a therapeutic planet of queer, matrixial wildness by working on, with, and against dominant aesthetic ideologies such as the phallogocentric sublime.²³⁷ In other words, the stakes of my argument rest on the following claims: 1) The specific aesthetic-ethical styles we deploy to take account of the “matrixial” “mediums” in which we culture our creatures matters immensely; 2) Ettinger’s matrixial theory and art is one such mode of subversion (as opposed to a reversal or inversion) for imagining the biocultural creation of non-Humans at the level of actual interpersonal/social performance and fantasy; 3) Ettinger’s theory of art also applies to literary texts and in so doing provides a reading practice that enables the discernment of and vulnerability to matrixial trans-subjective performative images and affects like those found in Shelley and Jemisin’s work, among others to explore more fully in the future; 4) Actual and literary representations of interpersonal and un/conscious performances of matrixial trans-subjectivity emphasize its significant role in development—as a fantasy of a prenatal and primarily embodied modality of life—as well as later in adult subjectivity as a learnable capacity for maternal/matrixial caregiving and vulnerable, “newborn” “self-

²³⁶ Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, 152 & 154.

²³⁷ I want to be clear that Ettinger does not support what she describes as the wholesale feminist “ban” on sublime aesthetics: “Deconstructing the ways these terms serve the ‘masters’ and finding different meaning for them seems to me a more promising perspective for feminist art history research.” I share this view to some extent and explore below some dimensions of what some might see as a matrixial sublime aesthetic in her work. However, I think that an aesthetic of wonder, as briefly sketched below, may provide more explanatory power and descriptive color to her matrixial theory than a “deconstructed” sublime. See Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, 217, endnote 16.

fragilization” with salutary effects. 5) Finally, both of these interconnected instances of matrixial trans-subject performativity, if mutually and reciprocally imagined via texts and engaged in more widely (alongside other minority, queer, wild performances of survival and flourishing), can potentially carry into and enhance the communicative acts at the heart of all the different types of our relationships without reducing us or them to just another codified identity with a new matrixial label. Like Bollas’ theory of the transformational object, Benjamin’s intersubjective recognition theory, and Fonagy, Allison, and Target’s mentalization theory, Ettinger’s matrixial theory may also have some modest socially generalizable applications as salutary performative fantasies and reading practices worthy of future exploration, but applications that are nonetheless definitively not necessarily continuous with so-called universal subjective experience.

The method of analysis throughout the dissertation does not strive to articulate the “truth” or “objective” value of the psychoanalytic theories I explore as an empirical display or spectacle of othered subjectivities or even to make claims about the real experiences of actual mothers, fathers, or caregivers. Instead, I try to show how some psychoanalytic developmental narratives, but especially matrixial theories of the m/Other, are potentially useful as loose metaphors or analogies for guiding our thinking and working through different mental and emotional constellations that we navigate and return to as oscillating waves throughout the life cycle. So, in this section as well, I do not intend to suggest any universal or conclusively descriptive or prescriptive implementations of Ettinger’s theory of matrixial trans-subjectivity. Rather, regardless of whether or not a given psychoanalytic thinker deploys the discourse of “objectivity” in an attempt to give their theory some degree of validity, I find their theories compelling insofar as they function as useful *speculative*

stories and *narrative fantasies* that increase everyday flourishing by helping individuals “self-mythologize” and that also inspire theoretical thinking about posthuman onto-epistememes and ethics (the latter of which, at the end of the day, are also stories; hopefully beneficial stories, but myths nonetheless). In this sense, these speculative fantasies (both literary and psychoanalytic) contain the “wildness” that is the before-unapprehended “spirit of the unknown,” the matrixial spirit that educates our epistemophilic desires not only for transformation but for transformation through encounters with difference that both entail new knowledge and that destructure conventional patterns of thinking.²³⁸

Thus, in this section, I highlight the affinities between Ettinger, Shelley, and Jemisin’s relational models of matrixial trans-subjectivity to show how they are pragmatically/performatively useful in the following ways: First, they promote provisional, “never-ending” *narrative fantasies* of self-other multitudes (that are not limitless infinitudes). In other words, Shelley and Jemisin’s metaphorical images of Ettinger’s idea of the matrix “as signifier of ‘transformative transferential potentialities in a shareable resonance sphere’ offers the structuring of signification and representation to dimensions of subjectivity that we have always known in a sense, but have not been able to think.”²³⁹ And second, in doing so, the metaphors within Shelley and Jemisin’s narratives may give rise to more fulfilling and ethical imaginary, real, and symbolic onto-epistemologies of wildness beyond the categorizing phallogocentric logic of identity where formerly unrecognized non-I(s)/objects instead become perceived as different subjects in co-emergence, in some cases, and, in others, turn out to be one of one’s own “lost” and partial I(s). In short, I argue that

²³⁸ Michael Taussig qtd. in Halberstam, “Wildness, Loss, Death,” 147.

²³⁹ Griselda Pollock, Introduction, “Femininity: Aporia or Sexual Difference?,” in *The Matrixial Borderspace*, ed. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2006), 21.

these speculative narratives that represent matrixial trans-subjectivities also point toward other epistemophilic modes and methods for *desiring* to “know” and interact with the wild natures of self and other that are distinct for the way they simultaneously hold in tension a “third” space of intersubjective relations between partial subjects alongside individuating (“separate”) parts of those same presubjects. Related to the differing modes for “knowing,” matrixial trans-subjectivities have capacities for the simultaneous expression of a unique combination of creative and ethical affects that are “normally” kept emotionally repressed/compartimentalized and taboo, including “nonprohibited prebirth” valences of primary trust, wonder (“fascinace”), compassion, and non-oedipal erotic jouissance. Such wild sensibilities gesture toward the fantasy of having the enigmatic, wild nature of our psychosexual desires “originally” and “authentically” recognized. This is a fantasy that I think is essential to subjective and sociopolitical wellbeing rather than the developmental trajectory that prohibits, rejects, and/or castrates various genres of being human into unacknowledged/not-worked-through melancholy formations of subjectivity. But, as I will discuss in the last chapter in the context of VanderMeer’s *Borne* novel, “failure is the measure of recognition” in caregiving contexts dominated by oedipalizing assumptions and projections.²⁴⁰ However, I argue here that matrixial theory and literature may function to foster the fantasy of foreclosed and/or “lost” matrixial parts of ourselves as reawakened or accessible by changing into something newborn. This matrixial vision in which “we will be recognized for what fails the terms of recognition, for what goes beneath, before, or beyond

²⁴⁰ Judith Butler, “Bracha’s Eurydice,” Foreword to Bracha L. Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, ed. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2006), xi.

the terms of self-definition or, indeed, cultural identification” is a fantasy essential to subjective and sociopolitical wellbeing.²⁴¹

As distinct from postnatal maternal subjectivity, I argue in this chapter that the prenatal matrixial trans-subject is born in/of a feminine psyche-soma that is perhaps related to what Melody Jue refers to as the epistemic affordances and constraints of perceiving and thinking with “oceanic milieus.” And perhaps this matrixial trans-subjectivity is a productive counter-mythological standpoint from which to try and imagine the *possible arrival* of usefully unsettled, ephemeral narrative fantasies of queer, posthuman, ecological, and egalitarian interpersonal communications and epistemes. Perhaps similar to the productively estranging effects of Jue’s “*milieu-specific analysis*,” literary “black mater” figures and other maternal fugitives and refugees who practice matrixial trans-subjective modes of wildness, wonder, and bewildered curiosity in strange homeplaces may invoke uncanny fantasies/memories of matrixial early relations. And therein function to defamiliarize and disrupt the “fixations that hold the subject imprisoned in inert psychic patterns,” and thus, “potentially at least, creates an opening for some sort of enlightenment—for new ways of living and relating.”²⁴² To borrow Le Guin’s terms from her 1986 essay “The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction,” such matrixial figures are distinct for their “lack of *loyalty* to civilization” and their nomadic roving beyond the visible, imaginable. And for that reason, they potentially help us recognize the need to jettison taken-for-granted, dehumanizing “killer stories” so that we can find the critical vocabulary and space to tell “untold” “life stories” in “all sorts of words and ways”—the joyful, life

²⁴¹ Butler, “Bracha’s Eurydice,” xi.

²⁴² Mari Ruti, “From Melancholia to Meaning: How to Live the Past in the Present,” *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* 15, no. 5 (2005): 653.

affirmative “myths of creation and transformation, trickster stories, folktales, jokes, novels...”²⁴³

However, even these defamiliarizing life stories full of queer vitality that form new glittering homeplaces are at risk of being devoured by habituation and/or by appropriations for profit. And matrixial theory itself suggests even our new and dearly won identities and narratives are always-already at every moment partial/in formation. To my mind, this emphasizes the importance of a constant and vigilant “devotion” to a self-reflexive analytic of “wild wondering/wandering,” which draws from Ettinger’s theory, and I think of methodologically, in part, as the matrixial art of deconstruction. This matrixial art of deconstruction is defined as the shocking and joyful imaginative experience of unraveling symbolic being to become performatively otherwise, and then to repeat that new identity in creative engagements with others at the “*matrixial borderspace of co-birth*” [which is also the ephemeral homeplace of co/in-habit(u)ation] until its recurrence mutates again with a difference, and so on.²⁴⁴ Also, significant here and in future chapters is how this matrixial renewal structurally resembles P.B. Shelley’s theory of poetry as a defamiliarizing/refamiliarizing cycle of metaphor that makes meaning by expanding the symbolic. For P.B. Shelley, poetic language is “vitaly metaphorical”:

[T]hat is, it marks the before unapprehended relations of things, and perpetuates their apprehension, until the words which represent them, become through time signs for portions or classes of thoughts instead of pictures of integral thoughts; and then if no new poets should arise to create

²⁴³ Le Guin, “The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction,” 152.

²⁴⁴ Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, 159.

afresh the associations which have been thus disorganized, language will be dead to all nobler purposes of human intercourse.²⁴⁵

The idea of an analytic of matrixial wild wondering/wandering as a form of deconstructive/reconstructive flickering (analogous to Freud's *fort/da*) comes from the way the "method" itself resembles prenatal, matrixial "unconscious intersubjective dynamics," as Ettinger describes them, and how these metamorphosing flows and harmonies emerge, congeal, and fade, and continue into postnatal and adult life to "constitute the base on which more conscious, intentional, cognitive modes of psychic organization rely."²⁴⁶ These latter forms are therefore in constant need of reinvigoration and even a total overhaul. Understood in this way, the affective, analytical, and artful experiences of wonderful wildness may function over time to build and gestate an epistemophilic (open/vulnerable to continuous adaptation) affective-cognitive infrastructure capable of discerning "what is wrong" and shifting the parameters of "what is" to "what is possible."

As I will discuss in more detail below, my emphasis on the value of (de)constructive ephemerality as, metaphorically speaking, cycles of wild nomadic estrangement followed by queer homeplace inhabitation, is related to Ettinger's claim that "in art, repetitions in anamnestic working-through do not reestablish the lost object" but instead that each repetition where a fresh "maternal" appearance occurs after her temporary disappearance leads to new "thresholds" of meaning.²⁴⁷ This sounds uncannily like the way P.B. Shelley theorizes the epistemophilic, poetic imagination at work in the child:

²⁴⁵ Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*, 512.

²⁴⁶ Hollway, *The Capacity to Care*, 70.

²⁴⁷ Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, 158.

A child at play by itself will express its delight by its voice and motions; and every inflexion of tone and every gesture will bear exact relation to a corresponding antitype in the pleasurable impressions which awakened it; it will be the reflected image of that impression; and as the lyre trembles and sounds after the wind has died away, so the child seeks, by prolonging in its voice and motions the duration of the effect, to prolong also a consciousness of the cause. In relation to the objects which delight a child, these expressions are, what Poetry is to higher objects.²⁴⁸

He theorizes in quite a matrixial psychoanalytic style how poetry goes on to work on the mature mind: “Poetry enlarges the circumference of the imagination by replenishing it with thoughts of ever new delight, which have the power of attracting and assimilating to their own nature all other thoughts, and which form new intervals and interstices whose void for ever craves fresh food.”²⁴⁹ Ephemeral, defamiliarizing voids and habituated disappearances of thought follow each appearing refamiliarizing crystallization of an idea that then requires new defamiliarizing stimuli, in other words.

Similarly, Ettinger extends Freud’s *fort/da* dynamic to claim that right at the “heart of wandering”—that both the metaphorical m/other and child undergo as they together-in-separateness repetitively navigate/work-through traumatically transforming joyful links with their I(s) and non-I(s),—arises the “potential shared production/revelation of home affect...for habituation as *heimlich* (familiar, homely).”²⁵⁰ Getting in touch with one’s prenatal “archaic trans-subjectivity with the m/Other” leads from the “no-place of nomadic

²⁴⁸ Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*, 511.

²⁴⁹ Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*, 517.

²⁵⁰ Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, 159.

existence” into the “fortuitous *homeplace* by a *recycling-in-transformation* of grains of hybrid shared mental objects, and of reiterated co-affecting.”²⁵¹ Ettinger suggests there is an inherently creative dimension to this *unheimlich/heimlich* matrixial dynamic between the always-already temporary, partial subjectivities of self and other: “With each successive recycling and co-affecting, an ephemeral, composite, unexpected home is crystallized. The product—unconscious home-affect—is inseparable from the process that creates it—the metamorphic co/in-habit(u)ation with-in each singular *severality*. Me and stranger(s) matrixially co/in-habit(u)ate with-in/by working art.”²⁵² In short, matrixial artwork and literature as well as the analytic method of matrixial wild wondering/wandering acknowledge and therein curb the risk of the sterility and stasis of oppressive habit that the double entendre of “co/in-habit(u)ating” signifies in part.

At the same time, matrixial artwork and texts all invite the viewer/reader/participant into renewing self-deconstruction as a symbolic death, followed by a matrixial pregnancy, and then newborn-ness, girlhood, maternity, elderly womanhood, and repeat, across uncanny, defamiliarizing nomadic wildernesses punctuated by familiar homeplaces where wild natures co/in-habit(u)ate. As P.B. Shelley puts it rather playfully to my mind, matrixial poetic/philosophical language “is a strain which distends, and then bursts the circumference of the hearer’s mind, and pours itself forth together with it into the universal element with which it has perpetual sympathy.”²⁵³ And ultimately, though attended by some discomfort at first, this matrixial call to the viewer/reader/participant that does wild queer work internally may “draw out the *seduction into life* offered by the maternal-matrixial Eros and make room

²⁵¹ Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, 159.

²⁵² Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, 159.

²⁵³ Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*, 515.

for recognition of the desire of the mother,” that was foreclosed in ourselves and others, for the “metramorphic quest and the cognition of its anamnesis.”²⁵⁴ But in referring to matrixial wild wonder/wandering as a deconstructive art I am also attempting to highlight the imperative that we consciously “keep adjusting the templates for change going forward” in order to protect the newly born “possible” specifically from new violent appropriations and reifying reconsolidations in the very worn-out terms that that wild wondering was meant to displace in the first place.²⁵⁵ Such evolutionary propulsion in continuous oscillations in solidification and evanescence may draw from matrixial “subjective resources far removed from the phallogocentric subject,” but they need to be consciously brought to light and socially revered.²⁵⁶

Despite the theoretical risks of thinking about wild wonder (an experience/response/sensibility), wild wonders (subjects and objects), and wildly wondering (an epistemic/analytic/practice/method), these wonderful constructs can help us to reenchant the familiar with joyful moments of celebration at the epiphanies of everyday, already-established life within various “undercommons.” Wildness and wonder can also arouse great, *productive* anxiety in the presence of the awe-full “non-I”—Ettinger’s term for the “m/Other” that also includes the beings and becomings originally connected to the prenatal, partially formed “I” (i.e., “presubject”), but which are later partially foreclosed to the postnatal, differentiated “I” (i.e., “oedipal subject”). In short, a sense of wildness and wonder may be a productive, aesthetic response to what is energizing *and* traumatizing about the “encounter-event” with mysterious, irreducible unknowns in the wild natures of

²⁵⁴ Ettinger, “Demeter-Persephone Complex,” 124.

²⁵⁵ Halberstam, “Wildness, Loss, Death,” 147.

²⁵⁶ Hollway, *The Capacity to Care*, 81.

self and other that recall the early matrixial effects on subjectivity. In this sense, matrixial aesthetic experiences are desirable because to some degree they transform our subjectivities in a mode that resonates with the haptic and kinaesthetic “memories” from prenatal life. On another level, bewildered responses of wonder at “what is wrong” with the “I” and “non-I” can dissolve exploitative, exclusionary ideologies and identities linked to state-sanctioned violence against marginalized groups. Finally, wildly wondrous responses to disturbing bewilderment can enable us to imagine methods to overstep forms of indoctrination to free the mind to wander toward wild, unanticipated (ephemeral) sanctuaries (i.e., new homeplaces).

Wild wondering is overall the paradoxical mood, epistemic-analytic style, and art of eternal *unbecoming in the passageway to newborn-ness*, an idea that I build from Ettinger’s reappropriation of intrauterine fantasies as expressive of a creative aspiration toward the freedom of “non-life” within the “matrix” that can feel darker and more shattering than “progressive” narratives of increasing ego consolidation and stability while also being essential to subjective wellbeing. This “unbecoming” component of matrixial trans-subjectivity provides a useful metaphor that enables the recognition of at least some speculative fantasies of environmental apocalypse and narratives of merging with nature as psychosocially important, rather than as mere expressions of death driven masculinist aggression, in so much as they contain publicly unacknowledged latent creative desires for radical individual and collective metamorphosis. In the same vein, the patriarchal myths of necessary matricide for proper hyper-individuation and other associated misogynistic “mother-monster myths” produce real suicidal desires and death wishes in art, fantasy, and reality that reflect the tragic unconscious aching for matrixial borderlinking and a fatal

inability to see how “the foreclosed and immemorial space of non-life-coming-into-life is *different* from the space of death.”²⁵⁷ The matrixial gaze *touches* each of us (in different ways) and *desires* us into redressing and addressing these mis/un-recognized fantasies of wildness and wonder by “ethically wit(h)nessing” the other in “compassionate hospitality,” as Ettinger formulates it. Enacted in coordination, these several modalities of matrixial wildness and wonder avoid the master narrativization techniques that universalize their “objective” observations and that are linked to “forms of epistemological, ideological, and ethical violence that seek to reduce the multiplicity and ambiguity of psychic realities into one overarching paradigm of unitary subjectivity.”²⁵⁸

Wandering into the Wildness of Wondering as an Alternative to the Sublime: Black Mater and Maternal Fugitive Figures

In her book *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World*, Zakiyyah Iman Jackson deconstructs the western philosophical tradition by foregrounding the sublime aesthetic “fantasies” of Kant and Hegel, among others. Jackson emphasizes how these thinkers dramatize a dialectical power struggle between the pure spirit/rational mind and the immanence of the animalized and sexualized African body. In so doing, Kant and Hegel developed the aesthetic theory of the sublime initiated in the eighteenth-century by Edmund Burke’s *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*. Jackson underscores the importance of recognizing how animalized Black female natures become the prop or foil to master subject identity formation. Jackson also shows how this racialized sublime aesthetics, that includes theories of the supposed animality of Blackness, promotes philosophies of Eurocentric being that then directly shape

²⁵⁷ Ettinger, “Demeter-Persephone Complex,” 143.

²⁵⁸ Ruti, “From Melancholia to Meaning,” 652.

the kinds of epistemological representations (observations and perceptions) that master identities/humanist subjects can make about other natures in the first place and in the future.

Jackson defines “black mater” as “mater, as matter,” as that which “gestures toward a web of interconnected signifiers such as materiality and black femininity, maternity, natality, and relation to the mother.”²⁵⁹ Jackson argues that in western bourgeois humanist philosophies, “what is invisible (but nonetheless present) or what is constitutive yet absent at the manifest level” is the “foreclosure of black *mater*, its latent capacities, and its effects on orbiting discursive-material formations of knowledge and being.”²⁶⁰ To put it another way, Black femininity is the absent organizing center, the “something missing” or absent trace, that structures the foundational value-hierarchies that erect the power of colonial, white masculinity: “In other words, the black maternal figure functions as a signifier that apports and delimits Reason and the Universal.”²⁶¹ For Jackson, the anti-Black, misogynistic, and biophobic paradigmatic structures—the habits of mind/thought styles that allow western master subjects to perceive and experience the world—are mediated by the absence of the “black mater” that is indefinite, uncertain, and incommunicable in any direct sense: “The term ‘nonrepresentability’ as applied to the black *mater*...alludes to a central and ever-present unsettling excess that nevertheless eludes representation.”²⁶² This indescribable quality of “black mater,” the “impossibility of black mater to be either represented or known,” is what appears as the sublime in the anti-Black, “modern grammar of dialectical subjecthood and authority.”²⁶³

²⁵⁹ Jackson, *Becoming Human*, 230, endnote 11.

²⁶⁰ Jackson, *Becoming Human*, 90.

²⁶¹ Jackson, *Becoming Human*, 108.

²⁶² Jackson, *Becoming Human*, 90.

²⁶³ Jackson, *Becoming Human*, 118.

But at the same time, Jackson's definition suggests that the sublime "black mater" has an unforeseen, latent capacity to deconstruct, by indirectly pointing beyond, the very anti-Black systems of knowledge and ontology that created it in the first place. However, for Jackson, salutary artworks and literary texts that "perform and expose" the Black feminine sublime do not substitute for this anti-Black system a new reified "normal" or attempt to set up a stable representation of Black female womanhood or subjectivity. Even so, flesh-and-blood "minoritarian" subjects may find such texts provide them with material for constructing more fulfilling, livable fantasies of self and other. But Jackson's point is that the performance and exposure of the unsignified, or quality of "excess," that is "black mater" opens the *possibility* of imagining the foundations for new articulations for being and becoming: "what emerges from this narrative strategy is not an affirmation of the positive value of either 'immanence' or 'transcendence' but rather a (re)valuation of deferral, the ongoing pursuit of a praxis that is not already determined by those terms, fails to signify in those terms, and mutates those terms and their grammar beyond recognition."²⁶⁴ Jackson here suggests that there is a distinct value to deferring the utopian impulse that would prematurely construct new taxonomies of being, becoming, and relating before the unsettling effects of "black mater" have had time to creatively mutate the conditions of reality.

Jackson's above promotion of the virtues of ontological deferral brings to my mind Jack Halberstam's constructs of wildness in their book *Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire*. For example, Halberstam explains that their view of wildness "does not promise freedom,

²⁶⁴ Jackson, *Becoming Human*, 90.

nor does it name a new mode of identification.”²⁶⁵ Halberstam underlines how wildness is the absence of order, the entropic force of a chaos that constantly spins away from the biopolitical attempts to manage life and bodies and desires. Wildness has no goal, no point of liberation that beckons off in the distance, no shape that must be assumed, no outcome that must be desired. Wildness, instead, disorders desire and desires disorder. *Beyond the human, wildness spins narratives...* (my emphasis).²⁶⁶ On the one hand, Halberstam proposes here in this passage that there is potential in a conceptualization of wildness as *différance* in the sense that it “functions as a form of disorder that will not submit to rule, a mode of unknowing, a resistant ontology.”²⁶⁷ But, on the other hand, for Halberstam, wildness does have some kind of “positive” or actualized content since it is also a “fantasy of life beyond the human.”²⁶⁸ So, Halberstam’s concept of wildness implies a post-Human subject to whom they “offer a rubric for passions, affects, movements, and ways of thinking that exceed conventional oppositions...and lays waste to oppositions that structure modern life.”²⁶⁹ Halberstam’s theory of the wild challenges post-Human subjects to “eschew the order of things with its private property, its cooked meals, and its family homes.”²⁷⁰ In doing so, the post-Human subject might be able to productively spin fantastic narratives that enable them to “live with the bewilderment that accompanies the desire to end that [old exploitative] world without knowing what comes next.”²⁷¹ Thus, living wild means getting

²⁶⁵ Jack Halberstam, *Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2020), 31.

²⁶⁶ Halberstam, *Wild Things*, 7.

²⁶⁷ Halberstam, *Wild Things*, 8.

²⁶⁸ Halberstam, *Wild Things*, 8.

²⁶⁹ Halberstam, *Wild Things*, 31.

²⁷⁰ Halberstam, *Wild Things*, 32.

²⁷¹ Halberstam, *Wild Things*, 32.

on a “matrixial trail” that bypasses the Human, without trying to permanently stabilize the “beyond” into “being” or domesticate and eradicate the “queer plenitude” of wild natures.²⁷²

Halberstam is not naïve about the various uses that the terminologies of the wild, wildness, and wilderness have served under systems of racialization, that “colonial notions of the wild—savage otherness, immaturity, apocalypse—are all too familiar.”²⁷³ In fact, Halberstam makes the very same argument about “wildness” that Jackson makes about the Black feminine sublime and that I explore in H. Rider Haggard’s *She* as key to master subject formation: “If nineteenth- and early twentieth-century expert knowledges tried to rationalize a colonial order, the wildness that it ascribed to Black otherness becomes a disordering force of opposition greatly feared and often conjured in order to be foreclosed.”²⁷⁴ Relatedly, Halberstam argues that it is important to be cautious about the “ambivalence” that “inheres” in queer wildness: “Going wild might well propel us into another realm of thought, action, being, and knowing, but it could just as easily result in the reinstatement of an order of rationality that depends completely upon the queer, the brown, and the marginal to play their role as mad, bad, and unruly.”²⁷⁵ Ultimately, however, unlike Economides’ position on the sublime, in *Wild Things* Halberstam maintains that such colonial abuses of the terminology of the wild “do not exhaust the meaning of wildness and neither do all fantasies of becoming feral fall under the sway of primitivist notions of unspoiled nature or fetishistic desires for a pure otherness.”²⁷⁶ So, Halberstam stakes the claim that wildness might function as a “launching pad” for more expansive considerations

²⁷² Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, 149.

²⁷³ Halberstam, *Wild Things*, 9.

²⁷⁴ Halberstam, *Wild Things*, 26.

²⁷⁵ Halberstam, “Wildness, Loss, Death,” 145.

²⁷⁶ Halberstam, *Wild Things*, 9.

of a queer, Brown, and Black undercommons.²⁷⁷ Relatedly, Halberstam claims that in many texts, such as Saidiya Hartman's *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* and Isaac Julien's *Looking for Langston*, "Blackness has also occupied the space of wildness in order to flee the 'world' in which it can only function as the not-subject" and that "wildness is both a relation to fugitivity and a refusal of the world within which Blackness must take flight."²⁷⁸

Just as Halberstam suggests that Black fugitive wildness accesses new knowledge, Joy James claims that fugitives' forced proximity to wild nature gave birth to the "maroon philosopher" who reimagines freedom in terms of flight: "Five hundred years of flights from captivity, into communal and conceptual wilderness, created the maroon philosophers' natural habitat at the boundary of democracy."²⁷⁹ James describes the maroon philosopher as one who can see the "outsider terrain" of the "black matrix" in which they dwell and how that "black matrix" delimits the system that created it. In James' sense, fugitive Blackness and the wild historical flights to metaphorical and literal wilderness in the Americas generate the imaginative faculty of the "maroon philosopher" who can discern and deconstruct hegemonic modes of reality and relation as well as imagine new and healthy modes of intimate engagement. Like James, Halberstam claims that there are untapped ontological, epistemological, and narrative affordances of the wild. And the resources of wildness, according to Halberstam, may be particularly useful for many different natures of diverse desires and embodiments, including fugitives and refugees of all kinds fleeing and resisting persecution and denigration.

²⁷⁷ Halberstam, "Wildness, Loss, Death," 145.

²⁷⁸ Halberstam, *Wild Things*, 27.

²⁷⁹ James, "Afrarealism," 124.

This characterization of creative wildness by fugitive Blackness shares affinities with other nomadic “maternal fugitive” figures—all those caring strangers in search of caring strangers, all those in search of refuge and the freedom to write more life-affirming stories, to invent new identities and names, to choose communities uninherited and not imposed. Fugitivity in this expanded sense might be understood as initially dominated by the experience of “bewilderment,” what Halberstam defines as “the process of becoming wild by shedding knowledge (as opposed to becoming civilized by acquiring it).”²⁸⁰ In this sense, bewilderment can be said to resemble the experience of a specific kind of revolutionary wonder. As Economides explains, “wonder could be seen as the expression of a potent desire for social change, a welcoming of radical newness, with all of the awe (and some of the fear) attending such an exploratory project.”²⁸¹ I understand Halberstam’s notion of the feeling of bewilderment, that begins as “both escape and madness, desire and disorder,” as the initial process of clearing the mind of webs of internalized, self-harming myths of “the Human” that minoritarian and master subjects alike take for granted as truth but which continuously cause psychic and spiritual hemorrhaging as long as they remain unconscious.²⁸² In response to bewildering existential indeterminacy and precarity, maternal fugitive subjects wander into wonder instead of running away in horror from interdependency and toward the illusions of separate, secure, and stable white masculinities. However, it is important not to romanticize the “maternal” even in this form. As the previous chapter points out, only the “good-enough” “maternal” does not run away in horror, and perhaps sometimes s/they/he should. That being said, some maternal fugitive

²⁸⁰ Halberstam, *Wild Things*, 31.

²⁸¹ Economides, *The Ecology of Wonder*, 27.

²⁸² Halberstam, *Wild Things*, 31.

subjects are exemplary for their propensity to “validate the fragility of groundless existence as something worthy of awe and care, instead of seeking assurance in metaphysical certainty.”²⁸³

Ursula K. Le Guin, for example, is one such exemplary “mom de plume” of nomadic fugitivity.²⁸⁴ In her aforementioned essay “The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction,” Le Guin describes her narrative of self-discovery in terms that follow the steps of the maternal fugitive subject’s wayward departure into wildness, wilderness—steps that wander away from a despairingly lethal attachment to the alienated Human ideal:

...they were human, fully human, bashing, sticking, thrusting, killing.

Wanting to be human too, I sought for evidence that I was; but if that’s what it took, to make a weapon and kill with it, then evidently I was either extremely defective as a human being, or not human at all.

That’s right they said. What you are is a woman. Possibly not human at all, certainly defective. Now be quiet while we go on telling the Story of the Ascent of Man the Hero.

Go on, say I, wandering off towards the wild oats, with Oo Oo in the sling and little Oom carrying the basket...

If it is a human thing to do to put something you want, because it’s useful, edible, or beautiful, into a bag, or a basket, or a bit of rolled bark or leaf, or a

²⁸³ Economides, *The Ecology of Wonder*, 24.

²⁸⁴ According to Alexis Pauline Gumbs, “mom de plume” is a term coined by S. Diane Bogus that “connects her work as a mother without the status of motherhood to her intertwined creative work as a writer,” like many readers, including myself, arguably relate to Ursula K. Le Guin, P.B. Shelley, Mary Shelley, N.K. Jemisin, and many other maternal fugitives and matrixial trans-subjects of the pen who care for fragile, yet powerful minoritarian “creatures.” See Alexis Pauline Gumbs, “m/other ourselves: a Black queer feminist genealogy for radical mothering,” in *Revolutionary Mothering: Love on the Front Lines*, eds. Alexis Pauline Gumbs, China Martens, and Mal’a Williams (Ontario: Between the Lines, 2016), 29.

net woven of your own hair, or what have you, and then take it home with you, home being another, larger kind of pouch or bag, a container for people...if to do that is human, if that's what it takes, then I am a human being after all. Fully, freely, gladly, for the first time.²⁸⁵

In this passage Le Guin foregrounds how the maternal fugitive subject ultimately rejects the aspiration of “human” recognition. She also shows how the maternal fugitive’s radical questioning of the category of “the Human” reveals a desire for a different “genre of human” achieved by wandering off into the unknown terrains populated by “wild oats.” The above passage from Le Guin also emphasizes that the maternal fugitive subject has a distinct capacity and passion for wandering into and wondering at strange wild beauty as well as for carefully embracing, collecting, and “enwombing” it in the safety of a supportive matrix/carrier bag and homeplace of co/in-habit(u)ation. Le Guin’s passage implies that this propensity for wonder—to respond with care, joy, awe, and longing to the unexpectedly beautiful and mysterious quality of wild natures—enables the maternal subject of flight to make an ephemeral “homeplace,” all aglow and aglitter with beautiful objects, for themselves and others wherever they wander.²⁸⁶

The maternal fugitive subject’s penchant for experiencing wonder as described so far in this section has many affinities with Jane Bennett’s theory of the mood of enchantment. Below Bennett primarily emphasizes the positive affects involved in experiences of wonder:

²⁸⁵ Le Guin, “The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction,” 151-152.

²⁸⁶ In using this metaphor of wandering into a chosen “home,” I am not naïve to the lack of public health infrastructure that makes America the land of people without housing on the outskirts of gentrified neighborhoods. This is exactly the spatial arrangement of the world in N.K. Jemisin’s *Broken Earth* series. Beyond the walls of the imperial city of the Fulcrum, the barren lands of the “stillness” stretch far and wide dotted with small villages called “comms.” And “commless” “orogenes” and other undercommons people wander the stillness, that is, if the orogenes attempting to pass as “stills” (i.e., humans without the ability to manipulate energetic forces) survive discovery by their former communities.

The mood I'm calling enchantment involves, in the first instance, a surprising encounter, a meeting with something that you did not expect and are not fully prepared to engage. Contained within this surprise state are (1) a pleasurable feeling of being charmed by the novel and as yet unprocessed encounter and (2) a more *unheimlich* (uncanny) feeling of being disrupted or torn out of one's default sensory-psychic-intellectual disposition. The overall effect of enchantment is a mood of fullness, plenitude, or liveliness...a fleeting return to childlike excitement about life.²⁸⁷

Lisa H. Sideris also touches on the idea of wonder as a cheerful affect when she mentions how in “romance languages, wonder’s etymological origins show connections to an Indo-European word for ‘smile.’”²⁸⁸ But what is fascinating in Sideris’ study is that she notes how “wonder and its associated terms can align with such seemingly disparate experiences, ranging from childlike delight to profound destabilization and even pain and death—a ‘cognitive crucifixion.’”²⁸⁹ She claims that the use of the word “wonder” to describe such an array of experiences “suggest[s] its unusual status among our repertoire of responses to the world.”²⁹⁰ Bennett’s above passage also significantly, albeit briefly, touches on the unnerving uneasiness that accompanies the vertiginous “cognitive crucifixion” of what I am calling the *unbecoming in the passageway to newborn-ness*. In the same vein, Sideris also qualifies her survey of the meanings of wonder to include its rough and jostling birth-like sensory derivatives by noting that in “German and English...wonder (*Wunder*) may be

²⁸⁷ Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001), 5.

²⁸⁸ Lisa H. Sideris, *Consecrating Science: Wonder, Knowledge, and the Natural World* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 14.

²⁸⁹ Sideris, *Consecrating Science*, 15.

²⁹⁰ Sideris, *Consecrating Science*, 15.

traceable to *wound*—a tear in the fabric of the ordinary, an ‘uncanny opening.’”²⁹¹ Just as infants in the passage from the womb/matrix arrive into the “thrown-ness” of life and the pregnant subject becoming-maternal painfully transfigures, the wonder-induced unbecoming of the mature subject in the passageway to newborn-ness sometimes, but not solely, initially includes analogous distresses. But key here is to recognize, tolerate, and articulate this distress so as to avoid the sublime impulse “whereby the subject stages encounters with alienating difference only to reassert its supposedly ‘essential’ freedom from and superiority to the other.”²⁹²

Ultimately, if the conservative idea of the “family home” expands into a co/in-habit(u)ated matrixial homeplace of queer wildness for the maternal/newborn fugitive trans-subject, it is through the mechanism of wonder that s/he/they can imagine that myriad, mysterious symbolic and material oases await engagement in the fantasized and real “larger world of vegetation and animals, rocks and landscapes, water, and creatures seen and unseen.”²⁹³ And since these wild natures are not experienced in opposition to the self, the myth of the unitary, rationalist master subject dissolves into the “wide-open space” of newborn/maternal fugitive subjectivity “across which an unknowable self is dispersed.”²⁹⁴ Halberstam’s argument implies that such a nomadic, post-Human subjectivity of wondering potential is full of wild desires for “un-being.” I consider this un-being to relate to what I refer to as the desire for unbecoming in the passageway to newborn-ness, which is derived from and an interpretation of what Ettinger calls “a certain aspiration to non-life.”²⁹⁵ I

²⁹¹ Sideris, *Consecrating Science*, 14.

²⁹² Economides, *The Economy of Nature*, 25.

²⁹³ Halberstam, *Wild Things*, 10.

²⁹⁴ Halberstam, *Wild Things*, 10.

²⁹⁵ Bracha L. Ettinger, “Maternal Subjectivity and the Matrixial Subject,” *YouTube* (2012), minute 10:19.

interpret her term “non-life” to mean prenatal existence prior to birth where the presubject is inundated with the haptic communications of maternal “non-I(s)”—the sounds and sensations of pressure, temperature, movement, etc., experienced as “other” by the prenatal partial subject.

To better understand the more fearful and “negative” variants of desire for and wonder about unknowable terra incognitas, including one’s own “un-being” in the forms of “non-I(s)” and “non-life,” it is useful to think of wonder’s associations with death, destabilization, disruption, and displacement as related to what Sideris calls the “loss of self, of *letting go* of ego-dominated rationality.”²⁹⁶ Sideris suggests that the loss of self that comes with wondering about the awe-full unknown and the undoing of the self leads to new, ethical dispositions such as “openness, availability, epistemological humility in the face of the mystery of being.”²⁹⁷ This sense of wonder has much in common with Halberstam’s understanding of the wild as stemming from a “postnatural” subject who “embraces sexuality as death, as the potential for evil, and as a mode of embodiment and knowing that is oriented ambivalently toward un-being.”²⁹⁸ Halberstam proposes that such a wild subjectivity might be better understood via a “new lexicon” that indexes “postnatural” sexual histories and their disordered structures for a “proliferating set of desires.”²⁹⁹ Theorizing such a wild matrixial trans-subjectivity, that simultaneously contains newborn and maternal “fugitivity,” may highlight certain affordances or “unspoken forms of address, gesture, and relation that preceded the sexual ordering of things” into anti-Black, misogynistic, and nature-phobic taxonomies, of which articulations occur in the year 1492

²⁹⁶ Sideris, *Consecrating Science*, 15.

²⁹⁷ Sam Keen qtd. in Sideris, *Consecrating Science*, 15.

²⁹⁸ Halberstam, *Wild Things*, 12.

²⁹⁹ Halberstam, *Wild Things*, 7.

with the trans-Atlantic slave trade and again with the “Great Confinement,” the birth of State disciplinary power and biopower at the sites of the hospital and prison.³⁰⁰

Matrixial Trans-subjectivity and the Wild Desire for Unbecoming in the Passageway to Homeplaces of Newborn-ness

Like Halberstam’s implied figure of a “historically” pre-differentiated, postnatural subjectivity and Fred Moten’s theoretical vision that “in the hold, blackness and the imagination, in and as consent not to be a single being, are (more and less than) one,” Ettinger’s theory of subjectivity as a matrixial multiplicity refuses to grant authority to the dialectical sovereignty of the subject over the object.³⁰¹ Ettinger’s “lack of loyalty” to patriarchal psychoanalytic master narratives makes it possible for her to imagine a prenatal “matrixial subjectivity-as-encounter,” which is a figure that definitively breaks from the postnatal, singular individual of the Freudian-Lacanian model. Ettinger’s understanding of subjectivity is multiple but not infinite and defined relationally as an “encounter between I and [an] un-cognized yet intimate non-I neither rejected nor assimilated.”³⁰² She understands this “matrixial subjectivity-as-encounter” also as a “transgressive psychic position in which the co-emergence and co-fading is prior to the I versus others.”³⁰³ At the most basic level, the metaphor of matrixial trans-subjectivity promotes an image of two partial subjects, who are each comprised of multiple “co-emerging” and “co-fading” I(s) and non-I(s), and that are enveloped in a “mutating copoietic net” held together by what Ettinger calls “fascinace.” Fascinace is very similar to wonder as Ettinger defines it as “an aesthetic

³⁰⁰ Halberstam, *Wild Things*, 11.

³⁰¹ Fred Moten, “Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh),” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 112, no. 4 (2013): 752.

³⁰² Ettinger, “Matrixial Trans-subjectivity,” 218.

³⁰³ Ettinger, “Matrixial Trans-subjectivity,” 218.

affect that operates in a prolongation and delaying of the duration of an encounter-event, which allows matrixial transference and copoiesis.”³⁰⁴ To my mind, matrixial transference refers to a kind of “chemical” communication whereby the becoming-m/Other subject aesthetically mediates sensory and nutritional material for the fetus, and the fetus influences the m/Other’s pregnant psyche-soma in kind. Copoiesis signifies the creative interdependency of the matrixial multitude, the mutually transforming influence that the partial “I(s)” and the becoming-m/Other “non-I(s)” have on one another (as distinct from Maturana and Varela’s autopoiesis theory). The becoming-maternal subject and the becoming-newborn subject caringly, ethically wit(h)ness or compassionately care for one another in their mutual co-emergence-in-differentiation: “The presubject that thus emerges in jointness develops primal trans-subjectivity before being a ‘separate’, ‘whole’ subject. Later, alongside one’s identity as a whole subject, I(s) and non-I(s) continue to interlace their borderlinks in metramorphosis on the matrixial resonance field.”³⁰⁵

In contradistinction, the Freudian-Lacanian model stages a universal drama of the hyper-individuated masculine, master subject’s power play within a white, bourgeois family romance, with “female” subjectivity included as an inferior afterthought to his developmental norm. In the Freudian-Lacanian model, this western, white patriarchal drama bases the formation of the egocentric subject on the alienating separation of a superior “I” from a rejected, inferior “m/other” who embodies pure lack (because she desires the phallus or some phallus fragment-signifier in the form of the *objet petit a*). Infants sexed at birth by their caregivers as male or female must accept castration but along different performative lines according to their gender. While the girl does this by renouncing the possibility of ever

³⁰⁴ Ettinger, “Matrixial Trans-subjectivity,” 221.

³⁰⁵ Ettinger, “Matrixial Trans-subjectivity,” 220.

having a phallus other than that which is provided through the child of a heterosexual marriage, the boy must give up his fantasy of there being a connection between his actual genitalia and his immature sense of omnipotent power. In either case, however, both gendered egocentric subjects enter the social-symbolic sphere by rejecting the m/other. The boy identifies with the “Name-of-the-Father” and the girl “masquerades” as the m/other of lack, but both are in search of the power of the phallus in the symbol of a desirable social third or other gender-appropriate “paternal” metaphor. The phallus is conceived of as any powerful distraction outside of the mother-infant dyad and not a “real” organ, which becomes the *objet petit a*, or the perceived threatening desire of the mother that she pursues (or the desire of the threatening other that pursues the mother) in her temporary absences from the infant. The developing master subject unconsciously fantasizes that his/her/their phallus is lost but attainable in the form of the myriad signifiers and associations linked to the mother’s (mis)perceived *objet petit a*—some quality of the parent functioning as the social third or whatever preoccupies or can possess the maternal caregiver.

However, the girl’s situation is strange in that it defends against the originally threatening phallic other by becoming the phallus that competed for the attentions of her mother—the mother herself understood as the signifier of the desire of that other:

That is, a ‘woman’ assumes a mask through which the original threatening object of desire [the paternal metaphor/or the third] becomes unrecognizable, and she—desirable. Or else she is a shameful and envious, castrated and incomplete creature, and/or a horrible figure of transgression of the paternal taboo, castrating and personifying the threat of psychosis. All of this comes

under by [sic] the expression ‘essential part of her femininity,’ for the denial of which ‘masquerade’ stands in.³⁰⁶

As I will discuss more fully in Chapter 6, the above passage relates to the idea that there are in existence both self-destructive and psychosocially/politically salutary feminized, racialized forms of melancholic identity. But for now, the above passage suggests that whatever method the subject uses to try and obtain or *be* the symbolic white patriarchal phallus involves self-harming disavowals and performative identifications in assimilation to the “Law,” which amount to the brutal self-maiming/repression of the developing subject’s queer plenitudes. Disciplinary figures (within and external to the family) that are especially invested in preserving patrilineal privileges of race, class, and gender—whether to their real or imagined benefit—misrecognize and misshape matrixial multiplicity into the rejected cuts and abjected castrations of the master subject and his angels of the house, so to speak.³⁰⁷ The fantasy of acquiring the phallus-fragment to give to a beloved requires the acceptance of castration of the absolute Phallus (omnipotence) alongside the tragic foreclosure of other bodily/sensory, cognitive, and affective dimensions linked to the rejection and abjection of wild m/other natures. To put it another way, the foreclosure of other matrixial dimensions is the negative and regrettable consequence of what is positive and necessary—that a subject accept castration to the degree that it signifies acceptance of the fantasy of omnipotence.

³⁰⁶ Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, 96.

³⁰⁷ The above quote also shows how people marginalized by the “master’s” gaze, as outside of the “dominant” and “ideal” genre of the white, male, cisgender Human, can aspire and achieve various magnitudes of master subject status, but only up to a limit. Even as master subject status is held out as the promise and prize of “universal merit” that keeps the brutalizing system of late-capitalism in production, its achievement by some “phallic” minorities is still only possible on the condition it benefits existing powerful figures and their nepotistic kinship networks, and is always indirectly and directly punished in minor and major ways.

One such foreclosed arena, according to Ettinger, is the imaginary sphere of the actual “matrix” of prenatal life, which exists prior to the “sexual ordering of things” enacted by the so-called resolution of the oedipal complex. The matrix is a “symbol and an image by which we can access and recognize the moves of the transgressive subjectivity beyond the moves of the differentiated subject and draw the activity of a specific Eros with aesthetical and ethical consequences.”³⁰⁸ This suggests that there are “otherworldly” desires, aesthetics, and ethics that stem from Ettinger’s vision of an original intrauterine matrixial sphere where preformations of the psyche and subject occur *prior to* the unfolding of the phallic economy of (non)relations. Despite the antecedent status of the “matrixial subjectivizing stratum,” Ettinger claims its impact continues to unconsciously reverberate throughout the subject’s lifecycle as an embodied, “affective companion” to the imaginary and “symbolic order.”³⁰⁹ This latter idea is similar to Christopher Bollas’ concept of the “transformational object”; namely, that the mother’s bodily style of enveloping and handling the postnatal subject is its first aesthetic and transformational experience. And the subject longs to repeat this aesthetic transformational experience with other natures over the course of their entire life in the hopes of achieving existential renewal and creative metamorphosis. As Bollas explains, the mother’s style of postnatal care results in an infant “ego [that] has internalized not simply an object (the mother) but a process (her aesthetic of transformation), and this process is a paradigm of subject relating to an object that transforms the subject’s being.”³¹⁰

However, while matrixial theory has some close affinities with Bollas’ postnatal theory of the “first transformational object”—where the mother-child rapport is sought for

³⁰⁸ Ettinger, “Matrixial Trans-subjectivity,” 219.

³⁰⁹ Couze Venn, “Post-Lacanian Affective Economy, Being-in-the-word, and the Critique of the Present: Lessons from Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger,” *Theory, Culture, & Society* 21, no. 1 (2004), 152.

³¹⁰ Bollas, “The Aesthetic Moment,” 44.

and re-experienced in future aesthetic experiences—a note of contrast is worth mentioning that makes Ettinger’s theory important for the analysis of the specific texts featured in this dissertation as a whole. As Ettinger herself points out, Bollas puts too much emphasis on the activity of the m/other “object” and the radical passivity of the postnatal presubject to the neglect of “matrixial reciprocity.” Within the matrix, reciprocity is where “experience is both a passive and an active participation in a process of ‘bringing something into being’ that flows from several directions and sources when *several* (not one, not all) elements coemerge to participate in a shared metamorphosis.”³¹¹ Too much emphasis on the maternal creative capacities at the expense of a consideration of the presubject’s vital influences on the m/other risks leading to less dialogic engagements with wild natures, and more appropriative and violent fantasies of usurping nature’s generative capacities. We find sobering illustrations of the latter in Wordsworth’s and P.B. Shelley’s compensatory moments of indulgence in the manic sublime and misguided Promethean extractive violations of the powers of wild natures that Mary Shelley critiques in *Frankenstein* as well as in *The Last Man*. Additionally, Ettinger underlines how the “transformational object” in the postnatal world to some extent retains its matrixial capacities and continues to “subjectivize matrixial subjectivity” in the emerging self of the postnatal infant/partial subject. But in other ways, the transformational object’s aesthetic styles of care are “direct off-springs of the archaic phallic stratum,” thus promoting the maiming cuts and castrations that foreclose the queer plenitudes of matrixial wild natures.³¹²

However, like Bollas, Ettinger underscores a foundational, epistemophilic desire for mutual transformation in reciprocal encounters with others in her theorization of the

³¹¹ Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, 84.

³¹² Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, 86.

matrixial borderspace. This psychic matrixial borderspace arises within the “borderlinked” virtual and real experiences of pregnancy and prenatality by an “I” that is a partial-subject and a “non-I” that is its “archaic m/Other”:

The matrixial borderspace is modelled upon a particular conception of feminine/prebirth intimate sharing. The womb/matrix is conceived of here not primarily as an organ of receptivity or ‘origin’ but as the human potentiality for difference-in-co-emergence. Its space is not a maternal ‘container’, its time is not the inaccessible chronological past. It is the space and time of subjectivization in co-emergence.³¹³

Here Ettinger’s reference to the “inaccessible chronological past” is responding to Lacan’s notion of the mother as the symbol of “the Thing.” For Lacan, the Thing is theorized as the pre-oedipal, pre-symbolic paradisiacal environment the fetus experienced *in utero* and that is physically lost at the moment of birth. However, the Thing continues to haunt and enchant the presubject’s imagination until the rite of passage that marks the entrance into patriarchal language and culture. Lacan believed that a subject’s desire for this lost, inaccessible past was pathological because the master subject is formed when he accepts the signifiers circling the paternal metaphor and enters the symbolic realm. So, according to an orthodox interpretation of Lacan, a subject aspiring to “absolute jouissance in the Thing would require an exit from the realm of signifiers, which is the realm of subjectivity, and the subject itself would be erased, annihilated.”³¹⁴ Perhaps “the Thing” is the *wildness* of the matrix/womb as Michael Taussig characterizes it: “Wildness is the death space of signification” and “raises

³¹³ Ettinger, “Matrixial Trans-subjectivity,” 219-220.

³¹⁴ Lionel Bailly, *Lacan* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2009), 139.

the specter of death of the symbolic function itself” as “the spirit of the unknown and the disorderly.”³¹⁵

But what if the egocentric subject is annihilated? And what if symbolic death is the wild ride the “spirit” needs to take in order to get “back” to non-life and renewal? It is worth noting briefly that the salutary benefits of the fantasy of non-life are qualitatively distinct from the nightmare of returning to the womb described, for example, in these lines from the lyrics to “Heart-Shaped Box” by Nirvana: “Broken hymen of Your Highness, I’m left black / Throw down your umbilical noose so I can climb right back.” The tenor of this metaphor is a criticism of the biopolitical (re)production of fungible subjects imagined through the vehicle of a fetus, on the one hand, who witnesses the lie of the “immaculate conception” of a feminized State by an extrahuman/divine and masculinized absolute, sovereign authority. On the other hand, an already-born and “black(ened)” subject recognizes and rejects this necropolitics of living death in the form of the umbilical executioner, so to speak.³¹⁶ While this metaphor is certainly compelling, these lines are also significant for demonstrating how a possible desire to metamorphose and begin again is rendered (and typically read) *only* in the terms of the nihilistic desire to die. But additionally, the problematic rejection and blame directed at the “mother-monster” as the “object cause” of all one’s suffering is also apparent here. In an open public lecture given to the students and faculty of the European Graduate School, Ettinger discovers glimpses of the presence of non-life aspirations in moments of suicidal ideation and fantasies of maternal hostility in Sylvia Plath’s poetry to make the

³¹⁵ Michael Taussig qtd. in Halberstam, “Wildness, Loss, Death,” 137.

³¹⁶ I am deferring until later addressing the further significance of “black” in these lines. But Like Alexis Pauline Gumbs, “I wonder if we could outgrow rope” as an insensitive metaphor “[b]raided with blood” in order to better and more ethically convey the desire for modes of being outside of the genres of Man2. Alexis Pauline Gumbs, *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals* (Chico and Edinburgh: AK Press, 2020), 102.

point that tragedy results when the “difference between non-life and death is not articulated symbolically.”³¹⁷

But to turn back to the discussion of the Thing. If the Thing is pre-signification/signifiers but not without material/means of communication and transmission, then “the Thing” might be better understood as a kind of psychosocial technology of communication whose materials are movement, touch, and aurality—the maternal envelope of sonorous vocality and liquid motion that cares for the wild. Or to put it slightly differently, what if this Thing possesses the transmissible capacity for “metramorphic weaving in subjectivizing matrixial moments”—a mutually self/other, creator/audience transformational capacity that is key to ethical co/in-habit(u)ating, “artworking,” and interpersonal relating throughout the life cycle?³¹⁸ And what if the annihilation or erasure of the subject is the very Thing the fragile subject desires in its aspiration toward non-life, or the unbecoming in the passageway to newborn-ness (i.e., a fantasy of existential and creative rebirth or metempsychosis with real health benefits)? Ettinger may partially agree with Lacan and Bollas that each becoming-subject (that we all are) is part of an “always-already forgotten yet forever unforgettable and looked-for originary aesthetic environment,” but she adds that this is also an “ethical compassionate environment” experienced as equivalent to “the Cosmos.”³¹⁹

What’s more is that, for Ettinger, Freud’s oceanic feeling is tragically misunderstood as a desire for undifferentiated unity and symbiotic fusion. Instead, she understands representations of the “oceanic feeling” as indices of the desire for “borderlinking-in-

³¹⁷ Ettinger, “Maternal Subjectivity,” *YouTube* (2012), minute 11:44.

³¹⁸ Ettinger, “Matrixial Trans-subjectivity,” 219.

³¹⁹ Ettinger, “Matrixial Trans-subjectivity,” 220.

differentiation in a compassionate resonance chamber.”³²⁰ Or to borrow Melody Jue’s terms from her book *Wild Blue Media: Thinking Through Seawater*, Ettinger’s theory implies that our aquatic origination in a *transformational* matrixial milieu is the reason we are attracted to the symbolic, imaginary, and real “ocean as a force for conceptual reorientations that sometimes estranges what we thought was familiar.”³²¹ In other words, the material ocean and the “oceanic feeling” correspond to the original aquatic conditions of the matrixial environment. The matrix has a similar “aesthetic” impact on us in the form of continuous instances of “cognitive estrangement” in response to the waves of sensations, frequencies, and vibrations that come from the m/Othernal “non-I(s).” These haptic communications between the prenatal “I” and the m/Othernal “non-I(s)” continuously defamiliarize and transform the presubject’s intrauterine present.

This interrelationship implies a non-dominating model of knowledge production based on the mutual transformation of the partial subjects in an encounter-event linked at the borderspace of the matrixial milieu. Subject/object distinctions still exist but partially and are much harder to stabilize while aquatically immersed *in utero*, in a manner of speaking. In other words, Ettinger’s theory of the foreclosed and overlooked subjectivizing stratum of the matrix/womb uses “conceptual displacement as a method of defamiliarization” to make taken-for-granted patriarchal, antiblack, and misogynistic “terrestrial orientations visible.”³²² Ettinger’s psychoanalytic method of thinking with the oceanic matrix/womb as structural to matrixial trans-subjectivities also interestingly uses the nonhuman, amphibian terms of a terrestrial becoming-m/Other and an aquatic presubject as transitional, temporary stages of

³²⁰ Ettinger, “Matrixial Trans-subjectivity,” 220.

³²¹ Melody Jue, *Wild Blue Media: Thinking Through Sea Water* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2020), 6.

³²² Jue, *Wild Blue Media*, 6.

“identity” in the “metramorphic quest and the cognition of its anamnesis.”³²³ Ettinger’s exploration of the subjectivizing force of the oceanic womb milieu has some affinities with Jue’s “science fictional method of thinking with the ocean [that] productively estranges the terrestrially inflected ways of theorizing and thinking to which we have become habituated.”³²⁴ In short, the reduction of desire for “the Thing” as purely death driven, psychotic, or regressive is surely another patriarchal mistranslation that prevents defamiliarizing cognitive/affective/sensory reorientations and obstructs access to the matrixial “resonance field” or “demonic ground” where black mater and maternal fugitive subjects can be something beyond the “embodiment of the price of culture and absent to herself.”³²⁵

Since matrixial trans-subjects are interlaced in each other’s corporeal-sensorial I(s) and non-I(s), knowledge and ethics based on mind/body, subject/object, original/copy dualities are unintelligible in this universe: “During co-emergence and co-fading, both the presubject (I) and the m/Other (partial-subject, non-I) are transformed, in different but related ways.”³²⁶ However, initially the maternal figure carries the metabolizing burden asymmetrically: “...the pregnant m/Other metabolizes archaic encounter-events and a whole spectrum of intensities, frequencies and vibrations for the premature and fragile presubject, who precisely through this shareability with-in a m/Otheral psyche is becoming a partial-subject in jointness-in-difference with-in her.”³²⁷ Even so, like the capacity for intersubjective recognition that I will discuss in Chapter 5 and the mentalizing capacity

³²³ Ettinger, “Demeter-Persephone Complex,” 124.

³²⁴ Jue, *Wild Blue Media*, 6.

³²⁵ Ettinger, “Matrixial Trans-subjectivity,” 218.

³²⁶ Ettinger, “Matrixial Trans-subjectivity,” 221.

³²⁷ Ettinger, “Matrixial Trans-subjectivity,” 220.

discussed in the final chapter, the m/Other's metabolizing, differentiating-in-jointness function is theorized as being internalized by the maturing presubject as a *link a* (as opposed to the *objet petit a*) demonstrated by how in some conditions "similar reattunement continues in the postnatal relational sphere, and with other m/Others."³²⁸ It is this caring, interdependent dynamic of "meaning-donation through the other," Ettinger explains, that makes possible "a different passageway to others and to knowledge" called "matrixial co-emergence" or "metramorphosis."

The knowledge system practiced and produced via metramorphosis, she explains, is "suitable for transformative links that are not frozen into objects."³²⁹ Ettinger rejects the idea of the phallic *objet petit a* as the privileged signifier of desire and suggests instead that a desire for the *link a*—a desire for interlacing in difference-in-co-emergence—is the primary epistemophilic mode. In this way, Ettinger hypothesizes that postnatal matrixial trans-subjects desire the *link a* of their original non-I, their matrixial borderlinking figure of differentiation in co-emergence that promoted creative, transformational interconnections between its I(s) and non-I(s). The matrixial trans-subject's borderlinking desire for the *link a* makes knowledge about wild other natures based on distance and domination impossible. So, in this way, we can understand how the wild desire for a borderlinking *link a* in matrixial co-emergence has a potential "healing power" that could repair the cuts and "castrations" of epistemologies based on rejection, abjection, and domination and moves beyond value-hierarchical logic.

Matrixial co-emergence is also potentially traumatizing because it entails a process that blurs individual boundaries and draws both m/Other and presubject into more-or-less

³²⁸ Ettinger, "Matrixial Trans-subjectivity," 220.

³²⁹ Ettinger, "Matrixial Trans-subjectivity," 218.

alternating states of what Ettinger calls self-relinquishment, disappearing, and fragilization. Ettinger's transparent acknowledgement of matrixial trauma is a nuanced update to Winnicott's idea of the necessity for a short period immediately after birth for little to no maternal impingement of the m/Other's will on the infant. In other words, the "mother," for Winnicott, should respond to the infant's creative bodily gestures in a way that intentionally produces the illusion of omnipotence until the infant's selfhood has a chance to congeal into a stronger central self. Otherwise, a mental structure that originates from overwhelming impingement by the m/Other/environment produces a compliant or "false self" that is frozen in alienation from potential borderlinking encounter-events with m/Others and themselves in the form of unthought-known non-I(s).

After a time, however, it is necessary for the mother to introduce incrementally (at developmentally appropriate times) steadily increasing impingements, interventions, and/or interceptions (some that are playful/kindly and others that function as reproof) so the infant mind becomes a fugitive to itself and nomadically moves from its crystalized (but insular, solipsistic) intrapsychic homeplace into an engagement and co/in-habit(u)ation with other wild natures, which will eventually become a new homeplace. The gradual development by the infant of a matrixial trans-subjective epistemophilic stance of playful co-creativity toward the external world is determined by the style of maternal care.³³⁰ And the resultant orientation to finding objects in the world as "entities in their own right" allows for "a world of shared reality...which the subject can use and which can feed back other-than-me substance into the subject," a capacity Winnicott fosters in the analytic setting, but that

³³⁰ D.W. Winnicott, "Creativity and its origins," in *Reading Winnicott: The New Library of Psychoanalysis Teaching Series*, eds. Lesley Caldwell and Angela Joyce (London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2011), 278.

might also be productively applied to practices in environmental ethics and the creative arts, including those of “science” in the most broad use of the word.³³¹ However, Winnicott also wit(h)nessed in his patients, so much so that he posits it as an “axiom,” the way that the “environmental influence” “comes into our work as a traumatic idea, intolerable because not operating within the area of the patient’s omnipotence.”³³² This is the case whether that influence is good or bad and whether it results from the analyst or m/other. Winnicott’s clinical observations document over and over again how “a patient will always cling to the full exploitation of personal and *internal* factors, which give him or her a measure of omnipotent control, rather than allow the idea of a crude reaction to an environmental factor, whether distortion or failure.”³³³

So, it is in this sense that skills in matrixial metamorphosing show their more-or-less foreclosed status in patriarchal cultures while also demonstrating the importance of fostering those very matrixial capacities so carefully defended against. But his observations also show how matrixial co-emergence is potentially experienced as “traumatic” by prenatal and postnatal presubjects. Ettinger and Winnicott also foreground the defamiliarizing, uncanny, shattering feeling we experience when we bump up against the unknown as adults and why it is so important that we have co/in-habit(u)ating wit(h)ness-Things able to help us metabolize the precarious events of life, and these can be an array of matrixial figures, such as artworks, texts, people, as well as nonhuman attachment figures including “nature,” the

³³¹ Winnicott, “The use of an object,” in *Reading Winnicott: The New Library of Psychoanalysis Teaching Series*, eds. Lesley Caldwell and Angela Joyce (London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2011), 259.

³³² Winnicott, “Creativity and its origins,” 274.

³³³ Winnicott, “Creativity and its origins,” 274.

latter of which Shelley suggests is possible with trees in his essay “On Love.”³³⁴ In short, both Ettinger and Winnicott emphasize two types of “traumatic” experience that play significant roles both in the process of socializing developing minds in the negative sense of indoctrination as well as in the positive sense of a supportive/nurturing environment of care.

Because this process involves an “aesthetic transgression of individual borderlines, which occurs in any case with or without our awareness or intentions,” for Ettinger it is especially important that subjects undergo a process of “awakening of a specific ethical attention...responsibility” to this invisible process that touches us on the “borders of the thinkable.”³³⁵ And certain kinds of “matrixial” artwork, criticism, and intimate communications can promote an awareness of the wonder and healthy anxiety of the human potential for post-Human subjectivizing difference-in-co-emergence. Therefore, it is through Ettinger’s framework that I interpret Halberstam’s above account of the wild desire for un-being and Sideris’ notion of wondrous self-dissolution, neither as symptoms of the death drive nor of straightforward suicidal ideation. Rather, I view the desires for un-being and self-dissolution represented in the aesthetics of wonder as fantasies of the traumatic aspiration to embody/reaccess the prenatal “non-life” of the matrix and the creative return passage back into a transformed life via metamorphosis in “resonance” with other wild m/Others from adult life.

³³⁴ See the following reference for an interesting study about how places and animals can also satisfy attachment needs for security and support when proximity seeking, as well as function as secure bases that enable presubjects and mature adult subjects to “explore their environment and expand their behavioral repertoire, secure in the knowledge that support would be available from attachment figures if needed.” Lucas A. Keefer, Mark J. Landau, and Daniel Sullivan, “Non-human Support: Broadening the Scope of Attachment Theory,” *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 8, no. 9 (2014): 525.

³³⁵ Ettinger, “Matrixial Trans-subjectivity,” 219 & 222.

Whether or not Ettinger is attempting to construct her own “supplementary” descriptive/prescriptive theory of subjectivity in a mode of “realism” or “objectivity,” I find her theory compelling in so much as it functions as a useful narrative fantasy that inspires creative thinking about onto-epistemes and ethics after monohumanist Man(2), in Sylvia Wynter’s formulation. I hope having said that again sufficiently contextualizes the following brief synopsis of the possible reasoning behind the privileging of “the feminine” in Ettinger’s theory, as opposed to striving for gender “neutrality,” for example. While Ettinger suggests that the matrixial trans-subjective capacity for borderlinking and metramorphosis is originally a “feminine” competence, she emphasizes that it is shared/shareable across multiply sexed prenatal presubjects (including males) in so far as it arises in contact with strange “non-I(s)” within the womb/matrix of a female mammal of the *Homo sapiens* species. The point is that, for Ettinger, the prenatal intercommunication between the presubject and matrixial m/Other precedes gender differentiation and presumably other structuring forms of social conditioning as well, including basic distinctions between the self/subject (I) and other/object (non-I). To my mind, this quality of polymorphous, severality (but not One or the infinite) is why Ettinger characterizes the matrixial trans-subjectivity as a kind of “trans-subjective unconscious web.”³³⁶ All together, these points suggest that, for Ettinger, matrixial trans-subjectivity is possible for all postnatal people in theory but originates in the prenatal biology of the human female reproductive system. Of course, Ettinger’s aesthetic-ethical developmental theory will need revision and its metaphorical effectivity will accordingly change, likely in ways for better and worse, if, in the future, innovative reproductive technologies provide more alternatives to intrauterine

³³⁶ Ettinger, “Matrixial Trans-subjectivity,” 218.

gestation.³³⁷ But I think the overall point for Ettinger is that the primary responsibility for enveloping and caring for prenatal, presubjects has historically and evolutionarily belonged to and/or been forced upon embodied feminine maternal subjects and this particular organization leaves unerasable, original feminine traces with specific creative implications worthy of consideration and respect.

Unfortunately, although these traces arguably still exist within, as Ettinger argues, the “foreclosure of the feminine matrixiality puts in danger the subject who is finding himself [sic] in self-fragilization, languishing for borderlinking in this erotic way.”³³⁸ As touched on briefly above, since the matrixial is a productive *narrative fantasy*—that human infants are “transconnected to maternal subjectivity right from the start” (whether or not this is Real)—its foreclosure creates a dangerous blindness to the major distinction between the deconstructive art of embodying non-life and actual suicidal desires for death.³³⁹ This conflation is quite apparent in some critics’ unqualified dismissal of the bulk of speculative literature as expressions of the apocalyptic power fantasies of white, male libertarians or as the typical postmodern imaginative failure to formulate alternatives to capitalism, to name a couple examples. But additionally, at the opposite end of the spectrum, narrative fantasies of total, symbiotic fusion with “mother nature” are now routinely (but not always) ignored as naïvely “romantic” at best, or, at worst, reduced to mere symptoms of latent fascism. The

³³⁷ I also wonder how the metaphor and myth of matrixial trans-subjectivity changes as it arises in encounter-events between different combinations of preterm non/human newborns and non/human, non-feminine matrices, like the imaginary humanoid species born from geodes in Jemisin’s *The Broken Earth Trilogy* and P.B. Shelley’s mountain-born witch, as well as actual infant presubjects born under 27 weeks and placed in neonatal intensive care units, for example. My discussion in Chapter 5 about the depressed, maternal A.I. called Mima from the film *Aniara* also comes to mind. Fradenburg Joy describes how “the haptic qualities of the voice,” especially “familial voices” can provide preterm infants with a good-enough “holding environment.” See Fradenburg Joy, “Care of the Wild,” 85.

³³⁸ Ettinger, “Maternal Subjectivity,” minute 15:30.

³³⁹ Ettinger, “Maternal Subjectivity,” minute 36:19.

foreclosure of the matrixial causes all such fantasies (literary and otherwise) to be misapprehended as mere pathology, instead of recognizing that *some* such fantasies may be valid conscious and/or unconscious critiques of a broken world or a creative suggestion of a replacement for that disastrous world. As the disenfranchised narrator Hoa in Jemisin's *Broken Earth* series says to the equally oppressed protagonist Essun: "I did watch the world burn. Say nothing to me of innocent bystanders, unearned suffering, heartless vengeance... Well, some worlds are built on a fault line of pain, held up by nightmares. Don't lament when those worlds fall. Rage that they were built doomed in the first place."³⁴⁰

Such fantasies may be self-medicating authorial entreaties, wittingly or unwittingly, for therapeutic borderlinking to access the transformational subjectivizing potential of a hoped-for "'mature' non-I (m/Othernal figure)" who will arrive to help the "'immature' or fragmented I" metabolize trauma and move toward "aesthetical modes" of life and vitality.³⁴¹ On the other hand, such fantasies in the form of literature may function as invitations from author/analysts to reader/patients to work through troubling psychosocial material. The reader may very well be a fragmented, immature "I" who vaguely perceives "compassionate hospitality" emanating from a text that the reader relates to as a "non-I who can m/Otherly wit(h)ness" their melancholy and/or trauma.³⁴² Furthermore, the reader's presumably newfound, wondrous sense of the "metramorphic psychic net" that gathers I(s) and non-I(s) into encounter-events, may compel them to join in "compassionate alliance with otherness on the borderlines between non-life and life" and to work through profoundly traumatic personal and sociopolitical events in fantasy *and* reality.³⁴³ Once this matrixial

³⁴⁰ Jemisin, *The Stone Sky*, 7.

³⁴¹ Ettinger, "Matrixial Trans-subjectivity," 221.

³⁴² Ettinger, "Matrixial Trans-subjectivity," 220.

³⁴³ Ettinger, "Matrixial Trans-subjectivity," 221.

function is internalized, a kind of benevolent circle is possible vis-à-vis fragile others in the matrixial trans-subject's sphere of influence. However, it is important to point out that the "mature" matrixial trans-subject will eternally experience "moments" of "fragilization" (e.g., vulnerability to disintegration and/or transformation) where s/he/they/it is in need of a m/Other to wit(h)ness them in "compassionate hospitality." So, perhaps it is more useful to think of individual personhood as an amalgam of I(s) and non-I(s)—each person as a matrixial/newborn trans-subject flickering in and out of continuous becoming in relation to its environmental circumstances in a nomadic no-place or a co/in-habit(u)ated homeplace. But whether the "mature" matrixial figure is a mother, theorist, author, witch, superhuman, or creature, etc., or none of the above, when they function as the "holding" matrix for a fragile presubject in unbecoming, the matrixial trans-subject inadvertently promotes "her" own further growth and evolution in an "ethical as well as aesthetical sense, as she enlarges her capacity for self-fragilization, compassionate hospitality and wit(h)nessing."³⁴⁴

³⁴⁴ Ettinger, "Matrixial Trans-subjectivity," 221.

Section II. Nineteenth-Century Speculative Treatments of Subject (Re)formation

Chapter 3. Melancholy Masculinity and Sublime Mania: The Matrixial “Unthought Known” in William Wordsworth’s *The Prelude*, “Nutting,” and “Ode: Intimations of Immortality” and Percy Bysshe Shelley’s *Alastor; or, The Spirit of Solitude and Epipsychidion*

As Louise Economides explains, the narrative logic of the sublime generally moves from “privation [to] anthropocentric empowerment, [to] narcissistic identification.”³⁴⁵ Thomas Weiskel provides a similar shorthand definition: “We call an object sublime if the attempt to represent it determines the mind to regard its inability to grasp wholly the object as a symbol of the mind’s relation to a transcendent order.”³⁴⁶ This structure is a symptom of the dualisms that undergird western philosophy, which exist in a dialectical relationship to oppressive patriarchal socialization processes that aim to (re)produce the “master identity.”³⁴⁷ Sylvia Wynter identifies this dynamic to suggest that “our stories/myths of origin function as behavior-motivating prescriptions, in that they also induce us to desire the ‘normalcy’ encoded in each ruling genre of being human, while likewise inducing us to be aversive to the ‘abnormalcy’ embodied in its correlated genre of nonbeing—even at our own

³⁴⁵ Louise Economides, *The Ecology of Wonder in Romantic and Postmodern Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 52.

³⁴⁶ Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), 23.

³⁴⁷ According to the ecofeminist philosopher, Val Plumwood, value-hierarchical dualisms are fundamental to the logic of the western “master identity” that tries to justify colonization, slavery, and oppressive gender dynamics. Those that belong to the sphere of culture define what is authentically human while those that belong to the sphere of mere nature play an instrumental role in the service of the sphere of culture. In other words, all those considered Nature (i.e., women, Black and Brown people, animals and the environment in general) are justifiably used as a means to the “master identity’s” ends, as *things* rather than as *persons* with self-directedness and value in themselves. Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

expense.”³⁴⁸ Sublime aesthetics, myths, and socialization practices together effect in the master subjects (and marginalized others) different degrees of melancholy/depressive alienation that manifest in poetic/creative sublimations in the form of strange, and often “mutually incompatible,” combinations of disparate psychic defenses ranging from paranoia to mania.³⁴⁹

In this chapter, I link Zakiyyah Iman Jackson’s critique of discourses of the sublime in western philosophy and aesthetics to what Keats famously but reductively referred to as the “wordsworthian or egotistical sublime; which is a thing per se and stands alone.”³⁵⁰ To do so, first I explore the monohumanist-Man treatments of wild nature(s), sublimity, and matrixial femininity/queer plenitude by William Wordsworth in his “Intimations Ode” (ca. 1802-1804) and *The Prelude* (1805/1850) and P.B. Shelley in *Alastor* (ca. 1815). In these analyses I foreground a) why these treatments are inadequate because antiblack, anti-matrixial, and bio-geo-phobic, and b) how they expose their own melancholic and/or phobic thinking in their depictions of maternal/matrixial/feminine and/or “black(ened)” figures and constellations. P.B. Shelley’s “Arab maiden” in *Alastor*, Mary Shelley’s African-originating plague in *The Last Man*, and the Arabian sorceress Ayesha in H. Rider Haggard’s *She* are all Orientalized and “black(ened)” m/other figures that illustrate Jackson’s point that the “antiblack, sexuating consequences of sublimity as an aesthetic attribution” can be applied to any othered group/collective considered non-white and non-western or “abnormal” (and therefore, exploitable).³⁵¹ Along these lines, I also introduce my speculation that the

³⁴⁸ Jason R. Ambrose, “On Sylvia Wynter’s Darwinian Heresy of the ‘Third Event,’” *American Quarterly* 70, no. 4 (2018): 850.

³⁴⁹ Melanie Klein, “The Psychogenesis of Manic-Depressive States,” in *The Selected Melanie Klein*, ed. Juliet Mitchell (New York: The Free Press, 1986), 132.

³⁵⁰ Keats, “Letter to Richard Woodhouse, October 27, 1818,” 295.

³⁵¹ Jackson, “Theorizing in a Void,” 628.

“classical” transcendental sublime and the Romantic “egotistical” sublime, or what I identify as the “manic” sublime, are combined and mobilized by hegemonic “imperial” sublime discourses popular throughout the nineteenth century. I develop the latter strand of this argument in the next chapter to show how Haggard’s novel *She* (1886) includes Orientalized constructions of the “black *mater*(nal)” figure in terms of an “imperial” (paranoid/manic) sublime. Haggard’s imperial sublime is especially exemplary of this revisionist appropriation of the Romantic poet’s unacknowledged self-aggrandizing/justifying usurpation of m/other nature’s powers: “We hear in the background of the Romantic sublime the grand confidence of a heady imperialism, now superannuated as ethic or state of mind—a kind of spiritual capitalism, enjoining a pursuit of the infinitude of the private self.”³⁵²

The second focus of this chapter complicates Wordsworth and Shelley’s masculinist complicities by showing the different degrees of success of their speculative approaches to the connections between the human mind and wild natures. Here I analyze Wordsworth’s “Nutting” (ca. 1789) and sections from both versions of *The Prelude* (1805-1850) and Shelley’s *Queen Mab* (ca. 1812-1813) and *Epipsychidion* (ca. 1820-1821). I show the distinct, yet similar, ways Wordsworth and Shelley critically grapple with and subvert misogynist, antiblack, bio-geo-phobic myths *and* sublime aesthetics that foreclose the epistemophilic ability to wonder at/wander in wildness. Both authors elaborate new “modes of being/knowing/feeling that gesture toward the overturning of Man.”³⁵³

William Wordsworth’s Sublime Imagination

This section untangles the melancholic/manic structure of Wordsworth’s sublime depictions of the imagination from his increasingly masculinist approaches to nature.

³⁵² Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime*, 6.

³⁵³ Jackson, *Becoming Human*, 4.

Wordsworth's masculinist approaches to nature oscillate between depictions of an idealized gender-feminine, tranquil, and beautiful space for the consolidation of his ego and oddly censored, androgynous, and/or analogically masculinized depictions of nature in connection with his mature imagination/philosophical mind. For example, Wordsworth defines the imagination as "but another name for absolute strength / And clearest insight, amplitude of mind, / And reason in her most exalted mood."³⁵⁴ An additional example of the latter appears in *The Prelude* (1850) when Wordsworth's description of the mind alludes to Milton's holy spirit from *Paradise Lost* who is like a broody hen warmly enveloping chaos as an egg in a nest while simultaneously seminally investing in chaos to make it fruitful: "There I beheld the emblem of a mind / That feeds upon infinity, that broods / Over the dark abyss."³⁵⁵ As Robert Hale argues about *The Prelude*, "Wordsworth figures himself as more connected to and dependent on the mother and Nature in 1805 than in 1850, and his later revision...seems to function to assuage the anxiety of associating his poetics with the mother and mothering Nature."³⁵⁶ In selections from *The Prelude* and his uncharacteristically Platonic "Intimations Ode" I foreground the increasingly appropriative construction of his sublime imagination/ego as compared, say, to depictions in his conversation poems. In both poems Wordsworth's language defends against the "unthought known" that the prenatal matrixial sphere and the aesthetic of care by the postnatal m/other are both fundamental to his sense of closeness to nature and therefore to the development of his mind.

³⁵⁴ William Wordsworth, "The Prelude of 1805 in Thirteen Books," *The Prelude: 1799, 1805, 1850*, eds. Jonathan Wordsworth, M.H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill (London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1979), 461, Book 14, lines 70-72. All references to 1805 and 1850 versions of *The Prelude* in this chapter are to this anthology unless otherwise noted.

³⁵⁵ Wordsworth, "The Prelude of 1805," 468, Book 13, lines 168-170.

³⁵⁶ Robert C. Hale, "Wordsworth, Revision, and the Blessed Babe: Reading the Mother in Book 2 of *The Prelude*," *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 33, no. 3 (2000): 159.

However, my analysis of “Nutting” opens to the possibility that Wordsworth’s occasional defensive elisions may be conscious decisions—that is, critical/creative choices that reflect his anxiety about accidentally deploying the sexualized and heterosexist gendered vocabulary of patriarchal language. Perhaps he fears that using sexualized, gendered vocabulary in connection to nature, or vice versa, will “induce” readers to adopt an aggressive and dominating colonial mindset, in Wynter’s sense. The other explanation, for the elision of wild m/others and his increasing spiritualization/masculinization of nature, is that Wordsworth betrayed his initial principles of defending all oppressed m/others because he supposed that in order to survive in the literary world, he must appeal to the reception culture of the patriarchal status quo. In other words, perhaps he thought that the only chance he had to legitimize his poetic paternal authority and widely disseminate his imaginative prescription against the tyranny of small-mindedness was if he could effectively “extrahumanize” the origins of his poetics in more familiar “truths” of Christian/Platonic divinity while simultaneously avoiding using too much language in registers that may trigger old reward pathways. In the 1850 version of *The Prelude* Wordsworth rather anxiously “works-through” the promises and perils of undertaking this plan:

...howsoe'er misled,
Never did I, in quest of right and wrong,
Tamper with conscience from a private aim;
Nor was in any public hope the dupe
Of selfish passions; nor did ever yield
Willfully to mean cares or low pursuits,
But shrunk with apprehensive jealousy

From every combination which might aid
The tendency, too potent in itself,
Of use and custom to bow down the soul
Under a growing weight of vulgar sense,
And substitute a universe of death
For that which moves with light and life informed,
Actual, divine, and true.³⁵⁷

According to this logic, Wordsworth might be choosing to slowly chisel away at the “cognitive closure” and “imperative of self-conservation” that prevents people from recognizing the “*laws of auto-institution*,” the laws, myths/aesthetics, and discursive formations that determine what he identified as hegemonic classes of being human that impinge on the “true self” and constrict the potential of the human mind.³⁵⁸ At the same time, in defiance of the monohumanist western system of authority, with “apprehensive jealousy” he identifies *and appropriates* for his own poetics the mechanism by which power interpellates and reproduces itself in subjugated subjects. In this way he might establish his own Romantic “genre-specific orders of truth” that would “serve to motivate, *semantically-neurochemically*, in positive/negative *symbolic life/symbolic death* terms, the ensemble of individual and collective behaviors needed to dynamically enact and stably replicate [his] fictively made eusocial human order *as an autopoietic, autonomously functioning, languaging living system*.”³⁵⁹ But I think he experiences qualms about the

³⁵⁷ Wordsworth, “*The Prelude* of 1850,” 467, Book 14, lines 149-162.

³⁵⁸ Ambrose, “On Sylvia Wynter’s Darwinian Heresy,” 853.

³⁵⁹ Sylvia Wynter, “Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species? Or, to Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations,” in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, ed. Katherine McKittrick (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015), 32.

consequences of this project as reflected in the passage above, especially in the vocabulary of “never,” “ever,” and anxiously confronts the fictionality of his own poetics in “Resolution and Independence,” among other poems.

So, on the one hand, beyond his purported poetic project to practice and instill a pedagogy of compassion towards alterity as outlined in his “Preface” (1802) to the *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), I explore the possibility of his unconscious melancholic tendency to deny wildness and to control (or constrict) what constitutes the “m/otherly” in “nature” and in himself into only positive terms. Wordsworth’s poetic constriction of internal and external reality functions to maintain the unacknowledged psychic foreclosure that stands against his identification/internalization with a more ambivalent yet richer picture of the matrixial wildness and queer plenitude in self and other. Wordsworth represses/represents his anxiety regarding his (mis)perception of the negativity/trauma of unbecoming in matrixial self-dissolution and/or the matrixial “care of the wild,” depending on what position he occupies at different moments in his life vis-à-vis a fragile/fragilizing wild m/other natures. To avoid being “touched” by wild m/others (as opposed to pure [i.e., sterilized], nurturing nurses), he averts his eyes from the matrixial gaze and its erotic aeries of the psyche for the more distant, sanitary illusion of the Poet as a sex/gender-neutral wind harp stimulated by charming and picturesque pastoral scenes with which he can masculinely and paternalistically touch others.

Wordsworth’s “nature” often functions as an anchor (e.g., a nurse, guide, guardian, etc.) of his moral understanding or philosophical mind, a mind that is characterized as “self-conscious” and/or “self-reflective” more than “rational,” and certainly not analytical (which is murdering to dissect). In this mode as guide, nature is never depicted as “sublime”

because he wishes to avoid the total self-shattering or growth-inspiring challenge of matrixial mirrors that might reflect his own appearance back to him in the form of a terrifying/unflattering image of Man—a mode of privileged, masculine human being that he is but perhaps wishes not to be. Wordsworth also rarely depicts nature in the terms of the masculine, transcendental sublime because a) he is invested in subverting toxic masculinity, and b) a *paternal* mirror might also shatter his illusion of the benevolent and erotically neutral, nurse nature whose powers he can unconsciously appropriate: “Since Wordsworth identifies society with masculinity, the masculine male, smug victor of the social sweepstakes, is barred from his poetry.”³⁶⁰ Wordsworth’s *conscious* intention to protest patriarchal, imperial symbolic authority as a mutilating and mind-stultifying social enterprise manifests in his critique of the language of sexual violation in “Nutting” and in his confrontation with the fictionality of the sublime in “Resolution and Independence.” This critical goal, however, is complicated and compromised by an *unconscious* ambivalence towards phallogentric identities and desires and an *unconscious* denial of the loss of and desire for “matrixial/feminine” ones in himself as an individual.

For example, in the following passage from *The Prelude*, Wordsworth seems insightful about his former nationalistic identifications with that “great emporium” and the naïve egotism of youthful pursuits of power:

...such a place must needs
Have pleased me in those times. I sought not then
Knowledge, but craved for power—and power I found
In all things. Nothing had a circumscribed

³⁶⁰ Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 304.

And narrow influence; but all objects, being
Themselves capacious, also found in me
Capaciousness and amplitude of mind—
Such is the strength and glory of our youth.³⁶¹

But at the same time, his implicit nostalgia alongside his silence on the role of m/other nature in relation to the power-seeking mind fail to detail the exact problem with power and also give away his desire for that youthful imposing and appropriative state of mind. This defensive lack of self and other awareness, his avoidance of painful knowledge, allow him to unwittingly participate in the masculinist appropriation of m/other nature's creative powers to foster the fiction/illusion of his totally autonomous and original sublime imagination, hence Keats' charge of the "egotistical" nature of his sublime.

Wordsworth at times is unable to process certain psychic experiences and denies the melancholic truth that Judith Butler formulates: "The ego comes into being on the condition of the 'trace' of the other, who is, at that moment of emergence, already at a distance. To accept the autonomy of the ego is to forget that trace."³⁶² Applicable here is Julie Carlson's foregrounding of Mary Wollstonecraft's idea that there is a cost to idealization that denies the knowledge of the negative details of lost and lacking objects: "Poets paint a 'heaven of fancy' that, by always 'fencing out sorrow,' excludes 'all the extatic emotions of the soul, and even its grandeur.'"³⁶³ To borrow Camille Paglia's insensitive yet insightful formulation of the issue, "Wordsworth's refusal to acknowledge the sex or cruelty of nature [and all wild m/others, *including himself*] is one source of the palpable repression in his poetry, which

³⁶¹ Wordsworth, "The Prelude of 1805," 306, Book 8, lines 753-760.

³⁶² Judith Butler, "Melancholy, Ambivalence, Rage," from *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 196.

³⁶³ Julie Carlson, "Fancy's History," *European Romantic Review* 14, no. 2 (2003): 169.

constricts and weighs it down.”³⁶⁴ Such denial is perhaps partly motivated by his desire for the “autonomy of the ego,” which causes him to tragically start to painfully “forget that trace,” as he documents in the “Intimations Ode.”³⁶⁵ The “trace” here shares an uncanny resemblance to the “gleam / The light that never was, on sea or land, / The consecration, and the Poet’s dream,” which may be the prenatal and pre-oedipal interconnection with the matrixial and the m/other.³⁶⁶ But if he had accepted/acknowledged something of the matrixial, maternal trace, on the other hand, he may have preserved the creativity of his matrixial poetic “spirit” because doing so means to “embark upon a process of mourning that can never be complete, for no final severance could take place without dissolving the ego.”³⁶⁷

Kate Rigby rightly suggests that Keats’ wholesale reduction of Wordsworth’s poetics to the “egotistical sublime” is an “unfair comment.”³⁶⁸ And because of Keats’ comment, she points out that many critics problematically and erroneously attribute egocentric concerns to the “Romantic poetics of solitary rambling” as a whole.³⁶⁹ Instead, she claims that “solitude” is essential to what she sees as Wordsworth’s contemplative ecopoetics, which she defines as a “contemplative praxis” that can “engender a deeper appreciation of the bodily dimensions of human existence, and thereby also of our environmental affectivity, pushing back against ratiocentric constructions of the human subject as a quasi-disembodied mind,

³⁶⁴ Paglia, *Sexual Personae*, 300.

³⁶⁵ Butler, “Melancholy, Ambivalence, Rage,” 196.

³⁶⁶ Wordsworth, “Elegiac Stanzas,” 430, lines 14-16.

³⁶⁷ Butler, “Melancholy, Ambivalence, Rage,” 196.

³⁶⁸ Kate Rigby, *Reclaiming Romanticism: Towards an Ecopoetics of Decolonization* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 16.

³⁶⁹ Rigby, *Reclaiming Romanticism*, 16.

immune to environmental influences.”³⁷⁰ Furthermore, she dismisses charges of “wilderness fetishism” and argues that the Romantics are more concerned with the wonder of wildness:

The experience of wonder is contingent upon an encounter with the self-disclosure of things ‘doing their own thing,’ as it were, pursuing their own way in the world: as if they were in some sense, if not necessarily consciously so, agentic or ‘self-willed,’ and hence ‘wild’ in the root meaning of the word, rather than pinned down as the passive object of human knowledge and power.³⁷¹

In place of the supposedly overstated “significance of the aesthetics of the sublime with respect to European Romanticism,” Rigby offers her view of the Romantics as primarily concerned with the wonder of “collective flourishing” in “naturalcultural” places.”³⁷² She claims that “Wordsworthian wandering” generates wonder that is “far from comprising an ‘egotistical sublime.’”³⁷³ Instead, she sees Wordsworth’s poetics of wonder as “affectionately fraternal, radicalizing the ‘brotherliness’ that was to have been brought about, but which was ultimately betrayed, by the French Revolution, by extending it democratically to places, animals, and indeed all manner of ‘things,’ including other people.”³⁷⁴

While Rigby makes a compelling case for the presence of solitary wandering and contemplatively wondering at the “wildness” of things in Wordsworth’s poetics, I do not think that this means that he absolutely does not also engage with sublime aesthetics for

³⁷⁰ Rigby, *Reclaiming Romanticism*, 17.

³⁷¹ Rigby, *Reclaiming Romanticism*, 15.

³⁷² Rigby, *Reclaiming Romanticism*, 14 & 16.

³⁷³ Rigby, *Reclaiming Romanticism*, 16.

³⁷⁴ Rigby, *Reclaiming Romanticism*, 16.

masculinist and/or subversive purposes. I also think that Rigby's use of the term wildness has more in common with the supposed gender-neutral "thing-power" of vital materialism than with the notion of the queer plenitude of matrixial trans-subjectivity, and if this aesthetic is present perhaps it is related to his anxiety about aggressive, gendered language and/or his desire to legitimize the authority of his poetics and/or his unconscious repression of his own queer plenitudes. I am also quite skeptical of the democratic potential of Wordsworth's reliance on fraternal metaphors that imply a patriarchal and nationalistic "Human Family," as the following lines from *The Prelude* suggest:

The power which these
Acknowledge when thus moved, which Nature thus
Thrusts forth upon the senses, is the express
Resemblance—in the fullness of its strength
Made visible—a genuine counterpart
And brother of the glorious faculty
Which higher minds bear with them as their own.³⁷⁵

These lines imply and occlude the racial, gender, and species hierarchy and exclusions that make them possible. His masculinization of nature and higher minds here occurs directly after his memory of supposedly unknowingly crossing what he anticipated was going to be the sublime landscape of the Alps. Wordsworth emphasizes the Alps' lack of seductive power with which to draw in viewers to distance the "sublime" birth of the imagination from its inspiration by and origination in m/other nature(s).

³⁷⁵ Wordsworth, "*The Prelude* of 1805," 482, Book 13, lines 84-90.

Wordsworth's disappointment in the failure of the French Revolution could also be understood as a lost ideal that he replaces with the "glory" of his mind, and which ultimately effects his systematic withdrawal from the social world:

The mind beneath such banners militant
Thinks not of spoils or trophies, nor of aught
That may attest its prowess, blest in thoughts
That are their own perfection and reward—
Strong in itself, and in the access of joy
Which hides it like the overflowing Nile.³⁷⁶

These lines suggest that his newfound "sublime consciousness of the soul in her own might and almost divine powers" needs no social recognition of its merits and is self-sufficient, autonomous in its narcissistic enclosure that "hides" it.³⁷⁷ However, these lines also unconsciously deliver a "social 'plaint'" that he refuses to acknowledge and that he defends against transforming into a melancholic "self-judgement" by overcompensating.³⁷⁸ He recasts the "militant banners" of "infinite" that comprise the "philosophic mind" as a recompense for the lost ideal of fraternal liberty. Yet these lines also quietly imply a subversive counsel to the masculine-identifying reader to reject patriarchal and nationalistic identifications for the security of an independent mind. As Camille Paglia puts it ever so provocatively, "A man [and brother] may choose emasculation in the service of the state, stultifying his imagination, or he may choose marriage with a mother goddess."³⁷⁹ But as mentioned above, rather than condoning "marriage" between man and nature, I think

³⁷⁶ Wordsworth, "The Prelude of 1805," 216 & 218, Book 6, lines 543-548.

³⁷⁷ Wordsworth qtd. in Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime*, 198.

³⁷⁸ Butler, "Melancholy, Ambivalence, Rage," 198.

³⁷⁹ Paglia, *Sexual Personae*, 303.

Wordsworth is careful to purify his poetics of any signs of sexualized and heterosexist vocabulary for the purposes of promoting his legitimacy and avoiding complicity in dominating fantasies and behaviors of sexual and colonial conquest. Of course, I do not mean to suggest that it is not possible that Wordsworth's poetics also unconsciously enact and participate in masculinist appropriative logics and behaviors.

While it may be true that Wordsworth's "ego" is solidified in more tranquil/beautiful scenes of nature, the relationship that he constructs in *The Prelude* between his imagination and more stark landscapes perhaps does have something of the quality of the "egotistical sublime" in its suspiciously overconfident analogies between nature's powers and the godlike poetic mind. For example, Wordsworth's allusion to "Kubla Khan" identifies the "awful and sublime" "blue chasm" as the location where "Nature lodged / The soul, the imagination of the whole," which is the "perfect image of a mighty mind, / Of one that feeds upon infinity."³⁸⁰ In other words, the power of the human imagination parallels nature's use of a sea of mist to transform the Snowdon landscape and force the "real sea" to "dwindle and give up its majesty."³⁸¹ While these equations may lend themselves to hubristic, technological interventions into non/human natures, Wordsworth's "overconfident" anthropocentrism only scratches the surface of the complicated psychic dynamics undergirding his engagement with sublime aesthetics. Thomas Weiskel's rather androcentric definition of Wordsworth's imagination, as an experience, reveals what he thinks is "egotistical" about some of Wordsworth's sublime moments:

Imagination is an extreme consciousness of self mounting in dialectical recoil from the extinguishing of the self which an imminent identification with the

³⁸⁰ Wordsworth, "*The Prelude* of 1805," 460, Book 13, lines 64-65 & 69-70.

³⁸¹ Wordsworth, "*The Prelude* of 1805," 460, Book 13, lines 49-50.

symbolic order enjoins. Hence the Imagination rises ‘Like an unfather’d vapour’: it is at once the ego’s need and its attempt to be unfathered, to originate itself and thereby refuse acknowledgment to a superior power.³⁸²

While I do not agree with Weiskel’s orthodox Freudian assessment that a rejection of real and/or symbolic paternal authority is necessarily narcissistic or egotistical, a brief elaboration of his views on the sublime is illustrative.

Weiskel’s basis for characterizing certain moments in Wordsworth’s poetry in the register of the “egotistical sublime,” or what he also refers to as the “positive sublime,” is in his perception of Wordsworth’s imaginative rejection of the oedipus complex. In contrast, he claims that poets and philosophers of the “negative” or transcendental sublime engage and identify with the “father principle.” For example, Weiskel states that “for both Kant and Burke, the myth of the superego takes a theological form,” and in so doing demonstrates how the essential function of the sublime rests in the “very moment in which the mind turns within and performs its identification with reason” or the “Father” beyond.³⁸³ The sublime is instrumental to monohumanist Man’s cultural reproduction, which for Weiskel is a positive thing: “The sublime moment recapitulates and thereby reestablishes the oedipus complex, whose positive resolution is the basis of culture itself.”³⁸⁴ According to Weiskel, “[t]he negative sublime apparently exhibits some features of a response to superego anxiety, for in the suddenness of the sublime moment the conscious ego rejects its attachment to sensible objects and turns rather fearfully toward an ideal of totality and power which it participates or internalizes.”³⁸⁵ In this way, Weiskel, Kant, and Burke’s theories of the sublime all

³⁸² Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime*, 203.

³⁸³ Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime*, 94.

³⁸⁴ Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime*, 94.

³⁸⁵ Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime*, 83.

function to demonstrate Wynter's concept of "extrahumanization" where different hegemonic genres of the human across history try to hide their "agency in the authorship, formation, and replication of [their] genre-specific social ways of existing by projecting their origins as having come from 'elsewhere'—including from various *supernatural beings*, by divinely instituted *natural law*, or by *natural selection* as an inexorable law of bioevolution."³⁸⁶

Interesting too is how Weiskel argues that melancholy release is closely interwoven into the experience of the negative/transcendental sublime. I think the reason for this is because, as an "extrahuman" mechanism for the cultural reproduction of Man, the sublime aesthetic structure is meant to parallel and stimulate into performative re-enaction the myths/narratives of oral and oedipal anxieties and defensive resolutions in the sense that Wynter theorizes:

Wynter proposes that our genre-specific sociogenic codes *condition* our species-specific genetic codes through the semantic or verbal activation of what neuroscientists have identified as the biochemical reward and punishment system of the brain (and body), collectively operating as a *symbolic-life/chemical-reward/placebo* versus *symbolic-death/chemical-punishment/nocebo* behavior-motivating and -orienting mechanism.³⁸⁷

As is expected then, in Weiskel's description of the interplay between the sublime and melancholy the subject (rendered in implicitly masculine terms) is first confronted with an overwhelming force in nature, which stimulates the oral fantasy of total absorption by the m/other. This desire for unity is quickly replaced with the fear of annihilation, which

³⁸⁶ Ambrose, "On Sylvia Wynter's Darwinian Heresy," 853.

³⁸⁷ Ambrose, "On Sylvia Wynter's Darwinian Heresy," 851-852.

stimulates in the subject the new desire to “possess” the power of m/other Nature. This possessive desire in turn stimulates “castration anxiety” or terror and melancholic guilt. Weiskel considers “the sublime of terror” as a mere moment or “*episode in melancholy*” based on the subject’s unconscious feeling of guilt about desiring to possess the power of m/other Nature: “The superego is displeased and in its harshness it can not only deprive the ego of self-esteem but punish it to the point of self-murder.”³⁸⁸ But conveniently, Weiskel suggests that “the sublime moment releases the ego from guilt through an identification with the power by which (in melancholy) it had formerly been punished.”³⁸⁹ This masculine identification with paternal authority or “absorption into a greater [divine] power at once beyond and within” draws pleasurable parallels between the ego and superego and therein gives the master subject the rewarding sense of “delight.”³⁹⁰ According to Weiskel, the pain of melancholy is “contained” as only a brief emotional compromise that gives way to a comfortable sense of internal/external power. Melancholy conceived as a temporary terrifying humiliation on the route to paternal/divine identification is how Kant as “an apologist for the sublime” is able to distinguish so-called virile melancholy from its more “languid” and luxuriously long-lasting (feminized) sister.³⁹¹ As I will briefly discuss below, Wordsworth playfully, but not unproblematically, interrogates this distinction in fascinating ways in the Alps passage from *The Prelude*.

In contradistinction, myths/narratives that depict the failed attempt to positively identify with the superego function to punish and discipline “abnormality” by leaving the sense of melancholy “unrelieved,” as perhaps the “traumatic sublime” works to do in

³⁸⁸ Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime*, 96.

³⁸⁹ Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime*, 97.

³⁹⁰ Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime*, 97.

³⁹¹ Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime*, 97.

Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*. At a supposed further distance from the melancholy of the transcendental/negative or traumatic sublime, Weiskel posits the "positive" or "egotistical sublime." For Weiskel, the egotistical sublime is an ultimately unsatisfactory and uniquely Wordsworthian and Shelleyan solution, elision, attack, or subversion of the former. For Weiskel, the egotistical sublime "seems akin to narcissism, and in it the psychological role of the father or authority appears to be strangely vacant."³⁹² Wordsworth's refusal to engage in a confrontation with the "father-principle" leads, according to Weiskel, to the "infinitely repeatable 'I am'" where "[n]o 'thou' or 'it' can enter its attractive orbit without being transubstantiated into the 'I.'"³⁹³

John G. Pipkin's definition of the transcendental sublime takes into account the gendered tropes of the sublime while also reiterating certain elements of Weiskel's above two definitions: "Romantic poets working in the discourse of the transcendental sublime attempt to transform awe or fear into an epiphany of spiritual self-awareness and imaginative empowerment."³⁹⁴ Indeed, as Pipkin suggests, "[r]egardless of their varied theoretical underpinnings, at some point these disparate formulations of the sublime all involve a denial of, or a turning away from, the powerful, material source of awe, terror, or linguistic/psychological saturation that has initiated the sublime experience, and a turning inward to locate within the self an analogue to this external power."³⁹⁵ Pipkin offers an additional discourse on sublimity in the form of the "material sublime," which he defines in opposition to the transcendental sublime poet's "successful suppression of encroaching

³⁹² Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime*, 83.

³⁹³ Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime*, 158.

³⁹⁴ John G. Pipkin, "The Material Sublime of Women Romantic Poets," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 38, no. 4 (1998): 600.

³⁹⁵ Pipkin, "The Material Sublime," 600.

material forces.”³⁹⁶ For Pipkin, the “‘material sublime’ denotes those moments either when the physical world announces itself within the textual gesture toward transcendence, effectively disrupting the act of suppression, or when the text itself foregrounds the materiality upon which the sublime experience is based.”³⁹⁷

I think together these five definitions of the sublime by Pipkin and Weiskel apply in complex ways to a selection of Wordsworth’s poems but still only partially account for his ambivalent, melancholy responses to nature, matrixial femininity, and sublime power. This is partly because traditional phallic subjectivization within western, antiblack patriarchies leads to multiple versions of melancholic formations of subjectivity, rather than a mere “melancholic episode” on the way to pleasurable patriarchal group belonging. Master subjectivity is also based on different intersectional degrees of non-I/other traumatic foreclosures and/or I/self-devaluations, abjections, and rejections. Whatever method the subject uses, when pressured/compelled, to try and obtain or *become* the embodiment of the symbolic white patriarchal phallus involves self-harming disavowals and performative identifications in assimilation to the “Law” that are ultimately at the expense of the subject’s own wellbeing. These identifications also cause various kinds of losses and amount to the brutal self-maiming/repression of the developing subject’s queer plenitudes of matrixial wildness.

Theoretically this means that the master subject is internally and externally haunted and plagued by the guilt of both normal rage/sadism that derives from developmental ambivalence and socially sanctioned aggressive rejection of m/others. The master subject also paranoically fears persecution by these rejected feminized/matrixial natures.

³⁹⁶ Pipkin, “The Material Sublime,” 600.

³⁹⁷ Pipkin, “The Material Sublime,” 600.

Additionally, the master subject is guilty vis-à-vis the “mercilessly violent conscience” of the superego that punishes the ego to the degree it is found “lacking” in the phallic characteristics attributed to the overrepresented ruling genre of monohumanist Man (who is a wealthy, western, cisgender white male human).³⁹⁸ To escape this emotional predicament, master subjects often have recourse to the defense of mania:

I would suggest that in mania the ego seeks refuge not only from melancholia but also from a paranoiac condition which it is unable to master. It’s torturing and perilous dependence on its loved objects drives the ego to find freedom. But the identification with these objects is too profound to be renounced. On the other hand, the ego is pursued by its dread of bad objects and of the id.³⁹⁹

In mania, the subject attempts to “escape from all these miseries” through omnipotent performances of denial and idealization, which allow the ego to preserve the good objects it is “unwilling and unable to renounce” while also escaping from the “perils of dependence on them as well as from its bad objects.”⁴⁰⁰ Instead of “avowing the trace of loss that inaugurates one’s own emergence,” the ego flees to their internal good objects and idealized external objects while simultaneously denying the existence of internal and external bad objects.⁴⁰¹

In this sense, engagement with the sublime might be understood as inducing the state of mania marked by omnipotence, denial, and idealization in order to control and master threatening objects loved by the master subject and on which they depend. Engaging with the sublime may suggest an attempt to “thro[w] off...the attachment to the lost object,

³⁹⁸ Butler, “Melancholy, Ambivalence, Rage,” 195.

³⁹⁹ Klein, “The Psychogenesis,” 132.

⁴⁰⁰ Klein, “The Psychogenesis,” 132.

⁴⁰¹ Butler, “Melancholy, Ambivalence, Rage,” 195.

enshrined in the workings of the conscience.”⁴⁰² The problem with this solution, according to Butler, is that “[i]n mania, the tyrant is fended off, but not thrown off or overcome. Mania marks the temporary suspension or mastering of the tyrant by the ego, but the tyrant remains structurally ensconced for that psyche—and unknowable.”⁴⁰³ Until the ambivalently hated and loved object is recognized as a lost and internalized/essential “trace” marking the emergence of the self and therein becomes able to challenge conscience, the ego will not transform/grow because the interminable practice of reverential mourning cannot begin (which allows for the simultaneous preservation of the other and new attachments and expressions of one’s newly expanded identity). Mourning allows for internalization/incorporation to function as “sites of rearticulation, conditions for a ‘working through’ and, potentially, a [real] ‘throwing off’ (*Auflehnung*).”⁴⁰⁴

But power has a vested interest in maintaining a baseline level of collective melancholia as a way of legitimizing its authority by extrahumanization: “The super-egoic conscience is not simply analogous to the state’s military power over its citizenry; the state cultivates melancholia among its citizenry precisely as a way of dissimulating and displacing its own ideal authority.”⁴⁰⁵ So, under these conditions the master subject remains locked in a painful cycle of melancholic stasis punctuated by the “biochemical reward” of violent and controlling reprieves of sublime mania given by “extrahumanly” justified sublime aesthetics, myths, and activities like real and fantasized colonial domination and exploitation. As Wynter puts the problem,

⁴⁰² Butler, “Melancholy, Ambivalence, Rage,” 195.

⁴⁰³ Butler, “Melancholy, Ambivalence, Rage,” 191-192.

⁴⁰⁴ Butler, “Melancholy, Ambivalence, Rage,” 191.

⁴⁰⁵ Butler, “Melancholy, Ambivalence, Rage,” 191.

each such genre-specific regime/program of truth, will law-likely function to *semantically-neurochemically induce* the performative enactment of our ensemble of always already role-allocated individual and collective behaviors within the reflexly and subjectively experienced terms of a cognitively closed, thereby genre-specific and fictively eusocializing, autonomously functioning, higher-level living autopoietic system.⁴⁰⁶

At the same time, power uses the same mechanism in the service of master subjects to either push out or keep in check subjugated “abnormal” or potentially exploitable subject positions. This situation involves marginalized, melancholic subjects whose thirst for life dwindles as a result of the superego’s destruction of self-esteem, which keeps the m/other obedient, submissive, and symbolically ineffective. At the extreme end, state-sponsored melancholia systematically and gradually tempts scapegoated or potentially threatening m/others into “self-murder” if they are not first murdered directly by the state.⁴⁰⁷

If there is truth to this dystopian sketch of the regulatory mechanism of liberal monohumanist society in the west, then the sublime in general is more accurately registered as different forms of sublime mania that replenish the master subject’s narcissistic supplies through the domination of m/others. In this state alienation is resisted by “subsum[ing] all otherness, all possibility of negation” so that wild m/other natures’ intensities become violently destroyed or idealized/denied in the service of the aggrandizement of the “sensible ego,” whether the subject believes that to be the private self, paternal authority, or the divine.⁴⁰⁸ This means both the transcendental and egotistical sublime, as Weiskel defines

⁴⁰⁶ Wynter, “Unparalleled Catastrophe,” 32-33.

⁴⁰⁷ As discussed in the previous chapter, it is important to distinguish between real suicidal desire and the symbolic fantasy of unbecoming as a stage toward becoming otherwise.

⁴⁰⁸ Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime*, 49.

them, are instances of patriarchal mania, each with a different emphasis on defensive strategies: The transcendental sublime promotes group/national identification/empowerment via the violent subjugation of m/others and submission to fraternal/paternal authority; the egotistical sublime promotes an idealizing denial that bolsters an overweening and false sense of independence, individuality, and self-sufficiency. As “discursive *formations*, aesthetic fields, and systems of knowledge” both versions of the sublime play a central role in the “performative enactment” of being western Man.⁴⁰⁹ Wordsworth seems to support this project in the following lines:

...To fear and love,
To love as prime and chief, for there fear ends,
Be this ascribed; to early intercourse,
In presence of sublime or beautiful forms,
With the adverse principles of pain and joy—
Evil as one is rashly named by men
Who know not what they speak.⁴¹⁰

But the point I am trying to make here is that both versions of the sublime also work as “extrahumanizing” strategies that legitimize the authority of the “truth” and protect culture from the “‘entropic disintegration’ (or ‘falling apart’) of our genre-specific identities and societal orders.”⁴¹¹ That “entropic disintegration” occurs is presumably evidenced by social revolutions or widespread collective recognition of the “laws of auto-institution that determine these uniquely human modalities—that is, that determine ‘us.’”⁴¹²

⁴⁰⁹ Wynter, “Unparalleled Catastrophe,” 31.

⁴¹⁰ Wordsworth, “*The Prelude* of 1850,” 467, Book 14, lines 162-168.

⁴¹¹ Ambrose, “On Sylvia Wynter’s Darwinian Heresy,” 853.

⁴¹² Ambrose, “On Sylvia Wynter’s Darwinian Heresy,” 853.

But what causes such “entropic disintegration” and how is such collective recognition promoted? Wynter suggests that the “liminal other” can cast doubt on the validity of the ruling genre’s monopoly on being, but how? Is this even possible given the asphyxiating, self-replicating structure of the melancholic engine described above? Butler’s theory of how melancholia “reproduces power as the psychic voice of judgment addressed to (turned upon) oneself, thus modeling reflexivity on subjection” is perhaps not the first, intuitive place one would turn to gather resources for answering these questions.⁴¹³ But I think Butler suggests that “entropic disintegration” is internal to hegemony. Power inevitably supplies the tools for its own unraveling through the production of marginally melancholic master subjects and abjectly marginalized, melancholic subjects, both of which function as potential liminal others of counter-assertion but to different degrees. I think this qualification of the “dominant” position works in the following fashion: On the one hand, if there is a high degree of unconsciously perceived *correspondence* between a subject’s identity/ego and their ego ideal, the internalization of loss as a psychic object will involve lower amounts of intense aggressive “energy” aimed back at the self/ego. And if there is a lower amount of aggressive energy aimed at the self/ego then there is less “destruction” or productive transformation of the conscience and the ego “in so far as the object resides as the ideality of conscience.”⁴¹⁴ Therefore, there is less contestation of and more conformity to the prevailing “genre-specific (and/or culture-specific) orders of truth through which we know reality.”⁴¹⁵

⁴¹³ Butler, “Melancholy, Ambivalence, Rage,” 197.

⁴¹⁴ Butler, “Melancholy, Ambivalence, Rage,” 194.

⁴¹⁵ Sylvia Wynter, “Unparalleled Catastrophe,” 32.

On the other hand, the more a “mercilessly violent” superego finds the marginalized ego to be “lacking” or “impoverished” in relation to the ego ideal (and as determined by the social devaluation/foreclosure of the lost object/ideal/quality), the higher the “amount” of aggression turned against the self/ego. Under these conditions “melancholy has the power to force the ego into death.”⁴¹⁶ However, if the marginalized, melancholy subject is able to confront reality and then chooses to refuse to follow the object into death, “the aggression instrumentalized by conscience against the ego [is]...reappropriated in the service of the desire to live.”⁴¹⁷ I suppose this latter situation potentially results in a higher degree of social criticism and change by generating more entropic dissent/disintegration. According to Butler, the melancholy subject gathers the formerly death-driven destructive energy to kill the object so that the self might live which effectively reverses the positions of the superego/ego ideal vis-à-vis the ego. Having killed the object a second time, the ego judges the superego and the ego ideal. This results in a situation in which the “conscience and the ego are necessarily undone by that murderous claim on life.”⁴¹⁸ This sets off the process of mourning and the internalization and readjustment of a changed internal world but there is “no break with the constitutive historicity of loss to which melancholy attests (except perhaps in the manic response, which is always temporary).”⁴¹⁹

The major insight here is that to “claim life in such circumstances” of socially mandated disparity between marginalized egos and ego ideals is to powerfully “contest the righteous psyche” and the society complicit in that loss.⁴²⁰ But this contestation is only

⁴¹⁶ Butler, “Melancholy, Ambivalence, Rage,” 194.

⁴¹⁷ Butler, “Melancholy, Ambivalence, Rage,” 192.

⁴¹⁸ Butler, “Melancholy, Ambivalence, Rage,” 194.

⁴¹⁹ Butler, “Melancholy, Ambivalence, Rage,” 194.

⁴²⁰ Butler, “Melancholy, Ambivalence, Rage,” 197.

possible if the marginalized, melancholy subject is able to acknowledge its embeddedness in a “sociality and linguistic life that makes such acts possible, one that exceeds the bounds of the ego and its ‘autonomy.’”⁴²¹ Recognition of one’s social determinations and limitations is not the same as identifying with the “beyond” of divine/phallic authority, but it is the path toward intervention in the societal order. Perhaps this explains how Wordsworth’s poetics of cultural criticism could coexist with some degree of complacency with the status quo. But an equally important logical consequence of these arguments is that societies stricken by horrific inequalities and dominated by a small, privileged elite inadvertently but inevitably inflame the militant power of melancholic mourning and the critical dissent of revolution (entropic disintegration), which is the situation in *The Broken Earth* series, for example.

While I think it is true that some of Wordsworth’s poems criticize the political functions and/or spiritual viability of the transcendental *and* egotistical sublime, it is less clear how consistently conscious or intentional he is about this agenda. However, at times, Wordsworth seems to function like Wynter’s “liminal other” who “reminds subjects of each societal order that they no longer need be enslaved to its story/myth of origin, behavior-motivating prescriptions, and ruling genre’s ‘monopoly on *being human*.’”⁴²² For example, in the “Preface” Wordsworth distances himself from patriarchal literary conventions, at least rhetorically. He suggests that while his unique mode of poetic writing has allowed him to gain much, he also “admits” (in a not so secretly prideful way) that “it has necessarily cut me off from a large portion of phrases and figures of speech which from father to son have long been regarded as the common inheritance of Poets.”⁴²³ Interestingly, Wordsworth’s

⁴²¹ Butler, “Melancholy, Ambivalence, Rage,” 197.

⁴²² Ambrose, “On Sylvia Wynter’s Darwinian Heresy,” 854.

⁴²³ Wordsworth, “Preface,” 82.

theories on the connections between pain and pleasure in poetry also relate to dreaming up methods for how to open people up to new counter-assertions or new myths by liminal others. In this mode, he seems attuned to the need to instill new biochemical reward systems by offering a new myth of human being and potential that speaks across class divides and that culminates in the sublime, open-minded imagination and self-conscious reflexivity. He also seems very aware that positive collective reception of art is contingent on habituated pleasure: "I am willing to allow, that, in order entirely to enjoy the Poetry which I am recommending, it would be necessary to give up much of what is ordinarily enjoyed."⁴²⁴ Additionally, Wordsworth is clear about the connection between reward systems and the acquisition of certain kinds of knowledge: "We have no knowledge, that is, no general principles drawn from the contemplation of particular facts, but what has been built up by pleasure, and exists in us by pleasure alone."⁴²⁵ He also openly states that his aim is to change what constitutes human literary pleasure: "[T]he pleasure which I have proposed to myself to impart is of a kind very different from that which is supposed by many persons to be the proper object of poetry."⁴²⁶

Along these lines, he also subtly undermines the melancholic moment of virility of the transcendental sublime to either critique patriarchal culture and/or literary tradition and/or to deny and dismiss the dangerous potential of wildness within m/other natures. In the passage of *The Prelude* that documents the anticlimax of crossing the Alps, Wordsworth playfully defies and interrogates Kant's distinction between masculine and feminine melancholy. He undermines the Kantian sublime by associating languid, long-lasting

⁴²⁴ Wordsworth, "Preface," 95.

⁴²⁵ Wordsworth, "Preface," 87.

⁴²⁶ Wordsworth, "Preface," 82.

melancholy with the powers of careful contemplation afforded by “sublime solitudes” in tranquil, beautiful spaces. And he associates “masculine” moments of terrifying melancholic dejection with disappointed anticipation. Wordsworth reveals the false promise of sublime myths and aesthetics, the deceptive regulatory function apparent in the offer of an overwhelming confrontation with an eroticized, feminized m/other nature as the pathway leading to paternal/divine identification and empowerment. Wordsworth locates the possibility for the emergence and ascension of the independent, free-thinking spirit of the imagination within this momentary melancholic disillusionment, when the “light of [common] sense / Goes out in flashes.”⁴²⁷ In contrast to transcendental sublime poets, the poet who oscillates between the manic and subversive can “build up greatest things / From least suggestions” because “they need not extraordinary calls / To rouse them; in a world of life they live.”⁴²⁸ Unlike the transcendental sublime poet who is momentarily overcome by the delicious absorption by m/other nature, manic poets are hyper-masculine because they resist that seduction: “By sensible impressions not enthralled.”⁴²⁹ Instead, Wordsworth neutralizes the emasculating threat of sex by dissolving the gendered language to highlight the mechanics by which the “quickenings impulse” of sensible impressions makes manic poets more able to “hold fit converse with the spiritual world.”⁴³⁰

Wordsworth deflates the power of the transcendental sublime in his depiction of Mont Blanc right before further undermining the aesthetic by emphasizing the underwhelming quality of the Alps. He first describes Mont Blanc as a “soulless image on

⁴²⁷ Wordsworth, “*The Prelude* of 1805,” 216, Book 6, lines 534-535.

⁴²⁸ Wordsworth, “*The Prelude* of 1850,” 465, Book 14, lines 101-102 & 104-105.

⁴²⁹ Wordsworth, “*The Prelude* of 1850,” 465, Book 14, line 106.

⁴³⁰ Wordsworth, “*The Prelude* of 1850,” 465, Book 14, lines 107-108.

the eye” that has overthrown “living thought / That never more could be.”⁴³¹ These lines suggest the mind-stultifying replication of ideology that the transcendental sublime is meant to perform. By contrast for Wordsworth, it is the “wondrous Vale / Of Chamouny” that might “reconcil[e] us to realities.”⁴³² But Wordsworth suggests that the important recognition of the fictionality of any one genre-specific sociogenic code does not release us from the problem of projection. Even in the valley projection is uncontrolled: “Whate’er in this wide circuit we beheld / Or heard was fitted to our unripe state of intellect and heart.”⁴³³ However, he emphasizes m/other natures’ influential impingements on his being in the 1805 version of *The Prelude*. For example, he uses sensual language to describe how he was “not left untouched” by the “simple strains / Of feeling, the pure breath of real life.”⁴³⁴ But as he increasingly feels the need to distance himself from the m/other (for whatever reason), in the 1850 version he deletes nature’s erotic aeriols of the psyche and masculinizes the “sound tenderness” of the lessons learned by the scene:

With such a book
Before our eyes, we could not choose but read
Lessons of genuine brotherhood, the plain
And universal reason of mankind,
The truths of young and old.⁴³⁵

⁴³¹ Wordsworth, “*The Prelude* of 1805,” 212, Book 6, lines 454-455.

⁴³² Wordsworth, “*The Prelude* of 1805,” 465, Book 6, lines 456-457 & 461.

⁴³³ Wordsworth, “*The Prelude* of 1805,” 214, Book 6, lines 469-471.

⁴³⁴ Wordsworth, “*The Prelude* of 1805,” 214, Book 6, lines 471-473.

⁴³⁵ Wordsworth, “*The Prelude* of 1850,” 215, Book 6, lines 543-547.

But in both versions, he characterizes the valley as a place that affords the “solitudes sublime” necessary for luxuriating in the “dejection” for “pleasure’s sake” that promotes meditative contemplation of the internal workings of the self and others.⁴³⁶

He also introduces the possibility of an even more virile melancholy, as distinct from both the “languid” and transcendental types, that is directly related to his own imaginative power: “Yet still in me, mingling with these delights, / Was something of stern mood, an under-thirst / Of vigour, never utterly asleep.”⁴³⁷ He goes on to describe how he felt a “deep and genuine sadness” upon unknowingly crossing the Alps.⁴³⁸ His melancholy stems from a disillusionment in the promises of power embedded in sublime aesthetics that he cannot admit at first because his senses are too habituated/conditioned by ideology, too “Hard of belief.”⁴³⁹ But in the very next stanza, this dejection is lifted by the “unfathered vapour” of his glorious imagination.⁴⁴⁰ His imagination shows him that it is not the phallic authority of society with whom we should identify. Rather, it is the “infinitude” of what is “evermore about to be”—the untapped potential of the individual human mind—that is “Our destiny, our nature, and our home.”⁴⁴¹

After this enthusiastic hymn to the imagination Wordsworth perhaps begins to veer off course into a severe description of the wilderness that concludes in the register of the manic/egotistical sublime: “Tumult and peace / the darkness and the light / Were all like workings of one mind.”⁴⁴² But these dark descriptions of nature do not appear until *after*

⁴³⁶ Wordsworth, “*The Prelude* of 1805,” 214, Book 6, lines 482 & 484.

⁴³⁷ Wordsworth, “*The Prelude* of 1805,” 214, Book 6, lines 488-490.

⁴³⁸ Wordsworth, “*The Prelude* of 1805,” 214, Book 6, line 492.

⁴³⁹ Wordsworth, “*The Prelude* of 1805,” 216, Book 6, line 520.

⁴⁴⁰ Wordsworth, “*The Prelude* of 1805,” 216, Book 6, line 527.

⁴⁴¹ Wordsworth, “*The Prelude* of 1805,” 216, Book 6, lines 538-539 & 542.

⁴⁴² Wordsworth, “*The Prelude* of 1805,” 218, Book 6, lines 567-568.

Wordsworth highlights that the melancholy of disillusionment/disappointment had evaporated into the glory of the imagination. This is a rather clever way of disrupting the narrative logic of the transcendental sublime while appropriating elements of its “semantic-neurochemical” reward pathways for his own purposes. This enables him to undermine the phallic authority of the transcendental sublime and to unite the marginally melancholy and the marginalized melancholy “features / Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree.”⁴⁴³ In doing so, Wordsworth reveals liminal others as the creative forces of entropic disintegration, “Characters of the great apocalypse, / The types and symbols of eternity, / Of first, and last, and midst, and without end.”⁴⁴⁴

In the “Preface” Wordsworth suggests that a writer can tap into old biochemical reward systems to tell new stories by balancing the poetic activation of an “unusual or irregular state of mind” with more familiar pleasures. He claims that the writer can increase readers’ threshold of tolerance for engaging with the painful content expressed by marginalized others in his poems by embedding such content within familiar formal techniques, much like a caregiver wit(h)nesses and metabolizes traumatic material for the fragile presubject:

Now the music of harmonious metrical language, the sense of difficulty overcome, and the blind association of pleasure which has been previously received from works of rhyme or metre of the same or similar construction, an indistinct perception perpetually renewed of language closely resembling that of real life, and yet, in the circumstance of metre, differing from it so widely, all these imperceptibly make up a complex feeling of delight, which

⁴⁴³ Wordsworth, “*The Prelude* of 1805,” 218, Book 6, lines 568-569.

⁴⁴⁴ Wordsworth, “*The Prelude* of 1805,” 218, Book 6, lines 570-572.

is of the most important use in tempering the painful feeling which will always be found intermingled with powerful descriptions of the deeper passions.⁴⁴⁵

These lines recall John Stuart Mill's essay "A Crisis in my Mental History" (1873) in which he suggests the combination of the maternal "holding" structure and transformative content of Wordsworth's poetry helped him to process and generate feelings, or provide the emotional and cognitive scaffolding, the imaginative faculty, for helping him to actively express his inner life; in contrast to simply passively receiving an imposing, aggressive explanation outlined in a paternal philosophical text, for example.

Wordsworth does indeed promote an image of the poet as one "whose soul hath risen / Up to the height of feeling intellect" and who is also possessed of a heart as "tender as a nursing mother's heart."⁴⁴⁶ This kind of poet is also fulfilled by providing the services of "female softness" to others that perhaps Mill sensed in Wordsworth's verse.⁴⁴⁷ But oddly, he suggests that the accomplishment of this "spiritual" or intellectual love is an endeavor that can only be independently pursued:

Here must thou be, O man,
Strength to thyself—no helper has thou here—
Here keepest thou thy individual state:
No other can divide with thee this work,
No secondary hand can intervene
To fashion this ability. 'Tis thine,

⁴⁴⁵ Wordsworth, "Preface," 93.

⁴⁴⁶ Wordsworth, "*The Prelude* of 1805," 470, Book 13, lines 204-207.

⁴⁴⁷ Wordsworth, "*The Prelude* of 1805," 470, Book 13, line 209.

The prime and vital principle is thine
In the recesses of thy nature, far
From any each of outward fellowship,
Else 'tis not thine at all.⁴⁴⁸

Wordsworth wants to be the sole possessor of the transformative power of the maternal without acknowledging that the wild m/other nature is that power's source. He denies the maternal role and matrix model on which he builds his ideas of the "truth that the power of the human imagination is sufficient to produce such changes even in our physical nature as might almost appear miraculous."⁴⁴⁹ Wordsworth distances himself increasingly from the m/other and nature until he believes that it is only the "mind sustained / By recognitions of transcendent power" whose senses develop into the "ideal form" and whose soul gains "more than mortal privilege."⁴⁵⁰

While Wordsworth does critique "stupid German Tragedies" and tries to reform public tastes and ethics, for various and undoubtedly consciously intentional and unconsciously defensive reasons, he also displays a greater resistance to confronting the fictional and biased aspects of the projections of his own new mythopoetics.⁴⁵¹ This results in the subtle mania of idealization/denial conspicuous in some of his idyllic rural life poems and the less subtle omnipotent mania present in the sudden appearances of the sublime imagination. An example of the former is discernable in his suggestion that "circumstances awful and sublime" in m/other natures merely shadow and therein foreground aspects of the

⁴⁴⁸ Wordsworth, "*The Prelude* of 1805," 470, Book 13, lines 188-197.

⁴⁴⁹ Wordsworth, "Preface," 93.

⁴⁵⁰ Wordsworth, "*The Prelude* of 1850," 463, Book 14, lines 74-77.

⁴⁵¹ Wordsworth, "Preface," 81.

human mind as read by the senses.⁴⁵² The “bodily senses” are mere tools that m/other nature acts upon in such a way that the poet comes to the realization that m/other nature’s purpose is to interact with the body in such a way that the mind becomes aware of transcendental truths. One such truth is that the very style of nature’s approach to and effect on the body analogically represents the mind’s creative and/or impinging approach to and effect on the imaginary, symbolic, and the real:

This is the very spirit in which they [imaginative minds] deal
With the whole compass of the universe:
They from their native selves can send abroad
Kindred mutations; for themselves create
A like existence; and, whene’er it dawns
Created for them, catch it, or are caught
By its inevitable mastery.⁴⁵³

In a rather circular way, nature functions to stimulate in the mind a recognition of nature’s “resemblance” to the power of the “glorious faculty,” which then stimulates more elevated, conscious thoughts and reflections that go on to potentially influence and shape the world in a style similar to nature.⁴⁵⁴ However, Wordsworth’s use of the loaded phrase “inevitable mastery” to describe this relationship of mutual modification unconsciously registers his apprehensiveness over the idea of nature’s power over his mind and body. Therefore, Wordsworth’s above promotion of a mutually influential relationship between the inspiring sensory world of nature and the power of the imagination is contingent upon the

⁴⁵² Wordsworth, “*The Prelude* of 1850,” 465, Book 14, line 80.

⁴⁵³ Wordsworth, “*The Prelude* of 1850,” 463, Book 14, lines 91-97.

⁴⁵⁴ Wordsworth, “*The Prelude* of 1850,” 465, Book 14, lines 88-89.

domestication of the “mastery” of m/other nature’s wild erotic aerials of the psyche into less potentially destabilizing forms. But nature does not willfully choose to perform “inevitable mastery” and to suggest it does perhaps promotes and induces his reaction to master that which he assumes is trying to master him. It is not hard to discern how this whitewashed account of mastery may eerily lend itself to justifying and enacting colonizing modes of “deal[ing] / With the whole compass of the universe” that also “send abroad” their “native selves” to “mutate” distant lands into a mirror of the empire’s understanding of proper “existence.”

Wordsworth also tends to exaggerate the strength of his prescriptive poetics by constructing the imagination in the omnipotent terms of the sublime. In *The Prelude* for example, he states that poetic minds originate directly from the divine:

Such minds are truly from the Deity,
For they are Powers; and hence the highest bliss
That flesh can know is theirs—the consciousness
Of Whom they are, habitually infused
Through every image and through every thought
And all affections, by communion raised
From earth to heaven, from human to divine;⁴⁵⁵

On the one hand, elevating the value of imaginative self-reflection is an important and salutary project. On the other hand, these lines promote a mind-body value split where the body is a mere instrument in the development that culminates in a higher consciousness capable of helping the “flesh” ascend to the divine. The body is a means to an end just like

⁴⁵⁵ Wordsworth, “*The Prelude* of 1850,” 465, Book 14, lines 112-118.

m/other natures. Additionally, one is never fully transparent to themselves or to others, and an overconfident and purblind belief in one's fundamental benevolence will surely lead to undue harm to both self and others. The misrecognition of all thoughts, images, things, etc. as signs of consciousness is also suspect as a kind of projective identification with one's own good objects and a denial of internal and external reality. Finally, these lines illustrate how, as Wordsworth's career progresses, his tendency is to "obscure the connection between the filial bond with the mother to the bond with Nature" and, by 1850 the "connection to Nature seems more innate."⁴⁵⁶

As the above examples illustrate, at times the way Wordsworth perceives nature reflects his social conditioning in Eurocentric, antiblack, and anthropocentric history and western knowledge systems. A toxic sociocultural western context causes wild nature to withdraw from human perception by estranging the mind from the body—the thinking subject from the material realm.⁴⁵⁷ This corporeal disassociation obstructs, with negative consequences, sensual and communicative contact between human subjects and other natures. Various environmental thinkers locate the genesis of this constructed mind-body split in the Christian rejection of the soul-imprisoning body in favor of the supernal realm.⁴⁵⁸ Other thinkers locate the origin of the problem in "Plato's philosophical derogation of the sensible and changing forms of the world—his claim that these are mere simulacra of eternal and pure ideas existing in a nonsensorial realm beyond the apparent world."⁴⁵⁹ Furthermore,

⁴⁵⁶ Hale, "Wordsworth, Revision, and the Blessed Babe," 156.

⁴⁵⁷ David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 92.

⁴⁵⁸ See Ken Hiltner, *Milton and Ecology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003) and Lynn White, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, eds. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1996).

⁴⁵⁹ Abram, *The Spell*, 94.

ecofeminist Val Plumwood has suggested that the hyperseparation of humans from nature is further aggravated by Cartesian philosophy's mechanization of, or "stripping out...of mindlike qualities such as agency and goal-directedness" from, the body and the natural world.⁴⁶⁰ Together these western mythologies work to deny the wild knowledge, vitality, and energetic forces that flow within and throughout both the human subject and the more-than-human world, thus eclipsing any hope of ethical and creative communication between the master subject and other earthly natures. Instead, these views culminate in Cartesian thinking that makes a "great and unbridgeable division between the sphere of nature and the sphere of the mental," a "total cleavage between the thinking being and mindless nature."⁴⁶¹

Plumwood also claims that the "Cartesian strategy" is to extricate volition, autonomy, and purposiveness from nature and the body only to reinsert it "into the picture from outside, either by godlike humans or by God himself, who drives nature as a separate Unmoved Mover, just as the mind drives and controls the actions of the body."⁴⁶² Plumwood asserts that this produces two configurations: "the ghostly, separate rational or spiritual 'driver', and the machine, the body of the world, emptied of its mindlike attributes and meaning."⁴⁶³ While the Romantic movement in general has been characterized as important for its critique of industrialism, alienation, and the devaluation of "feminine" epistemologies of embodied knowing (i.e. modes of being that promote feeling and intuition over reason), Wordsworth at times seems complicit in a version of the above Cartesian "respiritualization" of nature for the instrumental purposes of constructing a self-sufficient, autonomous subjectivity and legitimizing his poetic authority. In particular, critics such as Anne Mellor

⁴⁶⁰ Plumwood, *Feminism*, 115.

⁴⁶¹ Plumwood, *Feminism*, 116.

⁴⁶² Plumwood, *Feminism*, 115.

⁴⁶³ Plumwood, *Feminism*, 127.

have read Wordsworth's interactions with nature as subjugating and appropriating in that he is concerned with nature insofar as he can spiritualize it to serve as a mirror, and promote the development of his poetic mind.⁴⁶⁴ In the "Intimations Ode," for example, nature is a poor copy of the Platonic Ideal and, according to Cartesian logic, an empty vessel waiting to be filled with human significance, value, and purpose. Strangely like the figure he critiques in "Nutting," Wordsworth increasingly denies wild alterity and unreflexively projects his desires onto nature to "add the gleam, / The light that never was, on sea or land, / The consecration, and the Poet's dream."⁴⁶⁵

While many of his poems highlight the importance of the senses, Wordsworth's account of human development culminates with the "self or 'soul' ...defined, not [primarily] by the body and its sensory experience, but by the human mind, by the growth of consciousness."⁴⁶⁶ This closely resembles feminist psychoanalytical descriptions of masculine subjectivity as split across Cartesian mind/body, human/nature dualities. For example, the Platonic and Judeo-Christian project of transcending the earthly realm becomes for Descartes the transcendence of the body of maternally associated infancy and sense experience where "the purity of the intellect is guaranteed through its ability to transcend the body and secure the boundaries between self and world, subject, and object."⁴⁶⁷ According to Plumwood, subjects that grow under this distorting pressure usually develop two conceptualizations of the other in relation to the self. The paranoid conceptualization involves the subject imagining the other as a hostile and persecutory alien-other (threatening

⁴⁶⁴ Anne Mellor, *Romanticism*, 146.

⁴⁶⁵ Wordsworth, "Elegiac Stanzas," 430, lines 14-16.

⁴⁶⁶ Mellor, *Romanticism*, 147.

⁴⁶⁷ Susan Bordo, "The Cartesian Masculinization of Thought and the Seventeenth-Century Flight From the Feminine," *The Flight to Objectivity: Essays on Cartesianism & Culture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 99.

to one's ego-boundaries) who is "utterly different by nature and...part of a separate, lower, or exceptional sphere (Freud's 'dark continent'), thus denying continuity" and the common claims of intrinsic value.⁴⁶⁸ The second self-other formulation that commonly forms under oppressive patriarchal developmental customs leads to a perception of the other as an extension of the self's mental omnipotence where the other is assimilated to the self, which still "leads to domination and instrumentalization, the erasure of the other as an external limit on the self and its reappearance as a projection of the self."⁴⁶⁹ In this way, the master subject can satisfy his desires for re-unification while simultaneously denying the mother (the feminine nature) of that original bond.

In "Nutting" Wordsworth critiques the above developmental trajectory in which dominant society "encloses" upon rural life and distorts supposedly more gentle modes of masculinity into the incorporating tendencies of the imperial master subject: "The colonizing self does not interact with or encounter the other as independent other, but only in the image of its own desires or needs, which it imposes upon them."⁴⁷⁰ In "Nutting," Wordsworth attempts to make master subjects rethink their entitlement by implying there is an immaterial/invisible, animate spirit that must be respected in nature. The poem attempts to install a belief in this inanimate spirit to stem the tide of violent influence pouring in from urban centers. To execute this goal, his primary concern is to show the gendered and sexualized assumptions underlying tropes of mother nature, tropes that resemble deep ecological thinking in which the ego's boundaries are imagined as expanding outward to

⁴⁶⁸ Plumwood, *Feminism*, 161.

⁴⁶⁹ Plumwood, *Feminism*, 156.

⁴⁷⁰ Plumwood, *Feminism*, 158.

“lovingly” encompass all earthly things. But as Plumwood has illustrated, deep ecology’s unifying impulse usually belies an incorporating impulse.⁴⁷¹

Wordsworth reveals this idolizing language to be comprised of projections of idealized feminine gender and sexuality that justifies and *induces* masculine subjects to perform their roles as conquerors and exploiters of m/other natures. For example, the speaker of “Nutting” emphasizes the masculine logic informing his performance of harvesting hazelnuts by foregrounding his “Motley accoutrement” that is “More ragged than need was.”⁴⁷² In other words, his clothes provide him with the emotional and physical protection from nature’s erotic aereals of the psyche and therein induce in him a militant state of mind. However, the main point in the poem is that his being “tricked out” in “beggar’s weeds” is an exaggerated response to the ravage that nature might enact on his clothes. From this perspective, his clothing is less a “militant” pose and more of a sham identification with the poor and an aggrandizement of the difficulties that he will actually face. But he does describe himself, in the language of militant, colonial violation, as having “forc’d” his “way” into “one dear nook” that he notices is an “unvisited” “virgin scene” of “tall and erect” hazels hanging with “milk-white clusters.”⁴⁷³ His sexually charged and gender-confused diction abruptly changes into a focus on the communicative aspects of the ecosystem. He describes laying “beneath the shady trees” and listening to the voice of a stream whose “fair water-breaks do murmur on / For ever.”⁴⁷⁴ He hears “the murmur and the murmuring sound” but chooses to dismiss these signs of vitality as the mere “indifferent

⁴⁷¹ Plumwood, *Feminism*, 179.

⁴⁷² Wordsworth, “Nutting,” 130, lines 11 & 13.

⁴⁷³ Wordsworth, “Nutting,” 130, lines 14-16 & 18-20.

⁴⁷⁴ Wordsworth, “Nutting,” 131, lines 32-33 & 35.

things” of “stocks and stones” and “vacant air.”⁴⁷⁵ He then decides to destroy the trees with “merciless ravage.”⁴⁷⁶

But his feeling of being “rich beyond the wealth of kings” after his conquest is disrupted by a melancholy sense of guilt stimulated by the “silent trees and the intruding sky” that comprise his superego.⁴⁷⁷ He introjects the lost object of the murdered scene as well as his own disavowed femininity and is found lacking in terms of his masculine ego ideal. That his grief for these losses is not recognized by patriarchal society further aggravates the violence against his ego. On the one hand, the lines suggest that this “effects a melancholia that reproduces power as the psychic voice of judgement addressed to (turned upon) oneself, thus modeling reflexivity on subjection.”⁴⁷⁸ And this melancholia obscures the fact that an exploitative hegemony is responsible for this violence, and enables the reproduction of itself in compensatory acts of dominating control as when the speaker imposes his double standard on a feminine companion: “Then, dearest Maiden! Move along these shades / In gentleness of heart with gentle hand / Touch,—for there is a Spirit in the woods.”⁴⁷⁹ On the other hand, his moral lesson at the end could signal his recognition of a formerly unacknowledged loss and his reverential turn to mourning and *protesting* that loss as a tragic condition of his emergence.

Wordsworth’s admirable anti-hegemonic effort to instill open-mindedness and critical literacy as well as to promote the invincible integrity and limitless capacity of oppressed and marginalized minds unfortunately suffers from his impulse to seek assurance

⁴⁷⁵ Wordsworth, “Nutting,” 131, lines 37 & 40-42.

⁴⁷⁶ Wordsworth, “Nutting,” 131, line 44.

⁴⁷⁷ Wordsworth, “Nutting,” 131, lines 50-52.

⁴⁷⁸ Butler, “Melancholy, Ambivalence, Rage,” 198.

⁴⁷⁹ Wordsworth, “Nutting,” 131, lines 53-55.

in metaphysical certainty. This sometimes has the effect of emptying nature of wildness by projecting onto it only the positive, transcendental signs of the philosophic mind.

Wordsworth's nature constructs sometimes suggest that its only significance is as a tool for cultivating the philosophic mind or that its only value is as some other "arbitrary product of human consciousness," whether poetic or scientific.⁴⁸⁰ For example, in "Tintern Abbey"

Wordsworth suggests that through the medium of nature his senses can perceive the spiritual link that generates all elevated human thought:

...And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
of elevated thoughts: a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean, and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man,
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of thought,
And rolls through all things.⁴⁸¹

The emphasis in these lines is on the cognitive faculty's ability to discern how physical manifestations share a resemblance to human consciousness.

Mellor claims that Wordsworth imagines the development of his poetic self as a progression from original unity with a kind of pre-oedipal source of "primal sympathy" to a

⁴⁸⁰ Plumwood, *Feminism*, 110.

⁴⁸¹ Wordsworth, "Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye During a Tour," 68, lines 94-103.

final childhood separation that culminates in the achievement of self-consciousness/awareness characterized by intellectual/spiritual love of the self: “To achieve coherence and endurance, this self or subjectivity must transcend the body and become pure mind, become a consciousness.”⁴⁸² In the “Intimations Ode” I think Wordsworth promotes the Platonic doctrine of pre-existence and denies/represses his mother-born mind, his prenatal matrixial trans-subjectivity, and his dependency on nature, in a perhaps misguided but admirable effort to help his readers resist the sense of alienation in the face of interpolating, overwhelming, and dominating social forces—“amid ills that vex and wrongs that crush / Our hearts.”⁴⁸³ I think he aims to help his readers find the comfort, confidence, and encouragement to continue with the project of expanding their consciousness and remaining “true” to their authentic selves:

Oh! who is he that hath his whole life long
Preserved, enlarged, this freedom in himself?
For this alone is genuine liberty:
Where is the favoured being who hath held
That course unchecked, enerring, and untired,
In one perpetual progress smooth and bright?—
A humbler destiny have we retraced,
And told of lapse and hesitating choice,
And backward wanderings along thorny ways:⁴⁸⁴

⁴⁸² Mellor, *Romanticism*, 148.

⁴⁸³ Wordsworth, “*The Prelude* of 1850,” 465, Book 14, lines 124-125.

⁴⁸⁴ Wordsworth, “*The Prelude* of 1850,” 465, Book 14, lines 130-138.

Perhaps the “Intimations Ode” strangely indulges in fantasies of an original divine, Platonic harmony to distance and protect the power and “true liberty” of the imagination from the deflated sense of self-esteem or lack that would occur if all credit was given to feminine and natural origins. It is important for both his private self and poetic project to instill radical independence and open-minded, free thinking.

In the “Intimations Ode,” I think Wordsworth attempts to protect the vulnerable, newly formed “true self” from corrupting impingements by imagining the invincible integrity of the mind, a power whose certainty is metaphysically assured by the intuitive sense of its pre-existence as a formerly, inanimate spirit. This origin fantasy takes some of the anxiety away from the radically determining influence of culture, how habituation and oppressive custom effect a perceptive disenchantment that “there hath pass’d away a glory from the earth.”⁴⁸⁵ The pre-existence myth short-circuits the discouragement and paralyzing anxiety of feeling heavily determined by and reliant on phallic culture and/or the m/other and/or nature for the spirit that animates his poetics, which energizes his hope and confidence that he can be “true” to himself and make an original impact on the world. However, this also makes him complicit in depictions of femininity as a threat to overcome or leave behind in the process of masculine maturation.

Perhaps it is for this reason that in 1850 Wordsworth revises the lines in the 1805 version of *The Prelude* to deemphasize that his poetic sense of gleaming infinity originates *from* experiences with the mother and to instead depict his imaginative capacities as increasingly innate: “From this beloved presence—there exists a virtue which irradiates and exalts / All objects through all intercourse of sense.”⁴⁸⁶ In 1850, he revises these lines so that

⁴⁸⁵ Wordsworth, “Ode [Intimations of Immortality],” 434, line 18.

⁴⁸⁶ Wordsworth, “*The Prelude* of 1805,” 78, Book 2, lines 258-260.

all objects (including the m/other) irradiate “For him,” in the sense that they are perceived as gleaming because of his precocious ability to discern the transcendental presence or sign dwelling within them.⁴⁸⁷

Wordsworth’s anxiety over his impressionability drives his impulse to erase the material “sources” and “origins” of the power of his imagination, which include m/other natures’ “love.” For example, in the 1805 version of *The Prelude* he states that it is “From love, for here / Do we begin and end, all grandeur comes, / All truth and beauty—from pervading love.”⁴⁸⁸ He updates this in 1850 to read “By love subsists / All lasting grandeur, by pervading love; / That gone, we are as dust.”⁴⁸⁹ Ironically, the latter formulation turns to “dust” the humanity and aliveness of the former lines. In 1850 Wordsworth carefully guards against the unthought known embedded in the lines from 1805—he knows deep down that the metamorphic quest of life begins and “ends” countless times in the “compassionate resonance chamber” wherein matrixial trans-subjectivities are eternally “borderlinking-in-differentiation.”⁴⁹⁰ Wordsworth’s anxiety of origin and influence perhaps causes him to defensively absorb into himself all potentially threatening and/or destabilizing alterity: “I was often unable to think of external things as having external existence & I communed with all that I saw as something not apart from, but inherent in, my own immaterial nature.”⁴⁹¹

In the “Intimations Ode” maturation for Wordsworth begins with a lament over an increasing estrangement from his most authentic self, and from the spiritual and creative mode of perception characteristic of his pre-existent form. One is closest to this authentic

⁴⁸⁷ Wordsworth, “*The Prelude* of 1850,” 79, Book 2, line 238.

⁴⁸⁸ Wordsworth, “*The Prelude* of 1805,” 466, Book 13, lines 149-151.

⁴⁸⁹ Wordsworth, “*The Prelude* of 1850,” 467, Book 14, lines 168-170.

⁴⁹⁰ Ettinger, “Matrixial Trans-subjectivity,” 220.

⁴⁹¹ Wordsworth, Introduction to “Ode [Intimations of Immortality],” 433.

mode of being/knowing as an infant, then child. He describes this former state of infant spiritual attunement in the following terms: “trailing clouds of glory do we come / From God, who is our home: / Heaven lies about us in our infancy!”⁴⁹² Wordsworth distances his authentic self from nature and safely substitutes the threatening yet nurturing mother he loved with a more easily condemnable nurse. The logic of condensation allows him to fuse the “homely” nurse into the figure of Nature. He depicts the Nature figure as having “something of a Mother’s mind” but who is also a jailer who deceives the orphan prisoner into a kind of regression or to betray the integrity of the boundaries of his true self.⁴⁹³ She tries “To make her Foster-child, her Inmate Man, / Forget the glories he hath known, / And that imperial palace whence he came” until finally, “At length the Man perceives it die away / And fade into the light of common day.”⁴⁹⁴ Thus, the second state in the Wordsworthian developmental process involves the growing separation of the adolescent who eventually becomes overcome with feelings of stagnation and numbness to the primordial “gleamings” of early childhood.

In the “Intimation’s Ode,” the third stage of development sees the arrival of the poet as a realization of the power of imaginative self-consciousness, the achievement of the “philosophic mind.”⁴⁹⁵ Prior to this stage, the “homely Nurse” and the “shades of the prison-house” threaten to completely scramble/destroy the subject’s perception of the link to the invisible world by impinging on the vulnerable presubject until the true self dissolves into the alienating, false life of passive compliance.⁴⁹⁶ In the Ode, culture and nature obscure the

⁴⁹² Wordsworth, “Ode [Intimations of Immortality],” 435, lines 64-66.

⁴⁹³ Wordsworth, “Ode [Intimations of Immortality],” 436, line 79.

⁴⁹⁴ Wordsworth, “Ode [Intimations of Immortality],” 436, lines 81-84 & 75-76.

⁴⁹⁵ Wordsworth, “Ode [Intimations of Immortality],” 439, lines 189.

⁴⁹⁶ Wordsworth, “Ode [Intimations of Immortality],” 435-438, lines 66-68 & 81.

transcendental signifier of the self that was once evident in the “splendour in the grass” and the “glory in the flower,” which function to his mind as “evidence of a prior state of existence.”⁴⁹⁷ With time it becomes harder and harder for the subject to feel the conviction that his stronger central self originally dwells in a superior realm outside of the warping manipulations of mundane politics and bare life. But he transforms this grave lack—an interior impotence caused by culture and nature—into a celebration of his matured soul’s ability to catch glimpses in natural forms of “that immortal sea / Which brought us hither.”⁴⁹⁸ He acquires the capacity for contemplative self-reflection and thereby authoritative access to “truths that wake, / To perish never” and the associated formation of an invincible, hyper-individual, authentic selfhood that can stand alone and that nothing “Can utterly abolish or destroy” because it can see into, impose upon, and project onto all the forms of nature “the glory and the dream.”⁴⁹⁹ Nature is a psychic map of the growth of Wordsworth’s own sublime subjectivity wherein he traces his fallen birth, nature’s attacks against his holy sightedness, and his final quietly triumphant compensation in the “philosophic mind” and the “human heart” that can still just manage to see through nature’s veil to make out his soul’s kinship with divinity. The “philosophic mind” can see such presence of that divinity even in the lowly form of the “meanest flower that blows.”⁵⁰⁰ Wordsworth’s approach to nature is ultimately based on his desperate desire to self-consolidate into an invulnerable, self-willed, hyper-conscious state of “sovereignty within and peace at will” and a confidence in the “cheerfulness in every act of life; / Hence truth in

⁴⁹⁷ Wordsworth, “Ode [Intimations of Immortality],” 436, line 181, and Introduction to “Ode [Intimations of Immortality],” 433.

⁴⁹⁸ Wordsworth, “Ode [Intimations of Immortality],” 430, lines 83-84 & 163-164.

⁴⁹⁹ Wordsworth, “Ode [Intimations of Immortality],” 435-438, lines 57, 158-59 & 163.

⁵⁰⁰ Wordsworth, “Ode [Intimations of Immortality],” 433, line 205.

moral judgements; and delight / That fails not, in the external universe.”⁵⁰¹ But his defensive formulations, that border on toxic positivity, threaten to “swallo[w] reality in the effort to figure the human quest for spirit.”⁵⁰²

It is worth noting that while P.B. Shelley is often said to deploy Platonic rhetoric and imagery, he does so from the perspective of an atheist whose hope is immanent and relational. Shelley locates the site of social intervention in the queer expansion of intersubjective relations, the potential of which we can only discern now as “shadows of the dream.”⁵⁰³ In contrast, Wordsworth’s social intervention involves shoring up vulnerable individual minds against impinging hegemonic forces. He appeals to the immortal realm in an effort to seek metaphysical assurance and to legitimize his view that corruption is a problem of dwelling on the earth and allowing wild natures and culture to alienate the “authentic” self from “that which moves with light and life informed, / Actual, divine, and true.”⁵⁰⁴ Wordsworth’s locus of social intervention is in teaching individuals how to protect themselves from betraying their fragile “true selves” to the deadened, defensive façades the external world interpellates and manipulates them into being. Shelley is oriented toward illuminating erotic, epistemophilic, social practices that might “perfect” the “species” in the here and now. But Wordsworth’s particular aesthetic focus on the individual power of the mind vis-à-vis nature arguably has played an unintentional role in educating human subjects into the imperial grammars of universal Man—a language and logic saturated in Christian

⁵⁰¹ Wordsworth, “*The Prelude* of 1805,” 464, Book 13, lines 114 & 117-119.

⁵⁰² Nancy Craig Simmons, “Speaking for Nature: Thoreau and the ‘Problem’ of ‘Nature Writing,’” *Thoreau’s Sense of Place: Essays in American Environmental Writing*, eds. Richard J. Schneider and Lawrence Buell (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2000), 227.

⁵⁰³ Shelley, “The Sensitive Plant,” 295, Conclusion, lines 10 & 12.

⁵⁰⁴ Wordsworth, “*The Prelude* of 1850,” 467, Book 14, lines 161-162.

Platonism that instills a dangerously entitled (yet threatened) sense of anthropocentric, antiblack, misogynist moral superiority:

...we will teach them how;
Instruct them how the mind of man becomes
A thousand times more beautiful than the earth
On which he dwells, above this frame of things
...
In beauty exalted, as it is itself,
Of substance and fabric more divine.⁵⁰⁵

However, as we will see in Chapter 4, H. Rider Haggard's formulations allow for a more charitable view of Wordsworth's ambivalent and at times contradictory renditions of nature. Therefore, a charitable reading concludes that the above passage from the end of *The Prelude* perhaps amounts to a slight overstatement of Wordsworth's love for and pride in free and independent human thought and spirit.

Percy Bysshe Shelley's Melancholy Matrix

This section argues that Judith Butler's notion of melancholy as a "desirable" reaction to the formation of sexuality and gender under the sociogenic codes of monohumanist Man may be extended to feelings of lost or disappearing potentialities in terms of the environment. Each of these separate affective attachments are constitutive of masculine and feminine subject positions and different forms of associated melancholy, and of Shelley's critique of them. Shelley's *Queen Mab* offers a critique of masculine-subject formation as culminating in psychically maimed and vicious individual dispositions and

⁵⁰⁵ Wordsworth, "The Prelude of 1805," 482, Book 13, lines 446-452.

publics. Shelley locates the cause of a destructive form of collective melancholy and misery in psychosocial developmental origins conducted under western patriarchal-industrial hegemonies. Shelley's *Alastor; or, The Spirit of Solitude and Epipsychidion* think through how melancholy is culturally reproduced, in both harmful and advantageous modes, through the foreclosure of queer bonds with wild m/other natures. In *Epipsychidion*, Shelley specifically embraces the never-ending reverential practice of mourning as an ethical comportment towards the self and non/human life, a "wild" and nomadic way of living that follows a "matrixial trail" that bypasses Man on the way to a "homeplace" of "queer plenitude." This instance of perpetual melancholic mourning emphasizes the importance of the choice to acknowledge and ethically respond to the fact that self and other are founded upon "ruin" and mutual vulnerability, forever incomplete and contingent upon perpetual transformations by unspeakable losses.

At the same time, the Visionary Poet from *Alastor* can be read as Shelley's critique of what he perceives as the manic melancholy performed by masculine, master subjects broadly construed, *and* the Wordsworthian poetic persona, as a projection and identity that lives and dies *inside* Shelley's own psychic topography. Manic melancholy exists as a brief episode in the movement toward the "achievement" of mourning as object substitution. And this melancholic logic fuels the fantasy of human development as the progression from origins to self-sufficiency and/or poetic originality. The Visionary Poet ultimately destroys himself in the manic melancholy attempt to pursue and appropriate the image of his own power that he discerns in the feminine force that haunt his dreams. This narrative is meant to critically parallel the way the manic master subject tries to avoid "avowing the trace of loss

that inaugurates one's own emergence."⁵⁰⁶ In the manic mindset, the Visionary Poet's ego flees to his internal good objects and idealized external objects while simultaneously denying the existence or danger of real internal and external bad objects. Manic melancholia is characterized by the illusion of an invincible and "progressive" "movement forward" where one escapes the sublime depths of loss unscathed, unchanged, and with a shiny new object/poetics and self-begotten self/imaginative power to boot. Thus, the Visionary Poet of *Alastor* cannot transform his obsessive and melancholic quest for the original lost object that he misidentified as himself and projected onto wild m/other natures. He cannot locate opportunities for self-other growth-inspiring intimate contact because he refuses the necessary first step of acknowledging both the specific loss and the constitutive nature of all loss in the emergence of the fiction of the self, that we are "socially constituted bodies."⁵⁰⁷ This inaugurates the destruction/transformation of the ego, object, and conscience and sets off the interminability of mourning.

In contrast, the Visionary Poet desperately desires to consolidate his ego in the register of the imperial, consumer-capitalist, masculine, master subject who misrecognizes mourning as a brief obligatory process that promotes the absolute forgetfulness and full substitutability of desire-objects. I read *Alastor* as Shelley's criticism of manic melancholia for its narrow-minded, idealized orientation toward wild m/other natures. *Alastor* follows the path of a manic masculine, master subject in his effort to deny the grief and darkness inherent in his subjectivity as formed under hegemonic social, economic, and religious institutions, like those investigated in *Queen Mab*. This process first involves the violent

⁵⁰⁶ Butler, "Melancholy, Ambivalence, Rage," 195.

⁵⁰⁷ Judith Butler, *Prearious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London and New York City: Verso Books, 2006), 20.

disavowal of the idealized lost objects and the construction of an omnipotent fantasy of self-generation. These defenses combine to effect the master subject's inability to "consciously perceive" or "see clearly what it is that has been lost."⁵⁰⁸ An imperial-capitalist (manic/paranoid) logic that understands all objects as radically interchangeable/replaceable and the failure to recognize the way in which the lost entity is etched upon the ego are both socially sanctioned defenses in the sense discussed in the previous section. They are meant to push the master subject to "move on," a distinctly masculinist notion of mourning that promotes an image of selfhood as autonomous, invulnerable, and unaffected. In other words, the purpose of mourning for object substitution is to "confirm the ongoing ability of the libido to attach to another object (consumption) and not be profoundly transformed by what it has lost."⁵⁰⁹ The Visionary Poet's refusal to acknowledge the possible existence and impact of old attachments, both I(s) and non-I(s), self and other, as well as to recognize, identify with (incorporate into the ego), and wit(h)ness new objects of alterity (as opposed to projecting the idealized self onto wild m/other natures) result in death-driven behaviors and impoverished non/human relations.

However, Shelley also suggests that the "unthought known" of the Wordsworthian Visionary Poet is that as a postnatal matrixial trans-subject he desires the *link a* of the original non-I, the matrixial borderlinking figure of differentiation in co-emergence that promoted creative-transformational interconnections between his prenatal, presubjective I(s) and non-I(s). Unfortunately, the Visionary Poet can only chase after the image of his own

⁵⁰⁸ Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: Volume 14 (1914-1916)*, trans. by James Strachey (London: Vintage Books, 2001), 245.

⁵⁰⁹ Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands, "Melancholy Natures, Queer Ecologies," in *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*, eds. Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010), 338.

power modeled after the phallic *object petit a*, the divine paternal authority that possesses the wild m/other nature foreclosed by symbol and Law. The figure of the Visionary Poet thus demonstrates that Shelley critically perceives something of this narrative structure in Wordsworth's oeuvre. Evidence in support of this view is apparent in how the narrative of *Alastor* reverses the chronology of the Wordsworthian developmental procedure. This narrative reversal hints at its function for Shelley as a youthful (perhaps unconscious, perhaps conscious) poetic attempt to work-through his own grieving sense of disillusionment with what he perceives as Wordsworth's decline. For example, in *The Prelude* Wordsworth views the "true liberty" of the human being as its sequential ascension from the blindness of the "cave" to its culmination in the self-confident imagination and self-reflective mind:

This faculty hath been the moving soul
Of our long labour: we have traced the stream
From darkness, and the very place of birth
In its blind cavern, whence is faintly heard
The sound of waters; followed it to light
And open day, accompanied its course
Among the ways of Nature, afterwards
Lost sight of it bewildered and engulfed,
Then given it greeting as it rose once more
With strength, reflecting in its solemn breast
The works of man, and face of human life;
And lastly, from its progress have we drawn

The feelings of life endless, the one thought
By which we live, infinity and God.⁵¹⁰

In *Alastor* Shelley reverses the above Wordsworthian chronology by beginning with conversations with inanimate spirits and nature and following the “stream” back to an ocean cave, or the womb/matrix of matrixial trans-subjective metramorphosis—the origin/source that Wordsworth carefully guards against.

According to this view, Shelley stages his disappointment in Wordsworth in *Alastor*. This loss of an ego ideal shatters the Visionary Poet’s subjectivity into a “bewildered” state of fragilization and nomadic fugitivity that instinctively knows there is no revising the fact that it is “From love, for here / Do we begin and end, all grandeur comes, / All truth and beauty—from pervading love.”⁵¹¹ Along this line of thinking, the Visionary Poet’s wild wandering in *Alastor* might be understood as documenting Shelley’s bewilderment or the “process of becoming wild by shedding [Wordsworthian] knowledge (as opposed to becoming civilized by acquiring it).”⁵¹² Wittingly or unwittingly the narrative gestures toward knowledge of the metramorphic quest of life that begins and “ends” countless times in the “compassionate resonance chamber” wherein matrixial trans-subjectivities are eternally “borderlinking-in-differentiation.”⁵¹³ In response to bewildering existential indeterminacy and precarity, the Visionary Poet (as Shelley’s own fugitive subjectivity) must first wander into the wonder of existential self-dissolution and un-being:

A restless impulse urged him to embark.

⁵¹⁰ Wordsworth, “*The Prelude* of 1805,” 468, Book 13, line 171-184.

⁵¹¹ Wordsworth, “*The Prelude* of 1805,” 466, Book 13, lines 149-151.

⁵¹² Jack Halberstam, *Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2020), 27.

⁵¹³ Bracha Ettinger, “Matrixial Trans-subjectivity,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 23, no. 2-3 (2006): 220.

And meet lone Death on the drear ocean's waste;
For well he knew that mighty Shadow loves
The slimy caverns of the populous deep.⁵¹⁴

In this sense, the Visionary Poet's death in the cave at the end of *Alastor* might be understood as the initial stage in the interminable process of renewal vis-à-vis traumatic loss and matrixial subjectivity-as-encounter in difference-in-co-emergence. Annihilation or erasure of the appropriative, manic, omnipotent master subject embedded inside the self is the very wit(h)ness-Thing the fragile Visionary Poet desires in his aspiration toward non-life, or the unbecoming in the passageway to newborn-ness (i.e., a fantasy of existential and creative rebirth). As "both escape and madness, desire and disorder," *Alastor* marks a significant moment in Shelley's psychic and poetic process of trying to clear the mind of webs of internalized, self-harming myths of "the Human" that minoritarian and master subjects alike take for granted as truth, but which continuously cause psychic and spiritual hemorrhaging so long as they remain unconscious.⁵¹⁵

The autobiographical story embedded in *Epipsychidion* picks up where the narrative of *Alastor* ends with the death of the Wordsworthian component of the psyche represented as the Visionary Poet's entrance into the renewing matrixial sphere of non-life.

Epipsychidion begins with a poetic persona that resembles a more mature matrixial trans-subject who can tolerate the cycles of pain and pleasure in order to investigate and enact the "metramorphic quest and the cognition of its anamnesis."⁵¹⁶ In so doing, the narrative presents an alternative to melancholic mania or substitution. The poem models a more

⁵¹⁴ Shelley, *Alastor*, 81, lines 304-307.

⁵¹⁵ Halberstam, *Wild Things*, 31.

⁵¹⁶ Bracha Ettinger, "Demeter-Persephone Complex, Entangled Aerials of the Psyche, and Sylvia Plath," *English Studies in Canada* 40, no. 1 (2014): 124.

ethical, creative, and politically beneficial expression of melancholia that functions as a part of a never-ending “mourning” process involving a more conscious, memorialized sense of loving gratitude for the revered, though imperfect other’s transformative influence over the self, for better and worse. This melancholic approach also acknowledges the traumas, lost objects, and destroyed ideals that constitute matrixial trans-subjectivity to rule out the possibility of stable identity. The matrixial trans-subject’s accumulating contact with others has the potential to both favorably and negatively transform the self and other via a “sedimentation” of elements of those attachments as internalized psychic objects that compose both subjects in the “archeological remainders” of their egos.⁵¹⁷ In ideal circumstances, the self and other become transformed and enriched by wit(h)nessing and co/in-habit(u)ating with myriad perspectives, intellectual paradigms, phenomenological stances, and sympathies. This notion is an endorsement, not so much of “free” love aimed at rejecting the monopoly and monotony of the institution of marriage and compulsory reproduction (one standard reading of the poem), but of matrixial subjectivity-as-encounter, of metamorphic wit(h)nessing in co/in-habit(u)ation as a life practice, wherein any moving on from an engagement with difference also involves moving with difference(s). The psychological, erotic, and political speculative histories depicted in Shelley’s *Queen Mab*, *Alastor*, and *Epipsychidion* all address different dimensions of his anxiety and skepticism regarding Wordsworth’s approach to nature as an instrument that might restore the individual’s supposed original unity with the divine prior to its distortion by toxic social institutions. These three poems negotiate myths of original, dystopian, and utopian forms of psychological and communal co/in-habit(u)ating to illuminate the creative and ethical

⁵¹⁷ Judith Butler, “Melancholy Gender, Refused Identification,” in *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 196.

transformations attendant to melancholic minoritarian and master subjects who embrace destabilizing contact with queer wild[er]ness.

The Role of Subject Formation in Melancholy Ecological History

Shelley's *Queen Mab* explores toxic subject formation which entails the "socially and psychically produced" "precarious achievements," rather than essential "dispositions," that are "masculinity and femininity" under western patriarchies of the global north.⁵¹⁸ These "precarious achievements" are the traumatic source of the irremediable melancholic affective mode present throughout society. According to object relations theorist, Jessica Benjamin, the masculine subject is interpellated into ideological structures encoded with value-hierarchical notions of gender that provoke the distortion of the healthy individuation and differentiation of the self from the (m)other (and the object-world or "nature" that is affectionately perceived as fused with her presence in early infancy). Butler argues in *The Psychic Life of Power* that even prior to the oedipal stage these social pressures begin to unconsciously influence the masculine presubject to repudiate their identification with the "mother" (and therefore cut away the "feminine" and the "nonhuman" within the self) as well as disavow the original erotic attachment to the same-sex parent.⁵¹⁹ During the oedipal stage, the nascent ego forms into the masculine subject by incorporating the lost objects of his early psychic life (mother, nature, same-sex parent) in the form of identifications, which come to makeup the shadowy core or the gendered character of the ego. Mother-nature becomes the lost object of heterosexual desire as he is pressured to recognize her only as his antitype, as radically other than himself. The child negotiates the traumatic losses incurred owing to the social prohibition against desire for and the anxious and hostile rivalry against

⁵¹⁸ Butler, "Melancholy Gender," 135.

⁵¹⁹ Butler, "Melancholy Gender," 137.

his father for his mother's affections by identifying with (becoming) both the gender and the sexuality of the heterosexual patriarch while repositioning the image of the original Father as superego. Compulsory heterosexuality demands subjective and sexual conformation to the binary system and results in a systematic violence to or loss of one's supposedly whole or polymorphous self—the masculine subject experiences an ungrievable lack or void, an incompleteness, in terms of an unconsciously missing ability to identify as feminine/nonhuman and/or experience same-sex desire.

According to Butler the psychological mechanism through which the nascent masculine ego processes the above traumatic primary losses and prohibitions (ontological animality, femininity, and homosexuality) is through a state of melancholia rather than of mourning because they are unrecognizable/inexpressible-illegible by society and therefore not consciously grievable. Freud theorizes that a subject in mourning is quite aware of the precise loss experienced and undergoes a “piecemeal” detachment and withdrawal of the libido from the departed object until the “ego becomes free and uninhibited again” and able to recognize a substitute or form a new attachment.⁵²⁰ In contradistinction, for Freud, melancholy is defined as the subject's reaction to “an object-loss which is withdrawn from consciousness.”⁵²¹ Melancholia involves the unconscious incorporation/identification of the lost object into the subject's own ego: “Insofar as identification is the psychic preserve of the object and such identifications come to form the ego, the lost object continues to haunt and inhabit the ego as one of its constitutive identifications.”⁵²² In the case of the masculine subject the “matrixial” is conflated with the “feminine” which becomes the desired lost

⁵²⁰ Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” 244-245.

⁵²¹ Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” 245.

⁵²² Butler, “Melancholy Gender,” 134.

object hauntingly preserved in the ego as the “repudiated identification.”⁵²³ This produces in the masculine subject a permanent, incurable unconscious desire that motivates the obsessive quest for original unity with the pre-oedipal female-Beloved as an aspect of the fantasies circulating around the postnatal mother (and nature). Moreover, the refusal to identify with the feminine/matrixial forecloses the possibility of homosexual and queer forms of longing. And yet, queer and same-sex desire is unrieved in its disavowal and so also incorporated into the ego “as an identification with masculinity” where same-sex desire becomes an identification with the father and conformity to the masculine gender role.⁵²⁴

Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands builds off Butler’s theory of collective melancholia as the effect of the strict social scripting of gender and sexuality. Mortimer-Sandilands also highlights Freud’s original points about mourning and melancholia—that is, it is not just human objects that can cause melancholia: “Mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one’s country, liberty, an ideal, and so on.”⁵²⁵ She adds objects in the nonhuman world to the list of attachments that the melancholic is unable to register as grievable because social structures do not honor that relation as a legible loss:

[M]elancholi[a] [is] a state of suspended mourning in which the object of loss is very real but psychically “ungrievable” within the confines of a society that cannot acknowledge nonhuman beings, natural environments, and ecological processes as appropriate objects for genuine grief. In such conditions, loss becomes displacement: the object that cannot be lost also cannot be let go,

⁵²³ Butler, “Melancholy Gender,” 137.

⁵²⁴ Butler, “Melancholy Gender,” 138.

⁵²⁵ Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” 243.

and...such disavowed objects are preserved within the psyche in the form of identifications and incorporations.⁵²⁶

Mortimer-Sandilands's argument is that modern society is enmired in devastated ecological systems and is therefore stricken by melancholia because it is unable to grieve for disappearing environments that it experiences as unspeakable losses. This situation has a conspicuous parallel with dominant culture's inability to recognize certain human attachments as "true" or "authentic" losses and the phenomena of what might be understood via Butler as a widespread "queer melancholia." My interest is in how a "culturally prevalent form of melancholy" that stems from the lack of "public recognition or discourse" for naming queer and environmental traumatic loss functions as one systemic symptom, among many, of individual struggles with melancholy that express the ungrievable loss of connection to the wild and queer plenitudes of matrixial trans-subjectivity, postnatal m/others, and nonhuman natures.⁵²⁷ But I am also interested in how this matrixial melancholia can become a consciously adopted stance/life practice that can tolerate deprivation and promote further learning (and therefore loss) via creative and ethical engagements with the world, much like Klein theorizes that the creative, sublimating motive of reparation is established with the achievement of the depressive position.

As mentioned above, the differentiation of the self from the human mother is also a separation of the self from the object-world (nature). The socialization of males within western patriarchal society imagines proper human development as one of a chronological "progress" where the self breaks the first bond and separates from the mother. Patriarchal psychosocial development distorts the important individuation process that culminates in the

⁵²⁶ Mortimer-Sandilands, "Melancholy Natures," 333.

⁵²⁷ Butler, "Melancholy Gender," 139.

child's capacity for reciprocal relations and a secure sense of self under "'good enough' social relations," or within a non-patriarchal, anti-antiblack cultural environment.⁵²⁸

Masculine selfhood is acquired by rejecting and creating dissimilarity and difference from the mother-natural background, which leads to the scripted failure of the individual to recognize the mother "as an independent person, another subject" rather than as an "Other: as nature, as an instrument or object, as less-than-human."⁵²⁹ This tendency to see the mother as an object extends to the entire natural world because early in life the world of objects blurs into and overlaps with the mother's image. The "progress" narrative of the masculine/master subject's transcendence of the feminine/matrixial sphere and the mother (nature) results in the culturally prevalent tendency to enter into a state of manic and/or paranoid melancholy where self-determining, hermetic selfhood is premised upon the denial that we are previously comprised of our relations with wild m/other natures. It is also based on an understanding and "processing" of loss in the unfeeling mode of perpetual consumption and replacement of desire-objects. This mythology of selfhood functions as a system-regulating/replicating narrative conducive to reproducing anesthetized capitalist-consumer subjects.

In the same way that Butler stresses the ethical import of articulating and transmitting a certain awareness of melancholia as the expression of an original loss in terms of same-sex desire, Shelley's texts suggest the adoption of a melancholic stance in which one actively engages rather than denies the traumatic disruption of a "primordial state of

⁵²⁸ Jane Flax, "Political Philosophy and the Patriarchal Unconscious: A Psychoanalytical Perspective on Epistemology and Metaphysics," in *Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology, and Philosophy of Science*, eds. Sandra Harding and Merrill B. Hintikka (Holland: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1983), 252.

⁵²⁹ Jessica Benjamin, "The Bonds of Love: Rational Violence and Erotic Domination," *Feminist Studies* 6, no. 1 (1980): 148.

nature.”⁵³⁰ For Jennifer Lokash, this original loss is channeled into a productive melancholia in *Alastor* that allows for a narcissistic identification with non/human others or “the ceaseless pursuit of something that mirrors the self in all things.”⁵³¹ Despite the fact that this “narcissistic pursuit for perfect correspondence with another” inevitably fails, the recognition of a kernel of the self in the other arguably functions as the catalyst for a true “going out of one’s own nature.”⁵³² While I find compelling Lokash’s claim that the pursuit and recognition of similarity in the other is a first step toward overcoming divisions and divides, I also see how this point is debatable if the other continues to function solely as a mirror. For example, Wordsworth’s identification of the external world as a sign of what is already present and inherent in preexistent Human being leaves human identity to stagnate in the pool of its own image. Community is potentially fostered when one person can sympathize and recognize the way the other resembles and informs the fabric of one’s own being and is also able to celebrate the constant confrontation with discord that accompanies the pursuit of harmony—the way difference is made most conspicuous the instant we feel a soothing sense of sameness. As discussed, the masculine subject’s original bond with the m/other natures that he was forced to give up in early childhood becomes a “setting up of the object inside the ego.”⁵³³ Therefore, these lost objects constitute the ego and so in this way his being “thirsts after its likeness,” the foreclosed feminine/matrixial and queer non-I(s), which are the “invisible and unattainable point[s] to which Love tends.”⁵³⁴ In contrast to

⁵³⁰ Eric Gidal, “‘O Happy Earth! Reality of Heaven!’: Melancholy and Utopia in Romantic Climatology,” *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 8, no. 2 (2008): 76.

⁵³¹ Jennifer Lokash, “Shelley’s Organic Sympathy: Natural Communitarianism and the Example of ‘Alastor,’” *The Wordsworth Circle* 28, no. (1997): 179.

⁵³² Lokash, “Shelley’s Organic Sympathy,” 179.

⁵³³ Freud qtd. in Butler, “Melancholy Gender,” 133.

⁵³⁴ Shelley, “On Love,” 504.

Wordsworth's link to nature as a signal of immortality and infinity, Shelley proposes that a melancholic memory of loving, foreclosed similitude allows for discernment of the "secret correspondence" that bonds him with wild m/other natures and the nonhuman world.

For Shelley, m/other natures' "inconceivable relation to something within the soul" always productively accompanies the initially disappointing revelation of alienness within those same entities that quickly shifts to appreciation and an openness to coming creatively and radically undone.⁵³⁵ These sensations resemble the presubject's aesthetic experience of the matrixial sphere and the mother as the first metramorphosing in wit(h)ness trans-subject and transformational object. Christopher Bollas suggests that prior to the defensive splitting from the mother involved in subject formation the presubject experiences the "illusion of deep rapport of subject and object" in the form of a "continuity of being" where the "content of the self is formed and transformed by the environment."⁵³⁶ Bollas calls this immersion in the mother's phenomenological matrix of care-styles the presubject's first aesthetic experience that will come to shape "all future ways of being with the other."⁵³⁷ In this way the mother is both desire-object and an object of pleasurable transformation as the mother's "logic of care" facilitates and shapes the character of the presubject's ego and "manipulates the environment to make it symmetrical to human need."⁵³⁸ After the separation from the mother and forced repudiation of the feminine, the masculine subject internalizes the lost object—as a transforming and transformational entity—into the structure of the ego. Therefore, not only is the masculine subject compelled by a melancholic sense of loss to pursue unity with the lost object of desire throughout life but also the self also comes to seek

⁵³⁵ Shelley, "On Love," 504.

⁵³⁶ Bollas, "The Aesthetic Moment," 41.

⁵³⁷ Bollas, "The Aesthetic Moment," 45.

⁵³⁸ Bollas, "The Aesthetic Moment," 44.

specific kinds of “transformational objects to reach relative symmetry with the environment.”⁵³⁹ The drive for melancholic unity might best be described as the “aspiring to be matched in symbiotic harmony within an aesthetic frame that promises to metamorphose the self.”⁵⁴⁰ According to Bollas, all human subjects want to “achieve reunion” with non/human objects that “transform our internal and external realities” in ways reminiscent of our mothers’ methods.⁵⁴¹

This melancholic identification with the world as related somehow to the self, for Shelley, motivates the conscious illusion and vision to reunite humanity and animality (nature), masculinity and femininity, original and copy, because such a vision necessarily transforms into an appreciation of and creative comportment/receptivity toward radical otherness. Despite the impossibility of absolute reconciliation, the fantasy striving for unity-in-similarity is the first step toward approaching an appreciation and desire for even older sensations and desires for interlacing with wild m/other natures in difference-in-co-emergence. Both fantasies promote the transcendence of myriad human alienations and the creation of new kinds of joy for desiring postnatal beings in mutual entanglement.

Master Subject Formation in Queen Mab

Queen Mab is a poem about the subjectivization and development of the masculine subject under toxic hegemonic apparatuses and the resulting birth of collective misery. But the poem is also about the possibility of social and environmental justice via metamorphic wit(h)nessing. It is perhaps this maternal aesthetic matrix that informs Shelley’s choice to make the fairy figure Queen Mab from children’s stories the guide that gives the protagonist

⁵³⁹ Bollas, “The Aesthetic Moment,” 44.

⁵⁴⁰ Bollas, “The Aesthetic Moment,” 46.

⁵⁴¹ Bollas, “The Aesthetic Moment,” 46.

and young girl Ianthe lessons regarding the past so that she can restore for the future the matrixial borderspace, the “space and time of subjectivization in co-emergence” and “feminine/prebirth intimate sharing.”⁵⁴² This suggests his investment perhaps in a proto-ecofeminist and essentialist belief in the feminine subject’s greater access to nature, because of the social pressures she feels to identify with the mother, as well as the more general idea that children are closer to or have a greater capacity to commune with the “wisdom” of nature. This investment reveals his nostalgia for identities prior to differentiation where the presubject feels “[i]n the dim newness of its being... / The impulses of sublunary things, / And all is wonder to unpractised sense.”⁵⁴³ Thus, the reader is told that Ianthe is “[j]udged alone worthy” to see the “secrets of the immeasurable past” and future and that “the clear silver tones” spoken by Queen Mab are “unheard by all but the gifted ear.”⁵⁴⁴

The similarities and distinctions between Wordsworth and Shelley’s position on the imaginative capacities of childhood are present in his essay “On Life.” He claims that, as children, humans “less habitually distinguished all that we saw and felt from ourselves. They seemed as it were to constitute one mass.”⁵⁴⁵ Shelley perceives the strangeness of primal trans-subjectivity as the entangled, borderlinking of I(s) and non-I(s) within a “matrixial resonance field.”⁵⁴⁶ He suggests that some people maintain and can cultivate this ability to feel “as if their nature were dissolved into the surrounding universe, or as if the surrounding universe were absorbed into their being. They are conscious of no distinction.”⁵⁴⁷ These speculations are not unproblematic in their resemblance to Plumwood’s concept of

⁵⁴² Ettinger, “Matrixial Trans-subjectivity,” 219-220.

⁵⁴³ Shelley, *Queen Mab*, 48, Part VI, lines 153-155.

⁵⁴⁴ Shelley, *Queen Mab*, 20, Part I, lines 111-112 & 122.

⁵⁴⁵ Shelley, “On Life,” 507.

⁵⁴⁶ Ettinger, “Matrixial Trans-subjectivity,” 220.

⁵⁴⁷ Shelley, “On Life,” 507.

colonizing incorporation disguised as a love of unifying oneness. But these lines reveal Shelley's belief that momentary sensations of trans-subjective connectivity provide "insight into our hidden nature," or what the subject once experienced in primordial connectivity with the matrix and m/other.⁵⁴⁸ Shelley suggests that most adults both lose the ability to perceive their interconnectedness with non/human forms and mutate into a state of misery.

For example, later in the essay "On Life," Shelley voices regret that "as men grow up" they become "mechanical and habitual agents" causing the "power" to experience an "intense and vivid apprehension of life" to decay.⁵⁴⁹ *Queen Mab* chronicles the process of this decay wherein tyrannical societies systematically produce docile, alienated subjects as "mechanized automaton[s]" by disseminating false consciousness into the operations of violent social conditioning within the patriarchal household.⁵⁵⁰ Through the voice of the fairy queen, Shelley states that generation after generation is sacrificed to "destruction's scythe" and as soon as another "blossoms" "Red glows the tyrant's stamp-mark on its bloom, / Withering and cankering deep its passive prime."⁵⁵¹ Upon reaching adulthood the subject falls prey to the tyrant's "lying words and modes," his "[e]vasive meanings, nothings of much sound" that "lure the heedless victim to the toils / Spread round the valley of its paradise."⁵⁵² Later, Queen Mab makes the claim that in a state of nature "every heart contains perfection's gem," that humankind uninhibited by stifling social scripts is a "high being" with "pure desire and universal love" and "cloudless brain, / Untainted passion, elevated will."⁵⁵³ Moreover, Shelley's notion of non/human interconnectedness where

⁵⁴⁸ Shelley, "On Life," 507.

⁵⁴⁹ Shelley, "On Life," 507.

⁵⁵⁰ Shelley, *Queen Mab*, 34, Part III, line 179.

⁵⁵¹ Shelley, *Queen Mab*, 41, Part IV, lines 228-230.

⁵⁵² Shelley, *Queen Mab*, 41, Part IV, lines 232-236.

⁵⁵³ Shelley, *Queen Mab*, 45, Part V, lines 147-155.

“[s]oul is the only element” that flows “[t]hroughout this varied and eternal world” perhaps stems from his belief in the matrixial trans-subjective difference-in-co-emergence and the early subject/object aesthetic rapport.⁵⁵⁴ The sense of environmental symmetry felt in prenatal and early postnatal life may lead Shelley to claim that all the things of nature speak

Peace, harmony, and love. The universe
In nature’s silent eloquence, declares
That all fulfill the works of love and joy,—
All but the outcast man.⁵⁵⁵

Shelley mourns the unspeakable losses that result from hegemonic conditions that enslave and subjugate minds until their creativity is extinguished and they are unable to discover transformational objects in m/other natures that may enable metamorphosis: “How many a rustic Milton has past by, / Stifling the speechless longings of his heart, / In unremitting drudgery and care!”⁵⁵⁶

Shelley claims that humans were not created inherently evil and creatively stifled. Rather, the “unnumbered crimes” and violence that “desolat[e] the discord-waste land” are caused by “kings, and priests, and statesmen.”⁵⁵⁷ In other words, misery grows from the root of the patriarchal family “poison tree” from whose leaves “venomed exhalations spread / Ruin and death, and woe” throughout society.⁵⁵⁸ The implied source and disseminator of poison into the traditional patriarchal household is some kind of paternal and/or social third as master subject who teaches the presubject “specious names” during “soft childhood’s

⁵⁵⁴ Shelley, *Queen Mab*, 39, Part IV, lines 139-140.

⁵⁵⁵ Shelley, *Queen Mab*, 34-35, Part III, lines 195-199.

⁵⁵⁶ Shelley, *Queen Mab*, 45, Part V, lines 137-139.

⁵⁵⁷ Shelley, *Queen Mab*, 37, Part IV, lines 76-80.

⁵⁵⁸ Shelley, *Queen Mab*, 38, Part IV, lines 83-85.

unsuspecting hour.”⁵⁵⁹ The paternal master subject comes to signify protection against the subject’s fears of “reengulfment” or ego disintegration, psychic death after the masculine subject’s first sense of hard won, nascent, and fragile selfhood. He is taught implicitly to identify with the qualities of the “objective” master subject of rigid autonomy and separateness whose empire is the public sphere. The master subject as a “force” of “falsehood [that] hang[s] even o’er the cradled babe” causes the nascent self to repudiate the m/other:

...The child,
Ere he can lisp his mother’s sacred name,
Swells with the unnatural pride of crime, and lifts
His baby-sword even in a hero’s mood.
This infant-arm becomes the bloodiest scourge
Of devastated earth;⁵⁶⁰

These lines anticipate ecofeminist logic and feminist psychoanalytic accounts of development that see a connection between the repudiation of the mother/object-world perceived by the presubject as a entangled matrix and the later violence perpetrated against the earth, a situation that “stifl[es] with rudest grasp all natural good” in both self and repudiated non/human others.⁵⁶¹ Feminine m/other natures relationally define the masculine master subject by serving as “their other, their counterpart, the side of themselves they repress.”⁵⁶² Because of this developmental situation, the master subject desires to “dominate

⁵⁵⁹ Shelley, *Queen Mab*, 38, Part IV, lines 112-113.

⁵⁶⁰ Shelley, *Queen Mab*, 38, Part IV, lines 107-112.

⁵⁶¹ Shelley, *Queen Mab*, 38, Part IV, line 120.

⁵⁶² Benjamin, “The Bonds of Love,” 148.

both the woman (mother image) within himself and the woman outside of him.”⁵⁶³ Wild m/other Nature then appears as a “threatening, unpredictable force from which a man must differentiate himself and which he must control.”⁵⁶⁴

Shelley uses the image of the wilderness and the desert wasteland to emphasize the effects of the traumatic losses of early life imposed by patriarchal institutions on the health of the world. In contrast, he depicts peaceful pastoral scenes to highlight the restorative potential of more egalitarian forms of society. Foregrounding the moment of melancholic acknowledgement, Shelley speculates about the presubject’s emotional experience of undergoing the distorted process of differentiation in terms of the despair of waking up on a desert island. He highlights the traumatic realization of severance from the joys of the mother-matrix:

Ah! to the stranger-soul, when first it peeps
From its new tenement, and looks abroad
For happiness and sympathy, how stern
And desolate a tract is this wide world!⁵⁶⁵

Instead of finding transformational objects in abundance, the masculine subject finds “withered all the buds of natural good! / No shade, no shelter from the sweeping storms / Of pityless power!”⁵⁶⁶ Shelley is clear that “disease and woe” stem from “morals, law, and custom.”⁵⁶⁷ And these destructive laws and customs are “Heaped on the wretched parent” from whom the presubject “sprung,” the parent who goes on to inscribe them upon the child

⁵⁶³ Zimmerman qtd. in Luc Ferry, *The New Ecological Order* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 124.

⁵⁶⁴ Zimmerman qtd. in Ferry, *The New Ecological Order*, 124.

⁵⁶⁵ Shelley, *Queen Mab*, 38, Part IV, lines 121-124.

⁵⁶⁶ Shelley, *Queen Mab*, 38, Part IV, lines 125-127.

⁵⁶⁷ Shelley, *Queen Mab*, 38-39, Part IV, lines 128 & 130.

in turn in enacting the intergenerational transmission of abuse.⁵⁶⁸ Shelley suggests that upon the achievement of manhood, those early master subject-presubject, father-son whisperings “di[m]” “Bright reason’s ray” and come to “sanctif[y] the sword / Upraised to shed a brother’s innocent blood.”⁵⁶⁹ Shelley claims that under the influences of hegemonic patriarchal forces the masculine presubject is “cursed from its birth, even from its cradle doomed / To abjectness and bondage!” in that all “liberty and love / And peace is torn from its defencelessness.”⁵⁷⁰ The masculine presubject suffers the unspeakable, ungrievable trauma and disfiguration that comes from forced repudiation of matrixial trans-subjects and transformational objects of desire.

Manic Melancholia in Alastor; or, The Spirit of Solitude

Shelley’s *Alastor* depicts the brief melancholic existence and despairing death of a Visionary Poet in order to investigate and interrogate the effects of the social account of violent subjectivization in *Queen Mab* at the psychic level of the individual. The poem is also a critique of Wordsworth for refusing to acknowledge the masculine, master subject that constitutes his being and with whom he is complicit, an avoidance Shelley perceives as causing Wordsworthian poetics and politics to decline. Along these lines, a third perspective from which to understand *Alastor* is as a self-critique and melancholic negotiation of the Wordsworthian persona living/dying *within* Shelley. In other words, the poem ambivalently rages against the Wordsworthian “father-bard” whom he inherited and incorporated into his identity, and that he lost upon perceiving Wordsworth’s increasing complacent conservatism:

⁵⁶⁸ Shelley, *Queen Mab*, 39, Part IV, line 129.

⁵⁶⁹ Shelley, *Queen Mab*, 38, Part IV, lines 115-116.

⁵⁷⁰ Shelley, *Queen Mab*, 39, Part IV, lines 135-138.

Thou hast like to a rock-built refuge stood
Above the blind and battling multitude:
In honoured poverty thy voice did weave
Songs consecrate to truth and liberty,—
Deserting these, thou leavest me to grieve,
Thus having been, that thou shouldst cease to be.⁵⁷¹

Because Shelley grieves the death of the Wordsworthian persona, he must “kill off” this object within himself in Butler’s sense discussed above. This critical and antagonistic contestation with his Wordsworthian ego ideal causes a drastic reorganization of Shelley’s psychic topography.

The opening and closing addresses by the Narrator lead Earl R. Wasserman to think that the voice of the Narrator of the poem is not Shelley’s personal voice. Rather, Wasserman attributes these stanzas to a Wordsworthian Narrator who acknowledges human limitations and constraints. For Wasserman, the Narrator is the voice that enumerates the story of the Visionary Poet whose ideals are portrayed as unrealistic and destructive. I think instead that the Narrator and the Visionary Poet are the same ambivalent, grieving individual but at different points in life, perhaps Shelley’s personal voice or a Shelleyan caricature of himself. The more weathered Narrator tells the story of his own youthful past, his unique translation and naïve internalization of Wordsworthian ideology and the resulting misguided, unrecognized metamorphic quest for idealized wild m/other natures. The opening address of the Narrator, for example, details his mimetic performance of Wordsworthian ideology as mediated through his own personality. The Narrator directly

⁵⁷¹ Shelley, “To Wordsworth,” 92, lines 9-14.

acknowledges and addresses the “Mother of this unfathomable world!” whom he openly discloses he has loved forever and only.⁵⁷² He describes how he had hoped to “still” his “obstinate questionings / Of thee and thine [m/other nature], by forcing some lone ghost, / Thy messenger, to render up the tale.”⁵⁷³ The Narrator goes on to relate scenes from later adult life represented in *Epipsychidion* where he learns the metamorphosing power of matrixial co/in-habit(u)ation. The Narrator describes how he comes to terms with disillusionment as well as his transformation into a matrixial trans-subject:

...though ne'er yet
Thou hast unveil'd thy inmost sanctuary,
Enough from incommunicable dream,
And twilight phantasms, and deep noonday thought,
Has shone within me,...⁵⁷⁴

The Narrator then recounts the story of his frenetic mania that ultimately results in his misguided attempt at finding the space of non-life, his desire for the “death” of the Wordsworthian spirit within, the Visionary Poet’s unbecoming as the passageway to transformed newborn-ness. The Narrator’s closing address ambivalently laments when the “surpassing Spirit, / Whose light adorned the world around it, leaves / Those who remain behind” in a state of “pale despair and cold tranquility.”⁵⁷⁵ But the Narrator also reflects on how that state of grief also productively reoriented his entire perspective on reality: “Nature’s vast frame, the web of human things, / Birth and the grave,...are not as they

⁵⁷² Shelley, *Alastor*, 74, line 18.

⁵⁷³ Shelley, *Alastor*, 74, lines 26-28.

⁵⁷⁴ Shelley, *Alastor*, 75, lines 37-41.

⁵⁷⁵ Shelley, *Alastor*, 90, lines 714-716 & 718.

were.”⁵⁷⁶ It is as if the Narrator leaves the dead-end of masculine, master subjectivity and approaches the consciously *perceived* fantasy depicted in *Epipsychidion*, wherein the latter of which Shelley happily anticipates the never-ending matrixial rebirths and unbecomings ahead on his now consciously recognized metamorphic, nomadic quest to wild homeplaces of wit(h)nessing in co/in-habit(u)ation. Indeed, Shelley alludes to the death scene from *Alastor* in *Epipsychidion*: “In many mortal forms I rashly sought / The shadow of that idol of my thought.”⁵⁷⁷ He goes on to say that this violent obsession ultimately led to his contact with a matrixial m/other who is like a moon that “warms not but illumines” (i.e., Mary Shelley).⁵⁷⁸ This wild m/other nature “led” him into a “cave” in a “wild place” where she wit(h)nesses and unravels his master subjectivity: “She hid me, as the Moon may hide the night / From its own darkness, until all was bright / Between the Heaven and Earth of my calm mind.”⁵⁷⁹ At the same time, the radical and traumatic destabilization of this metamorphic, renovating contact is not all easy bliss: “And all my being became bright or dim / As the Moon’s image in a summer sea, / According as she smiled or frowned on me.”⁵⁸⁰ In this way, the Narrator and the Visionary Poet of *Alastor* represent two different moments in Shelley’s own metamorphic biography.

However, in so far as the Visionary Poet also contains an internalized version of the Wordsworthian persona and elements of the more generalized figure of the masculine, master subject, *Alastor* is a direct if ambivalent criticism of his literary and psychosocial inheritances. Indeed, Shelley’s association of the Wordsworthian “life cycle” with the

⁵⁷⁶ Shelley, *Alastor*, 90, lines 719-720.

⁵⁷⁷ Shelley, *Epipsychidion*, 399, lines 267-268.

⁵⁷⁸ Shelley, *Epipsychidion*, 400, line 285.

⁵⁷⁹ Shelley, *Epipsychidion*, 400, lines 287-289.

⁵⁸⁰ Shelley, *Epipsychidion*, 400, lines 296-298.

history of dogmatic religions in *Queen Mab* also suggests a critical orientation toward the champion of the immortal imagination:

...Then manhood gave
Its strength and ardour to thy frenzied brain;
Thine eager gaze scanned the stupendous scene,
Whose wonders mocked the knowledge of thy pride:
Their everlasting and unchanging laws
Reproached thine ignorance. While thou stoodst
Baffled and gloomy; then thou didst sum up
The elements of all that thou didst know;
The changing seasons, winter's leafless reign,
The budding of the heaven-breathing trees,
The eternal orbs that beautify the night,
The sun-rise, and the setting of the moon,
Earthquakes and wars, and poisons and disease,
And all their causes, to an abstract point
Converging, thou didst bend, and called it GOD!⁵⁸¹

In *Alastor* he reduces Wordsworth's approach to and understanding of nature as a "veil" to penetrate to arrive at the "higher" or "spiritual," anxiety-soothing, metaphysical "truth" that the origin and destiny of the individual soul is the immortal realm of a father sky god. The Visionary Poet in *Alastor* recalls Wordsworth's "Intimations Ode" wherein he laments the dwindling of his imaginative potency, a disenchantment with nature that ultimately leads to

⁵⁸¹ Shelley, *Queen Mab*, 50, Part VI, lines 88-102.

his identification with the philosophical mind that guarantees immortality through meditative and conscious contemplation: “Hence endless occupation for the Soul, / Whether discursive or intuitive.”⁵⁸² In *Alastor*, after this figure rejects the flesh-and-blood “Arab maiden,” he receives a “vision on his sleep” who takes the form of a Orientalized, black mater(nal) “veiled maid,” or what he has constructed as foreclosed in himself and whose power he wishes to (re)appropriate *for* himself.⁵⁸³ The Visionary Poet misrecognizes the black mater(nal) and feminine m/other as the “dream of hopes that never yet / Had flushed his cheek.”⁵⁸⁴ Accordingly, Shelley describes this Wordsworthian Visionary Poet as one from whom the “mystery and the majesty of Earth, / The joy, the exultation” had fled thus leaving only “His wan eyes [to] / Gaze on the empty scene as vacantly / As ocean’s moon looks on the moon in heaven.”⁵⁸⁵

Read alongside the patriarchal developmental account in *Queen Mab*, these lines suggest that Shelley’s *Alastor* exposes how the violent suppression, ungrieved disavowal, and objectification of m/other natures contribute to the “exasperation of the inequality of mankind.”⁵⁸⁶ He claims that the forces vying for the souls of minoritarian and master subjects are no longer divine or demonic spirits but the poetic principle versus the ego maniacal voice of imperial power: “Poetry, and the principle of Self, of which money is the visible incarnation, are the God and the Mammon of the world.”⁵⁸⁷ In other words, the masculine, master subject/Wordsworthian persona remains imprisoned in the “dull vapours of the little world of the self” and so driven by manic melancholia, or the patriarchal

⁵⁸² Wordsworth, “*The Prelude* of 1850,” 465, Book 14, lines 119-120.

⁵⁸³ Shelley, *Alastor*, 77, lines 149 & 151.

⁵⁸⁴ Shelley, *Alastor*, 77, lines 150-151.

⁵⁸⁵ Shelley, *Alastor*, 79, lines 199-202.

⁵⁸⁶ Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*, 530.

⁵⁸⁷ Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*, 531.

imperative of amnesia, to “move on” unceasingly in the quest to consume (i.e., dominate, domesticate, and appropriate) wild m/other natures.⁵⁸⁸ Instead of interacting with uncanny familiars of excess difference in a consensual dynamic of mutual exchange and evolution, the masculine, master subject colonizes otherness to reproduce the same without variance ad infinitum.

It is worth acknowledging here Shelley’s unconscious melancholic tendency and/or conscious problematic choice in *Alastor* to sexualize and Orientalize black mater figures as foils to his ideal of androgynous or polymorphous trans-subjectivity. For example, the Narrator of the “Preface” describes the Visionary Poet’s human ideal in trans-subjective terms as a combination of the implicitly masculine intellectual’s notions of the “wonderful, or wise, or beautiful” and the m/other’s “corresponding powers.”⁵⁸⁹ He describes how the Visionary Poet unites these binary elements into a “single image” that he “seeks in vain” as a “prototype of his conception” and “disappointed, he descends to an untimely grave.”⁵⁹⁰ This polymorphous ideal of queer plentitude recalls Shelley’s insistence that a “sexual relationship could not be satisfying if the woman was not ‘completely liberated from social and intellectual servitude.’”⁵⁹¹ More specifically, this ideal suggests that Shelley is gesturing toward the overthrow of masculine and feminine versions of Man, that liberation for masculine, master subjects entails “becoming-minoritarian,” so to speak, and for feminine subjects it entails adopting traits of a better version of masculinity. It is for this reason Shelley emphasizes that the Visionary Poet leaves his “cold fireside and alienated home”

⁵⁸⁸ Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*, 525.

⁵⁸⁹ Shelley, “Preface” to *Alastor*, 73.

⁵⁹⁰ Shelley, “Preface” to *Alastor*, 73.

⁵⁹¹ Sauleha Kamal, “Picturing ‘Female Followers of Mahomet’ as ‘Veiled Maids’: Muslim Women and the Victim/Seductress Binary in *Frankenstein* and ‘Alastor,’” *Postcolonial Text* 13, no. 1 (2018), 5.

while the Arab Maiden “to her cold home returned.”⁵⁹² However, it is problematic for Shelley to deploy these Orientalized figures to foreground what he sees as tyrannical about western patriarchal psychosocial development for masculine and feminine subjectivities. For example, the “Arab maiden who is still under the control of her father and her culture cannot be considered completely liberated, and must therefore be rejected.”⁵⁹³ In contrast, the problematic figure of the “veiled maiden” arises in the Orientalized East and is a sexualized fantasy of a “liberated” “Muslim woman” who is also an enchanting seductress. But this problematic use of the “black feminine sublime” in *Alastor* also foregrounds the being foreclosed to masculine, master subjectivity. In other words, the Orientalized “veiled maiden” is also the idealized, polymorphous version of Shelley’s selfhood: “Her voice was like the voice of his own soul / Heard in the calm of thought.”⁵⁹⁴ Shelley’s xenophobic depiction of both the “Arab maiden” and the “veiled maid” denies the possibility of diverse kinds of wildness and attempts to control (constrict) what counts as “desirable” in m/other natures.

The narrative of *Alastor* begins after the masculine, master subject’s rejection of the first bond, after the establishment of a “self-possessed” atomistic selfhood driven by repressed desire. The Visionary Poet describes the experience of indoctrination from his earlier life in the following terms: “When early youth had past, he left / His cold fireside and alienated home, / To seek strange truths in undiscovered lands.”⁵⁹⁵ The Visionary Poet, who conforms to the masculine, master subject position, is stable so long as he perceives the

⁵⁹² Shelley, *Alastor*, 76-77, lines 76 & 138.

⁵⁹³ Kamal, “Picturing ‘Female Followers of Mahomet,’” 5.

⁵⁹⁴ Shelley, *Alastor*, 78, lines 153-154.

⁵⁹⁵ Shelley, *Alastor*, 76, lines 75-77.

objects of wild m/other nature in terms of objectified standing-reserve, that is fetishized as the “infinite and unmeasured” “fountains of knowledge” of a “variety not to be exhausted.”⁵⁹⁶ The Visionary Poet here is a proper subscriber to the imperial capitalist logic of the infinite consumption and gratification of *having* objects rather than embracing the more communitarian ethic of *being*, *(un)becoming*, and wit(h)nessing with objects as joy-inducing, metramorphosing, and tragically disappointing, desiring, and ephemeral trans-subjects. The objects of nature “cease to suffice” and his desire for the repudiated object “at length is suddenly awakened” in the form of a “thirs[t] for intercourse with an intelligence similar to itself.”⁵⁹⁷

Having supposedly exhausted the resources of nature as material for asserting the unassailable invulnerability and superiority of selfhood, the Visionary Poet “seeks in vain for a prototype of his conception” but “Blasted by his disappointment, he descends to an untimely grave.”⁵⁹⁸ The “self-centred seclusion” that the Visionary Poet is socialized into performing causes him to “lov[e] nothing on this earth...rejoicing neither in human joy nor mourning with human grief.”⁵⁹⁹ He mistakenly reduces “the sublimest and most perfect natures” of the “wonderful,” “wise,” and “beautiful” world into a single image of feminized inanimate spirit whose currency is the mania of omnipotence and denial. In contrast, a more salutary model of existence might come forward if the “intellectual faculties, the imagination, the functions of sense” were all permitted to thrive on the diverse and multitudinous “sympath[ies] of corresponding powers in other human beings” and nonhuman others—multiple, mortal and imperfect others, not a single idealized Beloved

⁵⁹⁶ Shelley, “Preface” to *Alastor*, 72-73.

⁵⁹⁷ Shelley, “Preface” to *Alastor*, 73.

⁵⁹⁸ Shelley, “Preface” to *Alastor*, 73.

⁵⁹⁹ Shelley, “Preface” to *Alastor*, 73.

fantasy projected onto the other.⁶⁰⁰ By refusing to acknowledge loss or to love the panoply of “fellow-beings” who might enter with him into a dynamic of metamorphic borderlinking and wit(h)nessing in co/in-habit(u)ation, he consigns himself to a fate of material, spiritual, erotic, and creative atrophy. In this way, the Visionary Poet achieves the anonymity of that class of beings that are “neither friends, nor lovers, nor fathers, nor citizens of the world, nor benefactors of their country.”⁶⁰¹ Rather, Shelley implies that the Visionary Poet’s lineage stems from an “unnatural line of drones” and the “scarce living pullies of a dead machine.”⁶⁰²

In the opening two stanzas the Narrator invokes a bright and wild menagerie of wild m/other natures who he has “loved / And cherished” as his “kindred.”⁶⁰³ He wishes to repay their gifts of love with the loving creative verse they inspire in his heart. He abruptly shifts to a darker description of his former relationship to wild m/other nature when he says he has obsessively traced “the darkness” of her “steps” forever attempting to gaze upon her “deep mysteries” to “forc[e] some lone ghost, / Thy messenger, to render up the tale / Of what we are.”⁶⁰⁴ These lines effectively associate the Wordsworthian gaze with the recourse in Enlightenment discourse to metaphors of female violation: “The moon gazed on my midnight labours, while, with unrelaxed and breathless eagerness, I pursued nature to her hiding-places.”⁶⁰⁵ Reminiscent of Victor’s language of sexual conquest from Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, the Visionary Poet renders wild m/other natures somehow frustratingly

⁶⁰⁰ Shelley, “Preface” to *Alastor*, 73.

⁶⁰¹ Shelley, “Preface” to *Alastor*, 73.

⁶⁰² Shelley, *Queen Mab*, 33, Part III, line 119 & 43, Part V, line 76.

⁶⁰³ Shelley, *Alastor*, 74, lines 14-15.

⁶⁰⁴ Shelley, *Alastor*, 74, lines 20-29.

⁶⁰⁵ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, ed., J. Paul Hunter (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012), 33.

unreachable. This frustrated position regarding nature suggests the sense of hauntedness and obscurity overhanging the masculine ego due to his unconscious renunciation of the feminine and mother/object-world. The lines also exhibit an ambivalence that indicates an anxious revulsion and desire to differentiate from the maternal, to feel oneself separate and superior via domination. Finally, it reveals the sublimation of the drive for the original lost bond into the use of instrumental reason and/or imaginative contemplation to render nature into infinitely replaceable, mere resource objects and units of discrete knowledge for scientific or poetic applications.

The Narrator explains that, in order to escape the miserable guilt and anxiety at the core of the pursuit of impossible unity and detached consumption, he becomes a “desperate alchemist” who “Stak[es] his very life on some dark hope.”⁶⁰⁶ In other words, he engages in intimate and intellectual encounters with m/others:

...I mixed awful talk and asking looks
With my most innocent love, until strange tears
Uniting with those breathless kisses, made
Such magic as compels the charmed night
To render up thy charge:⁶⁰⁷

The Narrator is transparent when he states that while this intimate erotic bond has not “unveil’d” nature’s “inmost sanctuary,” the willful acknowledgement of the loss and the capacity to enter into relations of mutual transformation with new desire-objects stimulates “incommunicable dream[s], / And twilight phantasms.”⁶⁰⁸ These dreams reveal the way that

⁶⁰⁶ Shelley, *Alastor*, 74, lines 31-32.

⁶⁰⁷ Shelley, *Alastor*, 75, lines 33-37.

⁶⁰⁸ Shelley, *Alastor*, 75, lines 38-40.

humans are always already able to creatively *communicate*, or harmonize together as in a mutually composed song, with wild m/other natures: The “deep heart of man” “modulate[s] with murmurs of the air, / And motions of the forests and the sea, And [the] voice of living beings.”⁶⁰⁹ In contrast, Wordsworth foregrounds the way nature signifies his inherently immaterial nature and spurs the development of the glorious potential of the contemplative imagination. Nature does have an influence on his senses but only to reveal his own imaginative powers.

The Narrator then begins an enumeration of the Visionary Poet’s misguided path. After “early youth had past,” during which he receives an education in “divine philosophy” and “all of the great, / Or good, or lovely, which the sacred past / In truth or fable consecrates,” he leaves his family home to “seek strange truths in undiscovered lands.”⁶¹⁰ Read alongside the scathing critique of master subject formation in *Queen Mab*, this educational program undergone by the young poet should give us pause. Because of this “education” in repudiating the mother-nature, the shadowy female is incorporated via identification within the masculine ego and so “[h]e like her shadow” pursues “Nature’s most secret steps.”⁶¹¹ Unlike the Visionary Poet, the “wild antelope,” who “suspend[s] / Her timid steps to gaze upon a form / More graceful than her own,” recognizes the possibility that the radically other is potentially *more* beautiful.⁶¹² In contradistinction, the youth is hermetically sealed within the self, unable to perceive and unwilling to acknowledge the power of matrixial trans-subjects and transformational objects on the constitution of his being. He is entirely blind to the affections of the Arab Maiden in his obsessive focus on

⁶⁰⁹ Shelley, *Alastor*, 75, lines 46-48.

⁶¹⁰ Shelley, *Alastor*, 75-76, lines 71-77.

⁶¹¹ Shelley, *Alastor*, 76, lines 81-82.

⁶¹² Shelley, *Alastor*, 76, lines 104-106.

uniting with the feminine-Beloved, an image of his own feminine self-love he forecloses and wishes to re-appropriate from nature. Unconsciously prompted by the Arab Maiden, he dreams of the lost object, the maternal aesthetic matrix:

Her voice was like the voice of his own soul
Heard in the calm of thought; its music long,
Like woven sounds of streams and breezes, held
His inmost sense suspended in its web
Of many-coloured woof and shifting hues.⁶¹³

This dream forces the Visionary Poet into an unwanted confrontation with the unconscious memory of the traumatic severance of the first bond. Indeed, the reader is told every “night the passion came, / Like the fierce fiend of a distempered dream / And shook him from rest.”⁶¹⁴ However, the youth adopts the destructive model of manic melancholia where he keeps “mute conference / With his still soul” “[w]hile day-light held / The sky.”⁶¹⁵ In other words, he refuses to acknowledge the lost object in order to preserve the image of self as invulnerable. He continues the self-serving path of life as a never-ending cycle of consuming and discarding objectified others. His mad journey to consolidate the self by idealizing and absorbing the other leads to his utter estrangement from the world of desiring beings and speeds up his rapid decay. The cottagers who care for him view him with “wondering awe” and the mountaineer sees him as a wholly unapproachable “spectral form,” while to youthful maidens he remains illegible as they “call him with false names.”⁶¹⁶ Ultimately, his race to find objects that purely signal his immortal soul causes him to detach

⁶¹³ Shelley, *Alastor*, 78, lines 153-157.

⁶¹⁴ Shelley, *Alastor*, 79, lines 224-226.

⁶¹⁵ Shelley, *Alastor*, 79, lines 222-224.

⁶¹⁶ Shelley, *Alastor*, 80, lines 256, 259, & 268.

from every object of the world until his entire being becomes vacant. “No sense, no motion, no divinity” fills his “wonderous frame” as once it did before custom corrupted his true self—when he existed as a matrixial trans-subject, a “fragile lute, on whose harmonious strings / The breath of heaven did wander—a bright stream / Once fed with many-voiced waves.”⁶¹⁷

Metramorphic Melancholia in Epipsychidion

Epipsychidion is Shelley’s cognitive anamnesis of his metramorphic quest, his psychic biography of nomadic co/in-habit(u)ated homeplaces: “The ‘Epipsychidion’ I cannot look at;...If you are anxious, however, to hear what I am and have been, it will tell you something thereof. It is an idealized history of my life and feelings.”⁶¹⁸ The poem’s opening stanzas invoke an image of the repudiated feminine barricaded within the iron walls of the impervious masculine ego that takes the various forms of convents, prisons, and other spaces/cells of confinement. The “Poor captive bird!” and “spirit-winged Heart!” is depicted as in revolt against such ungrieved, traumatic loss and so beats the “unfeeling bars with vain endeavor” until with “panting, wounded breast / [she] stains with dear blood [her] unmaternal nest!”⁶¹⁹ The blurring of the image of the repudiated feminine, the maternal aesthetic matrix, and the multiple beloveds within the poem captures the logic of the melancholic pursuit of the transformational object. The matrixial trans-subject consciously mourns and memorializes the primordial bond and one’s constitutional dependency on it while also searching for entities that “evok[e] an existential memory” and provide the sense of “a generative illusion of fitting with [the] object.”⁶²⁰

⁶¹⁷ Shelley, *Alastor*, 89, lines 665-669.

⁶¹⁸ Shelley qtd. in Introduction to *Epipsychidion*, 391.

⁶¹⁹ Shelley, *Epipsychidion*, 393, lines 5, 13, 14, & 17-18.

⁶²⁰ Bollas, “The Aesthetic Moment,” 40.

Shelley uses the metaphor of siblings to imagine the masculine I(s) coexisting with the foreclosed and repudiated non-I(s), the prenatal, pre-oedipal feminine self that resembles Emily, “Youth’s vision thus made perfect.”⁶²¹ For example, the speaker mournfully wishes “...we two had been twins of the same mother,” but nevertheless claims consanguinity with Emily: “How beyond refuge I am thine. Ah me! / I am not thine: I am a part of *thee*.”⁶²² Later he obscures the image of the sisterly, repudiated feminine with the maternal aesthetic matrix where the “glory of her being” warms cold air like an “unentangled mixture, made / By Love, of light and motion: one intense / Diffusion, one serene Omnipresence.”⁶²³ The island paradise to which the trans-subjective lovers retreat is characterized similarly to the “resonance chamber” associated with the maternal-matrix of early life as the “motion, odour, beam, and tone” of the wild landscape “echoes” the “antenatal dream” as if “a soul within the soul—they seem.”⁶²⁴ These lines reflect the aesthetic experience of the presubject and m/other as wit(h)ness-Things co/in-habit(u)ing in difference-in-co-emergence. The lines illustrate how such matrixial trans-subjects are undone and remade by one another. And Shelley gives credit where it is due. His multiple beloveds are the origins of his creative verse and he describes them in the terms of matrixial metamorphosis and the mother as transformational object:

And all their many-mingled influence blend,
 If equal, yet unlike, to one sweet end;—
 So ye, bright regents, with alternate sway

⁶²¹ Shelley, *Epipsychidion*, 394, line 42.

⁶²² Shelley, *Epipsychidion*, 394, lines 45 & 51-52.

⁶²³ Shelley, *Epipsychidion*, 395, lines 91-95.

⁶²⁴ Shelley, *Epipsychidion*, 406, lines 451 & 455-456.

Govern my sphere of being, night and day!⁶²⁵

Because the presubject internalizes the m/other as matrixial trans-subject and transformational object, whose “style of being with the infant...constitutes the phenomenology of her transformation of the infant’s being,” the speaker celebrates the constant impressionability of the human psyche to the influence of intimate bonds.⁶²⁶

Shelley explains that he realizes his failed relationships stem from his naïve pursuit of the repudiated feminine of his primordial self, a lesson the Visionary Poet of *Alastor* had to “die” to learn for a “later birth.”⁶²⁷ The mistake is conceived of as the pursuit of the “shadow of that idol” of his “thought” in “many mortal forms” at the expense of discarding the beautiful excess and self-other metamorphosing difference of those forms because of their failure to confirm an absolute correspondence between self and other.⁶²⁸ The poem is slightly deceptive in that the speaker claims to have finally come across the “Vision” he “had sought through grief and shame.”⁶²⁹ But this vision of perfect oneness, of a “spirit within two frames” and “one passion in twin-hearts, which grows and grew, / ‘Till like two meteors of expanding flame, / Those spheres instinct with it become the same,” shifts back into an image of entangled but discrete trans-subjects that in their difference-in-co-emergence are able to “Touch, mingle, are transfigured; ever still / Burning, yet ever inconsumable.”⁶³⁰ *Epipsychidion* ends with the speaker’s annihilation because language fails to capture the metamorphic desire for unbecoming in difference-in-co-emergence in the passageway to newbornness: “The winged words on which my soul would pierce / Into the

⁶²⁵ Shelley, *Epipsychidion*, 402, lines 358-361.

⁶²⁶ Bollas, “The Aesthetic Moment,” 42.

⁶²⁷ Shelley, *Epipsychidion*, 397, line 188.

⁶²⁸ Shelley, *Epipsychidion*, 399, lines 267.

⁶²⁹ Shelley, *Epipsychidion*, 401, line 322.

⁶³⁰ Shelley, *Epipsychidion*, 407, lines 574-579.

height of love's rare Universe / Are chains of lead around its flight of fire."⁶³¹ The beloved's erotic aerials of the psyche send the self into the matrixial realm of non-life where he undergoes radical transformation and re-emerges from the ephemeral union in newbornness: "I pant, I sink, I tremble, I expire."⁶³² His propulsion towards monogamy with the image of the repudiated feminine functions to highlight its destructiveness. At the same time, the poem celebrates the acknowledgement of original loss as a method for propelling unions and helping one acknowledge the precarious and deep restructuring of one's being energized by bonds between trans-subjects who are formed "as notes of music are, / For one another, though dissimilar; / Such difference without discord."⁶³³

Thus, Shelley speculates that a promiscuous vulnerability and openness to multiple, simultaneous connections might effect positive change in the self and world: "Love is like understanding, that grows bright, / Gazing on many truths."⁶³⁴ For Shelley, matrixial Eros is like light that reflects "from a thousand prisms and mirrors" and "fills / The Universe with glorious beams, and kills / Error, the worm, with many a sun-like arrow."⁶³⁵ Shelley's argument is that if one shares as much of their "pleasure and love and thought" with as many non/human others as they can, then sorrow might be spared and unknown pleasures gained.⁶³⁶ This maxim is the "deep well" and "eternal law" of those "whose strife / Tills for the promise of a later birth / The wilderness of this Elysian earth."⁶³⁷ Shelley does not say that this eternal law leads to a heavenly afterlife. He says that following the trail of matrixial

⁶³¹ Shelley, *Epipsychidion*, 407, lines 587-589.

⁶³² Shelley, *Epipsychidion*, 407, line 591.

⁶³³ Shelley, *Epipsychidion*, 396, line 142-144.

⁶³⁴ Shelley, *Epipsychidion*, 397, lines 163-164.

⁶³⁵ Shelley, *Epipsychidion*, 397, lines 166-168.

⁶³⁶ Shelley, *Epipsychidion*, 397, lines 180-183.

⁶³⁷ Shelley, *Epipsychidion*, 397, lines 187-189.

law amounts to a “later birth” in the wilderness of this Elysian earth. These lines associate light and roaming Eros with a matrixial gaze that touches and desires trans-subjects into “ethically wit(h)nessing” the other in “compassionate hospitality.” Shelley’s wild erotic wondering in *Epispsychidion* suggests an epistemic-analytic style and art for eternal unbecoming in the passageway to newborn-ness. He adopts a melancholic stance to mournfully discern the trace left by the severance of former attachments. This allows him to identify and sympathize with a world of difference to potentially promote a utopian increase in the pleasurable forms of diverse communities.

This melancholic relationship to others resonates with Walter Benjamin’s theory of the ethical historicist and is like the history of the oppressed that Queen Mab reads from recollections of trauma and the “secrets of the immeasurable past” excavated by the “stern, unflattering chroniclers” of “unfailing consciences.”⁶³⁸ She tells Ianthe she will not narrate history in a mode of “retributive memory” nor in the mood of the “extatic and exulting throb” of the punishing and self-righteous victor.⁶³⁹ Instead, she conceives of nature as a record of the past and a melancholic method for memorializing traumatic histories and staying with the dead. This position parallels Shelley’s argument against the illusion of total divestment and renunciation of lost objects as fully substitutable by new desire-objects. Like Queen Mab suggests of nature and human culture, Shelley understands the self as “not only haunted but *constituted* by the past: literally built of ruins and rejections.”⁶⁴⁰ Shelley aims to provoke ethical responsibility by bringing to the foreground and encouraging further instantiations of the ways in which we creatively and erotically undo and are undone by

⁶³⁸ Shelley, *Queen Mab*, 21, Part I, lines 169-171.

⁶³⁹ Shelley, *Queen Mab*, 21, Part I, lines 174 & 176.

⁶⁴⁰ Mortimer-Sandilands, “Melancholy Natures,” 340.

others in our pursuit for reciprocal transformation. In the same way, Benjamin asks that the ethically motivated historian break from the tendency to empathize with the victor, a tendency he claims is motivated by trying to avoid the “despai[r] of grasping and holding the genuine historical image as it flares up briefly.”⁶⁴¹ Similar to the central argument of Shelley’s “Ozymandias,” Benjamin suggests that giving up this identification will compel the historian to refuse to characterize the “spoils” and forms “lying prostrate” won by “barbarism” as “cultural treasures,” as the uniform march of progress.⁶⁴²

In psychoanalytical terms, indulging in manic melancholia and substitution as methods for shoring up a false sense of psychic stability and integrity is collectively expressed as avoidant histories of linear progress. Both types of progress narrative promote deceptive fantasies of invulnerable, atomistic selfhood in denial of painfully felt and constitutional dependencies. Instead, like Queen Mab asks of Ianthe and Shelley asks of the reader, Benjamin suggests that minoritarian and master subjects assume the posture of the Angelus Novus and recognize that both the private self and “civilization” are “catastrophe[s] which kee[p] piling wreckage upon wreckage.”⁶⁴³ Indeed, the Spirit of Ianthe is described as “stand[ing] / High on an isolated pinnacle; / The flood of ages combating below.”⁶⁴⁴ From the “just perspective” she can see the foreclosed, ungrievable traumas that constitute the “events / Of old” that the victor mislabeled as “wondrous times.”⁶⁴⁵ In contrast, the imperial (paranoid/manic) master subject’s history is the version that “dim tradition... / Teaches the

⁶⁴¹ Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 199.

⁶⁴² Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 200.

⁶⁴³ Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 201.

⁶⁴⁴ Shelley, *Queen Mab*, 29, Part II, lines 252-254.

⁶⁴⁵ Shelley, *Queen Mab*, 29, Part II, lines 246-247.

credulous vulgar.”⁶⁴⁶ Both authors ask that minoritarian and master subjects “stay” with and “awaken the dead,” to recognize the ways in which suppressed loss organizes the core of being, propels desire, and structures the world in the terms of power.⁶⁴⁷ The erotic arials of the psyche emitted from such poetics might induce minoritarian and master subjects to wit(h)ness when Queen Mab orders time to “unfold the brooding pinion” of his gloom to “render thou up thy half-devoured babes,” to “Tear thou that gloomy shroud” that veils “Where millions lie lulled to their portioned sleep.”⁶⁴⁸

Shelley’s model of psychic melancholy calls for channeling the eternal search for the lost (transformational) object into the perpetual collision with other desiring beings. This collision results in a kind of mutual transformation that transcends given existential territories of both self and other. In the same way, Benjamin’s melancholy historical method (which resembles Shelley’s in *Queen Mab*) involves excavating the archeological wastes of the “progressive” narrative of modernity in order to “blast a specific era out of the homogenous course of history,” which has the effect of “blasting” the “specific life” or “lifework” of a marginalized other out of the elided past to give witness to, honor, and preserve.⁶⁴⁹ Similarly, melancholic “transformational-object seeking is an endless memorial search for something in the future that rests in the past” but which doesn’t merely reproduce the past.⁶⁵⁰ Rather, when one feels a “close enough” symmetry with another in the present based on the way that being resonates with the m/other’s aesthetic alongside an understanding of the interaction with the desire-object as necessarily involving the joyful

⁶⁴⁶ Shelley, *Queen Mab*, 29, Part II, lines 248-249.

⁶⁴⁷ Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 201.

⁶⁴⁸ Shelley, *Queen Mab*, 29, Part VIII, lines 4-5 & 7-9.

⁶⁴⁹ Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 207.

⁶⁵⁰ Bollas, “The Aesthetic Moment,” 42.

transformation of self, both the constitution and conditions of self and other metamorphose to forever change future intersubjective relations of “later birth.” In Benjamin’s terms, once the loss, trauma, or suppressed era’s course is plotted and “re-conditioned” or re-translated in terms anachronistic to its conditions of emergence, the field of conditions through which one might emerge change (a new context is created) thus producing the potential for new movements from which new entities might emerge. The rehearsal of the past’s deeply traumatic losses in *Queen Mab*, the melancholic refusal to forget the repudiated feminine, and the desire for uncannily familiar objects of radical difference in *Epipsychidion*, reach out with erotic aeries of the psyche to open the possibility of Shelley’s fantasy of a “happy Earth! reality of Heaven!”⁶⁵¹

⁶⁵¹ Shelley, *Queen Mab*, 29, Part IX, line 1.

Chapter 4. H. Rider Haggard's *She* and the Orientalized Black Feminine Sublime

In Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) Victor warns Walton about the dangers of sublime cosmopolitan knowledges and imperial ambitions: "Learn from me, if not by my precepts, at least by my example, how dangerous is the acquirement of knowledge and how much happier that man is who believes his native town to be the world, than he who aspires to become greater than his nature will allow."⁶⁵² In *Frankenstein* Shelley critiques the destructiveness undergirding the Promethean illusions of the perfectibility of human sensibilities and social systems. Shelley partly identifies this destructiveness in radical norms that simultaneously devalue domestic tranquility and threaten traditional gendered securities. She compares the implications of the viral replication of Promethean ideology to the nightmare scenario Victor suggests would occur if his Creature were to receive a mate: "Even if they were to leave Europe, and inhabit the deserts of the new world, yet one of the first results of those sympathies for which the daemon thirsted would be children, and a race of devils would be propagated upon the earth, who might make the very existence of the species of man a condition precarious and full of terror."⁶⁵³ The radical social politics of Promethean liberation threaten the traditional comforts of the family of Man.

But Shelley also suggests that Promethean liberation is a false promise because the Promethean subject only accepts into his "circle of care" those minoritarian subjects who he anticipates will supply him a clear advantage of some kind. For example, Safie, an Orientalized other whose mother was an enslaved "Christian Arab," is welcomed and educated into the De Lacey household because her "angelic beauty" is a service to Felix. In contrast, the "implicitly Black creature" is excluded because of his perceived threat to the

⁶⁵² Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 32.

⁶⁵³ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 119.

“very existence of the species of man.”⁶⁵⁴ The Promethean promise of liberation to minoritarian subjects is that they undergo “education” to simply assimilate into dominant structures and silently metabolize traumatic discoveries alone. Shelley expands her critique of Romantic ideology in *The Last Man* (1826) by equating it to a highly contagious African-originating plague that enters the narrative after the Orientalized Evadne curses her lover Raymond, an occidental warrior. The implicit critiques of the dangers of wandering too far from home in *Frankenstein* and *The Last Man* are taken up and distorted with explicitly xenophobic discourse in H. Rider Haggard’s African quest romance *She* (1886) in his construction of the Orientalized Black feminine sublime figure of Ayesha, an Arabian sorceress: “The terrible *She* had evidently made up her mind to go to England, and it made me absolutely shudder to think what would be the result of her arrival there.”⁶⁵⁵ Ayesha is a disturbing construct from Haggard’s anti-Black, misogynist imagination that combines Shelley’s sublime Creature, Safie, and her feminized, Orientalized, and “black(ened)” plague. In the context of Victorian anxieties over reverse-colonization, Haggard deploys the ethical and psychosocial problematics of imperial sublime aesthetics that reanimate the developmental stages of “master identity” subject formation under western liberal humanist patriarchies to protect against the threat of these sublime m/other natures.

Haggard was eager to “connect his story-telling to romantic...conceptualizations of childhood, imagination and buried layers of the psyche.”⁶⁵⁶ Haggard’s novel, understood as the “wild invention” of a speculative “romancer,” also suggests that the Romantic sublime has a scope of influence that is broader than Victorian adventure narratives, perhaps forming

⁶⁵⁴ Julie A. Carlson, “Just Friends? *Frankenstein* and the Friend to Come,” *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 41, no. 3 (2019): 295; Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 119.

⁶⁵⁵ Haggard, *She*, 255.

⁶⁵⁶ Patrick Brantlinger, “Introduction,” *She* (New York: Penguin Group, 2004), xviii.

a part of the early history of science fiction and speculative fantasy alongside Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.⁶⁵⁷ Similarly, P.B. Shelley's presentation in *Alastor* of the eroticized "Arab maiden" and a "protagonist who journeys farther and farther east, from Greece onward to Jerusalem and then India...also prefigures story lines that Victorian adventure novels would construct for their empire-building heroes."⁶⁵⁸ The biophobic, anti-Black, and "misogynistic traits of *She* and more generally of imperialist adventure fiction also characterize much science fiction with its fantasies about alien invaders and the exploration and conquest of outer space."⁶⁵⁹ So, on one level, there is an apparent likeness between both Wordsworth's manic sublime poetics and P.B. Shelley's solitary melancholy wandering discussed in the previous chapter, and the dark imperialistic wish-fulfillment fantasies in *She* that function as sublime compensations for what "Haggard felt he had lost, or failed to discover, during his five years in South Africa."⁶⁶⁰ On another level, those very "porno-tropic" fantasies of the dreadful eternal feminine archetype and the "pioneering" discovery of lost kingdoms in the interior of Africa are easily transfigured into the "white boys' club" genres of science fiction and fantasy with their romantic invasions of other planets populated by voluptuous female forms in skin-tight clothing.⁶⁶¹

Haggard's *She* combines these elements of scientific, psychic, and political fantasy in the first-person narration of Cambridge professor Horace Holly's journey with his

⁶⁵⁷ Haggard, *She*, 302.

⁶⁵⁸ Stephen Greenblatt and Deidre Shauna Lynch, "Introduction" to *Alastor; or, The Spirit of Solitude, The Norton Anthology of English Literature, Volume D: The Romantic Period* 10th ed., eds., Stephen Greenblatt and Deidre Shauna Lynch (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2018), 768.

⁶⁵⁹ Brantlinger, "Introduction," xxvi-xxvii.

⁶⁶⁰ Brantlinger, "Introduction," xxii.

⁶⁶¹ For more on the term "porno-tropic" as Anne McClintock's formulation for describing the imperial imagination vis-à-vis the colonized other see her book *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 1995).

adopted son Leo Vincey into the interior of Africa to find a purportedly “white sorceress living in the heart of an African swamp.”⁶⁶² During his adventure, Holly discovers the “Amahagger” tribe and their Middle Eastern, dictator-queen Ayesha who he experiences as both overwhelmingly desirable and terrifying.⁶⁶³ For Holly’s anti-Black imagination, the Amahagger represent a “curious mingling of races” as descendants of the Zulu- and Arabic-speaking peoples.⁶⁶⁴ Later he learns that Ayesha became immortal by bathing in a magical, quasi-evolutionary “Fountain and Heart of Life” surrounded by the ruins of the lost subterranean civilization Kôr that sits at the heart of a volcano. Ayesha is convinced that Leo is her Greek lover Kallikrates reincarnated, and guides them to the pillar of fire to give Leo immortality. The novel ends when she dies after entering the fire a second time in an effort to prove to Leo it will not destroy him.

Haggard’s *She* is illuminating as a class of Victorian literature composed during the span of the *fin-de-siècle* that expresses myriad racist anxieties of patriarchal British society, especially those concerned with miscegenation between colonial subjects and the threat of home-returning adventurers contaminated by the despotic principles and “effeminate” habits of the Black global south.⁶⁶⁵ The narrative also reflects the period’s misogynistic anxiety that the less rigid gender and class boundaries permitted in the colonies would blow back upon the metropolis and ideologically influence Britain in ways contrary to the middle-class status quo.⁶⁶⁶ For example, many conservatives of the period believed that exposure to the

⁶⁶² Haggard, *She*, 184.

⁶⁶³ Haggard, *She*, 184.

⁶⁶⁴ Haggard, *She*, 184.

⁶⁶⁵ Terence Rodgers, “Restless Desire: Rider Haggard, Orientalism, and the New Woman,” *Women: A Cultural Review*, 10, no. 1 (1999): 37.

⁶⁶⁶ Nan H. Dreher, “Redundancy and Emigration: The ‘Woman Question’ in Mid-Victorian Britain,” *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 26, no. 1 (1993): 6.

unrestrained “New Woman” as well as to “effeminate” Eastern and African cultures abroad embodied “forces capable not only of undermining patriarchy and empire, but of leading humanity” to a state of utter ruination.⁶⁶⁷ Plagued by fear, the Victorian imperial subject thought that “the proper response to the threat of being absorbed” by threatening otherness “was to eliminate the threat” via domination and assimilation.⁶⁶⁸ The Victorian inheritance of dualistic logic that associates subordinated people with the devalued realm of “nature” and white men with rationality, superiority, and personhood further enabled an imperial ideology of domination and assimilation that sees and justifies the land and the feminine body of other natures as the consumable property of empire. The British empire, controlling this anti-Black discourse of human animalization, was able to “blacken,” animalize, and/or feminize any given human group for the purposes of threat containment and to justify their exploitation, for the “imperial conquest of the globe found both its shaping figure and its political sanction in the prior subordination of women as a category of nature.”⁶⁶⁹ While Ayesha is an Arabian sorceress, her demise clearly shows how her unique cultural differences are unrecognized by the imperial subject who lumps all other natures into an undifferentiated mass according to personal and national exigencies because he is “a staunch believer...in the inferiority of the ‘dark races’ of the world compared to the ‘white race,’ and especially the English ‘race.’”⁶⁷⁰ The figure of Ayesha shows how one’s status as human is provisional, that anti-Black racialization and “dehumanization by means of the discursive

⁶⁶⁷ Rodgers, “Restless desire,” 37.

⁶⁶⁸ Joseph W. Lew, “The plague of imperial desire: Montesquieu, Gibbon, Brougham, and Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man*,” *Romanticism and Colonialism: Writing and Empire, 1780-1830*, eds. Tim Fulford and Peter J. Kitson (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 272.

⁶⁶⁹ McClintock, *Imperial*, 24.

⁶⁷⁰ Bratlinger, “Introduction,” xiii.

mechanism of ‘animalization’ will be readily available for deployment against *whatever* body happens to fall outside the ethnocentric ‘we.’”⁶⁷¹

As a product of the turmoil of colliding worlds and the resulting confusion of negotiating often incommensurable values, H. Rider Haggard’s *She* stresses the necessity for imperial men to secure their psychological and cultural integrity against all exotic and “deviant” other natures. Haggard’s text serves as a kind of misogynist’s “survival manual” and anti-Black conduct guide of the various disciplinary rituals necessary to restore the sense of superiority/masculine virility (i.e., the “authentic,” entitled humanity) and thereby effectively dominate and rule over wild natures. Unlike Percy Shelley and, as we will see, Jemisin’s liberatory fantasies of the “matrixial” undercommons that also deploy the imagery of volcano and mountain interiority, Haggard’s *She* demonstrates Darieck Scott’s characterization of the racial fantasy of the status quo that “secures material practices of economic exploitation and anchors psychic processes of differentiation and identification; it is a political tool of subjugation par excellence, ... seductively demanding that all individuals and collectives take up—and *believe*—racialized terms of self-definition as the price of social belonging and of economic as well as psychic well-being.”⁶⁷² For example, Haggard’s particular use of the imperial sublime is meant to rejuvenate the Victorian imperial subject’s sense of individual power and superiority as well as rekindle nationalistic identifications and investments in the British Empire. Haggard’s sublime method of national virilization stages confrontations between his master-subject protagonist and alienating “natural powers” that then transform into the direct violent domination of wild natures followed by his imagined

⁶⁷¹ Cary Wolfe, *Before the Law: Humans and Other Animals in a Biopolitical Frame* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 21.

⁶⁷² Scott, *Keeping It Unreal*, 12.

spiritual transcendence over the subdued material realm. These rituals of domination and fantasized transcendence over wild natures that occur throughout the narrative culminate when the novel's immortal dictator-queen Ayesha guides Holly to the Pillar of Fire and upon entering a second time "perishes in the mysterious subterranean fire."⁶⁷³

But prior to Ayesha's destruction, these rituals include, first, apprehending the world through the aesthetics of the imperial sublime also referred to by feminist critics as the transcendental "masculine" sublime. The imperial use of the sublime aesthetic in Haggard's novel *She* functions as indoctrinating propaganda for Victorian subjects. This cultural transmission through sublime aesthetics works "as an allegory of the construction of the patriarchal...subject, a self that maintains its borders by subordinating difference and by appropriating rather than identifying with that which presents itself as other."⁶⁷⁴

Strategically deploying the aesthetics of the sublime for imperial-minding, citizen-forming purposes involves the depiction of a situation in which a threatening nature strikes one with a humbling sense of fear and awe over the insignificance and smallness of "man." However, the subject quickly recovers from this humiliating experience in his desire to control wild natures through a form of transcendence in which the "subject's mind and/or imagination is exalted above nature, transcending anything it encounters in the material world."⁶⁷⁵ This sublime aesthetic teaches the budding contributors to empire that the proper qualities of the master subject are to dominate other natures through transactional encounters of control and transcendence.

⁶⁷³ Sigmund Freud qtd. in Brantlinger, "Introduction," *She* (New York: Penguin Group, 2004), xvii.

⁶⁷⁴ Barbara Claire Freeman, *The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Women's Fiction* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), 4.

⁶⁷⁵ Louise Economides, "'Mont Blanc' and the Sublimity of Materiality," *Cultural Critique*, no. 61 (2005): 89.

The second component of the virilization ritual in the novel *She* is for the master subject to cultivate skills in the technological domination of animals by hunting with machine weapons, which work in the aesthetic dimension of the sublime to “symbolize man’s combat with nature—a nature that is constantly threatening to engulf him from without and from within.”⁶⁷⁶ Although free will and technological domination are not always the same thing, because their logics overlap this performance of the “submission of brute nature to man’s free will” effectively reenacts the masculine British subject’s “‘breaking away’ from a natural state to which the animal remains prisoner.”⁶⁷⁷ The imperial subject’s hunting and killing of animal bodies using the technological weaponry of empire works to secure the boundaries between self and other, mind and body, masculinized human and feminized, animalized, and racialized nonhuman other, for the machine is the fetishized mark of progress for industrial empires. For the imperial mind, technology is the empirical light of rational society, a sublimation and symbol of humanity’s domination over and control of dark, wild natures. The hunting rituals described in the aesthetics of the imperial sublime also function to awaken in the masculine subject a supremacist sense of belonging to the ethereal realm of Plato.

H. Rider Haggard’s *She* gives an account of the imperial mind’s linked anxieties about the emasculating corruption of the pure British empire by the wild nature of the feminized, “Eastern” despot and “her” supposedly depraved culture, as well as the contagion of the transgressive New Woman. Both of these figures created by the anxious imperial mind culminate in the sublimely threatening form of “She-who-must-be-obeyed,” Ayesha,

⁶⁷⁶ Alain Renaut qtd. in Luc Ferry, *The New Ecological Order* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 51.

⁶⁷⁷ Ferry, *The New*, 51.

who then must be overcome to restore the “natural” order of western white male supremacy. The images of protagonist and Cambridge professor Holly’s dominating responses to wild natures in the novel significantly resemble the imperial (manic/paranoid) sublime that traces a narrative of desire to master, appropriate, and colonize other natures by assimilating threatening others who signify the unruly difference of the “black *mater(nal)*” into the domesticated terms that conform to his own needs. The aesthetics of the sublime represent the imperial mind’s socialized compulsion to force alterity into orderly colonized objects of pleasure and exploitation for the master identity. Ayesha’s destruction is crucial to the success of the text’s didactic admonitions against effeminizing otherness and marks the wish for an ultimate triumph of masculine, imperial authority. For the master subject, the total annihilation of wild nature is (at least) symbolically necessary for the preservation of traditional gender divisions, racial hierarchy, and the integrity of the imperial metropolis. In sum, H. Rider Haggard’s *She* employs the dominating and transcending impulses of the imperial sublime aesthetic (which mirror and originate from masculine psychosocial development under patriarchal society that provokes violent self/other interrelations) in his description of the imperial subject’s attempts to secure a sense of colonial superiority and power in the face of radically disorienting, “feminine” alterity or rather Black *mater(nal)ity*.

However, despite Haggard’s overall anti-Black, androcentric project of subduing the threat of the New Woman, as well as societies and people from Africa, the Middle East, and wild nature in general, aspects of Ayesha’s symbolic character lend themselves to subversive readings. For example, the very “inconsistencies” of the novel speak to constructed traces of the foreclosed “other” such as Holly’s “animal” intellectuality and his ward Leo Vincey’s physique that resembles the “feminine” corporeality of a Hellenistic boy.

Additionally, Ayesha's sublime and beautiful androgyny alongside her unique skillset in the usually incommensurable paradigms of magic and science complicate any straightforward reading of the novel's purported moral and political purposes. These composite figures harbor a disruptive capacity and reflect the repressed desire of "black *mater*(nal)" subjective potentialities left in the liberal monohumanist's imperial unconscious. Whether it is Haggard's intention or not, the character of Ayesha, in particular, operates in Jackson's terms as a form of "*black mater* [that] holds the potential to transform the terms of reality and feeling, therefore rewriting the conditions of possibility" (my emphasis).⁶⁷⁸

Ayesha is an excellent example of how imperial representations are conspicuous for their almost palpable anxieties regarding race, species, and gender, and how those anxieties betray the fact that the imperial "project of pure division" is weakly constructed on a pure "colonial fantasy" and not on any essential or empirical aspect of human being or belonging.⁶⁷⁹ Such anxieties function as a symptom of the uncertain/insecure foundations upon which the imperial worldview and power are fabricated:

...[A]s an enabling condition of an imperial Western humanist conception of the world as such, the black *mater*(nal) marks the discursive-material trace effects and foreclosures of the dialectics of hegemonic common sense and that the anxieties stimulated by related signifiers, such as the black(ened) maternal image, voice, and lifeworld, allude to the latent symbolic-material capacities of the black mater, as mater, as matter, to destabilize or even

⁶⁷⁸ Jackson, *Becoming Human*, 39.

⁶⁷⁹ Leela Gandhi, *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-de-Siècle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2006), 4.

rupture the reigning order of representation that grounds the thought-world relation.⁶⁸⁰

In the very way Jackson describes above, the novel *She*, despite the narrative's disciplinary intentions, subversively undoes the naturalized image of imperial ontological stratifications. Ayesha's identity functions as a kind of ironic image of human hybridity that promotes the rejection of mind/body (human/racialized animal) dualism in favor of human individuals developing a composite of polymorphously "perverse" traits, yet unthought and unseen, and a fluency in the language of the wild earth. This is not to suggest that the figure of Ayesha does not reflect colonialist, racist mindsets or problematic gender politics. In fact, her heterogeneity is better understood as highlighting the way "colonizer and colonized mutate unawares but inexorably into each other in the countless hybrid and interstitial sites of imperial antagonism."⁶⁸¹

Hence, her character *foregrounds* the problems of unqualified liberatory models of subjectivity that are based on combinations or "unifications" of the binary oppositions of liberal humanism. Arguably, such hybrid figures do not "resolve the problem" of imperial binarism and its inhumane politics because they remain dependent on the grammar and infrastructure of empire. Additionally, "whole" figures made of unified western value-hierarchical dualisms reveal how their "character as it stands is not an independently constituted nature, but equally represents a distortion. It is a reflection in the dualistic mirror of the master's character and culture."⁶⁸² Contrary to what might have been Haggard's intention, the antithetical signifiers that circle around the character Ayesha undermine his

⁶⁸⁰ Jackson, *Becoming Human*, 39.

⁶⁸¹ Gandhi, *Affective*, 3.

⁶⁸² Plumwood, *Feminism*, 32.

imperial obsession with pure ontological divisions by highlighting the artificiality of the state machine, and in so doing point toward the *possibility* of more earth-embedded and less anti-Black, heteronormative modes of being, becoming, and belonging.

The Imperial Sublime of Big-Game Hunting in She

Literary critic Madhudaya Sinha has also noted the role of hunting in the “taming and humbling of the vast African landscape” in her larger study of how the novel promotes homosocial conservatism during the height of Victorian imperialism.⁶⁸³ And according to Andrew Libby’s study “The Aesthetics of Adventure,” the sublime readily serves as a “ready-made aesthetic” category to use in “pro-imperialist adventure narratives” that “sanction the ideology of British empire-building.”⁶⁸⁴ The developmental path followed by the master subject under anti-Black, anti-woman patriarchal socialization manifests in and reproduces itself through the aesthetics of the sublime which effectively transmits imperial culture and patriarchal domination. Significantly, Haggard represents Holly’s hunt for destabilizing and threatening wild natures in terms of the imperial and masculine sublime. Holly repeatedly experiences a momentary incapacitation or inability to express his confrontation with the perceived surplus of a threatening other nature that is often either nonhuman and/or feminine. But each iteration of paralysis metamorphoses into a representation of otherness distinct for its self-serving terms of transcendental superiority, which mirrors the assimilating, incorporating psychic impulses.

By way of introduction to this section, the following example illustrates the above claim that the narrative is structured by a repeating pattern wherein scenes of the “master

⁶⁸³ Madhudaya Sinha, “Triangular Erotics: The Politics of Masculinity, Imperialism and Big-Game Hunting in Rider Haggard’s *She*,” *Critical Survey*, 20, no. 3 (2008): 33.

⁶⁸⁴ Andrew Libby, “The Aesthetics of Adventure: The Dark Sublime and the Rise of the Colonial Anti-Hero,” *Literature Resource Center*.

subject's" incapacitation by powerful women and m/other natures transition into depictions of compensatory acts of technological domination and ideological transcendence over those same perceived threats. For example, the matrilineal culture of the indigenous people in the novel is first represented in terms of pure astonishment, then in terms of horror as Holly discovers the cannibalistic underside of the "diabolical" women whose "fierce eyes" and "caressing was so snake-like."⁶⁸⁵ Holly, who self-identifies as "a bit of a misogynist [sic]," first describes the matrilineal culture and customs of the Amhagger as an "extraordinary" mystery.⁶⁸⁶ He is especially alarmed and disoriented by the following matrilineal kinship principles:

[W]omen among the Amhagger are not only upon terms of perfect equality with the men, but are not held to them by any binding ties. Descent is traced only through the line of the mother, and while individuals are as proud of a long and superior female ancestry as we are of our families in Europe, they never pay attention to, or even acknowledge, any man as their father, even when their male parentage is perfectly well known.⁶⁸⁷

This description is followed by a disturbing scene in which the "*people who place pots upon the heads of strangers*" supposedly attempt to cannibalize the members of Holly's exploration party.⁶⁸⁸ Holly's fearful paralysis in response to what he perceives as the surplus power of the threatening m/other is quickly overcome by two key actions of overcompensating domination. Holly murders both the threatening m/other and the part of the "self" vulnerable to her power: "The heavy bullet from my pistol had driven through the

⁶⁸⁵ Haggard, *She*, 104-105.

⁶⁸⁶ Haggard, *She*, 87 & 93.

⁶⁸⁷ Haggard, *She*, 87.

⁶⁸⁸ Haggard, *She*, 104

bodies of both, at once striking down the murdress [sic], and saving her victim from a death a hundred times more horrible. It was an awful and yet a most merciful accident.”⁶⁸⁹

Furthermore, he is comforted by a tribal leader who reassures Holly that, although “women do what they please” and are “worship[ped],” once Amhagger women become “unbearable” the men “rise” and “kill the old ones as an example to the young ones, and to show them that we are the strongest.”⁶⁹⁰ In fact, the tribal leader Billali reports that “[m]y poor wife was killed in that way...but to tell thee the truth, my son, life has been happier since, for my age protects me from the young ones.”⁶⁹¹ Holly affirmatively summarizes Billali’s paternalistic and misogynistic position on women in the following hyper-separating and self-serving terms: “[T]hou hast found thy position one of greater freedom and less responsibility.”⁶⁹²

Once this “principle” of masculine superiority is reasserted, the adventure narrative can continue by transitioning into a disquieting depiction of nature. Holly follows a “winding and devious path” into the wilderness and struggles to maintain self-other, human-animal distinctions: “Presently the path, at any rate to our unaccustomed eyes, grew so faint as to be almost indistinguishable from those made by the aquatic beasts and birds, and it is to this day a mystery to me how our bearers found their way across the marshes.”⁶⁹³ But neither the species of “enormous iguana” or “hideous black water-snake” nor the “extraordinary roaring and alarming sound produced by hundreds of snipe” can deter Holly from his defensive recourse to the discourse of the transcendental sublime.⁶⁹⁴ Once camped for the night, Holly becomes “drunk” on the “Infinite” and “glorious sight” of the “immense

⁶⁸⁹ Haggard, *She*, 105.

⁶⁹⁰ Haggard, *She*, 118.

⁶⁹¹ Haggard, *She*, 118.

⁶⁹² Haggard, *She*, 119.

⁶⁹³ Haggard, *She*, 119-120.

⁶⁹⁴ Haggard, *She*, 120-121.

arch of heaven” “by which man might well measure his own insignificance!”⁶⁹⁵ And according to the concluding movement of the hypocritical illogic of the sublime, to the inverse degree by which such a “man” self-judges as insignificant vis-à-vis the paternal “Almighty,” he is superior to women, m/others, and nature.⁶⁹⁶

As discussed in the previous chapter, the imperial (manic/paranoid) sublime shares many qualities with the aesthetic theories of the sublime and beautiful promulgated by Kant and Burke. In her book *The Feminine Sublime*, Barbara Claire Freeman describes the central moment of the masculine sublime as the “self’s newly enhanced sense of identity; a will to power drives its style, a mode that establishes and maintains the self’s domination over its objects of rapture” (3). The experience of the sublime basically begins in a desire to control an alienating and threatening wild nature with the hope that reason will transform “awe or fear into an epiphany of spiritual self-awareness and imaginative empowerment.”⁶⁹⁷ Both Kant and Burke define the sublime experience as a terrifying encounter with a powerful object of nature that provokes a temporary and pained sense of physical vulnerability that overwhelms the authority of the self. Sublime phenomena, which inspire a negative pleasure according to Burke, are gloomy and vast in scale like dark caves, or in *She*, Kôr’s ancient ruins. Such phenomena can be uncomfortably obscure like Ayesha’s “Oriental, despotic veil” or have a preternatural loudness like the cries of animals.

Kant’s descriptions of the sublime differ from Burke’s in that he emphasizes the transcendental element of the experience. Kant describes a situation in which one’s imagination attempts to comprehend the entity whose sheer expansive terror exceeds the

⁶⁹⁵ Haggard, *She*, 121.

⁶⁹⁶ Haggard, *She*, 121.

⁶⁹⁷ John S. Pipkin, “The Material Sublime of Women Romantic Poets,” *Studies in English Literature*, 38, no. 4 (1998): 600.

imagination's grasp and causes it to break down: "As a signifier of excess, the sublime shows moments" when the human mind's imagination is "inadequate for understanding the world."⁶⁹⁸ The next moment however, the mind triumphs by deploying and identifying with the law of reason, which exercises its superior ability allowing for a "heightened lucidity" that "resists the blocking source by representing the very inability to represent the sublime 'object'; it thereby achieves supremacy over an excess that resists its powers."⁶⁹⁹ For instance, the supposedly intimidating number of stars overwhelms the imagination but the faculty of reason can represent this magnitude in the concept of "infinity." Ultimately, "reason's function is to comprehend a totality that the imagination cannot itself represent, and thereby discloses a superiority over nature."⁷⁰⁰

Holly's encounters with African animals, his contemplation of the vast landscapes and night sky, and finally his encounter with Ayesha all follow the trajectory of sublime aesthetics marked first by vulnerability, which is then followed by domination, colonizing assimilation, and a fresh assertion of "masculine" selfhood and identification with the immaterial/transcendent realm of the law of the Father. For example, after Holly, Leo (Holly's adopted son given to him by his dying colleague Vincey), and Mahomed (the only deckhand to survive the storm the group encounters at the beginning of their journey) miraculously escape their sinking ship and board their small emergency vessel, they sail "merrily up" an African river greeted by sensational sublime-inducing panoramic views of foreboding swamps and animals such as hippopotami and strange wild geese. Holly's descriptions of the natural world match the qualities of sublime objects as described by

⁶⁹⁸ Libby, "The Aesthetics of Adventure."

⁶⁹⁹ Freeman, *The Feminine Sublime*, 3.

⁷⁰⁰ Freeman, *The Feminine Sublime*, 71.

Burke. In one of several definitions, Burke describes the sublime as “whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror.”⁷⁰¹ The sublime is “productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling,” which is terror for Burke, and “[w]hen danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are, delightful.”⁷⁰² Such is the case when one of Holly’s companions experiences in intolerable proximity to his “head” the “horrible and incredible” “red-hot pot” as opposed to the “very fine” “view” of the “dim sea of marsh” that is facilitated by occupying a distant position on the high rim of the “cup of a volcanic plain.”⁷⁰³

Burke also describes the sublime experience or a sense of “delightful horror” as induced by objects that approach colossal scales and infinite series, where the “eye not being able to perceive the bounds” of a thing or scene causes those things to “seem to be infinite, and they produce the same effects as if they were really so.”⁷⁰⁴ When Holly stands at “the edge of the swamp” to “stare at the spectacle in dismay” he notes that “It was apparently boundless, and vast flocks of every sort of waterfowl came flying from its recesses till it was sometimes difficult to see the sky.”⁷⁰⁵ This description includes an overwhelming sense of infinity in terms of nature’s excess in the form of the swarming populations of multiple species of birds. For the swamp to have the capacity to harbor the inhabitation of such a

⁷⁰¹ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry Into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful, Critical Theory Since Plato*, eds. Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle (Wadsworth: Cengage Learning, 2005), 340.

⁷⁰² Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry*, 340.

⁷⁰³ Haggard, *She*, 104 & 119.

⁷⁰⁴ Edmund Burke, *On the Sublime and Beautiful, Vol. XXIV, Part 2: The Harvard Classics* (New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1909–14; Bartleby.com, 2001), Part II, Section 9: <https://www.bartleby.com/24/2/>.

⁷⁰⁵ Haggard, *She*, 71.

great number of birds suggests the landscape extends in volume and space in imperceptible dimensions and directions, a sense which threatens to absorb the onlooker. Burke also describes “intolerable stenches” and “poisonous exhalations” as capable of provoking sublime sensations “when united with images of an allowed grandeur” and intimidation such as the aforementioned.⁷⁰⁶ Holly’s description of the horrible stench and gloominess of the swamp are sublime in this Burkian sense: “Now that the sun was getting high it drew thin sickly looking clouds of poisonous vapour from the surface of the marsh and from the scummy pools of stagnant water.”⁷⁰⁷ Holly is pained and masochistically delighted by all the “stasis” and “slime,” by his own misogynistic “vision of primal nondifferentiation, the chthonian...swamp world of the Great mother...ready at any moment to engulf [him].”⁷⁰⁸ For example, Holly confesses that the scene had “excited my curiosity to an extent to which I was secretly ashamed.”⁷⁰⁹ However, according to Anne McClintock, such “feminizing of the land” also often “betrays acute paranoia and a profound, if not pathological, sense of male anxiety and boundary loss.”⁷¹⁰

Leo and Holly seize upon the opportunity to reclaim their sense of masculine dominance by killing and transmogrifying desolate wild nature through the consumption of a waterbuck, a ritualistic attempt to assimilate threatening alterity into the empire of the self. What is especially disturbing about this scene is how the scope of a rifle frames Holly’s initial humanization of the buck. He describes the creature’s behavior as a kind of miniaturized version of Caspar David Friedrich’s painting *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*

⁷⁰⁶ Burke, *On the Sublime*, Part II, Section 22.

⁷⁰⁷ Haggard, *She*, 71.

⁷⁰⁸ Camille Paglia, “Sexual Personae,” *Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “Rime of the Ancient Mariner”* (*Modern Critical Interpretations*), ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986), 103.

⁷⁰⁹ Haggard, *She*, 71.

⁷¹⁰ McClintock, *Imperial*, 24.

(1818), which depicts a man standing upon a sublime mountain summit and surveying the view: “He lifted the rifle, and the roan-coloured buck, having drunk his fill, raised his head and looked out across the river. He was standing right against the sunset sky on a little eminence..., evidently a favourite path for game, and there was something very beautiful about him.”⁷¹¹ Holly remarks on the powerful feelings of delightful horror that this creature and habitat provoke in him: “I do not think that if I live to a hundred I shall ever forget that desolate and yet most fascinating scene: it is stamped upon my memory.” Holly’s oddly romantic and humanized depiction of the buck quickly unravels into a creeping sense of looming impingement on all sides by overwhelmingly sinister forces:

To the right and left were wide stretches of lonely, death-breeding swamp, unbroken and unrelieved so far as the eye could reach, except here and there by ponds of black and peaty water that, mirror-like, flashed up the red rays of the setting sun. Behind us and before stretched the vista of the sluggish river, ending in glimpses of a reed-fringed lagoon, on the surface of which the long lights of the evening played as the faint breeze stirred the shadows. To the west loomed the huge red ball of the sinking sun, now vanishing down the vapoury horizon, and filling the great heaven, high across whose arch the cranes and wild fowl streamed in line, square, and triangle, with flashes of flying gold and the lurid stain of blood.⁷¹²

Holly describes his paranoid experience of uncomfortable suffocation in a kind of demonic womb of Africa within which he experiences attacks by foreboding planets, shadows, and harpies all of which somehow communicate ill omens via Black and red colored inscrutable

⁷¹¹ Haggard, *She*, 73.

⁷¹² Haggard, *She*, 73.

shapes, shadows, and shimmery reflections. Holly experiences these creatures as a block to his visionary gaze as they blot out the “great heaven.” This indeterminate sublime African landscape resembles Jackson’s development of Wynter’s concept of the “demonic ground” which is defined as a metaphor for the way Blackness and Black femininity function for the anti-Black imaginary as the “outer limits both of the ‘universal’ order of sex-gender and of patriarchy.”⁷¹³ This passage also illustrates Jackson’s theory that a disavowed Blackness is structural to sublime aesthetics and “evokes a paradoxical latent power or capacity to potentially activate a threat to visions of totality that we might perceive as generative.”⁷¹⁴

Holly’s uneasy attempt to represent the complicated and strange otherness of this creature and scene threatens to disrupt the revelation of a naturalized hierarchy that the imperial sublime promises. Holly’s descriptions of the scene become increasingly ominous indicating that the agency, beauty, and purposeful deliberation he witnesses in the buck are deeply confusing and disturbing for him in so far as these qualities are a transgression of the creature’s status as pure ontological animal. In fact, the hunting party looks ridiculous beside the native creature exuding the powers of calm, crystalline competence: “...three modern Englishmen in a modern English boat—seeming to jar upon and looking out of tone with that measureless desolation; and in front of us the noble buck limned out upon a background of ruddy sky.”⁷¹⁵ Holly is confronted with the littleness of Man, the artificiality of his worldview, and murderously responds by constructing a seething and sublime nature that he can then trample “back” into submission in a triumph of his will: “*Bang!*...We got out of the boat and ran to the buck, which was shot through the spine and stone dead.”⁷¹⁶ Holly can

⁷¹³ Jackson, “Theorizing in a Void,” 619.

⁷¹⁴ Jackson, “Theorizing in a Void,” 628.

⁷¹⁵ Haggard, *She*, 73.

⁷¹⁶ Haggard, *She*, 73-74.

only deny his “sense of order’s dependence on the abject figures constitutive to it and the systemic historical conditions of its emergence and renewal.”⁷¹⁷ It is quite possible that in many cases the young British minds that consumed these “mild” stories about sportsmen “thirsting for the blood of big game” went on to become the pathological adult minds capable of committing “unsavory rages, . . . massacres and rapes,” the “atrocious rituals of militarized masculinity” carried out in the attempt to overcome threatening wild natures in the name of empire.⁷¹⁸

Under the indoctrinating influence of patriarchal socialization and the Christian-Platonism of Victorian conduct manuals like *She*, what the developing master subject originally denies in himself he projects onto subordinated others and the natural world, both of which provoke rage because they stand for everything he has purged from the self and which threaten to overwhelm him, to unravel his cultural achievements and drag him back to the realm of bestial femininity. In point of fact, as Plumwood explains, the “feminine is explicitly and repeatedly associated in Plato with the lower order of nature as opposed to reason, associated with . . . primeval chaos: with disorder and ungoverned emotion, . . . with moral evil, incompetence, animal nature and distance from *logos*, with lower, slavlike nature unsuited to the public sphere, and with the baser self and bodily appetite.”⁷¹⁹ Consequently, Holly’s Christian-Platonic allegiances become increasingly apparent as the narrative continues to oscillate between abject, feminine horror and the delight of imperial sublime flight.

For example, after Holly and Leo begin their expedition escorted by the Amahagger

⁷¹⁷ Jackson, “Theorizing in a Void,” 618.

⁷¹⁸ McClintock, *Imperial*, 28.

⁷¹⁹ Plumwood, *Feminism*, 77.

tribe to the lair of “She-who-must-be-obeyed,” Holly finds himself in the “miry wilderness” engulfed by the “awful smell of rotting vegetation..., which was at times overpowering.”⁷²⁰ Holly is humiliated by the animal-like experience of “sitting down on the ground round a scanty fire,” and so to compensate for his compromised dignity he quickly transitions into contemplating the night sky: “I lay and watched the stars come out by thousands, till all the immense arch of heaven was sewn with glittering points, and every point a world! Here was a glorious sight by which man might well measure his own insignificance!”⁷²¹ Holly’s mind “wearies” as “it strives to grapple with the Infinite” but finds solace as he tries to “trace the footsteps of the Almighty as he strides from sphere to sphere, or deduce His purpose from His works.”⁷²² Here, in the mode of the imperial sublime, Holly performs mock humility while simultaneously suggesting that his “philosophic mind,” his astronomical acuity, can see that the father god desires British territorial expansion from “sphere to sphere” because the master subject’s “destiny,” “nature,” and “home” “Is with infinitude—and only there.”⁷²³ He fantasizes about the perfection of such an immense, universalist Man, of the “type and image of what man is, and what perchance man may one day” be in terms of the Eurocentric ideal and capacity to outsource labor so that he can “rest year by year upon that high level of the heart to which at times we momentarily gain!”⁷²⁴

Moreover, like the poet of the transcendental sublime standing atop an anticlimactic alpine peak, Holly blissfully imagines freedom from the limitations of his mother-born body: “Oh, that we could shake loose the prisoned pinions of the soul and soar to that

⁷²⁰ Haggard, *She*, 120.

⁷²¹ Haggard, *She*, 120-121.

⁷²² Haggard, *She*, 121.

⁷²³ Wordsworth, “*The Prelude* of 1805 in Thirteen Books,” 216, Book 6, lines 538-539.

⁷²⁴ Haggard, *She*, 122.

superior point, whence, like to some traveller looking out through space from Darien's giddiest peak, we might gaze with the spiritual eyes of noble thoughts deep into Infinity!"⁷²⁵ Reminiscent of the way Wordsworth imagines himself as a prisoner of the "homely Nurse" nature, Holly suggests nature is monstrously maternal for a "stony-hearted mother is our earth, and stones are the bread she gives her children for their daily food. Stones to eat and bitter water for their thirst, and stripes for tender nurture."⁷²⁶ For Holly, the "mother monster" myth alongside his exclusionary Platonic ideal of the human justifies the paternalistic biopolitical control and technoscientific manipulation of subordinated people and the "foul and thorny places of the world" for the benefit of the master subject who he refers to as the "glittering points above" and the "brightness of our better selves."⁷²⁷ Holly's Christian Platonism bolstered by the aesthetics of the imperial sublime produces the disturbing necrophilic politics of empire: "when the flesh hath fallen from us, then shall the spirit shine forth clad in the brightness of eternal good, and for its common air shall breathe so rare an ether of most noble thoughts."⁷²⁸ For Holly, the purpose of life is to subdue the whole sphere of wild nature to escape the "bowels" of the cave and walk onto the brightly illuminated stage of immortal British imperial mastery. The novel's deployment of imperial sublime aesthetics (where one experiences the ascension from the slimy, deceptive material world of appearances to the immortal realm of the imagination's perfect rational Ideas) functions to reproduce the master subject and his empire in accordance with the psychic investments instilled in the collective imagination under anti-Black, anthropocentric patriarchal socialization.

⁷²⁵ Haggard, *She*, 122.

⁷²⁶ Haggard, *She*, 250.

⁷²⁷ Haggard, *She*, 122.

⁷²⁸ Haggard, *She*, 251.

Orientalizing the Black Feminine Sublime in She

Similar to Holly's treatment of the waterbuck, the figure of Ayesha reflects what Jackson describes in her essay "'Theorizing in a Void': Sublimity, Matter, and Physics in Black Feminist Poetics" as the "oblique" function of the Black feminine sublime for the anti-Black imagination: "When not made invisible, the black feminine sublime may become obliquely figurative in the form of material metaphors, where these representations are given mythical and/or abject representation."⁷²⁹ As the group approaches Ayesha's kingdom Holly portrays nature in terms of the mythological and the sublime, but through a strange detailing of hybrid assemblage of feminine and masculine traits. For example, the "grim grandeur" of the phallic "towering volcanic mass" made of a "precipice" whose "crown lost itself in cloud" commands all of Holly's focus, and he struggles to represent the indescribably sublime matrix where Ayesha dwells: "All I can say is that it almost awed me by the intensity of its lonesome and most solemn greatness."⁷³⁰ Just as the African landscape is "quite indescribable on paper," so too does Ayesha exude an incomprehensible, inexpressible magnificence.⁷³¹

It is interesting that Holly's attribution of sublime qualities to a woman is quite outside of Burke's understanding of his own theory of the sublime and the beautiful. As many critics of the masculine sublime have pointed out, "Burke's project in the *Enquiry* hinges upon assumptions about gender that give rise to the distinction between the beautiful and the sublime."⁷³² Burke's assumptions about the essential differences and proper relations between the sexes allows him to argue that "'the ideas of the sublime and the

⁷²⁹ Jackson, "'Theorizing in a Void,'" 622.

⁷³⁰ Haggard, *She*, 132.

⁷³¹ Haggard, *She*, 134.

⁷³² Freeman, *The Feminine Sublime*, 47-48.

beautiful stand on foundations so different that it is hard, I almost said impossible, to think of reconciling them in the same subject.”⁷³³ In other words, at least on the surface, for Burke beauty is associated with femaleness or “the sex” and sublimity is a quality of maleness, “an emissary” of the “king of terrors.”⁷³⁴ Burke’s assuredness that an object is either sublime or beautiful rests on his belief in the so-called “apparent naturalness of the difference between the sexes” and thus the sublimity of an object is consistently described in terms of so-called masculine qualities such as “power, size, ambition, awe, and majesty” and “always includes intimations of power, majesty, and brute male force—a storm at sea, a raging bull, a ruler or sovereign, greatness of dimension.”⁷³⁵ On the other hand, “beautiful” objects exude the “feminine traits of softness, smallness, weakness, docility, delicacy, and timidity.”⁷³⁶

However, despite Burke’s desire for a parsimonious aesthetic theory of neat, gendered symmetry, Jackson demonstrates that Burke’s own writings contradict this tidy division in that “the manifest image of the sublime’s powerful threat to visions of totality is a ‘negro woman.’”⁷³⁷ In addition, it is interesting how Burke describes the “breast” of “a beautiful woman” in terms that also overrun the gendered demarcations of his own aesthetic theory: “Observe that part of a beautiful woman where she is perhaps the most beautiful, about the neck and breasts; the smoothness; the softness; the easy and insensible swell; the variety of the surface, which is never for the smallest space the same; the deceitful maze, through which the unsteady slides giddily, without knowing where to fix or whither it is

⁷³³ Edmund Burke qtd. in Freeman, *The Feminine Sublime*, 48.

⁷³⁴ Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry*, 340.

⁷³⁵ Freeman, *The Feminine Sublime*, 48.

⁷³⁶ Freeman, *The Feminine Sublime*, 48.

⁷³⁷ Jackson, “‘Theorizing in a Void,’” 623.

carried.”⁷³⁸ The breast is the most beautiful object whose serpentine lineations render the gazer giddy and unmoored. This observation and Jackson’s analysis are in agreement with other feminist critics of the Burkean sublime but Jackson’s in particular emphasizes that he “color coded” masculine sublimity in the terms of darkness and Blackness and feminine beauty in the terms of whiteness and light. However, she suggests that for Burke Black femininity confounds these “simple” aesthetic stratifications. Jackson demonstrates how for the anti-Black imagination Black femininity was able to somehow “peculiarly and inherently compel sublime vision,” but in a way that “simultaneously regulates and confounds the organization of desire for orderly racial and gendered difference as well as grounds, even as it unsettles the Burkean aesthetic system’s heteronormative teleology.”⁷³⁹ Jackson carefully highlights both the disciplinary role of the Black feminine sublime and its latent potential to unravel oppressive institutionalized norms.

While Ayesha speaks Arabic, Holly’s characterization of her and her role within the plot of the novel as a whole highlights the pliability of the “antiblack, sexuating consequences of sublimity as an aesthetic attribution” to any group considered nonwhite.⁷⁴⁰ As Jackson puts the issue elsewhere, “Irrespective of the innumerable and ever-transient definitions of black identity across the diaspora, which by definition are ephemerally produced, all *black(ened)* people must contend with the burden of antiblack animalization of the global paradigm of blackness, which will infringe on all articulations and political maneuverings that seek redress” (my emphasis).⁷⁴¹ Historically, Blackness as an attribute of a specific cultural identity is fluid and unstable. For example, in Debbie Lee’s study of

⁷³⁸ Burke, *On the Sublime*, Part IV, Section 23.

⁷³⁹ Jackson, ““Theorizing in a Void,”” 624.

⁷⁴⁰ Jackson, ““Theorizing in a Void,”” 628.

⁷⁴¹ Jackson, *Becoming Human*, 19.

Romantic period representations of Black single mothers she foregrounds the story of a young mother referred to as “Black Peggy” and a “native of Bengal” in the Foundling Hospital maternal petition records.⁷⁴² In other words, the anti-Black master subject, in this instance Holly the protagonist, strategically mobilizes the “black feminine sublime” in order to liquidate the deviant wild natures at the margin of “Chaos” and anarchy that he perceives pressing in on the “‘universalist’ system of Order...Progress, Reason, and Beauty.”⁷⁴³ Additionally, as occidental conqueror, Holly *orientalizes* the Black feminine sublime figure when, for example, he wonders to himself whether Ayesha is a “naked savage queen” or a “languishing Oriental beauty” while also perceiving her hands to be “white as snow.”⁷⁴⁴

The mythical, Orientalized, and anti-Black characterization of Ayesha is distinct for its hybridization of sublime and beautiful qualities. For example, Holly experiences Ayesha’s “awful beauty” in a disruption of the typical spatial arrangement of the sublime experience in which a master subject examines a sublime object of nature from a safe distance.⁷⁴⁵ Instead, Ayesha remains behind a curtain through which she can see Holly but he cannot see her. She assumes the masculine gaze and Holly is the object gazed upon: “I could not see the person, but I could distinctly feel...her gaze, and, what is more, it produced a very odd effect upon my nerves. I was frightened, I do not know why.”⁷⁴⁶ Holly describes the sensation of the phallic beams of Ayesha’s gaze “sinking through and through” him and “filling” him with “nameless terror” until the effects of her power cover him in “beads” of “perspiration.”⁷⁴⁷ Ayesha eventually draws back the curtain to reveal herself as

⁷⁴² Lee, “Black Single Mothers,” 169.

⁷⁴³ Jackson, “‘Theorizing in a Void,’” 618 & 628.

⁷⁴⁴ Haggard, *She*, 145.

⁷⁴⁵ Haggard, *She*, 242.

⁷⁴⁶ Haggard, *She*, 145.

⁷⁴⁷ Haggard, *She*, 145.

an obscure “figure” whose face and body are “wrapped up in soft white, gauzy material” that remind Holly “most forcibly of a corpse in its grave-clothes.”⁷⁴⁸ Ayesha is like the terrifyingly sublime sovereign and despot that Burke describes as a figure made more terrible by “judicious obscurity.”⁷⁴⁹ She is “half-divine” with “glorious eyes” and an “air of majesty.”⁷⁵⁰ Holly fears “this ghost-like apparition,” her “mummy-like form,” which is also that of a “tall and lovely woman, instinct with beauty in every part, and also with a certain snake-like grace.”⁷⁵¹ Ayesha’s “terrible” serpentine qualities match Burke’s assertion that “There are many animals, who though far from being large, are yet capable of raising ideas of the sublime, because they are considered as objects of terror. As serpents and poisonous animals of almost all kinds.”⁷⁵² According to Burke, things that are terrible and sublime have a kind of uncertain chaos and confusion about them in the same way “night adds to our dread” and “the notions of ghosts and goblins, of which none can form clear ideas, affect minds.”⁷⁵³ Certainly, Holly’s Burkean description of Ayesha “is dark, uncertain, confused, terrible, and sublime to the last degree.”⁷⁵⁴

Yet when Holly witnesses Ayesha take off her gossamer veils, she is confusedly described as “beauty made sublime.”⁷⁵⁵ The menacing image of Ayesha with “rich hair of raven blackness” contrasts heavily with her “snow white hand” with the “pinkest nails” at the tips of “long tapering fingers” and her “soft” and “silvery voice” like the “murmur of a brook.”⁷⁵⁶ Holly describes her movements as stereotypically “coquettish,” and naturally, of

⁷⁴⁸ Haggard, *She*, 146.

⁷⁴⁹ Burke, *On the Sublime*, Part II, Section 3.

⁷⁵⁰ Haggard, *She*, 159.

⁷⁵¹ Haggard, *She*, 146.

⁷⁵² Burke, *On the Sublime*, Part II, Section 2.

⁷⁵³ Burke, *On the Sublime*, Part II, Section 3.

⁷⁵⁴ Burke, *On the Sublime*, Part II, Section 3.

⁷⁵⁵ Haggard, *She*, 159.

⁷⁵⁶ Haggard, *She*, 145.

course, she is murderously jealous of female rivals and her diet consists only of “fruit and cake” of which she consumes merely “a little.”⁷⁵⁷ At the same time, Ayesha is a “great chemist” who has “one of the caves fitted up as a laboratory” where she genetically engineers mute and passive servant girls.⁷⁵⁸ Holly describes her as a formidable and skilled debater “whose brain was supernaturally sharpened” because she has “all manner of knowledge of the secrets of Nature at her command.”⁷⁵⁹ The human/animal, male/female, white/Black, and reason/emotion dichotomies freely intermingle and encircle Ayesha’s form.

Like Holly’s enchantment by the waterbuck, he vacillates between feeling seduced by Ayesha’s ineffable magnificence and anxiously desiring “Providence” to subjugate her wild nature back into subservience to the colonial, patriarchal order. Holly’s anxiety and uncertainty reveals his terror of acknowledging and confronting the racist, nature phobic, and sexist structures, conditions, and logic involved in the production of master subjectivity and empire. His anxiety heightens each time he is confronted with the unthought known that race and gender are merely cultural constructions. To keep intact his delusion of superiority, to keep the wheels of the imperial machine turning, Holly remains willfully ignorant of the central role of the disavowed othered wild natures to master subject formation. Holly is anxious to keep hidden from himself the truth of the artificiality of the symbolic order, how Black people, women, and animals have been made to signify the “incarnation of abject dimensions of humanity for which ‘the human’ is foundationally and seemingly eternally at war.”⁷⁶⁰ Ironically, Ayesha threatens to disclose this forbidden knowledge to Holly’s

⁷⁵⁷ Haggard, *She*, 157.

⁷⁵⁸ Haggard, *She*, 197.

⁷⁵⁹ Haggard, *She*, 196.

⁷⁶⁰ Jackson, *Becoming Human*, 20.

consciousness when she states that the dualisms of life are “natural” and mutually interdependent:

Good and evil, love and hate, night and day, sweet and bitter, man and woman, heaven above and the earth beneath—all these things are necessary, one to the other, and who knows the end of each? I tell thee that there is a hand of Fate that twines them up to bear the burden of its purpose, and all things are gathered in that great rope to which all things are needful.

Therefore doth it not become us to say this thing is evil and this good, or the dark is hateful and the light lovely; for to other eyes than ours the evil may be the good and the darkness more beautiful than the day, or all alike be fair.⁷⁶¹

The metaphor of a rope emphasizes the “binding” nature of a “higher power” who coerces beings into bearing the burden of reproducing his imperial dominion. In the above passage, Ayesha also implies that there is an uncertainty or open-endedness to the possibilities of becoming otherwise “inherent” in each term of every binary pair. And because of this latter possibility, she suggests that perhaps the stratifications of value are merely contingent cultural constructions whose signifiers slide and slip across geopolitical time and space. However, because Ayesha is a despotic ruler the highly ambiguous phrase that “doth it not become us to say this thing is evil and this good” because “other eyes” may hold a different opinion could also inspire darker interpretations. For example, Ayesha’s sense of justified duty to naturalize binaries in ways that suit the divine purposes of (her) nature critically foregrounds the pathetic comedy and powerful horror that the rhetoric of hegemony contains.

⁷⁶¹ Haggard, *She*, 205.

Holly reacts to Ayesha's philosophy by reducing it to something treasonous and morally dangerous when he asks himself "for what may not be possible to a being who, unconstrained by human law, is also absolutely unshackled by a moral sense of right and wrong, which, however partial and conventional it may be, is yet based, as our conscience tells us, upon the great wall of individual responsibility that marks off mankind from the beasts?"⁷⁶² He naturalizes his own sense of morality and suggests that anyone outside of his own moral system is devoid of humanity, understood in terms of individuality, and is indistinct from an animal. But perhaps against his own intention he also reveals how dominant social groups design their own destruction when they withhold access to the achievement of the white human norm from the very subjugated groups that make that group's social dominance possible.

This discovery that Holly at once glimpses and represses has much in parallel with Freud's infamous statement that women have less fully developed superegos than men:

Character-traits which critics of every epoch have brought up against women—that they show less sense of justice than men, that they are less ready to submit to the exigencies of life, that they are more often influenced in their judgements by feelings of affection or hostility—all these would be amply accounted for by the modifications in the formation of their super-ego.⁷⁶³

But Freud is confused: "What Freud mistook for her lack of civilization is woman's lack of

⁷⁶² Haggard, *She*, 205.

⁷⁶³ Sigmund Freud, "Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: Volume 19 (1914)*, trans. James Strachey (London: Vintage Books, 2001), 257.

loyalty to civilization.”⁷⁶⁴ In other words, first, both Freud and Holly make the mistake of taking the master subject’s psychic pattern and morality as the model. And as a result, they then misconstrue the Orientalized, Black feminine subject’s psychic structure to be an inferior version of the male norm. Key to these two degrees of error is the need to deny the existence of possible other models of subject formation and morality, to deny the possibility of divergence from and disloyalty to their master narratives. The unthought known for both Freud and Holly here is that “foreclosure seeks in the abjecting and voiding of black female sex/uality the stable arrangement of gender and regulation of sexual expressivity’s characteristic queer plenitude—its necessary failures to know and exhaustively regulate capacity is both cause for celebration and a profound site of incalculable and insatiable violence.”⁷⁶⁵ Exclusionary and oppressive systems produce the seeds of their own destruction by constructing the m/other as its “antipodal figure, as the nadir of Man,” within whom the “norm is not able to take hold.”⁷⁶⁶ Lacking the freedom and privilege (or desire) to identify with the law of the white father, theoretically, the subjectivities of wild natures do not necessarily subscribe to the same internalized strictures as those of the master subject’s superego. This implies that there is a certain degree of “queer plenitude,” of creative and insurgent wildness, that escapes foreclosure by psychic patriarchal conditioning, or that may be reopened, reconstituted from the ground up. However, at the same time, the signifying presence of this “queer plenitude” also provokes real and symbolic disciplinary violence (i.e., “abjection and voiding”) by the master subject in his attempt to naturalize artificial

⁷⁶⁴ Lillian Smith qtd. in Ursula K. Le Guin, “The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction,” *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, eds. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1996), 151.

⁷⁶⁵ Jackson, “Theorizing in a Void,” 633.

⁷⁶⁶ Jackson, *Becoming Human*, 20 & 101.

value-hierarchical arrangements of sex, gender, race, and species.

Holly anxiously senses his proximity to the vortex of the virtual Real in excess of and always threatening to topple the Law: “So we went, I, for one, meditating deeply on the awful nature of the problem that now opened out before us.”⁷⁶⁷ Like Victor fears the female Creature, Holly obsessively ruminates on the dangers of the unrestrained energies of wild natures returning to the heart of the empire from the colonies especially in the form of Ayesha, as the Orientalized, Black, feminine, sublime New Woman:

The terrible *She* had evidently made up her mind to go to England, and it made me absolutely shudder to think what would be the result of her arrival there. What her powers were I knew, and I could not doubt but that she would exercise them to the full. It might be possible to control her for a while, but her proud, ambitious spirit would be certain to break loose and avenge itself for the long centuries of its solitude. She would, if necessary, and if the power of her beauty did not unaided prove equal to the occasion, blast her way to any end she set before her...⁷⁶⁸

To this deeply paranoid diatribe, Holly adds a suspicion that sounds disturbingly like the contemporary white supremacist conspiracy theory of the great replacement.⁷⁶⁹ Holly fearfully suspects Ayesha will “assume absolute rule over the British dominions, and probably over the whole earth.”⁷⁷⁰ This is quite similar to the way in Shelley’s *Frankenstein* that Victor’s excessively “human and altogether worldly projection onto the monster’s

⁷⁶⁷ Haggard, *She*, 255.

⁷⁶⁸ Haggard, *She*, 255.

⁷⁶⁹ Dustin Jones, “What is the ‘great replacement’ and how is it tied to the Buffalo shooting suspect?”, *NPR* (2022), <https://www.npr.org/2022/05/16/1099034094/what-is-the-great-replacement-theory>.

⁷⁷⁰ Haggard, *She*, 255.

desires erases the possibility that in his non-humanness the monster might desire something entirely different” than to “re-populate the world with little monsters like himself.”⁷⁷¹

But Holly’s mind takes a strange turn, and he decides that perhaps instead Ayesha would “speedily make ours the most glorious and prosperous empire that the world has ever seen.”⁷⁷² From a structural perspective, these lines suggest that on some unconscious, repressed level, Holly understands that Ayesha is the demonic *mater*(nal) ground, to borrow Jackson’s terms, from which universal Man springs:

The whole thing sounded like a dream or some extraordinary invention of a speculative brain, and yet it was a fact—a wonderful fact—of which the whole world would soon be called on to take notice. What was the meaning of it all? After much thinking I could only conclude that this wonderful creature, whose passion had kept her for so many centuries chained as it were, and comparatively harmless, was now about to be used by Providence as a means to change the order of the world, and possibly, by the building up of a power that could no more be rebelled against or questioned than the decrees of Fate, to change it materially for the better.⁷⁷³

The double meaning of this passage reads as a direct confession or detailing of the “organizational logics of racialized sexuation and the secularizing imperatives (largely economic, but not exclusively so) of an imperial paradigm that sought dominion over life, writ large.”⁷⁷⁴ Holly highlights the way femininity is animalized as creaturely and racialized

⁷⁷¹ Audrey A. Fisch, “Plaguing Politics: AIDS, Deconstruction, and *The Last Man*,” in *The Other Mary Shelley: Beyond Frankenstein*, eds. Audrey A. Fisch, Anne K. Mellor, and Esther H. Schor (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 286.

⁷⁷² Haggard, *She*, 255.

⁷⁷³ Haggard, *She*, 256.

⁷⁷⁴ Jackson, *Becoming Human*, 25.

as “chained,” her desire educated into subservience. On another level, these lines suggest there is a small hidden melancholy part of Holly’s heart that also wishes to acknowledge and mourn the foreclosure of the “queer plenitude” of other wild natures as well as his own, what was maimed in his psyche in conforming to western white patriarchal socialization.

But before Ayesha can cast the wild spell of “queer plenitude” over England, she guides Holly and Leo deep down into a dead volcano to the flaming “awful cloud or pillar of fire” so that Leo can become immortal like her after bathing in the light.⁷⁷⁵ Ayesha warns them to “prepare to enter the very womb of the Earth, wherein she doth conceive the Life that ye see brought forth in man and beast—ay, and in every tree and flower.”⁷⁷⁶ Contrary to Holly’s earlier sublime flights of ethereal imagery, Ayesha’s guided sublime descent to the “very Fountain and Heart of Life as it beats in the bosom of the great world” is saturated with the language of earthly rootedness and the interconnectedness of all lifeforms, no matter the species. In contrast to Holly’s transcendental terms that reduce nature to a mere “veil” covering over divinity, Ayesha’s language emphasizes the vitality of wild, virtual potential immanent in the natural world:

‘Behold the substance from which all things draw their energy, the bright Spirit of the Globe, without which it cannot live, but must grow cold and dead as the dead moon. Draw near, and wash you in the living flames, and take their virtue into your poor frames in all its virgin strength—not as it now feebly glows within your bosoms, filtered thereto through all the fine strainers of a thousand intermediate lives, but as it is here in the very fount

⁷⁷⁵ Haggard, *She*, 286.

⁷⁷⁶ Haggard, *She*, 285.

and seat of earthly Being.⁷⁷⁷

These lines diverge from the Platonic logic of the masculinist sublime in a couple subtle ways. First, the substance and animating energy of the planet is described as a kind of life blood rather than something separate that originally comes from an alien divinity. Second, while these lines also assume the existence of distorting, corrupting social forces of oppressive habit, Ayesha's subtly evolutionary language puts emphasis on the "virgin strength" of wild natures in and of themselves. Her emphasis on the creative potential of creaturely becoming on earth now is not the Wordsworthian construction of nature as a personal portal to divinity in a Christian Platonic sense.

And, at least initially, Holly's encounter with the "awful cloud or pillar of fire, like a rainbow many-coloured, and like the lightning bright" is described in terms more akin to an aesthetic of wonder and a "wild" mode of knowing/learning about other natures:

We followed her through the rosy glow up to the head of the cave, till at last we stood before the spot where the great pulse beat and the great flame passed. And as we went we became sensible of a wild and splendid exhilaration, of a glorious sense of such a fierce intensity of Life that the most buoyant moments of our strength seemed flat and tame and feeble beside it. It was the mere effluvium of the flame, the subtle ether that it cast off as it passed, working on us, and making us feel strong as giants and swift as eagles.⁷⁷⁸

These lines subtly play with the idea of a sentient planet joyful in its own sense of wild energy. Furthermore, the contagious proximity to the living planet organism's core or heart

⁷⁷⁷ Haggard, *She*, 286.

⁷⁷⁸ Haggard, *She*, 286.

has the effect of muddying Holly's sense of distinction between reality and the fantasy of giants as well as any pure ontological divisions between species. Instead, he becomes playful and "seemed to live more keenly" in more awareness of his body, the "lightness" of his heart and the "divine intoxication" of his brain.⁷⁷⁹ He laughs "aloud" as he realizes the "higher joy" of "queer plenitude," of wild, embodied potential: "The sensations that poured in upon me are indescribable...I was another and most glorified self, and all the avenues of the Possible were for a space laid open to the footsteps of the Real."⁷⁸⁰

While Holly's wondrous, deterritorializing encounter with the flaming heart of the planet is very much embodied as a "new-found self" of "splendid vigour," he fails to sustain the connection with otherness in these terms. Instead, he falls back into the absurd perceptual and epistemological habits of the imperial sublime: "I know that I felt as though all the varied genius of which the human intellect is capable had descended upon me. I could have spoken in blank verse of Shakespearean beauty, all sorts of great ideas flashed through my mind; it was as though the bonds of my flesh had been loosened, and left the spirit free to soar to the empyrean of its native power."⁷⁸¹ After Holly's wondrous experience of "queer plenitude," he is extraordinarily quick to condemn Ayesha as a transgression against the natural order after she is destroyed in her attempt to bathe in the immortalizing flame of the womb of the earth for a second time:

But who can tell what had happened? There was the fact. Often since that awful hour I have reflected that it requires no great stretch of the imagination to see the finger of Providence in the matter. Ayesha locked up in her living

⁷⁷⁹ Haggard, *She*, 287.

⁷⁸⁰ Haggard, *She*, 287.

⁷⁸¹ Haggard, *She*, 287.

tomb waiting from age to age for the coming of her lover worked by a small change in the order of the World. But Ayesha strong and happy in her love, clothed in immortal youth and godlike beauty, and the wisdom of the centuries, would have revolutionized society, and even perchance have changed the destiny of Mankind. Thus she opposed herself against the eternal Law, and, strong though she was, by it was swept back to nothingness—swept back with shame and hideous mockery!⁷⁸²

Ultimately, the intolerable New Woman embodied by the androgynous Ayesha, affiliated with chthonian, “black(ened),” feminized wild natures, must be humiliated back into subjection, which Haggard ritually represents with witch burning imagery where she melts into a “shapeless face.”⁷⁸³ The above passage also functions as a chilling reminder of the master subject’s devaluation of wild natures as abject, void, “nothingness” in their role as foil to universal Man. The anonymity and “nothingness” that Holly (mis)perceives in Ayesha’s “black(ened)” and “shapeless face” speak to his entrenchment in a system that promoted the fungibility of enslaved humans as well as the interchangeableness of women in the economy of marriage. Regarding this latter point, the passage also reflects Holly’s belief that a passive, husband-obsessed angel entombed in the house is preferable to an intellectual woman with a healthy-minded desire to positively affect the world. After Ayesha’s death, Holly and Leo take back the “phallus” they (mis)perceive Ayesha having appropriated by drawing each a “shining lock” from the “pile of rippling hair that had fallen from her in the agony of that hideous change which was worse than a thousand natural deaths.”⁷⁸⁴

⁷⁸² Haggard, *She*, 294.

⁷⁸³ Haggard, *She*, 292.

⁷⁸⁴ Haggard, *She*, 297.

Haggard's investigation of the imperial fantasy of subduing the threatening and subversive force of racialized, feminized wild natures culminates in the destruction of Ayesha, on the one hand, and Leo and Holly's return to Britain on the other, which may leave his intended readers feeling ambivalent about the defense of antiblack, patriarchal integrity against supposed sublime "emasculating female power."⁷⁸⁵

However, despite whatever the novel's intentions and wish-fulfillment fantasies may have been, Ayesha's character undermines the "naturalness" of value-hierarchical dualisms by foregrounding their artificial construction by the imperial mind. Her character subverts the supposed essential difference between the sexes, between white(ened) and "black(ened)" humans, between humans and animals/nature by positing a kind of ecological interconnectedness. Her identity implies that there might be more to human being and wild nature than that enacted under the worlding of anti-Black patriarchal western authority. The figure behind Haggard's curtain is not "some naked savage queen, a languishing Oriental beauty, or a nineteenth-century young lady, drinking afternoon tea," all figments of the imperial subject's racist, porno-tropic imagination, but perhaps she is the New Woman figure in whom the qualities of the sublime and beautiful are united in such a way as to positively revolutionize the world by highlighting that world's very artificiality.⁷⁸⁶ To be sure, even as she is dying, Ayesha commands the group never to fail to remember that her subversive influence is not only historical but immortal and future-oriented: "Forget me not...I shall come again."⁷⁸⁷ *She is mater(nal)*. For as long as the master subject of neoliberal humanist patriarchy exists, the Black feminine sublime aesthetic will have the

⁷⁸⁵ Sinha, "Triangular Erotics," 41.

⁷⁸⁶ Haggard, *She*, 145.

⁷⁸⁷ Haggard, *She*, 293.

constant effect of unraveling him: “For every second of time [i]s the strait gait through which the Messiah might enter.”⁷⁸⁸ As Jack Halberstam puts the matter, there is only (and always) the potential for a wild, “healing creativity” that emerges from the “chaos” of “shredded dichotomies.”⁷⁸⁹ Or, to borrow the terms of Walter Benjamin’s gender-fluid invocation of the revolutionary sublime, we might “recogniz[e] the sign of a Messianic cessation of happening, or, put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past” in narrative moments “[w]here thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions.”⁷⁹⁰

⁷⁸⁸ Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 208.

⁷⁸⁹ Halberstam, “Wildness, Loss, Death,” 142.

⁷⁹⁰ Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 207.

Section III. Shelleyan Afterlives: Contemporary Speculative Treatments of Cross-Species “Homeplaces”

Chapter 5. M/Others of Miasmatic Mayhem: Climate Migration Anxiety, Ecofascism, White Melancholia, and Subjectivities of Destructive Plasticity from Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man* to Pella Kågerman and Hugo Lilja’s *Aniara* and Ari Aster’s *Midsommar*

Mary Shelley’s focus on plague in *The Last Man* begins an investigation and enactment of destructive plasticity, in terms of the end of existent life under the “genre-specific orders of truth” of Man2, that is useful for introducing the speculative horror films of Pella Kågerman and Hugo Lilja’s *Aniara* and Ari Aster’s *Midsommar*.⁷⁹¹ These three speculative horrors converge on questions of the relationships between a) climate migration anxiety and white, nationalist forms of melancholia, b) ecofascism and the insularity/privilege of nationalist pastoral nostalgia versus post-apocalyptic cult formation (and Shelley’s critique of Promethean romanticism as itself a kind of pastoral cult), c) consensual surrenders and/or inevitable collapses of cultural memory (breaking the link between past, present, and future), and d) relations between subjectivities of destructive plasticity and “anamnesis.” This chapter looks at how these contemporary films inherit from Mary Shelley the defamiliarizing aesthetic technique of speculative horror to investigate and enact in fantasy traumatizing encounters with the unknown after the extinction of monohumanist Man. These speculative horror films stage horrifying and traumatic encounters with the Other to deconstruct, either wittingly or unwittingly, problematic narratives of pastoral nostalgia conspicuous in far right and ecofascist discourses saturated

⁷⁹¹ Sylvia Wynter, “Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species? Or, to Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations,” in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, ed. Katherine McKittrick (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015), 32.

with white, masculinist melancholia.⁷⁹² These films work to foreground how nationalist pastoral narratives are indicative of the presence of the white melancholic mindsets associated with far-right ideologies and ecofascist mythologies, and that can only regressively react to their anxieties about climate migration.

The verdict has been in for a while: The forest infernos and underwater cities of anthropogenic climate change discourses and realities have psychological effects that we can no longer ignore, which have been variously identified as eco-anxiety, climate depression, environmental grief and trauma.⁷⁹³ To understand the proliferation of these new kinds of psychologies it is useful to study literature and the arts because according to the film critic E. Ann Kaplan they “showcase symptoms of social processes, cultural energies, and cultural change...they provide us with a barometer of what’s going on in any particular society.”⁷⁹⁴

⁷⁹² White melancholia is a term coined by the Swedish postcolonial and feminist scholars Tobias Hübinette and Catrin Lundström to describe “white regression and aggression” as well as the delusional, fascist “dream of a white homogenous past.” Hübinette and Lundström argue that white melancholia stems from “not being in full control anymore, and therefore yearning to return to the safe days of white homogeneity when it was easier to be a racist.” Tobias Hübinette and Catrin Lundström, “Sweden after the Recent Election: The Double-Binding Power of Swedish Whiteness through the Mourning of the Loss of ‘Old Sweden’ and the Passing of ‘Good Sweden,’” *NORA—Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, 19, no. 1 (2011): 50. I see white melancholia and “everyday” fascism as combining in ecofascist rhetoric that falsely equates immigration with “ecological disaster” and promotes strong borders against the climate migration crisis. Oliver Milman, “Climate denial is waning on the right. What’s replacing it might be just as scary,” *The Guardian* (2021), <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/nov/21/climate-denial-far-right-immigration>. Ecofascism is defined as “environmentalism that 1. Advocates or accepts violence and 2. Reinforces existing systems of power and inequality.” Because ecofascism suggests that “certain kinds of people are naturally and exclusively entitled to control environmental resources” ecofascist myths “fuel white supremacy, ultra-nationalism, patriarchy, ableism, authoritarianism, and mass murder.” April Anson, Cassie M. Galentine, Shane Hall, Alexander Menrisky, and Bruno Seraphin, “Against the Ecofascist Creep: Debunking Ecofascist Myths,” *Anti-Creep Climate Initiative* (2022), 12, <https://www.asle.org/wp-content/uploads/Against-the-Ecofascist-Creep.pdf>.

⁷⁹³ See David Wallace-Wells, *The Uninhabitable Earth: Life After Warming* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2019); Joseph Dodds, *Psychoanalysis and Ecology at the Edge of Chaos: Complexity Theory, Deleuze/Guattari and Psychoanalysis for a Climate in Crisis* (New York: Routledge, 2011); Sally Weintrobe, *Engaging with Climate Change: Psychoanalytic and Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2012); Donna Orange, *Climate Crisis, Psychoanalysis, and Radical Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

⁷⁹⁴ E. Ann Kaplan, *Climate Trauma: Foreseeing the Future in Dystopian Film and Fiction* (New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 28.

Indeed, climate change phenomena have inspired the creation of a new genre of climate-oriented “speculative horror” in literature and film—like Margaret Atwood’s *MaddAddam Trilogy* (2013) and Bong Joon-ho’s film *Snowpiercer* (2013) for example—which provoke an affective mode of horrified anticipation of the dystopian worlds to come. In response to such work, a substantial amount of the scholarship within the field of environmental humanities has focused on imagining and fostering various forms of communal ethics of non/human mutual entanglement for the purposes of mitigating the impending climate crisis and ensuring our species’ survival into futurity. These important ethics of interdependency are often framed in terms of a hopeful movement toward social and environmental justice via increased identification and attunement with our deep constitution by others.⁷⁹⁵ But less has been said about the possible psychic resistances to or horror of such entanglements, and still less has been said about the developmental and political socialization of such resistances within the western capitalist patriarchies of the global north, a social order that requires gender, class, and race hierarchies and inequalities.

Considerably little, if any, attention has been given to how the legacies and lessons from popular science fiction and horror films may overlap in their critical speculations about these kinds of “phobic” psychological reactions to the human species’ shift from supposed hyper-independence to a regained sense of “obligatory symbiosis”—the feeling in the age of the Anthropocene of returning, alongside our transnational “siblings,” to claustrophobic embeddedness in a resurrected, cyborg version of recalcitrant “mother nature.”⁷⁹⁶ Perhaps aggravating this supposed new and uncomfortable sense of forced proximity, so to speak, is

⁷⁹⁵ For example, see Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016); Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2010).

⁷⁹⁶ Michel Serres, “The Natural Contract,” *Critical Inquiry* 19, no. 1 (1992): 1-21.

the global prediction that the “greatest single impact of climate change could be on human migration—with millions of people displaced by shoreline erosion, coastal flooding, and agricultural disruption.”⁷⁹⁷ With this prediction in mind, this chapter contributes to the studies of the psychological effects of anthropogenic climate change by exploring cinematic renderings of a particular type of climate migration anxiety that stems from white, masculinist, and nationalist melancholia. Climate migration anxiety may take very different forms. On the one hand, it may manifest as a fearful anticipation of involuntary diaspora by people forced to leave their homes.⁷⁹⁸ On the other hand, for some groups in the nations that provide asylum to climate refugees it may express itself as xenophobic and/or ecofascist “border” anxiety.⁷⁹⁹ This chapter explores cultural representations of this latter emergent type of climate migration anxiety that is an expression of a dysfunctional political psychology rooted in the white, masculinist identity formation process characteristic of early emotional life in western nations of the global north. In other words, this chapter joins other environmental humanities projects that study films that seem to be “trying to understand the complex psychological mechanisms that inhibit humans from coming together to save themselves and the planet.”⁸⁰⁰

⁷⁹⁷ Oli Brown, “Migration and Climate Change,” in *IOM: Migration Research Series* (Geneva: International Organization for Migration, 2008), 9.

⁷⁹⁸ According to the Anti-Creep Climate Initiative, “Climate change is a crisis for migrants, not a crisis of migrants. Most people displaced by climate chaos (e.g., desertification, rising seas, extreme weather) move within borders, not across them. Weaponized borders, militarized police, rogue militias, and hardline anti-immigrant policies don’t address the real threats posed by climate change; instead they target those made most vulnerable to its effects.” April Anson, et al., “Against the Ecofascist Creep,” 18.

⁷⁹⁹ “Fascism always blames social problems on ‘outsiders’ and ‘others’ who must be kept out or rooted out of the body politic by a strongman leader and his military police. Ecofascism is no different—ecofascists have a long history of scapegoating immigrants and migrants for environmental damage. Fears that waves of ‘climate refugees’ will swamp the limited capacity of wealthy nations or unleash political unrest is only the latest version of this sort of xenophobia. There are no climate barbarians at the gates—migration is a human right.” Anson, etc., “Against the Ecofascist Creep,” 18.

⁸⁰⁰ Kaplan, *Climate Trauma*, 8.

This chapter argues that Ari Aster’s *Midsommar* (2019) and Pella Kågerman and Hugo Lilja’s *Aniara* (2018) both function as a subgenre of climate-oriented, speculative horror films that have arisen to critically represent the emerging political unconscious of the “reactionary” or far-right “camps” of Swedish and North American whiteness.⁸⁰¹ These groups deploy similar nostalgic narratives of “white melancholia” to express their shared climate migration anxiety, their shared dread of the interdependent proximity of the “other” as a threat to their distinct white privileges.⁸⁰² However, I argue that what is most significant and key to understanding the analytic pairing of these films is the parallel surge of similar kinds of white nationalist movements and the negative social effects of such anti-immigrant sentiment in both Sweden and the United States.⁸⁰³ These films offer a comparable transnational critical response to the contemporary spread, across Sweden and the United states, of the far-right vision of transformation for their “difference-polluted” and “decadent” nations—a nostalgic vision oriented toward an idealized past of ethnonational and organic purity.⁸⁰⁴ In other words, the reactionary fear and anxiety evoked by a climate future marked by large-scale human population displacement—and the loss of control and identity the far right associates with the intensification of local, national, and global forms of interdependency—manifest in the distinct form of a fascist utopianism grounded in nostalgia

⁸⁰¹ Tobias Hübinette and Catrin Lundström, “Sweden after the Recent Election: The Double-Binding Power of Swedish Whiteness through the Mourning of the Loss of ‘Old Sweden’ and the Passing of ‘Good Sweden,’” *NORA—Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, 19, no. 1 (2011): 43.

⁸⁰² Hübinette and Catrin Lundström, “Sweden after the Recent Election,” 50.

⁸⁰³ Allan Pred, *Even in Sweden: Racisms, Racialized Spaces, and the Popular Geographical Imagination* (Berkeley and Los Angeles CA: University of California Press, 2000), xii; Masha Gessen, “The United States and Sweden Share an Approach to Shutting Out Immigrants,” *The New Yorker* (2018), <https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/the-united-states-and-sweden-share-an-approach-to-shutting-out-immigrants>; Katia Elliot, “The Sweden Democrats are Sweden’s largest party,” in *SVT Nyheter* (2020), <https://www.svt.se/nyheter/inrikes/svt-novus-sd-storsta-parti?fbclid=IwAR01wZi3ZDzGQmPJpqn-VgFbz1JnP9D5dLHpEX8u1DX8VfJCbzaseXzjOk>.

⁸⁰⁴ Jens Rydgren, “The Radical Right: An Introduction,” *The Oxford Handbook of the Radical Right*, DOI:10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190274559.013.1.

for a lost Golden Age.⁸⁰⁵ In so doing, these films show how the genre of speculative horror also draws upon critical traditions committed to making the destructive, popular myths that creep in and ossify in parts of the collective imaginary appear strange and horrific so as to problematize and dismantle them in favor of alternative futures.⁸⁰⁶

However, these films are not just straightforward critiques of the xenophobic psychologies and pastoral mythologies of melancholic white nationalists that are implicated in enacting and justifying violence against marginalized populations globally, historically and presently. *Midsommar* and *Aniara* might often instead be read as bittersweet prognoses of the psychological ecologies that will come to dominate the climate-changed future. For example, these films offer a weak form of hope by speculating about how the as-yet-unimagined catastrophic traumas and novel experiences of our climate futures might come to so radically transform our subjectivities as to secure our freedom from the tyranny of these pathologies and narratives of gendered power and ethnic exclusion that violently react in horror at the impending forms of interdependence that will inevitably result as climate effects worsen. But the films also offer a bitter prognosis in the suggestion that this liberation may only be a happy accident, a byproduct of abrupt totalizing change that comes at the cost of shattering a system beyond recognition or care.⁸⁰⁷ Even so, the dark representations of dysfunctional interdependency between pairs of individuals and groups in *Midsommar* and *Aniara* foreground the way that intersubjective recognition theories of engagement from psychoanalysis may inspire more life-affirming practices and systems for

⁸⁰⁵ Gabriella Elgenius and Jens Rydgren, "Frames of nostalgia and belonging: the resurgence of ethno-nationalism in Sweden," *European Societies* 21, no. 4 (2019): 583-602.

⁸⁰⁶ Darko Suvin, "Estrangement and Cognition," *Metamorphosis of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979).

⁸⁰⁷ Catherine Malabou, *Ontology of the Accident: An Essay on Destructive Plasticity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012).

the present and future troubling times of climate-forced large-scale migration. Such theories may help us imagine how to live more sustainably, pleurably, and purposefully at the intersections of our necessary (i.e., constitutive) identifications with our interdependency—the communities to which we belong and the new ones we will have to form *now*, not later in a revolutionary rebirth from the apocalyptic ashes of fascist imaginaries, but with the still living elements of our present planet earth.

The Monstrous Others of Speculative Horror and Psychoanalysis

According to the Marxist and psychoanalytic film critic Robin Wood’s highly influential essay, “An Introduction to the American Horror Film,” horror films adhering to “progressive” logics are notable for “their fulfillment of our nightmare wish to smash the norms that oppress us and which our moral conditioning teaches us to revere.”⁸⁰⁸ On the other hand, characteristics contributing to the “genre’s reactionary wing” entail the further necessary discipline and domestication of “uncivilized” (i.e. the repressed and othered) aspects of human identity and desire that have rebelliously resurfaced after the partial “failure” of patriarchal capitalist socialization processes during early childhood. In broad terms, the final part of Wood’s theory suggests that “the figure of the Monster” in American horror films is portrayed in polarized fashion as sympathetic and/or “evil incarnate.”⁸⁰⁹ In other words, the monster functions as a vehicle for the dramatization of a kind of Norse battle between the new gods, whose ambition is to allow for the beneficial reemergence and striving for recognition of the repressed, oppressed, and othered aspects of selfhood, versus

⁸⁰⁸ Robin Wood, “An Introduction to the American Horror Film,” in *Movies and Methods: An Anthology: Volume 2*, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 129.

⁸⁰⁹ Wood, “An Introduction,” 113.

the old reactionary giants that seek to restore hierarchy and inequality via controlling constraints and prohibiting taboos.

Central to Wood's understanding of the political functions of the monster figure in American horror films is his concept of "surplus repression," which he defines as "specific to a particular culture and is the process whereby people are conditioned from earliest infancy to take on predetermined roles within that culture."⁸¹⁰ More specifically, he suggests that surplus repression succeeds when it has shaped us into "monogamous heterosexual bourgeois patriarchal capitalists ("bourgeois" even if we are born into the proletariat, for we are talking here of ideological norms rather than material status)."⁸¹¹ For Wood, the repression of the human species' "natural" bisexuality (i.e., the "femininity" and same-sex attraction in men and the "masculinity" and same-sex attraction in women) is key to "forming human beings for specific predetermined social roles."⁸¹² Under capitalist patriarchies, anything that appears contrary to these norms is monstrously other. While Wood clearly recognizes that gender plays an important role in this "conditioning-via-repression" process, he seems to only focus on the Oedipal stage of development. Put differently, he does not emphasize the developmental and ongoing social significance of the earlier "maternal-infant dyad" stage.

Indeed, Wood's "monogamous heterosexual bourgeois patriarchal capitalists" also repress what the philosophical psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin has theorized as the *intersubjective relational process* itself—the interactive, interdependent system of mutual, reciprocal recognition that first takes place between two minds in the early maternal-infant

⁸¹⁰ Wood, "An Introduction," 109.

⁸¹¹ Wood, "An Introduction," 109.

⁸¹² Wood, "An Introduction," 111.

dyad stage. This early intersubjective process is theorized phenomenologically as oscillations between rhythmic oneness, joyful differentiation (i.e., a healthy consciousness of where the other ends and the self begins), and co-created “world building” of intimate spaces of “thirdness” that are not reducible to either the self or the other. For Benjamin, this series of dialectical oscillations, in developmental terms, constitutes the formation of the self in the first place, before the oedipal repression of the internal “other” from Wood’s account of political socialization.

Benjamin’s concept of thirdness as a kind of psychic position and intersubjective space, as well as a process or activity, offers a useful model to help better understand the “monsters” of *Midsommar* and the “aliens” of *Aniara* as figuring the repression of the process of othering that haunts the collective imagination and discourse of the far right in discussions of climate-induced migration. Benjamin’s model builds upon object relations theories and infant-mother observation studies that describe how the mind is formed in a dialectical communication process between the attachment figure and the infant. For example, “normal” development begins with the infant proto-subject’s necessary yet temporary sense of omnipotence, a perception made possible via the immature mental tendency toward excessive projective identification and the inability to differentiate between external and internal objects.⁸¹³ Projective identification is an unconscious strategy for reducing emotional distress. Through fantasy, it is a “mental activity that allows us to alter an unpleasant reality by making it into something more pleasurable.”⁸¹⁴ In this way, infantile pleasures and anxieties are confusedly associated with good and bad aspects of the self, and

⁸¹³ Donald Winnicott, “The theory of the parent-infant relationship,” *Reading Winnicott*, eds. Lesley Caldwell and Angela Joyce (London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2011), 147-169.

⁸¹⁴ Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2004), 12.

are defensively inserted into the objects of external reality, especially attachment figures in early experience. This normal stage of omnipotence and excessive projection is “appropriately subverted by the adaptive mother” incrementally at developmentally appropriate times.⁸¹⁵ In other words, as the infant starts to notice the other as a separate, equal subject (via increased capacity for cognition and emotional regulation) and the attachment figure begins to intervene more markedly in one-way projective communications, the subject/infant is slowly freed from the psychic aloneness of thinking the external world emanates from themselves.

In observational studies of mother-infant interactions, these interventions take the form of basic interactive patterns of attuned “rhythmicity,” in which the good-enough attachment figure tries to mediate the persecutory intensity of “bad” projected external objects by carefully considering, understanding, and responding to the infant’s signals of emotional disequilibrium in the form of “marked” ostensive cues (e.g., eye contact, contingent reactivity, special vocal tones, etc.). Self-other differentiating and empathetic, ostensive cues trigger the sense of self as a center of meaning refreshingly separate from, yet also receptive to, the revitalizing influence of others. Additionally, this marked mirroring behavior stimulates the infant’s trust in the future expectation of effective parental mediation (i.e., what Benjamin calls the lawful third or the sense that the world appropriately recognizes and responds to one’s suffering). Attachment figures who consistently succeed in helping the infant to make meaning out of emotionally overwhelming experience create a sense of stable expectation and thereby instill the neural systems that enable an epistemological stance of trust and receptivity toward social others.

⁸¹⁵ Winnicott, “The theory of the parent-infant relationship,” 151.

To summarize, Benjamin describes her theory of the oscillating process of intersubjective “choreography” through the metaphor of a co-created and unscripted dance that one learns in infancy and continues to enact throughout the lifecycle. In ideal circumstances, the dance begins with a) mutual intended attunement between self and other. Attunement is then inevitably replaced by b) moments of breakdown in the rhythmic togetherness of the third and the corresponding inward retreat or dissociation of the self. And finally, in good circumstances of intersubjective literacy, these steps are followed by c) the acknowledgement by the self of the other’s communicated and recognized failures of alignment which culminates in relational repair and psychic stability. Crucially, this last step of acknowledgement not only involves the subject’s recognition of the independence and autonomy of the other, but also contains the subject’s recognition of his or her own vulnerable and interdependent relation to the other.

However, this developmental process is violated and warped under forms of western patriarchal socialization in the global north. According to Benjamin, in such societies the masculine, invulnerable, hyper-independent “master identity” from Hegel’s *Phenomenology of the Spirit* (1807) is idealized across race, class, and gender. And the early infantile splitting of the “good” subject from the “bad” projected object becomes part of the mechanism of repression and denial of the other that characterizes adult experience. Repression in this sense becomes a method for avoiding the trauma of not being recognized in some capacity by the parent (e.g., a child assigned “male” at birth is caught admiring the look of his mother’s lipstick on his face and is punished). This devalued, “bad” aspect of the self is then projected onto monstrous others. Benjamin suggests this process is finalized during the oedipal stage of patriarchal socialization, which involves the universal

repudiation of the “feminine” (i.e., the maternal body perceived as interdependent with and chained to the mortal realm of “nature”).

This means that not only are feminine traits repressed and denied by “masculine” subjects but also the actual holding or “recognizing function” of the maternal/parental figure is also repressed. In other words, to deny the “fact of mutual dependency on equally human others” the whole intersubjective “dance” of attunement/breakdown/repair necessary to human survival is repressed and forgotten.⁸¹⁶ Instead, the western subject without memory un-reflexively demands recognition while refusing to recognize the subjectivity of the feminine “object” (i.e., women, other cultures, ethnic minorities, “the proletariat,” animals, nature, etc.). For Benjamin, this projective form of “relating” involves the “complementary doer-done to relation,” in which one is unable to relate to external others beyond the instrumental, defensive, and destructive projective fantasy that “Only one can live,” self-versus-other, us-versus-them.⁸¹⁷ The continued idealization of the master identity maintains a social aspiration toward the delusion of self-sufficient omnipotence and therefore enacts the repetitive compulsion toward abuser/victim, doer/done to one-way projective entanglements and obscures the fact that for each “to recognize the other...is essential to emotional liberation.”⁸¹⁸ In sum, Hegel’s master identity requires two achievements. It must “renounce need for the maternal object in order to separate itself from early helplessness and dependency, that is, to become like the father.”⁸¹⁹ And it must forget entirely this whole

⁸¹⁶ Jessica Benjamin, *Beyond Doer and Done To: Recognition Theory, Intersubjectivity and the Third* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 19.

⁸¹⁷ Benjamin, *Beyond Doer and Done To*, 12.

⁸¹⁸ Benjamin, *Beyond Doer and Done To*, 14.

⁸¹⁹ Benjamin, *Beyond Doer and Done To*, 15.

process of the formulation of selfhood that was absolutely interdependent on engaging with the mother's structuring recognition.

Imagining early emotional experience in these terms (as a slow emergence from the dialectical cycles of projective, instrumental relating into the reflexivity of intersubjective "holding" or mutual recognition) is useful for imagining the sociopolitical implications of how we oscillate between these psychic positions throughout the lifecycle. For example, as Benjamin suggests, an intersubjective theory of the dyad can help us to better understand non-dyadic formations like the group/community life and processes of collective trauma. Benjamin's theory seems to build upon Wilfred Bion's ideas to suggest a useful ethical model where individual subjects, regardless of relational type (i.e., analyst/patient, friends, lovers, etc.), become conscious of and take turns enacting the occupation of the position of the "mother" and "infant." In Bion's terms, at times the individual subject performs the role of the "contained" by demanding recognition, of communicating/transmitting unwanted affect to the attachment figure, who then satisfies the subject's need for recognition by "containing" or metabolizing, resonating with, and converting the toxic feeling into psychic nutrients, the recognizable and thinkable elements characteristic of reflective functioning for re-introjection and mental growth.⁸²⁰ In a mutually, reflective "benign hermeneutic circle," this dance generates Benjamin's co-created "third" space—a lawful habitat—that allows for the interdependent, interacting pair to mature into the creativity of mutual enrichment and metamorphosis, growth. Indeed, attachment studies show that a sense of security of attachment, "rooted in a history of feeling recognized, appears to increase the likelihood of trust" in others as valuable sources of knowledge.⁸²¹ Such an attachment history also

⁸²⁰ Wilfred Bion, *Learning from Experience* (London: Karnac Books, 1984).

⁸²¹ Fonagy, et al., "Reconciling Psychoanalytic Ideas," 795.

“provides a model to follow when one encounters a vulnerable or needy other,” like a displaced climate refugee, for example.⁸²²

However, there are significant and negative interpersonal and social consequences if Benjamin is correct in her understanding of trauma as the non-recognition of the self by an other with whom one is interdependent. Likewise, Wood’s claim that Western subjects are socialized through a violent mechanism, that requires the self to repress the otherness within, forebodes later debilitating sociopolitical effects. The problem is that subjects may resort to dysfunctional attachment styles in developmental contexts of mandatory repression as brought forth by the attachment figure’s non-recognition of socially devalued traits in the subject. And dysfunctional attachment styles include anxious and avoidant care systems. And anxious/avoidant care systems involve tendencies to feel “overwhelmed by personal distress, to slip into the role of another needy person rather than occupying the role of caregiver, or to maintain emotional distance from the needy other as a way of reducing his or her own negative emotions.”⁸²³

The prevalence of anxious and avoidant care systems may contribute to the decline of prosocial behavior that is key to the survival of our admittedly flawed current diverse and democratic cultures, but also would foreclose possibly better future social systems. The point here is that this repressive style of forming western master identities—through the non-recognition of vulnerable, interdependent internal and external others—is especially problematic in the context of increasing numbers of climate refugees in need of deep

⁸²² Phillip R. Shaver, Mario Miulincer, Jacquelyn T. Gross, Jessica A. Stern, and Jude A. Cassidy, “A Lifespan Perspective on Attachment and Care for Others: Empathy, Altruism, and Prosocial Behavior,” in *Handbook of Attachment: Theory, Research, and Clinical Applications*, eds. Jude Cassidy and Phillip R. Shaver (New York and London: The Guilford Press, 2016), 879.

⁸²³ Shaver et al., “A Lifespan Perspective,” 892.

support, recognition, and care. If predictions of masses of people in “aggressive” need activate dysfunctional care systems characteristic of the western nations of the global north, then it is probable that far-right discourses may make these problematic psychic dispositions worse and more serious. Furthermore, the far right may discover that evoking such dysfunctional relations to interdependency through apocalyptic narratives of rebirth and pastoral nostalgia may advance their nativist and anti-immigration agendas.

Climate Migration Anxiety and the Horror of Interdependence

At first glance, the plots of Ari Aster’s *Midsommar* (2019) and Pella Kågerman and Hugo Lilja’s *Aniara* (2018) seem set in dramatically different times and worlds. Despite the large degrees of temporal and spatial separation between these two films, read through the framework of attachment theory and intersubjective psychoanalysis they are useful for thinking about the ways white nationalists use xenophobic, melancholic, and nostalgic rhetoric to frame the rapidly spreading global issue of climate migration. For example, both plots oddly begin with the traumatic loss of a damaged “home” by a newly orphaned “family of man” as experienced by white, western individuals from nations in the global north. This is an intentional reversal meant to highlight the reality that the burden of climate vulnerability disproportionately falls on the global south (residents of Batasan in the Philippines and the Maldivian Islands, for example). And both films trace the psychological effects of the western refugees’ fated migration journey across forbidden borders in search of a new Eden, only to arrive at the unexpected realization that “all they’ve ever dreamt of

will never occur” and, even worse, all of their “visions and dreams” were always already “going towards their demise.”⁸²⁴

In addition to providing a critique of western, master identity formation and dysfunctional relational dynamics as responsible for our species’ march toward extinction, the plot arcs of both films foreground how master subjects refuse to acknowledge their white melancholia. By making explicit/implicit reference to the western addiction to the self-fulfilling prophecy depicted in Hieronymus Bosch’s count-down-to-doomsday triptych oil painting from the late medieval period, *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (see Figure 1), the films suggest that white melancholia drives the master subjects’ indulgence in pastoral nostalgia and narratives of apocalyptic rebirth from decadence.



Figure 1: Hieronymus Bosch, *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (c. 1490-1505).

⁸²⁴ Annika Rogell, “Producer’s Statement,” in *Aniara Press Kit* (2018), https://s3.amazonaws.com/cdn.filmtrackonline.com/mongrelmedia/starcm_vault_root/media%2Fpublicwebassets%2FMongrelized+Aniara+Press+Kit_%7B7c0c6648-106c-e911-a986-0edcbcd33718%7D.pdf.

The first panel of the painting depicts God's gift of Eve to Adam as birds fly in the distant horizons and animals roam. The second panel attempts to show a relationship between the "deadly sins" and overpopulation (with clear parallels to fears of mass migration by the overpopulated global south—according to the contemporary western imagination mired in the confused yet compatible logic of Malthus and Hitler). And the third panel shows the supposed results of the unrestrained, frenzied consumption portrayed in the second panel: Paradise is destroyed and replaced by a nightmare on Earth. As a strategy of critique, the films mirror the nostalgic ethos and apocalyptic logic of Bosch's painting. For example, *Midsommar* carefully conforms to these narrative expectations. But these expectations are ultimately disrupted and destabilized at the end of the film by the irruption into the plot of an absurd, pseudo-feminist revenge fantasy wherein Danny's distress dissolves into a rather demonic smile as Christian is sacrificed in a village ritual. The nostalgic ethos and apocalyptic logic are disrupted by this subtle critique of narratives that promote the total absorption into a loving, "homogenous" family at the cost of the complete reconstruction of one's sense of human identity and community belonging to the point that the previous self is unrecognizable and forgotten. In contrast, *Aniara* relentlessly documents a grueling sequence of violent events and inevitable consequences that stem from white melancholia, or the collective complicity of white countries in pastoral nostalgia—a regressive fantasy of omnipotence via one-way projective relations with maternal natures and their AI replacements (i.e., "'feminine beings,' by which I mean those who carry the negative affects for the other").⁸²⁵

⁸²⁵ Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect*, 15.

Located in a future marked by environmental destruction and nuclear holocaust, *Aniara* tells the science fiction of an evacuation to Mars that goes horrifyingly wrong: the spaceship *Aniara*, carrying thousands of privileged refugees away from the dying Earth, gets thrown off course due to a collision with space debris. The engine catches fire and so to prevent a fatal explosion, the villainous captain ejects the fuel supply and thus loses all maneuvering power over the ship. Significantly, the captain is portrayed by Swedish-Iranian actor and filmmaker Arvin Kananian. At first, the passengers attempt to adjust to life onboard the aimlessly wandering *Aniara* by escaping into a virtual paradise simulated by the “Mima,” a kind of mothering AI that is designed to reach into individual human memory banks to induce “near-spiritual” visual and sensory hallucinations of being back in the pastoral landscapes and wildernesses of Earth (see Figure 2 below).



Figure 2: Pella Kågerman and Hugo Lilja, stills from *Aniara*, 29:02 & 5:20.

In the left still above the passengers have escaped to their personal paradises. The Mima creates the right image from the contents of MR’s “memory bank.” The Mima is managed by a nameless protagonist (portrayed by Emelie Jonsson) who is simply referred to by her labor function as the “Mimaroben” (MR). Eventually, however, despite MR’s warning, this instrumental treatment of the sentient Mima as a receptacle for the one-way projective

“dumping” of negative affects proves unsustainable. The AI commits suicide after its desperate appeal for spiritual release is cruelly ignored by the non-white captain: “There is protection from nearly everything, but there is no protection from mankind... How terror blasts in, and horror blasts out. Deliver me from the vision.” After the Mima self-destructs, the passengers, who have come to rely on the one-way comforting recognition that the Mima had provided, become apathetic and disoriented and start forming cults while ironically the captain implements violent authoritarian rule. Over the course of 24 years, the spaceship transforms into a sarcophagus that drifts off helplessly into the ominous depths of the cosmos—the blank, non-recognizing gaze of “mother” space. The resistant, incomprehensible otherness and *Blackness* of interstellar space is likely what pushes the predominantly white, living-dead passengers over the edge, and they descend piecemeal into the “decadence” of mindless consumerism, abject dependency, sex cults, and suicidal dejection. The final scene of the film shows the dark and lifeless spaceship, 5,981,407 years in the future, meandering toward an Earth-like planet in the Lyra constellation. The arrival to pastoral heaven has come a little too late.

Similarly, the plot of *Midsommar* traces a western heroine’s journey from a lost home to her arrival at an unexpected “Paradise.” For example, the disturbingly unexpected fairytale sounds of harps and an angelic choir accompany the opening scene of *Midsommar*,

which is a prophetic mural (see Figure 3).⁸²⁶



Figure 3: Mu Pan, mural for *Midsommar* (2019). Courtesy of the artist.

Reminiscent of Bosch's representation of the tragic history and fate of humanity in *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, the film's opening mural consists of four separate scenes intended to reveal the entire plot in a single chronological image. After a few seconds, the mural opens from the center like the curtain of an opera to reveal a series of beautiful snowy wilderness landscapes from Northern Sweden. And the magical chorus is replaced with the haunting melody of a Scandinavian kulning song, the traditional herding call sung by women to attract grazing livestock back home from high mountain and forest pastures, but also to communicate to distant human listeners, and to deter predators and other threatening supernatural beings.⁸²⁷ The sense of foreboding solace and inertia given off by the Siren's call to return to home to a pastoral mother nature is broken by the shrill sound of the

⁸²⁶ Mu Pan, opening mural from *Midsommar* (2019), https://mupan.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/midsommar_color_3000.jpg.

⁸²⁷ Anna Johnson, "Voice Physiology and Ethnomusicology: Physiological and Acoustical Studies of the Swedish Herding Song," *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 16 (1984): 42-66.

protagonist Dani (portrayed by Florence Pugh) receiving a telephone call and the beep of her parents' answering machine inside of a silent house whose residents are all dead—aural signifiers of the fated events to unfold as depicted in the first grisly scene of the mural (see Figure 3). Very soon after these opening frames, the audience learns that no one was available to answer Dani's call because her sister had committed parricide and suicide via carbon monoxide poisoning—a reference to the intergenerational existential aggression triggered by assuming unfairly burden of responsibility of inheriting a climate-changed world, an issue which is also suggested in *Aniara*.

After the tragic death of her family, Dani is thrown into a despairing search for a new family, or at least an intimate partner, to recognize and help her process and grow from the trauma. Dani is reluctantly invited by her emotionally avoidant and disloyal boyfriend, Christian (portrayed by Jack Reynor), on a trip with his anthropologist classmates, Mark and Josh (portrayed by Will Poulter and William Jackson Harper, respectively), to a summer solstice celebration at a small village commune in Hårga, Sweden—the hometown of his only Swedish friend, Pelle (portrayed by Vilhelm Blomgren). They enter the community by driving under a sign in Swedish translated as: “Stop the mass immigration to Hälsingland. Vote for the ‘Free North’ [political party] this Autumn.” After parking their car in the middle of the pastoral scene from Bosch's first panel (see Figure 1), they are invited to consume entheogens under a midnight sun (that merely concretizes their alienation from others as well as their own bounded senses of selfhood). After entering the actual perimeter of the village town through a circular hole in a giant wooden, painted sun straight out of a far-right fantasy of the golden age (i.e., a piece of Hårga religious art), the plot unfolds with Christian and his American friends, along with two non-European Lononders, disappearing

one by one, reduced to objects for a religious ceremony that happens once every 90 years involving dark fertility rites and ritual senicide and sacrifice. In a strange use of irony, the colonial, culturally-appropriating Americans are also apparently murdered partly to protect and preserve the Swedish community's nativist, cultural identity.

The opening scenes of *Aniara* also begin with a similar tragic loss of family. The film oddly begins with the ending credits running alongside a series of depictions of chaotic weather, war-ravaged landscapes, and ghostly cities. These scenes are musically accompanied with a shrill and constant staccato note that creates a sense of panic alongside the ethereal white noise of a waterphone instrument that imitates the sound of a dying person's last gasping breath. This disturbing visual and aural imagery concludes with a spaceship of refugees leaving Earth's atmosphere. As a series of frames provide a survey of the faces of the refugees onboard, a mother's disembodied voice is heard asking if her toddler would like to say "bye-bye to Earth. You'll regret it if you don't." To which the toddler responds: "Bye-bye Earth." Another tragic loss of family occurs later in the timeline of *Aniara*. MR becomes romantically involved with the pilot Isagel (portrayed by Bianca Cruzeiro). Isagel becomes pregnant after participating in ritual sex, and they plan to raise the child together as a family. However, during the last trimester of her pregnancy, Isagel begins to despair about the ethics of reproduction in the context of their small "island" nation threatened by the problem of scarce resources and the potential of a colonizing flood by the vacuum of space. Isagel believes "there are no possibilities here" for a child born into a society organized by a tranquilizing combination of hierarchical domination and religious mysticism: "I'll give birth to a prisoner. I'll deliver someone to eternal night." Isagel's circumstances parallel the suicide of Dani's sister. But they also recall images of the global

south abandoned to deal with a crisis they did not create (as in the flooding in Bangladesh for example). Such island nations are surrounded by the cruelly unrecognizing empty stare of the wealthy westernized global north, like the Aniara spaceship is suspended in the cold vacuum of space. However, MR vows to Isagel that she is “going to get rid of the darkness,” and she tries to create the conditions for new kinds of recognition, kinship, and intimacy appropriate for thriving in their new island nation. But on the sixth year of the voyage Isagel kills the child and commits suicide.

In this sense, the Mima can be read as a representation of the personal and collective inaction and denial surrounding the climate crisis—responses which are “most common in the western nations of the global north, which, perhaps not surprisingly, largely brought about the crisis” and will also, not surprisingly, be the last to feel the effects of the crisis.⁸²⁸ For example, after the passengers onboard Aniara have lost the nostalgic hope of ever being able to return to their original home-planet Earth and once their utopian dreams of a new Eden on Mars are dashed, they become increasingly addicted to the psychological services provided by the Mima. In an introductory lesson outlining the protocol for interacting with the Mima, MR explains that she was “originally created” to emotionally comfort the “first settlers on Mars” by virtually “transport[ing]” them “back to Earth as it once was.” MR instructs the passengers to lie down comfortably under the golden sun colored Mima, tilting their heads down, and then “once you go into the images, you won’t feel your...[.]” MR never finishes explaining exactly what the Mima does to the mind, because she is interrupted and jostled about as the Aniara crashes into space debris. However, the film gives the impression that the Mima acts as a kind of physical and mental-spiritual sedative by taking

⁸²⁸ Ken Hiltner, “Climate Crisis 101” (2020), <http://hiltner.english.ucsb.edu/index.php/2914-2/#Syllabus>.

away the passengers' moral culpability for destroying Paradise Earth. For example, a passenger asks her, "What's happening?" and the MR responds: "Not sure, but don't worry. Why don't you lie down on the Mima pillow. You can lie here for as long as you want." This dialogue demonstrates that the Mima provides the master identity the opportunity to continue the illusion of invulnerability via one-way projective relations to the objectified other, but also gestures toward the way this personal dynamic is extrapolated to the level of exploitative political relations between the global north and south. This sense of safety and access to "paradisiacal" resources that the Mima provides is a metaphor for distinctly western privileges that multiply inaction and denial, and which are literally built off of the backs of "feminine beings," the social others and their lands that the western nations of the global north deny using instrumentally for the impossible purpose of unlimited economic growth and unbridled accumulation and consumerism.

But *Midsommar* and *Aniara* not only share a concern with mythologies of apocalyptic rebirth into the lost golden age. Nor do the films only focus on the monsters born from psychological development under white-nationalist, western patriarchies made manifest in the cults formed in both films, which consist of an odd mixture of nationalist white-separatism and distorted elements of eco-spiritual communalism, as advocated by some eco-fascist groups. They also showcase the monsters (and aliens) that haunt the nightmares of white, masculinist subjects who subscribe to the far-right ideologies. For both films are full of the "monsters within" described by Wood and revealed through Benjamin's model, "monsters" understood as materialized projections of the otherness that is loved, hated, and repressed within the "master identity." "The monstrous body is pure culture," according to Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's formulation: "The monster's body quite literally

incorporates [the] fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy (ataractic or incendiary) ... of a certain cultural moment—of a time, a feeling, and a place.”⁸²⁹ The “monsters” in the films also include the “original” repressed other, “woman” as the embodiment of a misconceived understanding of interdependency (i.e. the vessel of repressed feminine behaviors and “decadent” practices and “deviations” from patriarchal sexual norms).

Among these othered aspects of deviant sexuality, femininity, other cultures, etc. that are projected onto the monsters of *Midsommar* and the “aliens” of *Aniara* is the fear of practices or events that repeat the affective “atmospheres” of the foundational interdependency of early life. In both films, instances of erotic intimacy or ritual, practices or acts that emphasize the vulnerability of age and youth, the processing of trauma and public mourning rituals, are all accompanied with the most disquieting and nightmarish sounds to highlight the horror of interdependency and its interactive mechanism of mutual recognition, the primal rhythmicity of the third from early life. Both films’ “horror” music and the sounds that emanate from their female and/or “feminized” characters during rituals and events all foreground how terrifying the power of radical interdependency is for the

⁸²⁹ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” *The Monster Theory Reader*, eds. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 38.

“master identity” (see Figure 4).



Figure 4: Pella Kågerman and Hugo Lilja, stills from *Aniara*, 1:40:00 & 1:00:09 (left column); Ari Aster, stills from *Midsommar*, 2:00:38 & 2:05:08 (right column).

Examples from *Aniara* include the top left image of the cult in a prayer chant: “Come closer. Give us light,” and the bottom left image that features the cult’s unsettling fertility ritual. Examples from *Midsommar* include the top right image, which is also a scene from a fertility ritual whose participants are eerily moaning in unison to mirror and amplify the emotions of the “breeding” woman, Maja (portrayed by Isabelle Grill). And the bottom right image is a kind of group mourning ritual that also pairs radical empathic mirroring and recognition with the uncanny sounds of gasping breaths and guttural moans.

These rituals and their soundscapes all remind one of the reciprocal processes of recognition fundamental to the development of a sense of self, the fear of the object-other who gave the master identity recognition (i.e., a sense of power, independence, invulnerability). But these intersubjective scenes and sounds also horrify by provoking the

memory of the *process* that involved the object-m/other who, in justifiably demanding and deserving recognition of her separate existence and acknowledgement of her suffering, created the “master’s” mind. These scenes recall the memory of the wit(h)ness-Thing who brings the master proto-subjects out of solipsism and into a relation with the external world. In sum, these films put on display the point of view of the master subject which experiences these “intersubjective” activities as horrifying because they threaten the illusion of self-containment. But such images are also horrifying to the historically conscious perspective that remembers and notices the way that eco-spiritual crowds, moving as one interdependent body in jubilant apocalyptic togetherness, are haunted by the fascist propaganda of blood and soil, of images calling forth the “pure Nordic races” to return to the earlier golden ages of a nation’s history. Similar to Nietzsche’s agenda in his essay “On the Use and Abuse of History for Life,” these films will not let the audience forget that imagining a viable and sustainable way out of our troubling times requires a critical, archival, and creative consciousness, a “certain kind of knowledge of the past, now in the form of monumental, now of antiquarian, now of critical history.”⁸³⁰ According to this logic then, *Midsommar* and *Aniara* arrive at the speculative conclusion that the “Earth and Human will soon [become] a paradise lost” if one-way projective relations continue to dominate human identity formation and social dynamics at the individual and collective levels.⁸³¹ Furthermore, the films suggest that these toxic psychosocial dynamics will also continue to reproduce if the public continues to uncritically consume nostalgic apocalyptic narratives that popularize the belief that the obliteration of the (non-white) enemy is necessary for the survival of “humanity”

⁸³⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, “On the Use and Disadvantages of History for Life,” in *Untimely Meditations*, ed. Daniel Breazeale and trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 77.

⁸³¹ Rogell, “Producer’s Statement,” in *Aniara Press Kit* (2018).

and that salvation from “darkness” means the “return” to a lost, conservative golden age. Rather, what ensures a “dark future ahead” is that such reactionary, nostalgic narratives survive without major critical qualifications.⁸³²

However, *Midsommar* diverges from a straightforward critique of the horror of interdependency by the far right. *Midsommar* also speculates about how the psychological effects of losing family, ecological home, and intersubjective recognition could produce a monstrous, radical personality change in the shape of the “survivor’s identity, a never before seen existential and vital configuration.”⁸³³ In her book *Ontology of the Accident* Catherine Malabou describes how this survivor’s identity emerges post-trauma due to the principle of destructive plasticity. She defines destructive plasticity as a life force that “enables the appearance or formation of alterity where the other is absolutely lacking. Plasticity is the form of alterity when no transcendence, flight or escape is left. The only other that exists in this circumstance is being other to the self.”⁸³⁴ In other words, traumatic moments of intolerable pain, violence, loss, or extreme tension “push a person towards an outside that does not exist.”⁸³⁵ The result is the formation of a “flight identity” or a “radical metamorphosis” that is “well and truly the fabrication of a new person, a novel form of life, without anything in common with a preceding form.”⁸³⁶ This kind of metamorphosing trauma, for Malabou, is the “sudden event, linked to the permanent disappearance of our childhood and thus to the impossibility of taking refuge in the past, the impossibility of regression.”⁸³⁷ She suggests that suddenly without warning after a brutal catastrophe, we

⁸³² Elgenius and Rydgren, “Frames of nostalgia and belonging,” 597.

⁸³³ Malabou, *Ontology*, 19.

⁸³⁴ Malabou, *Ontology*, 11.

⁸³⁵ Malabou, *Ontology*, 10.

⁸³⁶ Malabou, *Ontology*, 18.

⁸³⁷ Malabou, *Ontology*, 48.

become unrecognizable to ourselves, as well as indifferent to our old worries as wholly new creatures with new desires. However, Malabou notes, these new psychologies are often marked by emotional coldness and detachment. The survivor's new identity is not necessarily an affirmative model, but it is a category of human life being born(e) and therefore may be important to consider as environmental and political disaster escalates in scale and frequency.

The psycho-social dimensions of the climate-caused *accident* as manifested in the form of the survivor's identity are noticeable in plot points from *Midsommar* that stray from the folk horror genre conventions. For example, Dani reacts differently than the others to the exposure to psychoactive teas and midnight sun. While frantically dancing with other women from the village in a maypole competition, inspired by the Hårgalåten folk song, she becomes suddenly joyful, intimate with the others, and fluent in Swedish. The folk song lyrics derive from a Hårga legend, still told widely to children across Sweden, in which an entire town's youth are seduced into dancing to the death by a fiddle-playing demon (a story that recalls Bosch's third panel of frantic, overpopulated debauchery). But when Dani is the only woman left standing, after enduring hours of forced, erratic dancing, she is crowned May Queen by the Hårga people, and begins to feel finally recognized. She feels the first stirrings of a stabilizing interdependence and sense of familial belonging, although horror creeps in, even here. She is forced into dancing, kissing, and empathically mirroring until she is assimilated into the eco-fascist community. Dani's psychological metamorphosis culminates in the notorious closing scene of the film: The final camera shot foregrounds Dani's smile of complicity at Christian's transformation into a sacrificial animal via insertion into the corpse of a gutted bear to be slaughtered by a "cleansing" fire. When Dani

smiles at the camera, it is as if she asks the audience what is subjectivity formed of traumatic destructive plasticity as opposed to melancholic subjectivity still attached to/able to process its lost object of love: “If we lose all relation to childhood and the past, the moment we are formed by destruction, what do we look like? What do we look like once we are metamorphosized by destruction, once we are formed by destructive, explosive, nuclear plasticity?”⁸³⁸ The answer, the closing events of the film seem to suggest, might be the horrible repetition of fascist mysticism and sacrificial Malthusian environmental ideology, on the one hand. But on the other hand, the film also suggests that a break in the continuity of toxic subjectivity, culture, and history is possible. Dani’s indifference to and disinterest in one final look back at Christian represents her burning past and suggests her entry into a novel and monstrous mode of existence outside of the xenophobic norms of white, nationalist heteropatriarchies.

As I will discuss in the next chapter, in the *Broken Earth Trilogy* Jemisin depicts a “black mater” protagonist who undergoes a similar kind of traumatic transformation according to laws that resemble Malabou’s concept of destructive plasticity. However, Jemisin does not reproduce the narrative of descent into political paralysis or simply rehearse the acts of xenophobic violence commonly executed by master subjects racked with white melancholia and/or the nihilism of survivor identity. Instead, Jemisin uses her traumatized protagonist to explore and enact how matrixial trans-subjects can mobilize the drives underlying destructive plasticity and “racial melancholia” to form a queer,

⁸³⁸ Malabou, *Ontology*, 70.

multiethnic, cross-species practices of care organized around the collective and individual “anamnesis” of inherited trauma/abuse.⁸³⁹

⁸³⁹ David L. Eng and Shinhee Han, *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation: On the Social and Psychic Lives of Asian Americans* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2019).

Chapter 6. Poetry and Storytelling as Renewal: Militant Melancholia and the Queer Spirit of Matrixial Trans-subjectivity from Percy Bysshe Shelley's *The Witch of Atlas* to N.K. Jemisin's *The Broken Earth Trilogy*

In this chapter I analyze P.B. Shelley and N.K. Jemisin's representations of Black femininity that demonstrate the role of animalization/naturalization of race and gender in the sublime discourses and aesthetics of "universal humanity" that Zikiyyah Iman Jackson has identified. But this chapter focuses more on the unforeseen generative capacities of Jemisin's "wonderful" updates to this figure in her *Broken Earth* series that share much in common with Shelley's positive epistemophilic attunement to the "wild" potential of matrixial "natures" in *The Witch of Atlas* (ca. 1820) and his rejection of a transcendent order of Platonic Nature conspicuous in the sublime. In the first section I build on Debbie Lee's argument, in "Mapping the Interior: African Cartography and Shelley's *The Witch of Atlas*," that Shelley's poem portrays the "English mind" as the gender coded product of the "imperialistic mapping and naming" of African geography popular in nineteenth-century travel writing about sub-Saharan Africa.⁸⁴⁰ That is, Shelley critiques the universalist assumptions about sex and gender of these racialist observations, especially for how such an oppressive and reified framework of apprehension conditions Eurocentric commentators' perceptions and therefore the kinds of knowledge about other "natures" they are able to construct. While Shelley's poem of speculative fantasy criticizes British imperial representations of African geography and African women, it also celebrates what remains in excess of the gendered, racializing and animalizing terms of hegemonic discourse as represented by his "wizard Maid" figure and her beloved Hermaphroditus.

⁸⁴⁰ Debbie Lee, "Mapping the Interior: African Cartography and Shelley's *The Witch of Atlas*," *European Romantic Review* 8, no. 2 (1997): 182.

Similarly, but from the perspective of the African diaspora in the global north, in the second half of this chapter, I argue that N.K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth Trilogy* (2015, 2016, 2017) reimagines and mourns via "racial melancholy" the anti-Black histories of our current ecological situation.⁸⁴¹ Accordingly, I show how Jemisin employs second-person address, the narrative mode most conducive to arousing empathy and intersubjective recognition, to explore subjective effects of racial melancholia, or of "what mode of being becomes available, and what mode might *you* invent...if an essential feature of *your* existence is that the norm is not able to take hold" (my emphasis).⁸⁴² She depicts the racial past as stemming from a power elite's brutal system of indoctrination that educates the desire for knowledge negative forms of epistemophilia. This manifests in destructive and paranoid one-way projective communications between those who identify with the "master identity" and those forced into one of two slave classes called "tuners" and "orogenes." However, Jemisin also uses the aesthetic and epistemic mode of wonder—as opposed to the sublime—to approach and discern the supernormal of racialized mothering that remains resistant to the totalizing reach of the ruling state. Jemisin gives shape to this theoretical maternal fugitive enclave as a creative source, capacity for, and "location" of onto-epistemological change—where the "maroon philosophy at democracy's border" is born.⁸⁴³

The *Broken Earth* series reaches beyond realist restrictions and toward an imaginary of "matrixial" wonder that is distinct from the psychology, epistemology, and symbolic of the egotistical sublime and its imperial afterlives. These texts depict astonishingly

⁸⁴¹ David L. Eng and Shinhee Han, *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation: On the Social and Psychic Lives of Asian Americans* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2019).

⁸⁴² Jackson, *Becoming Human*, 101.

⁸⁴³ Joy James, "Afrarealism and the Black Matrix: Maroon Philosophy at Democracy's Border," *The Black Scholar* 43, no. 4 (2013).

ambivalent and melancholy moments of “revolutionary mothering,” in the form of effective matrixial encounters of mutual “epistemic trust” and “wit(h)nessing” as the magic that might glue together the matter(s) of multispecies, multi-cultural queer futurity. At the same time, these texts, especially Jemisin’s, remain firmly grounded in the realities of the structural sociopolitical antagonisms and power asymmetries that continue to unevenly haunt/shape developmental entanglements of care and the psychic terrains they produce across the global north and south. As a whole the chapter explores Shelley and Jemisin’s “black *mater(nal)*” figures, and the kinds of “mothering” work they do as they “care for the wild,” as L.O. Aranye Fradenburg Joy puts it.⁸⁴⁴ Jemisin’s texts also emphasize how “revolutionary mothering” is often performed by “other-than-gestational mothers.”⁸⁴⁵ To analyze these texts I use Bracha L. Ettinger’s concepts of “matrixial trans-subjectivity” and of “metramorphic borderlinking” as well as Joy James’ theorization of the “fugitive philosophy” created in response to the affordances and limitations of the “black matrix.”⁸⁴⁶ Ultimately, I suggest that these texts contribute to two ongoing debates in Black critical theory and posthuman Anthropocene discourse. On the one hand, Shelley’s *Witch* and Jemisin’s *Broken Earth* series critically interrogate *and* celebrate the terms of posthuman “relationality” popular in discussions about the viability of the Anthropocene concept.⁸⁴⁷ On the other hand, these

⁸⁴⁴ L.O. Aranye Fradenburg Joy, “Care of the Wild: A Primer,” in *Ecosophical Aesthetics: Art, Ethics and Ecology with Guattari*, eds. Patricia MacCormack and Colin Gardner (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 70.

⁸⁴⁵ Alexis Pauline Gumbs, *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals* (Chico and Edinburgh: AK Press, 2020), 162.

⁸⁴⁶ Bracha L. Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2006) and Joy James, “Afrarealism and the Black Matrix: Maroon Philosophy at Democracy’s Border,” *The Black Scholar* 43, no. 4 (2013): 124-131.

⁸⁴⁷ For example, see Axelle Karera, “Blackness and the Pitfalls of Anthropocene Ethics,” *Critical Philosophy of Race* 7, no. 1 (2019): 32-56, Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2018), and Braidotti, Rosi. “Four Theses on Posthuman Feminism,” *Anthropocene Feminism*, ed. Richard Grusin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 21-48.

texts combine the reconstructive thinking of “black optimism” with the deconstructive allegiance of “Afro-pessimism” to systematically grapple with the afterlives of slavery in the form of ongoing Black suffering.⁸⁴⁸

In this regard, I mean to explore how scholars of the Romantic era negotiate the intersections and divergences between so-called Afropessimistic versus optimistic Black studies theory and philosophy.⁸⁴⁹ In particular, I take up Bakary Diaby’s suggestion that the study of Blackness in the field of romanticism should “continue working on slavery, but we should not let it be our only engagement with, again, the deeply quotidian socio-political ordering of the world that we inhabit and have inherited from the long Romantic period.”⁸⁵⁰ Among other examples of how romantic studies might study Blackness beyond mostly white abolitionist representations of Black suffering, Diaby briefly suggests that scholars “look at P.B. Shelley’s ‘The Witch of Atlas’ and the part played by an African woman in the history of that poem’s world.”⁸⁵¹ I develop and extend Diaby’s interrelated propositions to argue that the critical and visionary project at the heart of Shelley’s *Witch* deeply resonates with the way that N.K. Jemisin’s *Broken Earth Trilogy* critiques naively utopian developmental narratives of posthuman care that seem blind to the real and imaginary “black and brown commons forged in the afterlives of invasion, genocide, slavery, and settler colonialism.”⁸⁵²

⁸⁴⁸ I acknowledge the reductive, over-simplifying nature of these supposed oppositional terms while also recognizing their hermeneutic and discursive power, and that as theorists we are all “reticent” about labels “in spite of the fact that we make recourse to them.” From Fred Moten, “Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh),” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 112, no. 4 (2013): 738.

⁸⁴⁹ For example, see Marlon B. Ross, “The Race of/in Romanticism: Notes Toward a Critical Race Theory,” *Race Romanticism, and the Atlantic*, ed. Paul Youngquist (London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2013), 25-58, and Debbie Lee, “Black Single Mothers in Romantic History and Literature,” *Race Romanticism, and the Atlantic*, ed. Paul Youngquist (London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2013), 165-181.

⁸⁵⁰ Bakary Diaby, “Black Women and/in the Shadow of Romanticism,” *European Romantic Review* 30, no. 3 (2019): 252.

⁸⁵¹ Diaby, “Black Women,” 252.

⁸⁵² Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes*, xii.

In other words, these texts follow Darieck Scott's theoretical explorations of the negative and positive potential of the interconnected genre-worlds of literary, psychological, and political fantasy. On the one hand, both Shelley and Jemisin speculate about the historical fantasies of distorted imperial minds that "sustain the unjust status quo that decrees blackness and queerness must occupy lower rungs on its hierarchy."⁸⁵³ But on the other hand, both texts also share Scott's faith in the subversive power of fantasy, that "fantasy's activity is partly the recovery of the possible, the *action*...of forging some kind of realization of the possible; it is a push back against the tyranny of history."⁸⁵⁴

In this way, both *The Witch of Atlas* and *The Broken Earth Trilogy* can be categorized as "Ustopias," which Margaret Atwood defines as a fictional world/mappable "landscape" and as a "state of mind" that combines utopian and dystopian elements, fantasies of an "imagined perfect society and its opposite."⁸⁵⁵ Both Shelley and Jemisin's Ustopias contain nightmarish and paradisaical states of mind portrayed as fantasy landscapes and vice versa. This linkage between landscapes and states of minds recalls my earlier discussion of Shelley's critique of toxic patriarchal social conditioning in *Queen Mab* where he warns that "Kings, priests, and statesmen, blast the human flower / Even in its tender bud . . ." by stifling the "mother's sacred name."⁸⁵⁶ Subjugated to this conditioning, the patriarchal "infant-arm becomes the bloodiest scourge / Of devastated earth . . ." in its destruction of nature and racialized, animalized, and feminized others.⁸⁵⁷ In other words,

⁸⁵³ Darieck Scott, "Introduction: Fantastic Bullets," *Keeping It Unreal: Black Queer Fantasy and Superhero Comics* (New York: New York University Press, 2022), 15.

⁸⁵⁴ Scott, "Introduction," 33.

⁸⁵⁵ Margaret Atwood, "Margaret Atwood: the road to Ustopia," *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/oct/14/margaret-atwood-road-to-ustopia>.

⁸⁵⁶ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Queen Mab*, *Shelley's Poetry and Prose: A Norton Critical Edition* 2nd ed., eds. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company: 2002), 37, IV, lines 104-105, 108.

⁸⁵⁷ Shelley, *Queen Mab*, 37, IV, lines 111-112.

Shelley recognizes the inscription of oppressive custom on the Eurocentric infant-subject's state of mind, which then "matures" into a lack of desire of or a distorted approach to knowing about other natures. In short, the inscription of oppressive custom on the infant mind negatively affects subsequent desires to know other natures. Shelley sees desolating power as literally infusing the material world, a long-lasting desertification evident in "Ozymandias," *Queen Mab*, and *The Sensitive Plant*, for example.

Similar to the way cognitive-affective habits and myths of origin are inscribed onto the mind by custom to become "mind-forg'd manacles" that filter the perception of the natural world, Shelley and Jemisin emphasize the way that thought styles or conceptual systems impress upon and inscribe landscapes of the natural world—how they infect and deform actual matter as mediated through the "infant-arm" wielding the "bloodiest scourge." That is, Shelley and Jemisin regard the physical environment itself as a social product. Cities become earthquake-riddled deserts and gardens become volcanos as a consequence of changes in the moral and civil nature of human beings and therefore in how they approach other natures in the attitudes and styles of their science and philosophy. For Shelley, power tends toward disease; it is the force that creates pathogenic spaces in the world. In much of Shelley's poetry tyrannical moral and political institutions cause a decline in peoples' capacity to maintain the fertility and health of their environment. Diseased environments are not the cause of social and political disorder but rather their result, the effects of hegemonic ideology and custom that is literally a desolating pestilence. Similarly, for Jemisin, the entire earth has been forever changed by what Kathryn Yusoff calls "White Geology" to such an extent that Bill McKibben has pronounced the "end of nature" and that our new planet, damaged and degraded beyond all recognition, should be called "Eaarth." Arguably, it is for

this reason that Jemisin aptly calls the hostile, sentient planet at the heart of her trilogy “Evil Father Earth,” for indeed, the planet is remade in the image of the imperial, liberal humanist, Cartesian subject, a veritable anti-Black patriarch and cannibal whose state of mind transforms nature into a “universe of death.”⁸⁵⁸ However, before “people began to do horrible things to Father Earth,” “[a]ccording to legend, Father Earth did not originally hate life” but rather “he was pleased and fascinated by it, and proud to nurture such strange *wild beauty* upon his surface” (my emphasis).⁸⁵⁹ These lines from Jemisin suggest some faith that psychosocial conditioning may still be reversible to the extent that humans “recover” and create new, healthy *fantasies* of perceptual and spiritual access to the wild and wonderful potential of natures within both self and other.

I think that these texts combine utopian and dystopian inflected aesthetics and fantasies (landscapes and states of mind) because they both are written in the midst of heated debates about the effectivity of reform versus revolution, abolition and police reform for example, on the one hand, and the French Revolution and environmental collapse on the other. Shelley and Jemisin show that possible utopias that unfold as a result of slow jurisprudence versus the rupturing apocalypse that brings the *jouissance* of the new may in fact “each contain a latent version of the other.”⁸⁶⁰ They seem to agree with Scott that “[r]eaching this habitable imaginary will not require exploding the whole world and starting again from scratch; nor does it require the inevitably and necessarily slow, torturous, Sisyphean struggle of eternal revolution.”⁸⁶¹ Marginalized writers and theorists do not have

⁸⁵⁸ Wordsworth, “*The Prelude* of 1805,” 466, Book 13, line 141.

⁸⁵⁹ N.K. Jemisin, *The Fifth Season, The Broken Earth: Book One* (New York: Orbit Books, 2015), 379.

⁸⁶⁰ Atwood, “Ustopia”

⁸⁶¹ Scott, “Introduction,” 40.

to accept the false choice between a rigorous commitment to only deconstructing anti-Black, antifeminine, nature-phobic histories and systems of domination or solely pursuing the reform/expansion of liberal humanism's "*selective and circumscribed*" circle of care.⁸⁶² But rather, they suggest that a more effective catalyst of cultural evolution lies in the fantastic approach of psychic, embodied, and inhabitable imaginaries, which may amount to representing a necessary triangulation of forces—the deconstructive dissolution of the worn-out genre of universal Man and his psychic models, liberal humanist reform, *and* the everyday, subversive, reality-constituting fantasies "in excess of the real," especially the "wild" ones we find in speculative literature including psychoanalysis.

The Wonder of Matrixial Non-Life and the Birth of Wild Wandering Newborn-ness in Percy Bysshe Shelley's The Witch of Atlas

Debbie Lee argues that P.B. Shelley's *The Witch of Atlas* is a poem that effectively captures the link between the "exploration of Africa's interior and the exploration of the human interior by Romantic writers" as well as the way that "gender codes coincide with the mapping of both."⁸⁶³ Shelley's critical focus on the gendered and racialized geopolitics of mapping during his time is helpful for the navigation of contemporary terrains of the "White Anthropocene," as what Kathryn Yusoff defines as both a "*colonial geology*" that "generates a specifically racialized territorialization of the earth," and a "political geology" that "organize[s] around an 'innocent' geologic subjectivity in the pursuit of a future environmental citizenship" that assumes specific "strategies of individuation and communing" in its "geologizing of the social."⁸⁶⁴ And this latter "erasure" of differentiated

⁸⁶² Jackson, *Becoming Human*, 20.

⁸⁶³ Lee, "Mapping the Interior," 169.

⁸⁶⁴ Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes*, 106.

Anthropocene effects in the interpellation of a “we” forgets that “our” “economies of geology still largely regulate geopolitics and modes of naturalizing, formalizing, and operationalizing dispossession and ongoing settler colonialism.”⁸⁶⁵ Indeed, Shelley attempts to critique the limited meaning and sublime function of the “black mater” and her imagined geographical locus for imperial subject formation by trying to make the “wild or the space of utopia... appear through the resignification of the primitive and the animalistic.”⁸⁶⁶ I understand Shelley’s *The Witch of Atlas* in this way as a poem that attempts to deconstruct and therein defamiliarize habitual anti-Black habitual modes of representing feminized, maternal wild natures and geographies while also encouraging depictions of new matrixial possibilities.

In his attempt to recycle and rethink colonial terminologies of anti-Black geological mapping in *The Witch*, Shelley anticipates José Esteban Muñoz’s concept of “disidentification”: “The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message’s universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recruits its workings to account for, include and empower minority identities and identifications.”⁸⁶⁷ For example, Shelley advocates for this kind of deconstructive “unthinking” in “On Life”: “It leaves, what is too often the duty of the reformer in political and ethical questions to leave, a vacancy. It reduces the mind to that freedom in which it would have acted, but for the misuse of words and signs, the instruments of its own creation.”⁸⁶⁸ I think this promotion of “unthinking” as a form “freedom,” this “scrambling” of encoded messages surrounding matrixial and Black

⁸⁶⁵ Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes*, 106.

⁸⁶⁶ Halberstam, “Wildness, Loss, Death,” 143.

⁸⁶⁷ José Esteban Muñoz qtd. in Halberstam, “Wildness, Loss, Death,” 143.

⁸⁶⁸ Shelley, “On Life,” 507.

maternity and femininity, shares affinities with what Giselle Liza Anatol identifies in Nalo Hopkinson's narrative as "not only subverting the idea of the innately maternal woman, but [also] specifically debunking the contradictory European constructions of African-descended women as (a) hyper-maternal mummies and (b) genetically apathetic cold-hearted, and emotionally distant mothers: stereotypes generated during the slave era and continuing into the present day."⁸⁶⁹ A letter written to Byron from P.B. Shelley attests to his awareness of the stereotypes of motherhood haunting women:

What should we think of a woman who should resign her infant child with no prospect of ever seeing it again, even to a father in whose tenderness she entirely confided? If she forces herself to such a sacrifice for the sake of her child's welfare, there is something heroically great in thus trampling upon the strongest affections, and even the most unappeasable instincts of our nature. But the world will not judge so; she would be despised as an unnatural mother.⁸⁷⁰

Overall, these lines foreground Shelley's ability to anticipate and see the human cost/suffering behind conservative social stereotypes. Perhaps P.B. Shelley's attempt to speak beyond anti-Black, anti-woman ready-made mother-monster myths is partly responsible for the less than satisfactory interpretations of the Witch's moral character. For example, critics have implied that the Witch's beauty and perfection are somehow at odds

⁸⁶⁹ Giselle Liza Anatol qtd. in Jackson, *Becoming Human*, 234-235, endnote 37.

⁸⁷⁰ These lines imply that heroic virtue is embodied by a mother who can overcome her desire to be near her child, if the separation is caused by her intention to benefit the child. On the one hand, these lines suggest that "human nature" is plastic. On the other, they imply the virtual impossibility of the hypothetical situation and in so doing reproduce essentialist ideas of motherhood. However, the emphasis on "strongest affections" and "instincts" may be more of an indication of a desired rhetorical effect meant to persuade his intended audience, Byron, to ease Clare's anxieties regarding the care of their child. Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Letter 463. To Lord Byron, Venice, Milan, April 22, 1818," *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley: Shelley in Italy*, ed. Frederick L. Jones (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), 10.

with her supposed “lack of understanding sympathy with the problems of mortal creatures.”⁸⁷¹ But why should beauty and femininity combine to obstruct matrixial trans-subjectivities from critically identifying and rejecting unacceptable non-I(s) in Ettinger’s sense, or impinging/intervening and stopping detrimental behaviors and ideologies in Winnicott’s sense? Or, perhaps her “lack of sympathy” can be read as a misunderstood form of self-relinquishment to allow temporary illusions of omnipotence as a step toward the confident maturity of a secure sense of “true” selfhood.

Critics have also uncharitably dismissed her interactions with “mortal creatures” as “pranks” with “consequences” not as “satisfactory to humankind as they might be.”⁸⁷² First, I do not agree that there is evidence for this reading that the Witch plays “pranks” on other creatures because the location where she is described as having “played her many pranks” is her non-living homeplace that apparently floats high in the atmosphere: “A haven beneath whose translucent floor / The tremulous stars sparkled unfathomably.”⁸⁷³ She also is described as having “played upon the water” encircling her wild sky haven as “many quips and cranks,” which is far removed from the realm of mortal creatures.⁸⁷⁴ But second, the description of the Witch as “lacking in understanding sympathy” assumes that the Human deserves absolute, unconditional sympathy (an omnipotent desire) and that it is an impossibility that the Human might misperceive the salutary benefits of change for the advent of matrixial chaos. Third, these descriptions assume the Witch is the inferior being

⁸⁷¹ Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat, Introduction to *The Witch of Atlas*, in *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose: A Norton Critical Edition* 2nd ed., eds. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company: 2002), 365.

⁸⁷² Reiman and Fraistat, Introduction to *The Witch of Atlas*, 365.

⁸⁷³ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Witch of Atlas*, in *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose: A Norton Critical Edition* 2nd ed., eds. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company: 2002), 380, stanza LI, line 449 and stanza XLIX, lines 433-435.

⁸⁷⁴ Shelley, *The Witch of Atlas*, 381, stanza LI, lines 453-454.

who must mirror and accommodate the moral and epistemic systems of “the Human.” Fourth, perhaps fun-loving, defamiliarizing, wayward treatment (e.g., the caring “impingements” of playful interventions) is what these “mortal creatures” need to be able to discern and then to enter into the vulnerable state of self-fragilization that would enable their receptivity to much-needed reproofs for their tyrannies. Ultimately, the assumption here is that queer wild femininity can only ever amount to monstrosity. But P.B. Shelley I think instead uses the same “subtle slights” he apports his Witch to create a compelling performative fantasy of matrixial femininity that only makes sense to maternal fugitives wandering across the nomadic wildernesses of “weird winter nights.”⁸⁷⁵ In contrast, the revolutionary energy of queer maternal care is lost on “the Human” reader who is blinded in looking at the world through the western, anti-Black, phallogocentric prism of “garish summer days, when we / Scarcely believe much more than we can see.”⁸⁷⁶ In this way, P.B. Shelley’s poem enacts Halberstam’s caution and hope regarding the deconstructive, utopian project of Muñoz’s disidentification:

There is, of course, a risk in these reconstructions of the encoded messages—the risk is that the replaying of racialized tropes of wildness and primitivism, of disorderliness and belatedness, will simply flow right back into the discursive machinery that produces bodies of color as perpetually out of line and out of time, out of whack, and out of work. But, as Muñoz’s work carefully showed, the risk is always worth taking even if and when it leads to failure.⁸⁷⁷

⁸⁷⁵ Shelley, *The Witch of Atlas*, 388, stanza LXXVIII, lines 670.

⁸⁷⁶ Shelley, *The Witch of Atlas*, 388, stanza LXXVIII, lines 671-672.

⁸⁷⁷ Halberstam, “Wildness, Loss, Death,” 143.

And apparently *The Witch of Atlas* is a failure, at least according to P.B. Shelley's opening lines of dedication to Mary Shelley who he perceives as disapproving of the poem "upon the score of its containing no human interest."⁸⁷⁸

In the first stanza of the poem, P.B. Shelley seems to wonder to himself what "no human interest" could mean as an articulation of his failure. He speculates whether the reason for her condemnation is because the poem is classified as a "visionary rhyme": "... you condemn these verses I have written / Because they tell no story, false or true?"⁸⁷⁹ But if, for the sake of exploration, we take P.B. Shelley at his word, why would the author of the first science fiction/speculative dystopian fantasy—the mom de plume of fantastic "hideous progeny"—reject the tale of the nomadic wild wanderings of his "wizard lady" on the grounds of the narrative's supposed lack of reality? Perhaps P.B. Shelley is unfairly reducing a difference in emphasis regarding their approach to politics and ethics that they both express in the form of speculative fantasies. In other words, arguably, the depiction of a Cartesian father's refusal to widen his "circle of care" to include a monstrous child of nature reveals that Mary Shelley's primary ethical concern in *Frankenstein* is to bring to the foreground of liberal humanist Man's consciousness the injustice of his politics of recognition as it is based on the marginalization and exclusion of others who do not match his pure and phallic, white cisgender *appearance*. On the other hand, I find it hard to accept that she would not be able to see that *The Witch* is analogous in spirit with her criticism of recognition politics.

Then perhaps her accusation that the poem has "no human interest" highlights a disagreement over what literary techniques are most "efficient" for enacting salutary

⁸⁷⁸ Shelley, Dedication "To Mary" in *The Witch of Atlas*, 367.

⁸⁷⁹ Shelley, *The Witch of Atlas*, 367, stanza I, lines 3-5.

psychosocial and ecological change in the world. For example, in contradistinction to the way the playful eccentricities of P.B. Shelley's *Witch* may provoke superficial readings, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is a more straightforward condemnation of the imperial, phallogocentric gaze in its role of racializing, animalizing, and feminizing others to justify their exploitation. In this light, perhaps it is doubtful that she agreed with P.B. Shelley's declaration that "The great instrument of moral good is the imagination; and poetry administers to the effect by acting upon the cause."⁸⁸⁰ Furthermore, she criticizes how the phallogocentric gaze settles like concrete on profitable m/other constructs and explains how this projective vision is comorbid with an indiscriminate deafness and illiterateness vis-à-vis the other. In Julie Carlson's formulation, "*Frankenstein* offers an unprecedented exposé of why and how depictions of injustice that are narrated by subordinated creatures, no matter how movingly *and* logically, so rarely are acted upon even when they are heard."⁸⁸¹ In short, for Mary Shelley writing during the abolitionist debates, perhaps the quest to gain the recognition of racialized others as full citizens under the law comes first and foremost as a matter of life and death. Forcing imperial, egocentric subjects to obey more humane laws is possibly of more intuitive and paramount importance for Mary Shelley, way over and above what she supposedly dismisses in *The Witch* and what I am calling P.B. Shelley's matrixial art of deconstruction.

It may be that she thought that his project was too distantly "cerebral" or "abstract" in its attempts to unravel the symbolic underlying the "Human" to jolt Man into awareness and into becoming otherwise. Halberstam's characterization of wildness may be what Mary Shelley identifies as the unjustified risk of P.B. Shelley's wild matrixial poetry that does not

⁸⁸⁰ Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*, 517.

⁸⁸¹ Carlson, "Just Friends?", 292.

speak in the “language of order and explanation but in beautiful, countermythologizing grammars of madness.”⁸⁸² To put it differently, it is feasible that “no human interest” means the poem is premature, has arrived “too early,” and therefore misses the mark because there is no representative from the dominant genre of Man—with enough self-reflexivity or openness to growth-inspiring criticism—able to resist the reactive and defensive “psychological manoeuvres that he employs to deny responsibility for what he has created.”⁸⁸³ And regarding this latter speculation, perhaps the embryo of an incendiary spirit underlay Mary Shelley’s “objection” to the poem, and portended the world-shattering politics of *The Last Man*. Indeed, the novel is arguably more radical than even P.B. Shelley’s revolutionary tastes would have been able to stomach if he had lived long enough to read her visionary tale of apocalyptic horror: “As such, the nonhumanness of the frame narrator stands as a pessimistic rebuttal to projects hopeful of political change, an insistence that deconstruction without supplementary politics is not enough, and a radical call for the very essence of ‘man’ to be reconceived as the first step toward change.”⁸⁸⁴

In other words, *The Last Man* can be read as a kind of ironic rebuttal to the phallogentric, liberal humanist privilege that P.B. Shelley is ignorant of in his own lament in the dedication of *The Witch*: “O, let me not believe / That anything of mine is fit to live!” In fact, her nonhuman narrator replies across time in resonance with the *Broken Earth* series’ nonhuman narrator. Both nonhuman narrators echo the radical thought that the old regime should fall, along with any success, fame, and privilege P.B. Shelley or other western, white egocentric subjects possess by writing to the audiences of that world: “I did watch the world

⁸⁸² Halberstam, “Wildness, Loss, Death,” 147.

⁸⁸³ Carlson, “Just Friends?,” 292.

⁸⁸⁴ Fisch, “Plaguing Politics: AIDS, Deconstruction, and *The Last Man*,” 281.

burn. Say nothing to me innocent bystanders, unearned suffering, heartless vengeance... Well, some worlds are built on a fault line of pain, held up by nightmares. Don't lament when those worlds fall. Rage that they were built doomed in the first place."⁸⁸⁵

To wrap up and simplify this series of speculations, Mary Shelley's objection could just be another instance of irritation at what many critics have often perceived as P.B. Shelley's poetic indulgence in masculine flights of the imagination (although the matrixial can be understood in a sense as the aesthetic and ethical dimensions of the post-Human imagination). But the poem is also vulnerable to the critique that he unabashedly appropriates the Black feminine sublime to his own benefit and therein demonstrates he has no investment or concern for the ongoing violence of anti-Black representations and fantasies.

However, despite the significant qualifications that all of the above speculations raise, I nonetheless argue that the deconstructive art of *The Witch*—that manifests in the matrixial gaze of the “lady-witch”, and in the co/in-habit(u)ating wonder of her matrix-like homeplaces—contains radical psychosocial and ethical potential or what Ettinger calls metramorphic “covenants hidden in art.”⁸⁸⁶ Additionally, through these figures and images, *The Witch* catalyzes a joyful investment in matrixial “metabolism,” of practicing self-relinquishment vis-à-vis the fragile other in a stance of reverent reverie, in Bion's sense of approaching the other without memory or desire and Winnicott's notion of opening space for the other to come into their own. Such matrixial self-relinquishment that allows the other to appear shares affinities with Keats' negative capability as well, which in this context is understood as the toleration and fascinace regarding traumatic “uncertainties, Mysteries,

⁸⁸⁵ Jemisin, *The Stone Sky*, 7.

⁸⁸⁶ Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, 151.

doubts” transmitted from the m/Other, and the refusal to know, name, and distinguish them according to the “irritable reaching” logic of phallogentric “fact & reason.”⁸⁸⁷ And indeed, Shelley’s own most direct formulation of these analogous modes of matrixial self-relinquishing is in terms of an epistemophilic-ethical skill that masculine-identifying subjects, and people in general, can/should also cultivate:

The great secret of morals is Love; or a going out of our own nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own. A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and the pleasures of his species must become his own.⁸⁸⁸

In doing so, *The Witch* gives the reader/participant space to find and borderlink to the ethical “wit(h)ness-Thing” we need in order to process paralyzing trauma, what was “*as yet non-knowledge.*”⁸⁸⁹ This gives readers, now newborn matrixial m/others, the freedom to care for and co/in-habit(u)ate the wildness of/with others in turn as we continue forward on the nomadic metamorphic quest connecting us to worlds larger than ourselves. To borrow one of P.B. Shelley’s own descriptions of the power of poetic language, the matrixial poetry of *The Witch* both “spreads its own figured curtain” and “withdraws life’s dark veil from before the scene of things” with the effect that he “creates for us a being within our being,” a matrixial embryo being who is the “wonder of our being.”⁸⁹⁰

⁸⁸⁷ John Keats, “Letter to George and Tom Keats, December 21, 27?, 1817,” 109.

⁸⁸⁸ Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*, 517.

⁸⁸⁹ Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, 151.

⁸⁹⁰ Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*, 533.

In the introductory “dedication” stanzas of *The Witch of Atlas*, Shelley attacks Wordsworth’s *Peter Bell* and portrays it as a foil to his Witch. He uses Wordsworth as a case study to foreground anti-Black logic and the appropriative impulse at the core of the erasure of racialized others.⁸⁹¹ But critics have also pointed out that P.B. Shelley’s story of the Witch’s adventures, that includes her “flight into the skies of the Southern Hemisphere,” can be read as a satirical stab at a particular moment in the *Peter Bell* prologue when “the prosaic narrator rejects the talking boat’s offer to take him to a calm, cool oasis in sub-Saharan Africa.”⁸⁹² After declining this flying female boat’s invitation to a globe-trotting adventure, *Peter Bell* tells the story of a “rustic” animal abuser who finds a corpse in the water when taking a break from creature-beating to stare at his reflection (an image that brings to mind a Freudian-Hans meeting the Lacanian-Mother/Monster-Mirror). He gathers up the corpse and lets the donkey meander back home. There he discovers the corpse is the late husband of a mourning widow with pitiful children and therein becomes a more sensitive person. The boat from *Peter Bell* also makes a similar critical appearance in Byron’s “apology to poetry” from *Don Juan*. Byron satirizes the flying boat as an infantile repetition of an equally unimpressive scene from the *Prelude* that tells the story of a boat-stealing boy who is guilt-ridden and haunted by sublime mountain scenery:

... Wordsworth sometimes wakes,—
 To show with what complacency he creeps,
 With his dear “Waggoners,” around his lakes.
 He wishes for “a boat” to sail the deeps—
 Of ocean?—No, of air; and then he makes

⁸⁹¹ Shelley, *The Witch of Atlas*, 368, stanza VI, lines 41-48.

⁸⁹² Reiman and Fraistat, Introduction to *The Witch of Atlas*, 366.

Another outcry for “a little boat,”

And drivels seas to set it well afloat.⁸⁹³

Byron identifies in *Peter Bell*, and applies to Wordsworth’s entire oeuvre, what he sees as a narrow-minded complacency oblivious to the dangers and deficiencies of idealizing and appropriating small-town insularity and convention.

Arguably, P.B. Shelley’s critique of *Peter Bell* is less elitist in its focus on the artistic failure of provincial style, and more oriented toward the problematic unethical messages underlying Wordsworthian aesthetics and the structural use of the “black mater” figure in the construction of western systems of symbolic and material domination. This recalls the earlier discussion of Wordsworth’s use of feminized others in his egotistical sublime fantasies of the philosophic mind’s mastery over nature. Shelley’s criticisms also point out how Wordsworth’s constructs are emblematic of the wider social problem of feigned indifference to the ethics of how the people and places of the African continent were represented in travel accounts and maps produced in an “era dedicated to science and objective truth.”⁸⁹⁴ In other words, as Debbie Lee points out, “[d]uring the Romantic era, a tremendous shift took place in African cartography, which amounted to a geographic undressing of the continent.”⁸⁹⁵ Lee suggests that there is a connection between the gender-coded “explorations[s] of Africa’s interior” and the “human interior” during the era, and therefore, I am suggesting that Shelley is critical of Wordsworth’s supposed “distance” from this issue and discourse. To apply Yusoff’s formulation to Shelley’s criticism, he seems to

⁸⁹³ Byron, George Gordon, *Don Juan*, in *Byron’s Poetry and Prose: A Norton Critical Edition*, ed. Alice Levine (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company: 2010), 499-500, stanza 98, lines 874-880.

⁸⁹⁴ Lee, “Mapping the Interior,” 169.

⁸⁹⁵ Lee, “Mapping the Interior,” 169.

be suggesting that Wordsworth's "refusal of responsibility in the mapping...of geology" is latent yet apparent in the way this poem romanticizes a kind of parochial regionalism that leaves intact the symbolic ways in which, during the romantic era and into the current period, "geologic classification organizes psychic lives and modes of nonbeing."⁸⁹⁶ Or, to put it slightly differently, his perception of Wordsworth's indifference to or refusal to consider the issues of "geopower" in his own work, represented by his narrator's refusal to go to the African continent, "reinforces and reiterates the 'naturalization' of colonial dispossession of land and minerals."⁸⁹⁷ For all Wordsworth's concern with the distorting effects of custom and his privileging of the local, P.B. Shelley suggests that Wordsworth's work is nonetheless complacent with the wider western cultural inability to recognize the importance of anti-racist, gender-non-binary geopolitical historical representation and analysis, an insight that also applies to current Anthropocene debates; namely, we need theory that "extends concern for the contemporary subjects caught in dehumanizing geologic relations that deform the earth in various ways (which is recognized in the Anthropocene) and that deform subjects (which is not explicitly recognized)."⁸⁹⁸

Indeed, P.B. Shelley's mockery of Wordsworth in these dedication stanzas comprehensively outlines and frames his central concerns in *The Witch*, which are to use Wordsworth as an example of the larger problem of unethical representations of the other. He specifically refers to the character of Peter Bell to problematize Wordsworth's supposed ignorance of his own anti-Black, instrumental depictions of a racialized, impoverished other to showcase a didactic moral lesson. For example, P.B. Shelley suggests that "If you strip

⁸⁹⁶ Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes*, 105.

⁸⁹⁷ Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes*, 105.

⁸⁹⁸ Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes*, 105.

Peter, you will see a fellow / Scorched by Hell's hyperequatorial climate / Into a kind of sulphureous yellow."⁸⁹⁹ In other words, according to P.B. Shelley, Peter Bell is a racialized villainous prop character, in "shape a Scaramouch, in hue Othello," and straight from the hellscape that is the anti-Black, class-prejudiced imagination.⁹⁰⁰

In contrast, P.B. Shelley unveils the project at the heart of *The Witch* as an art of matrixial deconstruction: "If you unveil my Witch, no Priest or Primate / Can shrive [absolve] you of that sin, if sin there be / In love, when it becomes idolatry."⁹⁰¹ Shelley strikingly claims here that if the phallic gaze were to truly "see" the matrixial and "black mater" figures, that in the egotistical sublime threaten annihilation, then the liberal, secular humanist being born of the Cartesian enlightenment (i.e. "the Human") would vanish—entirely disappear—because the center cannot hold with this forbidden knowledge, so to speak. Once the matrixial gaze is finished "fragmenting, multiplying, scattering, and assembling together the fragments" that were "the Human," all that remains is the "Priest" and the "Primate"—the superstitious and terrorizing envoy of capricious father-sky-gods and the horrifying abject animality of the Great Ape *Homo sapiens*.⁹⁰² In other words, the matrixial gaze illuminates how the priest and primate are symbols of the archaic nightmare figures from which the Cartesian liberal humanist construct of "the Human" was meant to escape by racializing, animalizing, and feminizing wild others into various intersecting categories of disenfranchisement, subjugation, and dehumanization. And upon acquiring such knowledge nothing can save the deconstructed Human, the "you" that Shelley addresses, because the "sin" that created a phallic universe of death was the same violent act

⁸⁹⁹ Shelley, *The Witch of Atlas*, 368, stanza VI, lines 41-43.

⁹⁰⁰ Shelley, *The Witch of Atlas*, 368, stanza VI, line 45.

⁹⁰¹ Shelley, *The Witch of Atlas*, 368, stanza VI, lines 46-48.

⁹⁰² Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, 154.

of symbolic (and real) matrixial, anti-Black matricide that cut and castrated the patriarchal egocentric subject into being. For P.B. Shelley, the sin that becomes apparent in the “unveiling” of the Witch is the foreclosure of the m/other and her transformation into various m/other-monster and m/other-goddess myths (which amount to the same thing in the phallic stratum). And such mother-goddess and mother-monster myths substitute the fetishistic “idolatry” of these virgin/whore/goddess/monster figures for the “primordial mother as Love.”⁹⁰³

Alternatively, P.B. Shelley could intend these lines also to be read in a second way. Viewed from the phallic angle, his deconstructive act of “unveiling” the matrixial and “black mater” figures as ideological structural conditions for “the Human” is *mis*recognized as a sin but nonetheless characterized as so because it disturbs the delusional “peace” of the status quo and transgresses Abrahamic religious prohibitions. But viewed from the matrixial perspective, his act of love is in risking the “catastrophe of identity” to bring forth a life-affirming story of the “transient return-in-transformation of archaic ‘woman’-m/Other *encounter-Thing, co/in-habit(u)ating*” within and interconnecting all of us.⁹⁰⁴ These lines also suggest that the idolatrous nature of his love of the matrixial is meant to bring to mind more positive associations and meanings of the word, such as awe and reverence for the “archaic mother” who was/is the “subject of glamour and an object of wondering and languishing, amazement and fascination.”⁹⁰⁵ In short, he provocatively states that if the love he feels for his Witch can be considered a sin, it is so only in terms of the “idolatrous” adoration for the metramorphosing difference-in-jointness of a beloved intimate lover,

⁹⁰³ Ettinger, “Demeter-Persephone Complex,” 124.

⁹⁰⁴ Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, 160-161.

⁹⁰⁵ Ettinger, “Demeter-Persephone Complex,” 134.

friend, or caregiver and the attraction to wild unknown horizons. But caution is in order because “wildness can give us access to the unknown and the disorderly, and we will enter there at our own risk.”⁹⁰⁶

After the dedication stanzas, *The Witch of Atlas* begins by narrating the tale of how a possibly supernatural being, referred to as a “lady-witch” and “wizard lady,” is mysteriously gestated within a matrix-cavern full of emerald stone and lighting, which is itself enwombed within the Atlas Mountains.⁹⁰⁷ Her birth predates both “Truth” and “Error,” before they together “had hunted from the earth / All those bright natures which adorned its prime, / And left us nothing to believe in.”⁹⁰⁸ To my mind, these lines refer to the long history of violence experienced by matrixial trans-subjects and “black mater” figures in their abjected foreclosure by phallogentric metaphysics, philosophy, and eugenic “science.” It is interesting how these lines anticipate Carolyn Merchant’s historical analysis of the systematic interconnected violence enacted against the feminine and nonhuman natures in her now classic ecofeminist book *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (1980). But for my purposes in this section, I think the connection between these lines and the ongoing material and psychic/symbolic matricide as the condition for master subject formation under patriarchy is the reason behind why the Witch’s mother is only briefly and directly mentioned once as “one of the Atlantides.”⁹⁰⁹

However, the “absent” mother character may suggest the “presence” of matrixial trans-subjectivity. The reason for the omission of the stock character maternal housewife

⁹⁰⁶ Halberstam, “Wildness, Loss, Death,” 147.

⁹⁰⁷ The mysterious mineralizing/geological circumstances of the Witch’s birth are very similar to the way the stone eaters rebirth themselves from the sparkling centers of beautiful egg-like geodes in the *Broken Earth* series.

⁹⁰⁸ Shelley, *The Witch of Atlas*, 368, stanza I, lines 51-53.

⁹⁰⁹ Shelley, *The Witch of Atlas*, 369, stanza II, line 57.

could be to emphasize the theme of creative “internal” conditions of being with/in the matrixial m/Other and foreground P.B. Shelley’s desire, like Ettinger’s, to “rethink the human subject as infused by the transsubjective dimension.”⁹¹⁰ In other words, just as Winnicott was fascinated with the line of Tagore’s poem that states “on the seashore of endless worlds, children play,” suggesting to Winnicott that the ocean and seashore are also places of play and renewal, imaginative re-arrangement and change, so too does Shelley describe the careful gestation process as shared co/in-habit(u)ating exchanges between the moon, ocean waves, matrix-cave, and the prenatal Witch. The nourishing, mutual entanglement of these partial objects comprises an image of the matrix from the “internal” perspective, and in so doing it resonates with Ettinger’s formulation that “Entangled psychic aerials of the psyche, transconnected kernels, inform the individual subject throughout life, starting with the most archaic phase in a psychic dimension shared with a female body and maternal figure.”⁹¹¹

For example, close by the cave within which the Witch is gestating, the moon commands the waves over the duration of nine full months “to indent / The sea-deserted sand—like children chidden / At her command they ever came and went.”⁹¹² This nonhuman writing scrawled as ripples and folds over ocean-receding sand celebrates the Witch’s prenatal existence and her future birth in the offspring. But it is also significant how these nonhuman sandy “inscriptions” appear and disappear (*fort/da*) with the billowing waves’ oscillating rhythms. The waves leave memory traces and imprints of I(s) and non-I(s) in the language of surge and retreat for the Witch near her cave and show how “metramorphosis

⁹¹⁰ Ettinger, “Demeter-Persephone Complex,” 123.

⁹¹¹ Ettinger, “Demeter-Persephone Complex,” 123.

⁹¹² Shelley, *The Witch of Atlas*, 369, stanza IV, lines 75-77.

composes/traces home and habituation in one and the same psychic move, aglitter with their specific affect and trembling with it.”⁹¹³ In other words, this performance of fragile perpetual transformative erasure is characteristic of the matrixial sphere where “vulnerability is not a sacrifice of myself in a disappearing for the sake of the Other, but rather a partial disappearing to allow jointness.”⁹¹⁴ Therefore, the waves that “ever came and went” in close proximity to the prenatal Witch in her “chamber of grey rock” can be read as the creative, traumatic, and nourishing matrixial trans-subjective encounter-events of alternating impingement and self-relinquishment that are necessary to the Witch’s development: “At her command they [the waves] ever came and went— / *Since* in that cave a dewy Splendour hidden / Took shape and motion” (my emphasis).⁹¹⁵ In this sense, the rippling sands under constant erasure represent how the Witch’s “biography of matrixial recurrences-in-difference is recorded in their metamorphoses: in the successive changes in the borderlinks of a relation of suspension, across different rhythms of recurrent intermittence.”⁹¹⁶ As such, in the very next line P.B. Shelley emphasizes this metamorphic quest is not the story of a one-way path of influence by an active transformational mother-object onto a passive infant. Instead, Shelley emphasizes how “with the living form / Of this embodied Power, the cave grew warm.”⁹¹⁷

The mutual cave-witch transformational influence emphasizes the way, as Ettinger puts it, “Co/in-habit(u)ating is inseparable from the subjects’ affecting and transforming one another, creating a borderspace where their subjectivity-as-encounter is transgressed, at the

⁹¹³ Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, 160.

⁹¹⁴ Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, 145.

⁹¹⁵ Shelley, *The Witch of Atlas*, 369, stanza II, line 63 and stanza IV, lines 75-80.

⁹¹⁶ Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, 145.

⁹¹⁷ Shelley, *The Witch of Atlas*, 369, stanza IV, lines 79-80.

price of their being dispersed into partial-subjects—not split, but assembled into an amalgamated temporary identity via joint hybrid objects and links; ensembled but not fused.”⁹¹⁸ And so continues the Witch’s development in these terms as a “subjectivity-as-encounter—where an-other is not an absolute separate Other—they turn both of us into partial-subjects, still uncognized, thoughtlessly known to each other, matrixially knowing each other, in painful fragility.”⁹¹⁹ For example, “The all-beholding Sun” who “had ne’er beholden / In his wide voyage o’er continents and seas / so fair a creature” as the prenatal Witch is overcome and entangled by the pull of her “erotic antennae of the psyche.”⁹²⁰ His image of the prenatal Witch emphasizes her ephemeral homogenization in her own I(s) in a familiar homeplace: “So fair a creature, as she lay enfolden / In the warm shadow of her loveliness.”⁹²¹ The sun expresses his affective awe of the Witch with nourishing displays of affection: “He kissed her with his beams, and made all golden / The chamber of grey rock in which she lay.”⁹²² These lines are interesting for the way they highlight the possibility of the matrixial mediation of haptic, non-I communications to the prenatal infant by external and possibly masculine-identifying ethical caregivers in the maternal figures’ environment. But these lines also emphasize how the defamiliarizing matrixial encounter-event with a non-I catalyzes further transfigurations, and indeed, in response to the sun’s “erotic aerials, the Witch, immersed in the sun’s golden “dream of joy, dissolved away” and “’Tis said, she first was changed into a vapour, / And then into a cloud.”⁹²³ She also changes into a meteor and into a mysterious star. Finally, she takes the queerly wild form of a “lovely lady” of “such

⁹¹⁸ Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, 145.

⁹¹⁹ Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, 144.

⁹²⁰ Shelley, *The Witch of Atlas*, 369, stanza II, lines 58-60.

⁹²¹ Shelley, *The Witch of Atlas*, 369, stanza II, lines 60-61.

⁹²² Shelley, *The Witch of Atlas*, 369, stanza II, lines 62-64.

⁹²³ Shelley, *The Witch of Atlas*, 369, stanza III, lines 65-66.

gentleness and power even to behold,” that shatters the reader with her matrixial gaze that peers from dark eyes of “unfathomable night.”⁹²⁴ But she is still within the emerald “enwombed rocks” and therefore has not “left” her prenatal homeplace. Nonetheless, the defamiliarizing void within the Witch’s prenatal, matrixial trans-subjective gaze calls to the reader and “gives rise to affects of wonder and awe, languishing and com-passion, grace and solace, anxiety and fragility—responses that enable one’s own transformation and testify that the painting [or text] has opened a new vulnerability.”⁹²⁵

And so, this matrixial trans-subjective gaze of “unfathomable night” is the other reason for the wild “lack” of a fully fleshed out mother character. In other words, as Halberstam explains, matrixial “Wildness is not the lack of inscription; it is inscription that seeks not to read or be read but to leave a mark as evidence of absence, loss, and death.”⁹²⁶ Thinking with Ettinger, I understand Halberstam’s description of wilderness to mean that in the “matrixial stratum...the barriers to death, feminine sexuality, and the archaic sexual union become thresholds for meaning.”⁹²⁷ To clarify further, perhaps *The Witch* accomplishes less vis-à-vis readers at the level of mere straightforward “inscriptions” of symbolic communications of a rational, orderly message neatly packaged in a fairytale narrative, plot, and character, which we expect should include a mother figure for a newborn “lady-witch.” And rather, the matrixial gaze within *The Witch* reaches out with the “matrixial affects, frequencies, and intensities...named the erotic antennae of the psyche” and touches the readers’ own borderlinking potential.⁹²⁸ In other words, somehow the

⁹²⁴ Shelley, *The Witch of Atlas*, 369, stanza V, lines 81 & 83 and stanza VI, line 96.

⁹²⁵ Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, 152.

⁹²⁶ Halberstam, “Wildness, Loss, Death,” 147.

⁹²⁷ Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, 146.

⁹²⁸ Ettinger, “Matrixial Trans-subjectivity,” 220.

Witch's matrixial gaze gives the uncanny sensation that it rolls out of the page and into the reader where it settles into a catalyzing embryo of self-fragilization that gets to the busy unraveling/unweaving of various patriarchal cultural/developmental achievements. And this disturbing feeling of cultural dissociation and subjective suspension wildly propels the reader toward unbecoming in the nomadic passageway to newborn-ness: "The matrixial gaze rolls into several eyes, transforms the viewer's point of vision and returns through her eyes to the Other of culture, transformed."⁹²⁹

The matrixial gaze disorients us in its illumination of "a borderspace of inside/outside as flip sides of subjectivity-as-encounter in severality."⁹³⁰ In short, the matrix completely scrambles/subverts the phallic relationship between the eye and the gaze as fusion or split that allows the egocentric subject to "master" the m/Other by destroying her at her terrifyingly sublime point of emergence. Instead, the matrixial gaze is described as a relation of difference between a "hybrid gaze" and a "floating eye" and "whose advent is transformation, and which roves and wanders, since its elements are diffracted between several floating erotic points of vision that do not converge at a fixated emergence point that would completely disappear."⁹³¹ So, this matrixial "sublime" gaze is not from any single point of view and instead "grafts trans-subjectivity in co-emerging entities into a relation woven in severality between appearing and the lack-to-being."⁹³² This means that when the reader is first introduced to the matrixial gaze of the Witch, the point of view of the narrator becomes more visible, almost self-conscious, and the reader's phallic gaze softens and also suddenly becomes more fragile, newborn, like prenatal "floating eyes" encapsulated within a

⁹²⁹ Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, 153.

⁹³⁰ Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, 152.

⁹³¹ Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, 152.

⁹³² Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, 153.

m/Other. For example, the Witch's gaze is described as "Two openings of unfathomable night" as "Seen through a Temple's cloven roof."⁹³³ This roving and wandering but mostly disorienting point of view continues as the narrator explains how "the dim brain whirls dizzy with delight / Picturing her form" and remembering how her "low voice was heard like love, and drew / All living things towards this wonder new."⁹³⁴

And thus, immediately after she takes the form of a "lovely lady," the Witch receives visitation from a veritable queer plentitude of wild nomadic friends who co/in-habit(u)ate with her in the hopes of accessing the mutually transformative matrixial psychic space: "Identification takes place here with the *primordial mother* as Love, an Eros beyond sexuality. This Eros of borderlinking stretches along resonating strings or aerials of the psyche from kernel to kernel (between different subjects), first in physical proximity and then even at great distance and even beyond loss."⁹³⁵ For example, several species of large cats native to Africa are the first to gain entrance into "The magic circle of her voice and eyes," that the narrator describes as able to "imparadise" all of their "savage natures."⁹³⁶ In other words, in respectfully approaching the matrixial trans-subjectivity of the m/Other as a subject, rather than performing the phallic rejection of her via objectification, taboo, and censorship, they access ways to subjectivize as matrixial and potentially open up previously foreclosed non-I(s). In matrixial alliance they can touch the metramorphosing strings that envelope them as a net and therein free themselves "by opening a space for creativity, subversion, resistance, and sublimation in a beyond-the-phallus imaginary and symbolic

⁹³³ Shelley, *The Witch of Atlas*, 369, stanza V, lines 83-84.

⁹³⁴ Shelley, *The Witch of Atlas*, 369, stanza V, lines 85-88.

⁹³⁵ Ettinger, "Demeter-Persephone Complex," 124.

⁹³⁶ Shelley, *The Witch of Atlas*, 370, stanza VII, lines 103-104.

realm.”⁹³⁷ For example, the leopard can be understood as opening to self-deconstruction by communicating desire in the “countermythologizing grammars” of matrixial wildness:

—the pard unstrung
His sinews at her feet, and sought to know
With looks whose motions spoke without a tongue
How he might be as gentle as the doe.⁹³⁸

Similarly, the lioness with cubs asks the Witch to teach her how they might unravel their habituated natures’ “inborn thirst of death.”⁹³⁹ Together the Witch and these creatures—who for the Witch function as non-I(s) that could become integrated into her presubjectivity as I(s)—dwell within the emerald womb/matrix and homeplace with myriad eyes, visions, and perspectives that have a transforming effect on all, and especially the Witch.

While still within the prenatal matrix of her cave, the Witch encounters a more negatively impinging, but nonetheless transforming traumatic non-I when she becomes aware of the gaze of “Universal Pan.” The phrase “‘tis said” below emphasizes the conjectural nature of this figure’s presence to further destabilize the authority of a singular point of view from which to imagine transformation in the poem. But the repetitions of the qualifying phrase “‘tis said” throughout the poem and in the below passage also foreground the artifice of cultural narratives that denigrate wild others and wash “the Human” residing at the heart of empire in pure white light:

And Universal Pan, ‘tis said, was there,
And though none saw him,—through the adamant

⁹³⁷ Ettinger, “Demeter-Persephone Complex,” 129.

⁹³⁸ Shelley, *The Witch of Atlas*, 370, stanza VII, lines 99-102.

⁹³⁹ Shelley, *The Witch of Atlas*, 370, stanza VII, line 99.

Of the deep mountains, through the trackless air,
And through those living spirits, like a want [mole]
He past out of his everlasting lair
Where the quick heart of the great world doth pant—
And felt that wondrous lady all alone—
And she felt him upon her emerald throne.⁹⁴⁰

If “none saw him,” then Universal Pan is presumably invisible, which I think is Shelley’s way of critiquing the fantasy of the “idealized” white, hyper-masculine, hyper-separated genre of “the Human.” Pan signifies this because he is described as “universal” which recalls the gazing subject that hungrily feeds upon the objects of desire, the colonizing presence that occupies space everywhere. Universal Pan is “Man,” a figure who is invisible because “he” does not exist as anything other than a predatory power fantasy and unrealistic, discriminatory model of the human. And “though none saw him,” the Witch (as she represents feminized, racialized wild nature) can feel his imperial, phallogentric gaze violating her space and enframing “upon her” as though she were mere standing reserve. The “none” who see this event could also imply the blind complicity to the exploitative treatment of m/others. And finally, “none saw him” could refer to the Witch’s condition as a prenatal, partial subject of flickering, floating, hybrid gaze because she sees through fetal and m/other eyes as a matrixial trans-subject connected at the matrixial borderspace of co-birth that is the oceanic emerald womb, so to speak. The “none saw him” could also refer to the refusal of feminized, racialized others to either subscribe to the phallic subjectivity of the Human who “sees” or grant that master subject recognition.

⁹⁴⁰ Shelley, *The Witch of Atlas*, 371, stanza IX, lines 113-120.

After this experience, the Witch weaves a veil to “shadow” the matrixial “Splendour of her love” because, the narrator reports, “No thought of living spirit could abide” on any “object in the world so wide, / On any hope within the circling skies” other than “her form, and in her inmost eyes.”⁹⁴¹ “Which when the lady knew,” she wraps herself in a veil she “skillfully” makes of wild natural landscapes and atmospheric materials: “She took her spindle / And twined three threads of fleecy mist” along with star beams, clouds, mountains, waves, and the “Long lines of light such as the Dawn may kindle.”⁹⁴² The stanza IX above, where the narrator excuses the phallogocentric gaze for its excessive, obsessive focus on the Witch, occurs chronologically prior to stanza XII, when the Witch understands the phallic gaze and veils herself. This can be read in several ways. On the one hand, this situation could represent the mythological moment of foreclosure of the “black mater” and matrixial m/Other that causes the creation of “the Human” and his violent derivatives. Prior to this moment, for example, the Witch does not feel the need to shadow herself from the respectful gaze of the wild cats and all those others who “came, much wondering how the enwombed rocks / Could have brought forth so beautiful a birth.”⁹⁴³ As a quick aside, while the creatures see her as born, she is still forming within the emerald cave. But on the other hand, the Witch’s decision to veil herself right after the narrator’s description of her overwhelming beauty could be read as an example of the way matrixial theory effectively represents how prenatally, pre-maternally, in birth/ing, and to old age, in the era of rapid globalization and industrialization as well as presently, “the trauma of the Other and of the world infiltrate us from without and with-in.”⁹⁴⁴ Third, she as an individual traumatically senses transmissions

⁹⁴¹ Shelley, *The Witch of Atlas*, 372, stanza XII, lines 140 & 142-144 and stanza XIII, lines 151-152.

⁹⁴² Shelley, *The Witch of Atlas*, 372, stanza XIII, lines 145-147.

⁹⁴³ Shelley, *The Witch of Atlas*, 371, stanza X, lines 126-127.

⁹⁴⁴ Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, 224, endnote 33.

and desires from matrixial non-I(s) that in this above scenario are described in terms of an imperially lecherous violation by Universal Pan.

After this occurrence, her co/in-habit(u)ation into ephemeral stable “unity” as a veiled prenatal Witch of wild and wonderful queer plenitude is described as living “alone in this wild home” with her “own thoughts...each a minister, / Clothing themselves.”⁹⁴⁵ The rich, nourishing complexity of her emerald matrix is also described in detail over several stanzas some of which are entirely devoted to highlighting each of her major senses and the queer mixture of her protean powers as her I(s) come into contact with metamorphosing non-I(s). The “deep recesses” of her “odorous dwelling,” for example, are described as “stored with magic treasures” like “Sounds of air, / Which had the power all spirits of compelling.”⁹⁴⁶ And “there lay Visions swift and sweet and quaint” in this shared matrixial psychic sphere in the form of her unthought knowns and uncognized non-I(s).⁹⁴⁷ The I(s) and non-I(s) circulating throughout the psyche-soma she shares with her matrix are described as “white, green, grey, and black, / And of all shapes.”⁹⁴⁸ They also interchange, co-emerge, and fade in varying intensities, frequencies, and rhythms: “Each in its thin sheath like a chrysalis, / Some eager to burst forth, some weak and faint / With the soft burthen of intensest bliss.”⁹⁴⁹ The erotic aerials of her psyche become the entangled creative strings invested with intense future metamorphosing potential: “[E]ach was an adept / When loosed and missioned, making wings of winds, / To stir sweet thoughts or sad, in destined minds.”⁹⁵⁰ This psychic-embodied dimension of her matrixial trans-subjectivity is like an

⁹⁴⁵ Shelley, *The Witch of Atlas*, 374, stanza XXI, lines 209-210.

⁹⁴⁶ Shelley, *The Witch of Atlas*, 372, stanza XIV, lines 153-155.

⁹⁴⁷ Shelley, *The Witch of Atlas*, 372, stanza XV, line 161.

⁹⁴⁸ Shelley, *The Witch of Atlas*, 372, stanza XV, lines 167-168.

⁹⁴⁹ Shelley, *The Witch of Atlas*, 372, stanza XV, lines 162-164.

⁹⁵⁰ Shelley, *The Witch of Atlas*, 372, stanza XVI, lines 174-176.

“aviary / Of ever blooming Eden-trees” that she is described as holding onto tightly like an infant in “a floating net a love-sick Fairy / Had woven from dew beams while the moon yet slept.”⁹⁵¹ Though occurring near the end of the poem, the Witch is described as a “sexless bee” (i.e., the undeveloped female worker bee who collects honey from flowers) to emphasize her queer matrixial plenitude that begins in this emerald womb environment and ventures out into the wilderness. She is “sexless” because her psyche and body exist before and beyond oedipal sexuality in “gentleness and power.” This queer wildness will later enable her to begin her metamorphic quest as a nomadic “wizard-maiden” who can taste of “all blossoms” since she is “confined to none” with “an eye serene and heart unladen” as she experiences cycles of unbecoming in the passageway to newborn-ness.⁹⁵²

But prior to her departure from the cave (her emergence from prenatal non-life into postnatal life), the wild queer plenitude of the Witch’s matrixial trans-subjectivity is also described as including a powerful intellect in the form of “wisdom’s wizard skill” that knows how to do “wondrous works” with “substances unknown.”⁹⁵³ For example, this wizard intellect in a Witch’s form enables her to engineer technologies like “Carved lamps and chalices and phials” that sound like they are capable of generating electric lighting as they shine “In their own golden beams—each like a flower / Out of whose depth a fire-fly shakes his light / Under a cypress in the starless night.”⁹⁵⁴ Overall, these lines describe how within her matrixial emerald dwelling/womb “Metamorphosis is a co-poietic activity in a web that ‘remembers’ these swerves and relations, inscribes affective traces of jouissance and imprints of trauma and encounter, and conducts such traces from *non-I* to *I*, from one

⁹⁵¹ Shelley, *The Witch of Atlas*, 372, stanza XVI, lines 170-172.

⁹⁵² Shelley, *The Witch of Atlas*, 385, stanza LXVIII, lines 589-592.

⁹⁵³ Shelley, *The Witch of Atlas*, 372, stanza XIX, line 195 and stanza XX, line 201.

⁹⁵⁴ Shelley, *The Witch of Atlas*, 373, stanza XX, lines 205-208.

encounter to further encounters.”⁹⁵⁵ And such is the nature of her metamorphic quest out of her emerald cave where she transforms others when she finally “remembers” the matrixial “scrolls of strange device” from prenatal life that revealed how “the Human” can self-deconstruct into “that happy age” before and beyond phallic foreclosures, cuts, and castrations of “earth-consuming rage.”⁹⁵⁶

But before she leaves the cave, several new non-I(s) in the forms of nymphs of the forest, mountains, oceans, and streams reach out with their erotic aerial strings and touch her own borderlinking potential sending her into another traumatizing transformation. These nymphs ask permission to do her bidding on land and sea but she rejects their offer because she knows that imperial man will exploit the earth to oblivion and so each creature will perish: “The boundless Ocean like a drop of dew / Will be consumed—the stubborn centre must / Be scattered like a cloud of summer dust.”⁹⁵⁷ The Witch becomes even more explicit when she asks them “If I must weep when the surviving Sun / Shall smile on your decay— Oh, ask not me / To love you till your little race is run.”⁹⁵⁸ After this, the “wizard Maid” becomes increasingly depressed as she continues living alone in her emerald cavern while receiving the traumatizing transmissions from the earth in the visions she sees in her fountain: “This lady never slept, but lay in trance / All night within the foundation—as in sleep / Its emerald crags glowed in her beauty’s glance.”⁹⁵⁹ She wit(h)nesses through the “green splendour of the water deep” the traumas of the m/other in the form of “constellations” that “reel and dance / Like fire-flies.”⁹⁶⁰ Here the Witch wit(h)nesses

⁹⁵⁵ Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, 144.

⁹⁵⁶ Shelley, *The Witch of Atlas*, 373, stanza XVIII, lines 185, 188 & 190.

⁹⁵⁷ Shelley, *The Witch of Atlas*, 374, stanza XXIII, lines 230-232.

⁹⁵⁸ Shelley, *The Witch of Atlas*, 374, stanza XXIV, lines 235-237.

⁹⁵⁹ Shelley, *The Witch of Atlas*, 375, stanza XXVIII, lines 265-267.

⁹⁶⁰ Shelley, *The Witch of Atlas*, 374, stanza XXIV, lines 268-270.

something that is not directly described but the lines foreground the considerable effort it takes for her to hold her mind together and regain “her contemplations calm / With open eyes, closed feet and folded palm.”⁹⁶¹ Again, the emphasis here is how “the trauma of the Other and of the world infiltrate us from without and with-in.”⁹⁶² Indeed, her “bright tears” accompany the screams and “sobbing voices” of “departing Forms, o’er the serene / Of the white streams and of the forest green.”⁹⁶³ But the fountain that allows her to view earthly events also functions to highlight how the matrixial trans-subjective entity has a hybrid gaze “with no possible fixed point of vision” and therein subverts inside/outside perspective like an “eroticized eye floating between several subjective entities.”⁹⁶⁴ The Witch works through these overwhelmingly traumatic encounter-events because of this matrixial hybridity, and because she is still encapsulated within the metabolizing matrix of the emerald womb. She does so by immersing herself and laying down within an “inextinguishable well / Of crimson fire, full even to the brim / And overflowing all the margin trim.”⁹⁶⁵ She experiences this metabolizing matrixial transformation by fire like a “fierce war / Of wintry winds shook that innocuous liquor / In many a mimic moon.”⁹⁶⁶

After this experience, she decides that she feels stymied by her accustomed surroundings and the view of the world mediated through the secret fountain in her cave. She emerges from the prenatal non-life of the cave and embarks on a nomadic metamorphic quest in the form of a sailing adventure down the river Nile in a living boat she grows like a

⁹⁶¹ Shelley, *The Witch of Atlas*, 374, stanza XXIV, lines 271-272.

⁹⁶² Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, 224, endnote 33.

⁹⁶³ Shelley, *The Witch of Atlas*, 374, stanza XXV, lines 246-247.

⁹⁶⁴ Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, 152-153.

⁹⁶⁵ Shelley, *The Witch of Atlas*, 375, stanza XXIX, lines 278-280.

⁹⁶⁶ Shelley, *The Witch of Atlas*, 376, stanza XXX, lines 281-283.

plant from a “strange seed” stolen from “Chaos.”⁹⁶⁷ Soon after, she becomes the maker and caregiver of a “sexless” creature of wild, queer plenitude like herself with gorgeous wings that she calls Hermaphroditus. It is through her relationship with the fragile partial subjectivity of Hermaphroditus that she begins to learn more consciously the matrixial art of caring for the wild: “And ever as she went, the Image lay / With folded wings and unawakened eyes.”⁹⁶⁸ Together they function as an illustration of the “hybrid gaze” and “floating eye” of the severality that compose matrixial trans-subjectivity. Hermaphroditus functions as a kind of matrixial wit(h)ness-Thing for the Witch as “the Image” that is not “the Human” and is more like the matrixial-Thing. At the same time, his dreaming face is described as smiling ephemerally like an infant in response to the changes that ripple across his transformational matrixial creator’s aesthetic atmosphere. For example, he drinks in the “warm tears” and inhales the “sweet signs” that “with busy murmur vain, / They had aroused from that full heart and brain.”⁹⁶⁹ Eventually, the Witch asks him to use the force of his magical wings to propel the plant-boat against the current and up mountain slopes until she finds an “Austral lake” above which they make an ephemeral homeplace in the sky: “There she would build herself a windless haven” in the “high clouds, white, golden, and vermilion.”⁹⁷⁰ For a time, she co/in-habit(u)ates and learns to “play pranks” on clouds and water in this wild wilderness of “incessant hail with stony clash” that is described as the “wreck of some wind-wandering / Fragment of inky thundersmoke” and “a gem to copy Heaven engraven.”⁹⁷¹

⁹⁶⁷ Shelley, *The Witch of Atlas*, 376, stanza XXXII, lines 299 & 301.

⁹⁶⁸ Shelley, *The Witch of Atlas*, 378, stanza XL, lines 361-362.

⁹⁶⁹ Shelley, *The Witch of Atlas*, 378, stanza XL, lines 366-368.

⁹⁷⁰ Shelley, *The Witch of Atlas*, 380, stanza XLVIII, lines 428 & 429 and stanza LII, line 458.

⁹⁷¹ Shelley, *The Witch of Atlas*, 381, stanza LI, lines 443 & 446-448.

However, her mind is again thrown back to the matrixial place of non-life and created anew after she belatedly understands the meaning of her previous traumatic experiences. While she is still living in her stormy wind haven, the “armies of her ministering Spirits” (i.e. her thoughts) report après-coup “all that had happened new / Between the earth and the moon since they had brought / The last intelligence.”⁹⁷² Her emotional reaction to this freshly reopened wound is temporary mental fragmentation from the shock of again “joining with-in the other’s trauma” that “echoes back” to her “archaic traumas.”⁹⁷³ For example, she is described as growing “Pale as the moon lost in the watery night— / And now she wept and now she laughed outright.”⁹⁷⁴ Mentally defamiliarized and estranged from herself, she is cast out again as a fugitive from her familiar homeplace. So, she sets out once more on the metamorphic quest of the wild nomad through dizzying wildernesses where she might again expand the circumference of her imagination and wit(h)nessing capacities.

Once she comes into co/in-habit(u)ating contact with people in the cities and villages near the Nile River where it was “her delight / To wander in the shadow of the night,” her matrixial gaze resurfaces and she becomes a necessarily impinging and nurturing matrixial wit(t)ness-Thing for others.⁹⁷⁵ The Witch’s matrixial power lies in her ability to rejuvenate the spiritually and creatively dead back to life whether Human or post-Human. She nourishes the imagination’s return to non-life in the passageway back into renewed life. For example, as she wanders amongst sleeping people who “give little thought” to a Witch’s

⁹⁷² Shelley, *The Witch of Atlas*, 381-382, stanza LII, line 459 and stanza LIV, lines 476-478.

⁹⁷³ Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, 147.

⁹⁷⁴ Shelley, *The Witch of Atlas*, 382, stanza LIV, lines 479-480.

⁹⁷⁵ Shelley, *The Witch of Atlas*, 383, stanza LX, lines 519-520.

gaze, “To her eyes / The naked beauty of the soul lay bare.”⁹⁷⁶ But contact with the matrixial gaze also “exacts its price and has its own beauty; it has its solaces and its moments of grace, but it is profoundly destabilizing. You are not cut from lack; you appear by disappearing.”⁹⁷⁷ Just as the Witch’s matrixial environment oscillates between appearance and disappearance to enable the conditions of her subjective emergence, her matrixial gaze reappears in glaring, disintegrating intensity and disappears into the clouds of night to destabilize “common sense” understandings of “the Human” so that human beings might become something else entirely. The matrixial Witch sees “through a rude and worn disguise” straight to our “inner form most bright and fair” before “the Image” of the species was indoctrinated by “priests asleep—all one sort / For all were educated to be so.”⁹⁷⁸ Matrixial deconstruction causes priests to admit that “the god Apis, really was a bull / And nothing more” and reveals the artifice of kings.⁹⁷⁹ And matrixial contact for a “lying scribe” propels him to confess the truth “without a bribe.”⁹⁸⁰ But to those most fragile and in need of care, she is “like the spirit of that wind / Whose soft step deepens slumber.”⁹⁸¹

Ultimately, the matrixial gaze of the Witch stages transformations throughout the poem in such a way that the reader is “made fragile by the artist’s traumatic mold and contact, in whose effects s/he is caught, so that new paths open for her/him to be in contact with the trauma of the Other and the tragic of the world. The end point of the sliding is not the artist’s initial traumatic encounter, but *your* future opening to the outside by unfolding

⁹⁷⁶ Shelley, *The Witch of Atlas*, 385, stanza LXVI, lines 570-571.

⁹⁷⁷ Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, 147.

⁹⁷⁸ Shelley, *The Witch of Atlas*, 384, stanza LXII, lines 546-552.

⁹⁷⁹ Shelley, *The Witch of Atlas*, 386, stanza LXIII, lines 627-628.

⁹⁸⁰ Shelley, *The Witch of Atlas*, 386, stanza LXXII, lines 623-624.

⁹⁸¹ Shelley, *The Witch of Atlas*, 383, stanza LX, lines 521-522.

your inside” (my emphasis).⁹⁸² Shelley strikingly represents the Witch’s metamorphic co-poietic potential by foregrounding her role as a model of mature matrixial m/Other-hood: “And then, she had a charm of strange device, / Which murmured on mute lips with tender tone / Could make that Spirit mingle with her own.”⁹⁸³ The matrixial m/Other maintains stabilizing equanimity in metabolizing wit(h)ness to the traumatizing effects of “all the code of custom’s lawless law / Written upon the brows of old and young” for “little did the sight disturb her soul.”⁹⁸⁴ In the metamorphosing encounter with the Witch, it is suddenly “we” who are again “thrown” back toward that protean, oceanic “state of non-life out of which new life will come” as newborn-ness:⁹⁸⁵

We, the weak mariners of that wide lake
Where'er its shores extend or billows roll,
Our course unpiloted and starless make
O'er its wild surface to an unknown goal—
But she in the calm depths her way could take
Where in bright bowers immortal forms abide
Beneath the weltering of the restless tide.⁹⁸⁶

While the last two lines in the above passage immediately call to mind Platonic forms, I think the lines are meant to emphasize how the matrixial tendency to grow and metamorphose from traumatic encounters is both an immortal capacity, in the sense of fundamental to our human nature, perhaps, and a capacity that makes us figuratively

⁹⁸² Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, 147.

⁹⁸³ Shelley, *The Witch of Atlas*, 385, stanza LXVI, lines 574-576.

⁹⁸⁴ Shelley, *The Witch of Atlas*, 384, stanza LXII, lines 540-541 and stanza LXIII, line 545.

⁹⁸⁵ Ettinger, “Demeter-Persephone Complex,” 135.

⁹⁸⁶ Shelley, *The Witch of Atlas*, 384, stanza LXII, lines 546-552.

immortal, in the sense that “death” is a transformative moment or threshold into a new mode of existence and season of life. Whether you identify by the name of Witch, Wizard, Sexless Bee, Hermaphroditus, Flying Boat, Friend, Lover, or Universal Pan, “what wouldst thou have given” to the beloved m/Other “Witch who would have taught you” some matrixial “charm”?⁹⁸⁷

While neither P.B. Shelley nor Ettinger’s related models replace violent phallic psychosocial structures and cultural systems, matrixial poetry and theory do emphasize how the collective becoming-aware of such “queer plenitude” and insurgent wildness latent within all matrixial trans-subjects might begin to take out of existence the anti-Black, biophobic, phallogocentric subjectivizing order over time: “...transformative elements of an expanded subjectivity, hypothesized through the Matrix, might be understood as currently coming into play, as coming into imaginative and theoretical acknowledgedability [sic], in a shift affecting the current Symbolic.”⁹⁸⁸ And it is the subversive effect of matrixial artworks and literary texts that stimulate in their audiences a sense of defamiliarizing wonder that can make the audience into strange, fragile newborns to themselves to the extent that they question their way of being and belonging with other wild natures. This “cognitive crucifixion” that exposes worn-out habits may foster a matrixial co/in-habit(u)ating togetherness in a homeplace (beyond the traditional white family) where we perform compassionate hospitality and wit(h)ness each other unbecoming toward “oceanic” and “atmospheric” non-life in the passageway to and from the “terrestrial” terrains of newbornness. And then once ashore, turn around to return to the sea to do “evolution” all over, again and again. We return to the matrixial borderspace of co-birth not as a Real origin, but as an

⁹⁸⁷ Shelley, *The Witch of Atlas*, 385, stanza LXVI, lines 577-578 & 583.

⁹⁸⁸ Pollock, “Femininity: Aporia or Sexual Difference?”, 21.

Imaginary/Symbolic shattering, repair, and rebirth that does not involve the subordination of “objects.” As the contemporary Black poet Jordan Jace puts it: “. . . I want to move like water, to move / from unity to struggle to unity, / to have no perfect world we haven’t fought for.”⁹⁸⁹ Although N.K. Jemisin’s “erotic aerials of the psyche” move through the earth like liquid lava, they, like P.B. Shelley and Jordan Jace’s oceanic and watery matrixial “strings,” weave us together as the “partial-subjects” that we all are, as yet “unknown to each other” but caught up eternally in a traumatic, joyful “process of co/in-habit(u)ating” even after everything.⁹⁹⁰

The Demeter-Persephone Complex: Mothers and Daughters of Melancholy Wonders in N.K. Jemisin’s *The Broken Earth Trilogy*

A conservative group called the “Sad Puppies” claims that N.K. Jemisin’s triple-Hugo-award winning series, *The Broken Earth Trilogy*, has “no human interest” because she is a “social justice warrior” who has “hijack[ed] the genre” with texts that the group dismisses as “niche, academic, overtly to the left in ideology and flavor and ultimately lacking what might best be called visceral, gut-level, swashbuckling fun.”⁹⁹¹ In other words, they believe Jemisin’s trilogy contains “no human interest” because the text is written outside of what is visible and legible to them as anti-Black advocates of the “genre-specific orders of truth” of Man2.⁹⁹² Indeed, the “number of things that they do not notice

⁹⁸⁹ Jordan Jace, “I want,” in *Poem-a-Day* (June), curated by Jos Charles (*Academy of American Poets*: 2022), lines 27-29.

⁹⁹⁰ Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, 160.

⁹⁹¹ Lisa Dowell, Black Futures Matter: Afrofuturism and Geontology in N.K. Jemisin’s Broken Earth Trilogy,” *Literary Afrofuturism in the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Isiah Lavender III and Lisa Yaszek (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2020), 149.

⁹⁹² Sylvia Wynter, “Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species? Or, to Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations,” in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, ed. Katherine McKittrick (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015), 32.

are literally astronomical.”⁹⁹³ Jemisin has explicitly explained that she is writing against “traditional science fiction” and “post-apocalyptic fiction” because texts from these genres have historically “centered on [a] white male protagonis[t]” who “find[s] a group of people to dominate and force to rebuild society in his image.”⁹⁹⁴ These texts then typically show the white male protagonist’s plans ruined by the discovery that “the world was actually taken over by Black people and those Black people are cannibals who love white women and a whole bunch of other horrible crap.”⁹⁹⁵ Jemisin describes how this narrative is “still a good example of that white male power fantasy that I am really tired of, and annoyed and offended by” and that her trilogy is instead a “Black female power fantasy” about how “altruism and community” are key to survival.⁹⁹⁶ Jemisin’s trilogy suggests that though some of their stone monuments remain, the white western master subjects who make up the category of the human are “ephemeral things in the planetary scale.”⁹⁹⁷ As the nonhuman narrator of all three books of the trilogy notes, “people’s attention is directed toward the ground, not the sky” so “[t]hey do not notice what is missing.”⁹⁹⁸ Humans who conform to the standards of white western monohumanist Man destroy and miss out on whole entire and new horizons of liberated being because they are unable to imagine the value of caring for internal and external matrixial m/others: “But then, how can they? Who misses what they have never, ever even imagined? That would not be human nature. How fortunate, then, that there are more people in this world than just humankind.”⁹⁹⁹ As Jemisin puts it in her

⁹⁹³ Jemisin, *The Fifth Season*, 150.

⁹⁹⁴ Jessica Hurley and N.K. Jemisin, “An Apocalypse is a Relative Thing: An Interview with N.K. Jemisin,” *ASAP/Journal* 3, no. 3 (2018): 469.

⁹⁹⁵ Hurley and Jemisin, “An Apocalypse is a Relative Thing,” 470.

⁹⁹⁶ Hurley and Jemisin, “An Apocalypse is a Relative Thing,” 470.

⁹⁹⁷ Jemisin, *The Fifth Season*, 150.

⁹⁹⁸ Jemisin, *The Fifth Season*, 151.

⁹⁹⁹ Jemisin, *The Fifth Season*, 151.

acknowledgements for *The Fifth Season*: “This fantasy novel [that] was partially born in space” and is populated by “sentient rock people” is also partially made possible with the support of her nonhuman muse—her cat, “KING OZZYMANDIAS.”¹⁰⁰⁰ For all these reasons, perhaps it is not a coincidence that the post-Human narrator is a nearly immortal *Stone Eater* called Hoa who leads the ancient rebellion against his oppressors, during which an event occurs that shatters the Earth into seismic chaos.¹⁰⁰¹

When asked in an interview about the role of apocalypse in the work of liberation from deep structures of oppression, Jemisin comments that those who promote reform or “incremental change” as the “only safe way to make the world a better place” are not the people “who are suffering,” and are rather the people in the “status quo” who want to be “comfortable longer.”¹⁰⁰² As an example, Jemisin refers to Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” where he writes about “white liberals who were constantly urging him to go slower, to just wait for a time that would be better, there would be a time at some point in the future when it would be appropriate for black people to be granted basic civil rights.”¹⁰⁰³ Instead, Jemisin suggests that a back-and-forth dynamic between burn-it-all-down revolution and the incremental change of restorative reform is the cyclical nature of historical time that people of diverse (dis)positions have always experienced in highly stratified societies when trying to change the world: “The truth, the reality of how societal change must happen, is a balance between...punctuated chunks of plain old horrific violence leavened with periods of restabilization.”¹⁰⁰⁴

¹⁰⁰⁰ Jemisin, *The Fifth Season*, 467-468.

¹⁰⁰¹ A Stone Eater is “a sentient humanoid species whose flesh, hair, etc., resembles stone.” Jemisin, *The Fifth Season*, 465.

¹⁰⁰² Hurley and Jemisin, “An Apocalypse is a Relative Thing,” 473.

¹⁰⁰³ Hurley and Jemisin, “An Apocalypse is a Relative Thing,” 473.

¹⁰⁰⁴ Hurley and Jemisin, “An Apocalypse is a Relative Thing,” 473 & 474.

These two shaping forces of sociopolitical (and environmental) mutability—incendiary revolution (expressed as the “fatalistic posture” of “hope”) and incremental change—describe at the most, admittedly, reductive level the basic motivating forces of Afro-pessimism and more reform-oriented methods of recognition politics, respectively.¹⁰⁰⁵ African American Studies scholar Calvin L. Warren summarizes an abridged version of Afro-Pessimism as the following:

Afro-pessimists such as Frank Wilderson and Jared Sexton would argue for the *non-ontology* of blackness—that Blackness is excluded from the realm of humanity and this exclusion preconditions ontology itself. For Afro-pessimists, the grammar of bio-futurity and political programs will do very little to bring blacks into the fold of humanity; in fact, this grammar is the source of black suffering and dread.¹⁰⁰⁶

Warren also explains how some scholars have dismissively misattributed to all Black optimists the tendency to “docke[t] a humanist desire either to fold blacks into humanity and resolve the ontological problem, or to move ‘beyond’ race and embrace an optimistic future of universal humanism.”¹⁰⁰⁷ But Black optimism is also skeptical of unqualified celebrations of recognition politics, and rather more interested in conversations about Black subjectivity that do not *only* focus on the important issues of deconstructing anti-Black logic and bringing more awareness to the traumatic psychosexual, political, and socioeconomic intergenerational legacies of slavery. While also working to address these problems,

¹⁰⁰⁵ Jared Sexton, “Afro-Pessimism: The Unclear Word,” *Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge* 29 (2016): endnote 1, “The impulse to struggle, perhaps at its most genuine, need not speculate upon its prospects.”

¹⁰⁰⁶ Calvin L. Warren, “Black: Mysticism: Fred Moten’s Phenomenology of (Black) Spirit,” *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 65, no. 2 (2017): 220.

¹⁰⁰⁷ Warren, “Black: Mysticism,” 220.

philosophy and theory qualifying as Black optimist is perhaps best represented by Fred Moten's work. What Afropessimists call "social death," by which they mean the willed annihilation of Black lives as evident in slavery and its legacies, is for Moten what *politics* desires and thus the phrase misrepresents what has always been alive in Black people and Blackness—sociality. But Moten agrees that "black" is denied an ontology because it is the grounds (and materiality) on which "being" (aka whiteness) is based. As Julie Carlson summarizes Moten's project in his essay "Blackness and Nothingness," on the one hand, "*Black life*" is a "mode of no-thing-ness that disrupts the un/truths ascribed to subjecthood," and on the other hand, "*Black life*" is separate from the "'social death' that has been accorded to it."¹⁰⁰⁸

Jemisin's *Broken Earth* series brings together these two strands of African American criticism. The representative forms of restabilization efforts amid an endless apocalypse alternate back and forth and entangle into a *sublating* dialectic from which something new can emerge. She argues that these forces exist side-by-side in her trilogy because "That's what we've seen is actually effective. I wanted to play with and share both, to explore what would be the consequences of both."¹⁰⁰⁹ Although Moten is against dialectical and sublating discourse as too Hegelian and too retentive of binaries, Jemisin's blurring of states of social/environmental stability and apocalypse brings to mind Moten's characterization of the necessarily generative relation between anti-Black structural conditions and the paraontological imagination: "We have to continually work...in the hold on the open sea—through this interplay of the establishment and the breakdown of the cell if we are ever to

¹⁰⁰⁸ Carlson, "Just friends?", 297.

¹⁰⁰⁹ Hurley and Jemisin, "An Apocalypse is a Relative Thing," 474.

attend the birth of an insurgency that Fanon prophesies and enacts.”¹⁰¹⁰ To my mind, Moten’s claim for an “undercommon inheritance of another world, which is given in and given as fantasy in the hold” shares in the spirit of Shelley’s Demogorgon, who, significantly, is the fatal child born of wrecked hope and tyranny, the “potential energy” of revolution:

These are the spells by which to reassume
An empire o’er the disentangled Doom.

To suffer woes which Hope thinks infinite;
To forgive wrongs darker than Death or Night;
To defy Power which seems Omnipotent;
To love, and bear; to hope, till Hope creates
From its own wreck the thing it contemplates;¹⁰¹¹

This passage and Moten’s ideas share certain affinities with the matrixial development of subjectivity as an oscillatory process that produces “thresholds of meaning” somewhere and sometime in the destabilizing periods and wild spaces of traumatic despair at the m/other’s disappearance and upon her restorative reappearance.

The *Broken Earth* series channels, transforms, and sublates anti-Black logic/grammar and the matrixial “antiregulatory force” of the fatal Demogorgon child into the “mountain-sized anger” of Jemisin’s mother protagonist, Essun.¹⁰¹² Essun is an orogene,

¹⁰¹⁰ Fred Moten, “Blackness and Nothingness,” 769.

¹⁰¹¹ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound, Shelley’s Poetry and Prose: A Norton Critical Edition* 2nd ed., eds. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company: 2002), 286, Act IV, lines 568-578.

¹⁰¹² Moten, “Blackness and Nothing,” 778.

a type of disenfranchised human with the superhuman capacity to quell and create earthquakes: "...But more than anything else, it was supposed to be a story about a woman, about a woman who is a mother, who is fighting to make a world that is worthy of her children."¹⁰¹³ Hoa, the Stone Eater, an immortal (and rather maternal) ancestor of Essun's, narrates to Stone-Eater-Transformed Essun (and the reader), in the second-person voice, her own story of the many traumas that she experiences as a young girl called Damaya, a young woman referred to as Syenite, and finally as Essun, the middle-aged mother questing to find her lost daughter Nassun: "The world has already ended within her, and neither is ending for the first time. She's old hat at this by now."¹⁰¹⁴

In the wild and caring dynamics occurring among Hoa, Essun, and Nassun, the *Broken Earth* series can be read as posing an important question that links Moten's paraontological imagining of Black "nonbeing" (in the Buddhist sense) and no-thing-ness to Ettinger's matrixial trans-subjectivity as another kind of deconstructive technology of care: "What would it mean for us to take the word 'mother' less as a gendered identity and more as a possible action, a technology of transformation that those people who do the most mothering labor are teaching us right now?"¹⁰¹⁵ In the same way that the "imaginary perspective of the political subject—who is also the transcendental subject of knowledge, grasp, ownership, and self-possession" made Black being illegible and illegitimate, Ettinger suggests that the "matrixial space-time is usually foreclosed or infolded inside more phallic dimensions and ignored."¹⁰¹⁶ Like Moten's "antiregulatory," "dispossessive," "centrifugal"

¹⁰¹³ Hurley and Jemisin, "An Apocalypse is a Relative Thing," 475.

¹⁰¹⁴ Jemisin, *The Fifth Season*, 1.

¹⁰¹⁵ Gumbs, "m/other ourselves," 23.

¹⁰¹⁶ Moten, "Blackness and Nothing," 741 and Bracha L. Ettinger, "Matrixial Trans-subjectivity," *Theory, Culture & Society* 23, no. 2-3 (2006), 220.

force of Blackness in social life, “metramorphosis” sits at the heart of Ettinger’s matrix/womb and prior to the phallic, racial stratifications of the psyche: “Metramorphosis is a co-naissance – a transformational knowledge of being born together with the other whereby each individual becomes sub-subject in subjectivity that surpasses her personal limits, and whereby an other might become for me not only a sign of my archaic m/Other but also an occasion for transformation.”¹⁰¹⁷

In Jemisin’s *Broken Earth* series, racial, gendered, and environmental melancholic responses to the intergenerational traumas of enduring oppression are not only a fundamental part of subject formation in a patriarchal, anti-Black, anthropocentric world. Within the world of the *Broken Earth*, owning and navigating an intersection of melancholic losses also informs the essential *everyday* psychic strategies for the citizen-subject (stills) and the slave class (orogenes) trying to survive under the brutality of the Sanzed Empire—a nation state that promises safety in exchange for compliance to a highly stratified society of marked inequality. This mirrors a major perspective of Afro-pessimistic thought, namely, Black subjects’ entombment in the “material-discursive elements of anti-blackness,” a patriarchal, racial capitalist system posturing as a liberal democracy.¹⁰¹⁸ As Jemisin explains in an interview, “I was drawing from...the experience of living in a world where you’ve got a group of people devoting a great deal of energy to containing and suppressing another group of people and what it’s like surviving that. And what it’s like for everybody.”¹⁰¹⁹ While historical forms of violent material exclusion and dehumanizing hierarchical differentiation have produced subjects enmired in melancholic speechless paralysis, “the

¹⁰¹⁷ Ettinger, “Matrixial Trans-subjectivity,” 221.

¹⁰¹⁸ Sexton, “Afro-Pessimism”: Paragraph 33.

¹⁰¹⁹ Hurley and Jemisin, “An Apocalypse is a Relative Thing,” 474-475.

ego's melancholic yet militant refusal to allow certain objects to disappear into social oblivion" is potentially the first step in a never-ending mourning practice that involves (re)constructing and mobilizing a "good-enough" "true self" for political action.¹⁰²⁰ The melancholic's refusal to give up on trying to hold and name their unrecognized, ungrievable losses provides a model for shifting identity away from the impossible ideal of the (white) human and toward a politicized identity that narrates/speaks beloved lost objects/ideals and foreclosed identities into a healthy illusion or myth of a "good-enough" true self and m/other wit(h)ness-Thing.

If it is true that Jemisin asks us through the *Broken Earth* series to "consider what is at stake in defending a world built on cruelty and oppression—and what is at stake in ending it," then it is also true that she is asking us to consider the psychosocial implications of these traumatic encounter-events.¹⁰²¹ Jemisin uses the trilogy to ask us the additional crucial question of whether ending a world built on cruelty and oppression is even possible if we do not consider the psychic stakes of the matter. The trilogies demonstrate that if the matrixial foreclosure of queer wildness by anti-Black phallic culture remains unchallenged, familial "structures that produce that violence as part of their everyday operations" will continue to reinforce and reproduce institutional and social hierarchies of power across the generations and the planet.¹⁰²² At the same time, the trilogies suggest that a particular kind of matrixial loss—if left unacknowledged, unaddressed, and unrecognized—will inevitably produce the incendiary power of disenfranchised grief. This unacknowledged grief is represented in the trilogies in the form of matrixial militant melancholia, an affective/perceptual

¹⁰²⁰ Eng and Han, *Racial Melancholia*, 63 & 122.

¹⁰²¹ Jessica Hurley and N. K. Jemisin, "An apocalypse is a relative thing: An interview with N. K. Jemisin," *ASAP/Journal* 3, no. 3 (2018): 468.

¹⁰²² Hurley and Jemisin, "An Apocalypse is a Relative Thing," 468.

orientation/perspective invested in the mobilization of unbeing/unbecoming to support the world's passage away from the epoch of "the Human" and toward post-Human non-life into life. The trilogies tell the story of the end of the world as filtered through a mother's traumatic life and journey to find her daughter. In doing so, the trilogies also offer up a parallel version of Ettinger's new life-affirming subjectivizing myth, called the Demeter-Persephone Complex, that gets beyond the classical oedipal "killing story." The anamnesis of the Essun-Nassun Complex is told to Essun in second person voice by her formerly enslaved, nearly-immortal ancestor, Hoa. The Demeter-Persephone myth addressed to a matrixial trans-subjective "you" scrambles point of view, and therein helps them both work through their traumas of racialized, matrixial violence by remembering their interconnected matrixial biographies—their shared metamorphic quest across vast distances in space and time.

Melancholic identity can be understood in several ways, as self-destructive, de-pathologized, and psychosocially/politically salutary. Regarding the former, as discussed in Chapter 3, traditional phallic subjectivization within western, anti-Black patriarchies leads to multiple versions of melancholic formations of subjectivity oriented towards death based on different intersectional degrees of non-I/other traumatic foreclosures and/or I/self-devaluations, abjections, and rejections. Whatever method the presubject uses to try and obtain or *be* the symbolic white patriarchal phallus involves self-harming disavowals and performative identifications in assimilation to the "Law," which amount to the brutal self-maiming/repression of the developing subject's queer plenitudes of matrixial wildness. David L. Eng and Shinhee Han's theory of racial melancholia suggests a similar series of

events. However, their focus is on de-pathologizing such melancholia because they see the condition of minoritarian aspiration to “the Human” as not the exception but the rule:

If experiences of immigration, assimilation, and racialization in the United States are fundamentally circumscribed by the relinquishing of lost but unspeakable Asian [and African diasporic] ideals as well as foreclosed investments in whiteness attached to histories of immigration exclusion and bars to national belonging [as well as denials of the enduring legacy of slavery], then we must not slot racial melancholia under the sign of pathology, permanence, or damage. Instead, we reconceptualize it as a normative psychic state involving everyday conflicts and negotiations between mourning *and* melancholia, rather than, in Freud’s estimation, mourning or melancholia.”¹⁰²³

The above passage foregrounds, like Hoa does in the *Broken Earth*, that functioning organized around mourning and melancholy is an everyday survival strategy within conditions of constant traumatic and abusive impingement. They suggest that within oppressive contexts of continuous impingement, the human psyche solidifies into the melancholic compliance and alienation of a false sense of selfhood: “...we are fragile at the beginning, like all creatures. It takes centuries for us, the who of us, to...cool. Even the slightest of pressure—like you, demanding that he fit himself to your needs rather than his own—can damage the final shape of his personality.”¹⁰²⁴

In other words, people marginalized by the “master’s” gaze, as outside of the “dominant” and “ideal” genre of the white, male, cisgender Human, can aspire to and

¹⁰²³ Eng and Han, *Racial Melancholia*, 25.

¹⁰²⁴ Jemisin, *The Stone Sky*, 282.

achieve various magnitudes of master subject status, but only up to a point and it has a psychic price in melancholic formations of self. Even as master subject status is held out as the promise and prize of “universal merit” that keeps the brutalizing system of anti-Black late-capitalism in production, its achievement by some “phallic” minorities is still only possible on the condition it benefits existing powerful figures and their nepotistic kinship networks. Additionally, such aspiration is always indirectly and directly punished in minor and major ways as the *Broken Earth* captures so effectively:

Tell them they can be great someday like us. Tell them they belong among us, no matter how we treat them. Tell them they must earn the respect which everyone else receives by default. Tell them there is a standard for acceptance; that standard is simply perfection. Kill those who scoff at these contradictions, and tell the rest that the dead deserved annihilation for their weakness and doubt. Then they’ll break themselves trying for what they’ll never achieve.¹⁰²⁵

Disciplinary and institutional figures within and external to the family function according to just this logic in their efforts to preserve patrilineal privileges of race, class, and gender—whether to their real or imagined benefit. They misrecognize and misshape matrixial multiplicity into the rejected cuts and abjected castrations of the master subject and his angels of the house to the point where “psychic belonging and the promise of citizenship” are experienced as a “type of loss and self-hate.”¹⁰²⁶

But matrixial theory is important because it potentially provides vocabulary to supplement Eng and Han’s de-pathologized account of racial melancholia, Moten’s

¹⁰²⁵ Jemisin, *The Fifth Season*, 76.

¹⁰²⁶ Eng and Han, *Racial Melancholia*, 65.

paraontology, and Butler's theory of the psychic life of "minoritarian" subjectivities. As represented by the characters of Essun, Hoa, and Nassun briefly described above, for example, such subjectivities are barred from and/or do not wish to subscribe to the norms of western bourgeois masculine master subjects. Ettinger's theory "enables one to think through the kinds of signifying practices that enable...people to subtract themselves from the hold of dominant representations that sustain their subjection."¹⁰²⁷ "Black mater" subjects, maternal fugitive subjects, and matrixial/newborn trans-subjects (who eschew and/or "fail" oedipal triangle tests initiated and "resolved" first in childhood and then repeated in adolescence with possibly different outcomes), for example, might be understood as constructed in a potentially subversive way where the "norm is not able to take hold."¹⁰²⁸ While Eng's theory of racial melancholy emphasizes the structuring role of the "lack" of freedom and privilege in melancholy subject formation, I want to emphasize how a subsequent desire to disidentify with the law of the white paternal metaphor and open onto the matrixial unknown can result in a productive form of melancholy that keeps us search-desiring in an epistemophilic mode, like Demeter for Persephone, and thus keeps us attached to the "silver string of Life."¹⁰²⁹ I want to acknowledge, however, that the desire for disidentification is more conscious than early subject formation. Theoretically, the subjectivities of wild natures do not necessarily subscribe to the same internalized strictures as those of the master subject's psyche. And this implies that there is a certain degree of "queer plenitude," of creatively matrixial and insurgent wildness, that escapes foreclosure by psychic patriarchal conditioning. This queer wildness may be reopened or reconstituted from

¹⁰²⁷ Venn, "Post-Lacanian," 156.

¹⁰²⁸ Jackson, *Becoming Human*, 20 & 101.

¹⁰²⁹ Ettinger, "Demeter-Persephone Complex," 128.

the matrixial resonance field—from the “demonic ground” up—by wondrous, awe-full contact with the matrixial wit(h)ness-Thing, which “ain’t no thing” like a mirror, in Moten’s terms.¹⁰³⁰

Jemisin’s *Broken Earth* series consists of the books *The Fifth Season* (2015), *The Obelisk Gate* (2016), and *The Stone Sky* (2017). Each book of the trilogy begins with an epigraph that effectively encapsulates the overall thematic approach for that novel. The first novel is dedicated to “all those who have to fight for the respect that everyone else is given without question,” and centers on traumatic institutional discrimination and indoctrination as experienced by the feminized, racialized, and objectified character matrixial trans-subjective protagonist who is/was the girl Damaya, the young woman Syenite, and the middle-aged woman Essun...and a mysteriously distanced “you” who is also Essun, but different somehow: “YOU ARE SHE. SHE IS YOU. You are Essun. Remember? The woman whose son is dead...You’re an orogene who’s been living in the little nothing town of Tirimo for ten years.”¹⁰³¹ In the first book, Hoa narrates the chapters that focus on Damaya and Syenite primarily in third person, and the chapters addressed to a “you,” as in the above quotation, are about former experiences of Essun directed toward a different, present Essun, a kind of “newborn” Essun. But the solution to this identity puzzle—that of a past Essun versus the present tense “you” Essun—is not revealed completely until the third novel.

Nonetheless, all the past and present versions of Essun exist on an Earth-like supercontinent ironically called the Stillness because (a) this version of the Earth is sentient, (b) “Evil Father” Earth is enraged at all versions of humans for what he reductively

¹⁰³⁰ Fred Moten, “I Poem: Is alone together how it feels to be free? Ummm.,” *Interim* 39, no. 1 (2020): section, <https://www.interimpoetics.org/373374/fred-moten>.

¹⁰³¹ Jemisin, *The Fifth Season*, 15.

misperceives as their cruel and senseless flinging away of his child, the Moon, and (c) Father Earth desires and enacts his revenge on humanity through the constant threat of tectonic events like earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and tsunamis leading to “Fifth Seasons.”¹⁰³² Fifth Seasons are apocalyptic conditions that amount to “an extended winter—lasting at least six months, per Imperial designation—triggered by seismic activity or other large-scale environmental alternation.”¹⁰³³ Essun is mistreated for the “reason” that she belongs to a widely feared, and therefore enslaved/controlled, population of people called orogenes who possess a sensory organ called sessapinae and who are collectively blamed for the Fifth Seasons and Father Earth’s wrath. The sessapinae organ gives orogenes a perceptual awareness, called sesuna, of the movements of the Earth. The combination of this organ and perceptual capacity generates the unique power of orogenes called orogeny, which is defined as the “ability to manipulate thermal, kinetic, and related forms of energy to address seismic events.”¹⁰³⁴

The narrative of *The Fifth Season* begins right after Essun realizes that her husband Jija has murdered their toddler son, Uche, upon discovering that his son is an orogene. Essun had kept it secret, even from Jija, that she and their two children were orogenes because of the widespread violent hatred of orogenes. Jija then abducts their daughter Nassun in his attempt to flee their home in the “comm” of Tirimo. A “comm” is shorthand for community, city, or town and is the “smallest sociopolitical unit of the Imperial governance system” in

¹⁰³² The Fifth Seasons of the *Broken Earth* series are very much like the 1815 eruption of Mount Tambora, a volcano in Indonesia, that caused the “The Year Without a Summer” and inspired the apocalyptic fantasies of Byron’s poem “Darkness” and Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*—and the plots of both of these texts resurface in uncanny ways in Jemisin’s trilogy.

¹⁰³³ Jemisin, *The Fifth Season*, 460.

¹⁰³⁴ Jemisin, *The Fifth Season*, 462.

the Stillness.¹⁰³⁵ Just as Demeter pursues Persephone into the underworld, Essun quests after Nassun in the hopes of saving her from Jija and succeeds “because otherwise this would become the rather straightforward tale of you learning that your daughter is dead, and letting the world wither in your grief.”¹⁰³⁶ Over the duration of her matrixial quest for her daughter, Essun becomes co/in-habit(u)ating co-partners and friends with a boy version of Hoa and the transgender innovator Tonkee. Together they wander as fugitives over the no-place of the Stillness until they find the underground community of Castrima whose leader is the “wild” (non-Fulcrum trained) orogene, Ykka.

The first book starts at the beginning of Essun’s life as Damaya, a young girl who is abused by her “Stillhead” parents (i.e., people who lack orogenic capacities). Damaya is rejected and given over to be miseducated by a racist paramilitary order called the Fulcrum at the imperial city of Yumenes. To my mind, Jemisin describes this racist institution as the “anti-Hogwarts” to emphasize the traumatic (mis)recognition and (un)learning that occurs in the structurally racist learning environments of the west.¹⁰³⁷ Damaya’s abusive education is directed under the supervision of her “Guardian,” Shaffa. Guardians are former orogenes who have been corrupted by the Fulcrum via an invasive surgical procedure that implants a small fragment of Earth’s core into their sessapinae. Guardians are responsible for tracking and acquiring (or destroying) young and potentially trainable orogenes in the Stillness, and for controlling (or destroying) and “guiding” the education of those orogenes chosen as suitable (i.e., submissive/compliant enough) upon their arrival to the Fulcrum.

¹⁰³⁵ Jemisin, *The Fifth Season*, 459.

¹⁰³⁶ Jemisin, *The Stone Sky*, 139.

¹⁰³⁷ Hurley and Jemisin, “An Apocalypse is a Relative Thing,” 471.

The first book also wit(h)nesses Damaya’s transformation into Syenite as narrated by Hoa also in third person. Syenite is under strict orders to conceive an orogenic child for the Sanze Empire with Alabaster, a much more powerful but fellow Fulcrum-trained orogene: “She is a slave, . . . all roggas are slaves. [And] the security and sense of self-worth the Fulcrum offers is wrapped in the chain of her right to live, and even the right to control her own body.”¹⁰³⁸ At first, Syenite and Alabaster intensely dislike each other, but Alabaster warms up considerably faster. Syenite finds their relationship especially unsettling because he refuses to comply like those who “forget the real truth and embrace the falsehood for all they’re worth—because, they decide they cannot be worth much. If a whole society has dedicated itself to their subjugation, after all, then surely they deserve it? Even if they don’t, fighting back is too painful, too impossible. At least this way there is peace, of a sort. Fleetingly.”¹⁰³⁹ And according to Syenite, his refusal to accept falsehood is why, at first, “she hates Alabaster: not because he is more powerful, not even because he is crazy, but because he refuses to allow her any of the polite fictions and unspoken truths that have kept her comfortable, and safe, for years.”¹⁰⁴⁰ Later, Syenite and Alabaster escape to the orogene-tolerant, utopian homeplace and island of Meov, where the couple also find their shared, queer lover, Innon, who is not Fulcrum trained. Syenite conceives a son with Alabaster and the three happily co/in-habit(u)ate temporarily. The first book concludes with the murder of her infant son Corundum by her own forced hand—a catastrophic trauma that is responsible for fracturing her identity into Essun.

¹⁰³⁸ Jemisin, *The Fifth Season*, 348.

¹⁰³⁹ Jemisin, *The Stone Sky*, 312.

¹⁰⁴⁰ Jemisin, *The Fifth Season*, 348.

The second book of the trilogy, *The Obelisk Gate*, is dedicated to “those who have no choice but to prepare their children for the battlefield,” and therefore explores the intergenerational psychic effects of childhood abuse and trauma and how to (un)learn dysfunctional (un)thinking styles and coping mechanisms. Through the figure of Essun, Jemisin thinks through the rippling consequences of the intergenerational forms of racial melancholia characteristic of racialized, animalized, and feminized subjects, of shattered and marked identities:

After all, a person is herself, and others. Relationships chisel the final shape of one’s being. I am me, and you. Damaya was herself *and* the family that rejected her and the people of the Fulcrum who chiseled her to a fine point. Syenite was Alabaster *and* Innon and the people of poor lost Allia *and* Meov. Now you are Tirimo *and* the ash-strewn road’s walkers *and* your dead children...and also the living one who remains. Whom you will get back.¹⁰⁴¹

In particular, the novel investigates the reproduction of Essun’s psyche in her daughter Nassun as their matrixial trans-subjectivities are melancholically structured by loss, rejection, foreclosure, and abuse. For example, much later Essun becomes aware of this dynamic and asks Hoa two questions: ““What have I done?”” and ““What have I made her?””¹⁰⁴² Essun answers her own question with sudden horrifying clarity: “I made her me. Earth eat us both, I made her into me.”¹⁰⁴³ Essun and Nassun both experience too much abuse and “too much loss” under an anti-Black system of power that entrains people to believe that “any degree of orogenic ability must be assumed to negate its corresponding

¹⁰⁴¹ Jemisin, *The Obelisk Gate, The Broken Earth: Book Two* (New York: Orbit Books, 2016), 1.

¹⁰⁴² Jemisin, *The Stone Sky*, 170.

¹⁰⁴³ Jemisin, *The Stone Sky*, 170.

personhood. They are rightfully to be held and regarded as an inferior and dependent species” that must be controlled to maintain “seismic equilibrium.”¹⁰⁴⁴

In the second book, in addition to Essun’s “you” chapters, Hoa also narrates in third person chapters about Nassun’s present circumstances as she wanders across the dangerous, barren wilderness with her unstable, murderous father who hates orogenes. Eventually Nassun and Jija encounter a compromised Shaffa whose sessapinae implants have gone rogue. He is responsible for cornering Syenite into feeling, she had no other choice but to destroy everyone, her infant, and herself or be recaptured into slavery, a scene which alludes to Toni Morrison’s *Sethe* and also “recall[s] Margaret Garner.”¹⁰⁴⁵ After he horrifically panics Syenite on the island of Meov, Shaffa’s mental stability is shaken, and his affective and political alliances are scrambled as he descends into self-deconstruction. As such, Nassun’s chapters flash back into her own past as Shaffa slowly discovers she is Essun’s daughter. For Shaffa, Nassun is a “girl whose mother never loved her, only *refined* her, and whose father will only love her again if she can do the impossible and become something she is not.”¹⁰⁴⁶ Nassun’s chapters give unflinching wit(h)nesses to the intergenerational transmission of abuse, from Shaffa to Essun and then reproduced in Essun’s relationship with her daughter. But this is also about the intergenerational transmission of trauma: “There

¹⁰⁴⁴ Jemisin, *The Obelisk Gate*, 105.

¹⁰⁴⁵ “I drew inspiration from real events of oppression in our own world, not just slavery. You know, Margaret Garner had escaped slavery, although she was recaptured when she killed her daughter, so it’s not so much about narratives of slave rebellion as narratives of the endurance of oppression. Some of those narratives have to do with surviving under oppression as a closeted person, as Essun did for ten years before we actually see her. Some of it has to do with escaping, like the Maroon communities of Brazil. I was inspired by them to create the Island comm Meov, which is where they met Innon and the pirates and all that. So there are lots of different things that I was drawing from and it wasn’t so much slave rebellions as the experience of living in a world where you’ve got a group of people devoting a great deal of energy to containing and suppressing another group of people and what it’s like surviving that. And what it’s like for everybody.” Hurley and Jemisin, “An Apocalypse is a Relative Thing,” 474-475.

¹⁰⁴⁶ Jemisin, *The Obelisk Gate*, 154.

is such a thing as too much loss. Too much has been taken from you both—taken and taken and taken, until there’s nothing left but hope, and you’ve given that up because it hurts too much. Until you would rather die, or kill, or avoid attachments altogether, than lose one more thing.”¹⁰⁴⁷

While Essun reproduces some of the specific violent techniques on Nassun that Shaffa deployed to enforce her submission when she was Damaya (e.g. hand breaking), Essun also does so from a traumatized “cold, monstrous love” that simultaneously thinks it is “*better to die than live a slave*” and that she must ensure her children’s lives remain as “beautiful” and intact as possible.¹⁰⁴⁸ Essun’s particular experience of racialized trauma alongside the broad “expanse of the psychic *foreclosure of the mother*...and the psychic matricide offered by the cultural symbolization in patriarchal society for the subjectivization processes” produce in Nassun’s psychic structure a “*matrixial Thanatos* that turns against the self.”¹⁰⁴⁹ Nassun believes that she and her mother are monsters, and thus she “hates the world” in a “nebulous, directionless” way that fuels her commitment to the “path of destroying the world.”¹⁰⁵⁰ Nassun confesses her lack of faith to Shaffa that ““some things are too broken to be fixed”” and that all she can do is ““make sure the bad things stop.””¹⁰⁵¹ And Shaffa, the former Imperial Guardian and protector of the status quo, is so disillusioned and riddled with guilt that he becomes her “protector” on this nihilistic quest perhaps in the subversive, deconstructive mode of melancholy: ““Is the psychic violence of conscience not

¹⁰⁴⁷ Jemisin, *The Obelisk Gate*, 105.

¹⁰⁴⁸ Jemisin, *The Obelisk Gate*, 258.

¹⁰⁴⁹ Ettinger, “Demeter-Persephone Complex,” 124.

¹⁰⁵⁰ Jemisin, *The Obelisk Gate*, 149 and *The Stone Sky*, 189.

¹⁰⁵¹ Jemisin, *The Stone Sky*, 345.

a refracted indictment of the social forms that have made certain kinds of losses ungrievable?”¹⁰⁵²

But Nassun represents more than a self-destructive, death-driven form of melancholic attachment. Rather, like Shaffa’s “refracted indictment,” Nassun’s anger also demonstrates how the “ego’s death drive may be the very precondition for survival, the beginning of a strategy for living and for living on.”¹⁰⁵³ In fact, Shaffa describes the potential of Nassun’s matrixial “silver gaze” in the following terms: ““If you are the monster they imagined you to be...you are also glorious.””¹⁰⁵⁴ Since Nassun was “deprived of the potency of her archaic-mother” because this “mother-monster is abjected as object” and traumatizing other, her “rebellion” is mistakenly “perceived by herself as a death wish.”¹⁰⁵⁵ While her “matrixial Thanatos is awakened” in this sense, Nassun also demonstrates that such a daughter is in fact “longing not to death but to get into that state of non-life out of which a new life will come, in need for a symbolization of the metamorphic strings and borderlinks.”¹⁰⁵⁶ For example, Nassun never learned the Fulcrum’s intentionally stymieing method of orogeny. Instead, Nassun was only taught to sense planetary seismic movements by her mother and then later by herself. And it is when she is a lost fugitive wandering through the wildernesses of the Stillness that she discovers how to sense and creatively work with the Earth’s magic energy that she calls the silver. She comes to learn from the Stone Eaters that this silver she has identified is called “magic” and is what lay beyond the restrained perceptive awareness of orogeny:

¹⁰⁵² Judith Butler qtd. in Eng and Han, *Racial Melancholia*, 64.

¹⁰⁵³ Eng and Han, *Racial Melancholia*, 64.

¹⁰⁵⁴ Jemisin, *The Stone Sky*, 240.

¹⁰⁵⁵ Ettinger, “Demeter-Persephone Complex,” 135.

¹⁰⁵⁶ Ettinger, “Demeter-Persephone Complex,” 135.

[Magic is] the stuff underneath orogeny, which is made by things that live or once lived. This silver deep within Father Earth wends between the mountainous fragments of his substance in exactly the same way that they twine among the cells of a living, breathing thing. And that is because a planet is a living, breathing thing; she knows this now with the certainty of instinct. All the stories about Father Earth being alive are real.¹⁰⁵⁷

Nassun's dormant matrixial aeries of the psyche are still able to blossom under the most terrible of conditions. However, without her mother's necessary intervention she would remain enmired in the false choice between the "cruelty of the status quo, or the comfort of oblivion."¹⁰⁵⁸

Appropriately, the epigraph of the third and final novel is dedicated to survivors: "To those who've survived: Breathe. That's it. Once more. Good. You're good. Even if you're not, you're alive. That is a victory." Therefore, this final novel explores the life-affirming effects of the Demeter-Persephone myth "as a complex gives means and meaning for resisting objectification of mother and daughter, for liberating 'hysteria' from the grips of the circle of destruction, and for turning hurting links creative."¹⁰⁵⁹ In so doing, the reason behind Hoa's second-person narration of the Essun chapters becomes completely clear. Hoa addresses Essun throughout the novels as "you" because she has been transformed into a Stone Eater at the end of the third novel. In other words, the chapters addressed to "you" attest to Hoa's effort to help Essun remember her biography and ancestral history, her former life, after her transformation into a nearly immortal rock creature. When Essun

¹⁰⁵⁷ Jemisin, *The Stone Sky*, 242.

¹⁰⁵⁸ Jemisin, *The Stone Sky*, 302.

¹⁰⁵⁹ Ettinger, "Demeter-Persephone Complex," 129.

finally finds Nassun she refuses to hurt her powerful daughter, even though Nassun intends to use the power of the Obelisk's Gate to exterminate the entire planet by pulling the Moon back into a collision course with the earth. Instead, Essun pulls the "terrible transforming magic" entirely on herself, which turns her flesh to stone: "And then the line of transformation moves over your face, and you are gone. Still there physically, a brown sandstone lump frozen on the lower steps, with only the barest suggestion of a smile on half-formed lips. Your tears are still there, glistening upon stone. She stares at these."¹⁰⁶⁰ This scene does not fall into another life-annihilating fantasy of maternal sacrifice because Essun has not been killed. She has instead transformed into a new species of human being. The novels suggest also that she will be able to recover most of her human-embodied memories in this new form, and so she also retains a connection to her original human consciousness. Furthermore, Essun's "sacrifice" of her human form gives her a new immortality because it is almost impossible for Stone Eaters to die. In this sense, Essun's transformation could be understood in terms of Ettinger's notion of a "partial disappearing to allow jointness" that allows for the emergence of the tentative other, rather than a romanticized and total giving up of the self for the other.¹⁰⁶¹

After using the silver magic of the Obelisks to stop her daughter Nassun from putting every "broken monster" out of their misery, including the Earth himself, Father Earth petrifies her flesh like he did to the original Stone Eaters.¹⁰⁶² Before this humanoid species became Stone Eaters they were "tuners," human beings originally genetically engineered as slaves by the ancient colonial civilization of Syl Anagist. Tuners were made to operate the

¹⁰⁶⁰ Jemisin, *The Stone Sky*, 386-387.

¹⁰⁶¹ Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, 145.

¹⁰⁶² Jemisin, *The Stone Sky*, 309.

Plutonic Engine, a complex machine of advanced technology created to extract the magical, energetic life straight out of the living Earth's core: "True, no one thought of the Earth as alive in those days—but we should have guessed. Magic is the by-product of life. That there was magic in the Earth to take... We should have all guessed."¹⁰⁶³ Tuners were physically modeled after the indigenous Niess who perished long ago in a campaign of genocide led by the Syl Anagist Empire, who also used them as foils to their Humanity. Tuners spoke the Sylanagistine language of "the Human," but they also spoke "the language of the earth."¹⁰⁶⁴

Perhaps poetically akin to the metaphor of the matrixial awareness and desire for non-life to life, Hoa explains that as a tuner he perceived differently: "All energy is the same, through its different states and names. Movement creates heat which is also light that waves like sound which tightens or loosens the atomic bonds of crystal as they hum with strong and weak forces. In mirror resonance with all of this is magic, the radiant emission of life and death."¹⁰⁶⁵ Like the metamorphic net of the matrixial gaze that transforms all that its strings touch, Hoa explains that their roles as tuners were to "weave together those disparate energies. To manipulate and mitigate and, through the prism of our awareness, produce a singular force that cannot be denied. To make a cacophony, symphony."¹⁰⁶⁶ Eventually, the orogene Kelenli is sent to instruct them on the importance of their compliance, and her matrixial energy sounds to them like "radiant heavy metal, searing crystallized magnetic lines of meteoric iron, and more complex layers underneath this, all so sharp-edged and powerful that Gaewha and I both inhale in wonder."¹⁰⁶⁷ But instead of

¹⁰⁶³ Jemisin, *The Stone Sky*, 322.

¹⁰⁶⁴ Jemisin, *The Stone Sky*, 48.

¹⁰⁶⁵ Jemisin, *The Stone Sky*, 97.

¹⁰⁶⁶ Jemisin, *The Stone Sky*, 97.

¹⁰⁶⁷ Jemisin, *The Stone Sky*, 48.

teaching them compliance, Kelenli teaches them the matrixial art of unbecoming in the passageway to non-life to newborn-ness—what Alabastor and Hoa also taught Essun and that Essun taught Nassun at the end of her life:

None of us got here overnight. There are stages to the process of being betrayed by your society. One is jolted from a place of complacency by the discovery of difference, by hypocrisy, by inexplicable or incongruous ill treatment. What follows is a time of confusion—unlearning what one thought to be the truth. Immersing oneself in the new truth. And then a decision must be made.¹⁰⁶⁸

Essun’s decision changes the course of planetary history and fantasy toward militant matrixial melancholy newborn-ness. Instead of the violent oblivion of phallic m/other rejection, Nassun in true matrixial love realizes that “the world took and took” from Essun also, and “drops to her knees, crushed beneath the weight of grief as if it is an entire planet.”¹⁰⁶⁹ In her grief that she cherishes now, she is able to access creative Eros again and the desire to change the world for the better, as she tells Hoa on the last page of the novel.

Through the story of the traumatized fracturing of Essun’s former (and foreclosed) identities, Jemisin shows how a billion Black Anthropocenes have already ended in apocalypse: “Let’s start with the end of the world, why don’t we?”¹⁰⁷⁰ The trilogy shows how militant, matrixial mourning and melancholia are the dominant affects and actions of the eternal dystopia experienced as everyday reality for the marginalized and disenfranchised minoritarian subject for whom diasporic wandering, “assimilation, and

¹⁰⁶⁸ Jemisin, *The Stone Sky*, 311.

¹⁰⁶⁹ Jemisin, *The Stone Sky*, 387.

¹⁰⁷⁰ Jemisin, *The Fifth Season*, 1.

racialization configure psychic belonging and the promise of citizenship as a type of loss and self-hate.”¹⁰⁷¹ But Jemisin’s novels also suggest that new reverent and compassionate matrixial myths like the Demeter-Persephone Complex, and the radical mothering of mentalizing/matrixial narratives spoken in the voice of an “old Earthquake-daemon,” can together help us to unlearn and “repeal / Large codes of fraud and woe.”¹⁰⁷² Furthermore, the novels suggest that that daemon is addressed as “you,” impatient to make the world new, and “You are she. She is You.”¹⁰⁷³ In other words, Jemisin’s novels demonstrate that “it is the naming of these losses that transforms difference into a politicized identity.”¹⁰⁷⁴ As Hoa demonstrates, this narrative “reappropriation of melancholia, its refunctioning as a structure of everyday life,” is an act that “annuls the multitude of losses an unforgiving social world historically enacts and enables.”¹⁰⁷⁵ Hoa indeed reports the healing and soothing effects of melancholic storytelling: “FASCINATING. All of this grows easier to remember with the telling...or perhaps I am still human, after all.”¹⁰⁷⁶

Overall, Jemisin reappropriates melancholia by using the technique of second-person narration to track the integration process of Essun’s multiple selves into one identity: “You take a deep breath. Extend your hand...So much of your past keeps coming back to haunt you. You can never forget where you came from, because it won’t rusting *let* you. You can reject these dregs of your old self and pretend that nothing and no one else matters...or you can embrace them. Reclaim them for what they’re worth, and grow stronger as a whole.”¹⁰⁷⁷

¹⁰⁷¹ Eng and Han, *Racial Melancholia*, 65.

¹⁰⁷² Percy Bysshe Shelley, “Mont Blanc,” *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose: A Norton Critical Edition* 2nd ed., eds. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company: 2002), 99, III, lines 72 & 80-81.

¹⁰⁷³ Jemisin, *The Fifth Season*, 15.

¹⁰⁷⁴ Eng and Han, *Racial Melancholia*, 65.

¹⁰⁷⁵ Eng and Han, *Racial Melancholia*, 65.

¹⁰⁷⁶ Jemisin, *The Stone Sky*, 143.

¹⁰⁷⁷ Jemisin, *The Stone Sky*, 128.

This defamiliarizing, destabilizing narrative technique of building a character's history as a form of anamnesis addressed to "you" models a "style" of building a matrixial trans-subjective self in co-partnership with a trusted, recognizing other. In this way, the novels together function to enwomb the reader in the matrixial gaze of the artistic matrixial wit(h)ness-Thing. The stone and silver matrixial gaze of Essun metamorphoses and metabolizes the trauma of the m/other regarding the colonial history of institutional racism, slavery, and environmental exploitation. These novels' use of second-person narration to slowly develop Essun's identity parallels how the reader might integrate trauma for themselves and others in the modes of matrixial wit(h)nessing, which amounts to caring for the wild, which is to say (m)othering what is different, foreclosed, "not-I" about ourselves and others: "Generous caregivers—human, nonhuman, spiritual, and symbolic—can contribute to a person's sense of security and to his or her caregiving propensities; they can also provide models of compassion and loving kindness that can be copied."¹⁰⁷⁸

¹⁰⁷⁸ Shaver et al., "A Lifespan Perspective on Attachment and Care for Others: Empathy, Altruism, and Prosocial Behavior," 905.

Chapter 7. Toward an Ecological Psychoanalysis of Interspecies Communications and Epistemophilic Entanglements in Jeff VanderMeer’s *Southern Reach Trilogy*

This penultimate chapter and the last chapter of the dissertation mark a shift in focus from more human-oriented to trans-species accounts of the development of matrixial trans-subjectivity and metamorphic/melancholic epistemophilia. In other words, these chapters move from human entanglements to discerning, deconstructing, and (re)forming trans-species embodiment and community, and the eco-phenomenology that the comprehension (as well as construction) of such bodies and environments involves. In these last two chapters I argue that the mentalization concepts of epistemophilia, epistemic trust/vigilance, and (mis)recognition/ (un)learning/(re)educating illuminate the limitations and affordances of eco-entanglement thinking as represented in Jeff VanderMeer’s *Southern Reach Trilogy* (2014), *Borne* (2017), and *The Strange Bird* (2018). For example, the content of VanderMeer’s novels is congruent with Donna Haraway’s suggestion that we must “honor” the “state of ‘entanglement’ in multispecies kinship networks or what Timothy Morton calls the ‘mesh’ of our ecological relationships.”¹⁰⁷⁹ However, VanderMeer’s novels also suggest that parts of ourselves should individuate and acknowledge the unknown difference of the non/human m/other—preserve and respect m/others as separate beings. Additionally, his novels suggest that aspects of our individuated selves do/should die and disentangle, fall away as old knowledges, systems, and identities, as the Magician and Mord represent in *Borne*, and Lowry from *The Southern Reach Trilogy*. At the same time, parts of our individuated selves do/should disentangle to live, to wander away to new homeplaces, as the

¹⁰⁷⁹ Louise Economides and Laura Shackelford, “Introduction: Weird Ecology: VanderMeer’s Anthropocene Fiction,” in *Surreal Entanglements: Essays on Jeff VanderMeer’s Fiction*, eds. Louise Economides and Laura Shackelford (New York and London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2021), 2.

Strange Bird, Rachel, Borne, and the biologist enact across the different novels under study in these last two chapters.

It is in this sense that I argue that these several novels represent how the melancholy art of caring for the matrixial wildness in the self and m/other natures requires (un)learning and (dis)entangling from the “killing” narratives, logics, and aesthetics of western white Man. In the same way that we might gain “epistemic trust” in the warm face of the recognizing m/other as the Strange Bird does vis-à-vis her lover Sanji, we must also have epistemic trust in the first “stage” of uncomfortable dissolution, as demonstrated by the biologist, Rachel, and Borne. It is significant that these characters show how our diminution, our “partial disappearing to allow jointness” is not the same as the “sacrifice of [the] self in a disappearing for the sake of the Other.”¹⁰⁸⁰ While entanglement (i.e., trans-species interdependence) may be the condition upon which our existence is based, VanderMeer’s novels show how psychic disentanglement is perhaps the first step toward mutually beneficial forms of intimate entanglement. That is, disentanglement—in the sense of salutary individuation and deconstructive dissolution of damaging systems of thought and being—helps to sustain and mend our entangled psychic and material ecologies. VanderMeer’s *Borne* novels and *The Southern Reach Trilogy* together envision and enact exactly this phenomenon but with a particular focus on human considerations of nonhuman species. That is, the novels offer different examples of how matrixial wit(h)nessing and mentalizing recognition at any point in life could lead to positive epistemophilic styles that enable trans-subjects to care about/sustain (dis)entanglements with the wild aliveness of non/human m/others. For example, the novels feature transgenic protagonists, at various

¹⁰⁸⁰ Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, 145.

levels of psychic development, who need to both find and *learn to be* “an object with a lively mind—someone who can ask questions, take risks in suggesting links, hold on to the idea that behavior has meaning, and refuse to be put off by repetitive resistance and avoidance.”¹⁰⁸¹ In particular, the biologist, Rachel, and Borne’s metamorphic/melancholic epistemophilia demonstrates how the desire for transformation through encounters with difference both entails new knowledge and ruptures and transforms their conventional patterns of thinking into surprising modes of care. Their epistemophilic sensibilities help them to maintain the resilience they need to engage wonderful and destabilizing non/human m/others throughout the lifecycle to form diverse, multispecies kinship networks.

Area X as Matrixial Borderspace and Multispecies Transindividual Zone: Getting Back to the State of Non-Life to Restructure our Epistemophilic Orientations to Nonhumans

At the heart of VanderMeer’s surreal “nature” narrative is an exploration of the dualistic desire to both control and be undone or “reverse colonized” by nonhuman m/others—for “nature” to resist, disrupt, and dissolve anthropocentric/androcentric language, logic, and subjectivity into new multispecies ecologies of becoming. Jeff VanderMeer’s *Southern Reach Trilogy* (2014) critically investigates the desire for control by representing how gender bias and the feminization of nature have affected practices and concepts of science and how these concerns (and biases) also structure how human-non/human environmental entanglements are conceptualized and at what cost. One such apparent cost that the novels highlight, for example, parallels Michel Serres’s notion of the “turnabout” in “The Natural Contract”—that is, our “mastered earth” now “threatens to master us again in its turn.”¹⁰⁸² Serres condemns Cartesian mastery as responsible for our

¹⁰⁸¹ Rustin and Rustin, *Reading Klein*, 35.

¹⁰⁸² Serres, “The Natural Contract,” 7.

relation to objects as merely property subject to competition and warfare. He considers this relationship parasitic: “Thus former parasites, their lives endangered by the excessive demands placed on their hosts – who can neither feed nor house them any longer after death – becomes obligatorily symbiotic.”¹⁰⁸³ As a representation of this understanding of reverse colonization where humans are forced to acquiesce to nature’s demands, the trilogy constructs the sentient, alien environment of Area X that forces humans who enter its perimeter to choose symbiosis or death. After centuries of reducing and exploiting nature as an object-other, VanderMeer seems to be envisioning what happens when nature returns our technoscientific, objectifying gaze in the form of global ecological crisis, for instance as “runoff from agribusiness...coursing into seas ever-more acidic.”¹⁰⁸⁴ Through the figure of the first novel’s anonymous protagonist, known only as “the biologist,” the trilogy thus explores the waning faith in rationalist knowledge-making practices used to exploit nature and the deconstructive wish for a rupture with such knowledge. The biologist ultimately desires the transformation of what it means to be “human” away from fantasies of alienation and toward a melancholy acknowledgement of and engagement with multispecies compositions and connections, toward the matrixial knowledge that “there are no independently existing things that precede their intra-action” in Karen Barad’s words.¹⁰⁸⁵ The novels thus reject “masculinist” epistemologies in favor of an ecological outlook organized around the discernment of and participation in symbiotic and intercommunicative relations across species.

¹⁰⁸³ Serres, “The Natural Contract,” 7.

¹⁰⁸⁴ VanderMeer, *Authority*, 81.

¹⁰⁸⁵ Karen Barad, “Invertebrate Visions: Diffractions of the Brittlestar,” in *The Multispecies Salon*, ed. Eben Kirksey (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014), 231.

However, the novels also explore the possibility that not all members of the human species experience the “turnabout” of nonhuman forces as wholly negative in any simplified, unqualified sense. In other words, the novels also represent the matrixial melancholic drive toward “union” with “non-life.” To put it another way, the novels illustrate the marginalized melancholy desire to be wit(h)nessed by a m/other nature that can bring us back into contact with foreclosed non-I(s), and thus reverse colonize our subjectivities, societies, and ecologies as an epistemological alternative to manic and dominating epistemophilic expressions. The biologist most deeply struggles with the temptation and terror of this desire for “reunion.” In order to achieve reunion with “non-life,” with the state of newbornness that results in her awakening to alien and interspecies life-worlds, the biologist deploys different strategies of perception, paralinguistic communication, and affective attunement, some of which is recognizable from feminist care theory and eco-phenomenology.¹⁰⁸⁶ For example, the biologist’s eco-phenomenological knowledge-making is organized around the body-mediated “praxis of paying attention” to “nature,” in Tracy Warkentin’s terms.¹⁰⁸⁷ The biologist’s epistemophilic style resembles Warkentin’s exploration of the concept of a “kinaesthetic” and affective “comportment” defined as the “ongoing adjustments of postures, gestures, actions made in relation to others, in human-human and human-animal interactions.”¹⁰⁸⁸ This positive, epistemophilia and eco-phenomenology involves a kind of “empathetic looking” and “*attending* with the body as a situated researcher and *attending* to

¹⁰⁸⁶ See Josephine Donovan, “Interspecies Dialogue and Animal Ethics: The Feminist Care Perspective,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Animal Studies*, ed. Linda Kalof (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 1.

¹⁰⁸⁷ Traci Warkentin, “Interspecies Etiquette: An Ethics of Paying Attention to Animals,” *Ethics and the Environment* 15, no. 1 (2010): 102.

¹⁰⁸⁸ Warkentin, “Interspecies Etiquette,” 110-111.

the bodies of humans and other animals.”¹⁰⁸⁹ This bodily attendance recalls Ettinger’s theories of the bewildered wonderment or “fascinace” displayed by matrixial trans-subjects poised for the ethical collaborations of “fragilization-transformation.”¹⁰⁹⁰ The biologist’s positive epistemophilic orientation to the nonhuman world of the novels allows for her to practice a relational epistemology based on her own subjective, embodied experience. This method involves the careful mapping of cross-species affect and affiliation and results in an awareness of the phenomenal field as composed of other multiple experiencing, mind-full, signifying, and intentional subjectivities.

In particular, the biologist’s positive or metamorphic epistemophilic style and science make it possible for her to encounter and communicate with the alien trans-subjectivity of Area X. This transgenic, multiplicity, that imitates the Florida landscape to form an assemblage, brings to mind Brian Massumi’s concept of the “transindividual” “zone of indiscernibility.”¹⁰⁹¹ In other words, Area X triggers collaborative behavioral and

¹⁰⁸⁹ As Warkentin points out, the “terms ‘empathy’ and ‘sympathy’ enjoy much contestation [.]” Like Warkentin, when I use the term empathy I am “referring to a capacity engaged in an exercise of imaginative embodiment in which one strives to approximate the experiences of another being through a keen attentiveness to their gestures and actions, aided by an understanding of their sensory capacities.” While I disagree that this can completely avoid “a projection of emotion onto the other,” I do agree that empathy does not “mean that one can know exactly how or what the other is actually feeling, which tends to be implied by ‘sympathy.’” See Warkentin, “Interspecies Etiquette,” 119. Although Brian Massumi uses the word “sympathy” (as I will discuss in later sections of this chapter) I think he is using the term in Warkentin’s sense. I think holding together Warkentin and Massumi’s concepts alongside Ettinger’s theories of “fascinace” and wit(h)nessing is useful for theorizing our potential capacities for nonhuman care. Finally, it is worth emphasizing in this context that definitions of empathy and compassion from attachment theory resonate with Ettinger’s implied active, ethical interventionist wit(h)nessing stance. For example, attachment theorists suggest that the capacity for care is “rooted” in witnessing and experiencing parents’ and partners’ “prosocial modeling” of empathy and *acts* of compassion: Whereas “[e]mpathy is an experience of affective resonance with another’s emotions, along with a sense of concern for his or her welfare; it may also include cognitive apprehension of another’s condition or needs...which leads to *compassion*[...]...the feeling of care for others’ suffering, as well as the intention to relieve their suffering.” See Shaver et al., “A Lifespan Perspective,” 880 & 883.

¹⁰⁹⁰ Ettinger, “Demeter-Persephone Complex,” 135.

¹⁰⁹¹ Brian Massumi, *What Animals Teach Us About Politics* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014), 6.

expressive inventiveness and improvisation in those who find themselves located within its borders, but significantly, “without their difference being erased.”¹⁰⁹² This transindividual zone of multispecies becoming also resembles Ettinger’s matrixial borderspace, also known as the “compassionate resonance chamber,” wherein matrixial trans-subjectivities are eternally “borderlinking-in-differentiation.”¹⁰⁹³ Indeed, it is illuminating to think about the sentient landscape Area X, that is composed of multiple subjectivities and perceptual worlds, as a figure that combines the metaphorical power of Ettinger’s matrixial borderspace and Massumi’s multispecies transindividual zone. But whereas the previous texts I have analyzed focus more on metamorphic transformations in gender, sexuality, and identity, Area X is a rhetorical figure that points specifically to the need for transformations at the level of human epistemophilic expressions toward the nonhuman world. Thus, Area X transforms the epistemophilic styles of scientific trans-subjects who enter its borderspace away from imposition and toward metamorphic wit(h)nessing in dissolution. In this way, the zone or space of Area X in the novels functions as both a psychological stance and material situation/site that propels the development of new modes and technologies of perception and being, whereby the scientist, the science, and the object-in-environment of study co-evolve as they make themselves manifest to one another.

The *Trilogy* represents the resulting activity of the biologist’s “new science” as a kind of intercorporeal, eco-phenomenological “conversation” between certain human embodied minds and agential and intentional non/human others. And this trans-species conversation that takes place on the level of affective/chemical communication and micromovement reshapes the world of the novels. The destabilizing wonder of this

¹⁰⁹² Massumi, *What Animals Teach Us*, 6.

¹⁰⁹³ Ettinger, “Matrixial Trans-subjectivity,” 220.

ecological “mesh,” an awareness in part brought about by specific perceptual and epistemological practices and in part by the material “regard” of nonhuman m/others, the novels suggest, provides the fertile space for more creative interspecies crossings that in turn propel novel emergent ecologies or further evolutions in human and nonhuman subjectivity and society. However, in deploying eco-phenomenological methods of interacting with nature VanderMeer does not simply rehearse the “old epistemological dream” that one might “eliminate (or at least minimize) the distorting, obscuring effects of sensory error, personal bias, or social influence and arrive at (or at least approach) certainty in knowledge.”¹⁰⁹⁴ Although the eco-phenomenological method of discerning the natural world is another “interpretive compartment” of human beings, it is one that “disclose[s] the complex intelligibility and meaningfulness of beings” in ways that are potentially more ethical and evolutionarily creative because life-affirming and more tolerant of the pain of fragilization and destabilization.¹⁰⁹⁵

Indeed, the *Southern Reach Trilogy* imagines the pains and/or problems as well as the promises involved in a matrixial, transindividual borderspace of interspecies consideration and becoming in the form of various characters’ encounters with the sentient “environment” called Area X. As briefly mentioned, Area X seems to be/contain/house an assemblage of independent organisms with access to a unified consciousness and sensory plane. Based on descriptions of the ecological system in the novels, Area X has colonized a location in Florida called the “forgotten coast” 30 years prior to the beginning of the novels.

¹⁰⁹⁴ Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Scandalous Knowledge: Science Truth and the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 58.

¹⁰⁹⁵ Michael E. Zimmerman, “Heidegger’s Phenomenology and Contemporary Environmentalism,” In *Eco-Phenomenology: Back to the Earth Itself*, eds. Charles S. Brown and Ted Toadvine (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 76.

This “pristine wilderness” with “no trace of human-created toxicity” includes a defunct lighthouse whose light source once communicated with the extraterrestrial being(s) that created the space that is referred to as a “surface-dwelling terrestrial organism, previously unknown.”¹⁰⁹⁶ Area X is also composed of a breathing “tower” that tunnels into the ground with living writing scrawled along its walls by the “Crawler” as well as an invisible, lethal border that disintegrates anyone who touches it. Area X transforms the site it colonizes by assimilating all human technological artifacts into vegetative decompositions, dissolving Cartesian subjects into anonymity, and mutating eco-phenomenological human subjects into human-animal-insect-like chimeras. A clandestine governmental agency called “Central” sets up an outpost near the border called the Southern Reach. This organization is composed of psychologists, linguists, anthropologists, and scientists who specialize in ecology and quantum physics, all of whom are given the responsibility of studying the uncanny phenomena that is Area X. Attempts to understand Area X fail in catastrophic ways thus demonstrating the toxic intercorporeal style of hyperrationalist epistemological methods that fatally approach nonhuman others as inert, unintelligible objects. The Southern Reach sends expeditions of individuals in through a single portal in the border opened by the force that created Area X. Expedition members face violent deaths, entirely disappear to never return, or return across the border affectless and devoid of what makes them “unique” as master subjects only to die of an unknown cancer at a supernormal speed.

The first book of the trilogy, *Annihilation*, focuses on the “biologist” as a kind of anti-heroine/anti-villain. She successfully undergoes the intensive interview process and training by the director of the Southern Reach and is offered a position as a member of the

¹⁰⁹⁶ Jeff VanderMeer, *Authority: Book 2 of the Southern Reach Trilogy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014), 125 & 129.

“twelfth” expedition. The training process is described in the third book, *Acceptance*, wherein the reader learns that mission training is directed by a previous surviving expedition member called “Lowry” whose antagonism towards Area X takes the form of a subliminal desire to “punish nature for having punished him.”¹⁰⁹⁷ As a sort of misguided revenge, he conditions all of the expedition members to also function as antagonists toward Area X, while claiming that the actual purpose behind the hypnotic and surgical restructurings of expedition members’ minds is to provide them with the necessary kinaesthetic style to survive in Area X. This kinaesthetic style is supposedly a posture of radical independence but instead is the toxic posture of the impervious, Cartesian master subject. Lowry describes the biologist as an asset in her “natural” “paranoid and isolated and antisocial” disposition, but this is a misreading of and projection onto the eco-phenomenological subject whose individuated permeability, vitality, and open curiosity regarding the nonhuman world is dismissed as “unfriendly,” uncommunicative, and withdrawn.¹⁰⁹⁸ On the one hand, her so-called antisocial behavior may stem from possessing a comportment of precarious interconnectedness, an inhuman sense of one’s thinghood as a polymorphous subjectivity composed and directed by myriad agential forces and beings within a world of self-enclosed, unresponsive Cartesian subjects. On the other hand, her personality may be a direct rejection of the demands of misogynistic compulsory heterosexuality and masculinist science—both of which demand the m/other and nature to submit to the terms of their projections. Whatever the source of her peculiar behavior, except for the biologist all members of the

¹⁰⁹⁷ Jeff VanderMeer, *Acceptance: Book 3 of the Southern Reach Trilogy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014), 119.

¹⁰⁹⁸ VanderMeer, *Acceptance*, 273.

twelfth expedition are destroyed, including the psychologist-director who we later learn protected the biologist from Lowry's psychic interventions.

The second book, *Authority*, focuses on Central's recruitment of an interim director for the Southern Reach. He is quietly charged with studying and curing the organization's dysfunctional and failed missions and interrogating the biologist about her experience in Area X. Although his name is John Rodriguez, the interim director is primarily ironically referred to as "Control" to emphasize the futility of attempting to know or identify definitively natural entities and systems rather than acknowledging the complexity and constantly shifting quality of all animal life, including humans and their social systems. *Authority* ends with Control and the biologist diving into a whirlpool in the tide pools of the Pacific Northwest, which functions as a secondary portal into Area X (mysteriously created by the biologist who has an intimate connection with the alien force). The final novel *Acceptance* clarifies that the person who exited Area X was not the biologist but instead a doppelgänger called "Ghost Bird" that was created by the organism-like environment. In other words, the biologist is split into two forms: a posthuman form outfitted with a salutary kinaesthetic comportment that is described as an "organism that had never existed before" which exists in the "glory of good design," as well as a "human" form whose mentality is shaped by an eco-centric conceptual framework capable of "creat[ing] a new reality by avoiding old mistakes."¹⁰⁹⁹ VanderMeer represents the eco-phenomenological subject via a double image. He imagines this double form through the symbiotic relationship between a leviathan-like creature that the original biologist physically metamorphoses into and a duplicate copy of the biologist called "Ghost Bird" who is described as "superior to the

¹⁰⁹⁹ VanderMeer, *Acceptance*, 196 & 35.

original” because she is uncontaminated by the logic of Cartesian and master subjectivity.¹¹⁰⁰ In terms of ecological connectedness, the leviathan and Ghost Bird are two different incarnations “superior” to the original biologist, but they both retain some of the original biologist’s consciousness.

The above sketch of some of the major plot points from *The Southern Reach Trilogy* emphasizes how applying the critical and eco-phenomenological tools essential to metamorphic borderlinking, wit(h)nessing, and co/in-habit(u)ating involves 1) deconstructing the image of Man2, the “rational” human as an impervious, superior, atomistic individual of stable identity and absolute knowledge; 2) recognizing the nonhuman as articulate, intentional, and agential; 3) acknowledging the importance and power of embodiment in ethical interspecies encounters; and 4) equipping oneself with kinaesthetic styles and affective stances conducive to metamorphic borderlinking at cross-species planes of virtual potential. This chapter thus tracks the trans-species modes of responsivity demonstrated by VanderMeer’s mutated humanoid creatures, an anti-heroine/anti-villain female scientist, an alien landscape, an otter, and an owl to argue that they represent the matrixial, creative, and interpretive capacities of all life forms and the evolutionary benefits of widening access to the freedom to reveal non/human m/other natures in diverse modes and styles. However, it is worth stressing again that the radical fragilization and traumatic destabilization of such metamorphic, renovating contact is not all easy bliss as demonstrated by the biologist’s first contact with the Crawler, a transgenic creature produced by the queer lighthouse keeper’s forced collaboration with Area X. Both marginalized trans-subjects’ encounters foreground the traumatic and terrifying qualities of

¹¹⁰⁰ VanderMeer, *Acceptance*, 35.

unbecoming in language that recalls Blakean “self annihilation”: “I smelled a burning inside my own head and there came a moment when I screamed, my skull crushed to dust and reassembled, mote by mote. [...] *There shall be a fire that knows your name, and in the presence of the strangling fruit, its dark flame shall acquire every part of you.*”¹¹⁰¹

Blocking the Signals of Interspecies Communication: Masculinist Science and Toxic Intercorporeality

The *Trilogy* critically analyzes and deconstructs the ideological and cultural assumptions common to masculinist practitioners of modern science who characterize the “experimental task” as an “inquisition” where the “experimental method” is thought in “metaphors of domination and torture” for the purposes of using mutating technologies to transform nature into resources.¹¹⁰² The logic of this scientific methodology is dependent upon a “patriarchal conceptual framework” that consists of hierarchical value dualisms such as man/woman, mind/body, rationality/animality, self/other, etc. that provide the conceptual basis for the superior half of each dyad to dominate the constructed inferior dyad.¹¹⁰³ This results in a way of doing science premised on the “patriarchal legacy of valuing a masculinized, pure, detached reason over what has been constructed as ‘feminized’ embodied modes of knowing, such as emotion” and “has fostered a diminution of situated and relational knowledge-making.”¹¹⁰⁴ This way of doing science eradicates destabilizing unknowns and uncertainties in order to assimilate difference into the regime of the same and thereby affirm the egoistic image of the master self as unified, impervious, and sovereign.

¹¹⁰¹ Jeff VanderMeer, *Annihilation: Book 1 of the Southern Reach Trilogy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014), 4.

¹¹⁰² Trish Glazebrook, “Gynocentric Eco-Logics,” *Ethics and the Environment* 10, no. 2 (2005): 81.

¹¹⁰³ Glazebrook, “Gynocentric Eco-Logics,” 81; Plumwood, *Feminism*, 45.

¹¹⁰⁴ Warkentin, “Interspecies Etiquette,” 104.

Feminist and phenomenological critiques of science claim that this mode of knowledge-production, that characterizes most of the phenomenal world as inert and passive objects, functions to “deny [the object’s] ability to actively engage us and to provoke our senses” and thus to “block our perceptual reciprocity with that being.”¹¹⁰⁵ This blockage of perceptual reciprocity is partly due to the bodily comportment associated with mental conformity to the phallic logic undergirding the traditional scientific paradigm. In line with this thinking, Elizabeth A. Behnke’s essay “Ghost Gestures: Phenomenological Investigations of Bodily Micromovements and Their Intercorporeal Implications” suggests that “our everyday movement patterns and modes of corporeal comportment are socially/culturally shaped.”¹¹⁰⁶ She claims that a subject’s perpetual way of “making a body” consists of that entity’s “operative kinaesthetic style,” its “habitual bodily comportments” or “tendencies toward movement that persists as bodily ghost gestures.”¹¹⁰⁷ These “ghost gestures,” or unconsciously performed and “deeply sedimented kinaesthetic patterns” (micromovements), are culturally constructed and reproduce “certain styles of intercorporeal interaction and sustain certain modes of responsivity.”¹¹⁰⁸ As Warkentin explains for example, a researcher-scientist who subscribes to mechanistic/instrumental logic and value-hierarchical conceptual frameworks of domination is likely to have a “toxic intercorporeity,” a bodily comportment characterized by estranging postures of “numbing, freezing, bracing, or desensitizing” required for the performance of the “neutral and detached observer” advocated by scientific culture.¹¹⁰⁹ Behnke considers this kinaesthetic style toxic because it

¹¹⁰⁵ Abram, *The Spell*, 56.

¹¹⁰⁶ Elizabeth Behnke, “Ghost Gestures: Phenomenological Investigations of Bodily Micromovements and Their Intercorporeal Implications,” *Human Studies* 20 no. 2 (1997): 182.

¹¹⁰⁷ Behnke, “Ghost Gestures,” 181.

¹¹⁰⁸ Behnke, “Ghost Gestures,” 181.

¹¹⁰⁹ Warkentin, “Interspecies Etiquette,” 112.

functions to “cut the individual off from the web of intercorporeal connectedness, so that one is effectively (and affectively) isolated from others.”¹¹¹⁰ Warkentin analyzes what this contagious toxic intercorporeity might mean for the animal sciences: “Imagine, then, if a researcher embodies a toxic intercorporeity, how might it affect the research subjects and the whole relational space?”¹¹¹¹ In other words, assumption of the toxic intercorporeal posture of the “disembodied Cartesian subject who practices a universal rationality” in order to dominate “nature into scientific objects that can be dominated technologically” results in impoverished scholarship and ethically destructive trans-species zones of engagement.¹¹¹²

Similarly, Alphonso Lingis argues that “culture’s affective responses to nature fundamentally determine its projects.”¹¹¹³ He suggests that our cultural milieu determines our visceral, affective responses to natural forces, thought in terms of “respect” and “Promethean fear,” and thereby informs the shape that our scientific investigations take. Scientific constructions of nature are feedback into the cultural milieu to create the field of possible/intelligible affective responses to non/human others and environments. In other words, ongoing investments in myths of pure objectivity and rationality by state institutions, like the white patriarchal family or the masculinist cultures of science, materialize in individual subjects as toxic “thought styles,” embodied gestures, muscular movements, gazes, and emotional energies. Patriarchal thought styles are perceptual and conceptual dispositions that limit the way one visualizes, senses, and knows the world. Interpreting

¹¹¹⁰ Behnke, “Ghost Gestures,” 196.

¹¹¹¹ Warkentin, “Interspecies Etiquette,” 112.

¹¹¹² Glazebook, “Gynocentric Eco-Logics,” 84.

¹¹¹³ Alphonso Lingis, “Ecological Emotions,” in *Earth Matters: The Earth Sciences, Philosophy, and the Claims of Community*, edited by Robert Frodeman (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2000), 175.

Ludwik Fleck's constructivist account of the history of science, Barbara Herrnstein Smith defines his notion of "social, institutional, and cognitive" "communal styles":

A thought style is a disposition, not merely to think or speak, but also to perceive one way rather than another. Thus, for the members of a collective who share a given thought style, certain entities, categories, and connections will be especially salient and ready-to-hand and others less noticeable or invisible. These perceptual-conceptual dispositions are not 'biases', a term that suggests disabling distortions of otherwise clear or direct perceptions. Rather, and precisely because of how they constrain cognition, such dispositions enable what we call facts to be known, what we call reality to be brought forth and experienced.¹¹¹⁴

Fleck's articulation of a "thought style" common to social institutions and various other types of communities resembles Heidegger's notion of "enframing" as a kind of thought style common to western cultures of the global north or Man's Dasein (subjectivity/being) that construes objects of reality as mere material possessions for consumption. In "The Question Concerning Technology" Heidegger postulates that humans approach other beings with an a priori understanding of their capacity, use, and purpose. In other words, "Dasein's" ontogenetic development within a milieu best described as the military-industrial complex results in an unreflective instrumentalist understanding that "leads us to encounter beings—including natural beings—primarily either as tools or as raw material."¹¹¹⁵ In terms of the Cartesian scientist, this "enframing" thought-style conditions sensory and perceptual

¹¹¹⁴ Smith, *Scandalous Knowledge*, 59.

¹¹¹⁵ Michael E. Zimmerman, "Heidegger's Phenomenology and Contemporary Environmentalism," in *Eco-Phenomenology: Back to the Earth Itself*, eds by Charles S. Brown and Ted Toadvine (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 79.

apparatuses. These embodied thought styles are expressed as aggressive and detached forms of non-linguistic communication that contribute to knowledge production and interpersonal practices supportive of institutionalized oppression and dysfunctional environmental policy. This “comportment” functions as a projection onto the object of study thus determining a priori “how things appear,...what they can be understood as (science: object; technology: resource).”¹¹¹⁶ As touched on above, this generally hostile ideological comportment toward feminized m/other natures manifests in the flesh. Toxic ideological comportments materialize in the laboratory and field as “frozen gestures of defense and desensitization” because they have been the “typical style(s) of ‘making an [atomistic] body’” under the “historical/cultural setting” of western capitalist patriarchies of the global north.¹¹¹⁷ Behnke asserts that individuals are “always already caught up in a corporeal style” that is not of his/her own making (like language) and that these individuals may consciously or unconsciously extend and reproduce toxic micromovements when they attempt their “own way of making a body,” an effort which is necessarily informed by the parameters of oedipal relations and scientific ideology unique to the western military-industrial complex.¹¹¹⁸

After her entry into Area X, the biologist attempts to execute this very kind of penetrative intercorporeity as demonstrated by her acceptance of the “promethean” and rationalist mission to “continue the government’s investigation into the mysteries of Area X, slowly working our way out from base camp.”¹¹¹⁹ She starts out self-consciously “searching for entirely rational biological theories” for anomalous behaviors, but quickly reveals her “treasonous” belief in humanity’s perceptive limitations and the acceptance of

¹¹¹⁶ Glazebook, “Gynocentric Eco-Logics,” 87.

¹¹¹⁷ Behnke, “Ghost Gestures,” 193.

¹¹¹⁸ Behnke, “Ghost Gestures,” 198.

¹¹¹⁹ VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 181.

the irrational, uncanny, and inexplicable in nature.¹¹²⁰ She critiques the notion that her superiors “successfully” conditioned her fellow expedition members into being pure objective ciphers, mere receptacles to collect data from the mysterious Area X without the unavoidable tendency to subjectively and materially corrupt or intervene in the behaviors/expressions under scrutiny. The biologist seems to ascribe a certain agency to the objects of her study, similar to the interim director “Control” of the second novel *Authority*, who learns from studying the journals of the Southern Reach scientists that “when they looked away from the microscope, the samples changed; and when they stared again, what they looked at had reconstituted itself to appear normal.”¹¹²¹ On top of this understanding of agential objects as necessarily composed of the observers’ projections, the biologist believes that “nothing that lived and breathed was truly objective—even in a vacuum, even if all that possessed the brain was a self-immolating desire for truth.”¹¹²² Similarly, as Control watches “segments from the [first] expedition leader’s video journal” he comes to understand that his attempts to avoid “interference, the contamination, of someone else’s analysis or opinions” is vain because of his defensive projections: “He kept squinting into that murk hoping some shape, some image, would reveal itself. But in the end, it was just the self-fulfilling prophecy of black dust motes floating across the corners of his vision like tiny orbiting parasites.”¹¹²³ He concludes that “he was too armored with foreknowledge” and “if he wasn’t careful, everything would be magnified, misconstrued, until each frame carried the promise of menace.”¹¹²⁴ Control later comes to understand that his mind is like others’

¹¹²⁰ VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 17.

¹¹²¹ VanderMeer, *Authority*, 125.

¹¹²² VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 8.

¹¹²³ VanderMeer, *Authority*, 188-189.

¹¹²⁴ VanderMeer, *Authority*, 188-189.

“brains” that are “self-washed, bathed in [the] received ideologies that come down from on high, ideologies that could remain dormant or hidden for years, silent as death until they struck.”¹¹²⁵ In contrast to dwelling in the world as perceived by “[o]ur banal, murderous imagination,” as the biologist puts it, a world wherein all earth m/others either appear as terrifying or controllably vacant, absolutely graspable objects, Control’s matrixial epistemophilia allows him to speculatively fantasize about nonhuman agency: “He’d had a vision of the samples starting to dance behind that door, freed of the terrible limitations of the human gaze.”¹¹²⁶

This “banal, murderous imagination” is most conspicuously embodied by the first expedition leader, Jim Lowry who comes to administrate Central. Central is the government agency responsible for the creation of the Southern Reach facility specifically formed for the investigation/overthrow of Area X. Lowry’s traumatic experience in Area X (which initially leaves him “disoriented” and “babbling” in an inhuman language) provokes him into an obsessive quest to “control what cannot really be controlled.”¹¹²⁷ Lowry attempts to dominate the recalcitrant natures of Area X through “secret labs” filled with “higher-order animals...brought [t]here to bear the brunt of Lowry’s imagination, as if to punish nature for having punished him. Experiments on neurons, neural linkage, synapse control. Boring, impossible things like that.”¹¹²⁸ Lowry’s acts of deafness to and control over nonhuman others resemble those committed in a “Frankenstein laboratory of two-headed calves in formaldehyde” inhabited by “some hideous manservant with a hunchback lurching ahead of

¹¹²⁵ VanderMeer, *Authority*, 157.

¹¹²⁶ VanderMeer, *Authority*, 126.

¹¹²⁷ VanderMeer, *Acceptance*, 220.

¹¹²⁸ VanderMeer, *Acceptance*, 119.

them and explaining it all in an incomprehensible bouillabaisse of good intentions and slurred syntax.”¹¹²⁹

The image of Lowry and his laboratory represents the way cultural values and affective infrastructures come to form the very architecture of human perceptive/experiential potential, which then shapes ideological paradigms that become established “institutions” as “the concrete embodiments of not just ideas or opinions but also of attitudes and emotions.”¹¹³⁰ In other words, VanderMeer equates the affect-oriented “abstract incantations” invoked by true believers of the Cartesian “scientific process” with the “ziggurats of illogic erected by your average domestic terrorist” insofar as both scientific institutions and violent, xenophobic right-wing movements are founded upon dysfunctional and contagious values and affect rather than distort reality rather than bring us closer to reality.¹¹³¹ Interestingly, the contagious quality of Area X (which may or may not be positive) has similarities to Lowry’s contagious corruption of scientific ideology into a mode of epistemophilic imposition:

[B]y the time this hold, the doubling and mirroring, has waned as most reigns of terror do, the signs of his hand, his will, will have irrevocably fallen across so many places. His ghost will haunt so much for so many years to come, imprint upon so many minds, that if the details about the main known as Lowry are suddenly purged from all the systems, those systems will still reconstruct his image from the very force and power of his impact.¹¹³²

¹¹²⁹ VanderMeer, *Authority*, 125.

¹¹³⁰ VanderMeer, *Authority*, 147.

¹¹³¹ VanderMeer, *Authority*, 105.

¹¹³² VanderMeer, *Acceptance*, 299.

Underlying Lowry's claim that the surface mission of the Southern Reach is to "investigate (and contain) Area X" is the above toxic and contagious "emotion or attitude" and epistemophilic comportment that he spreads "within the agency."¹¹³³ This unnamed generative affect is Lowry's antagonistic fear of unruly m/other natures, a stand in for western epistemology's fear of wild m/other natures and desire for mastery as the affective drive behind the violent reduction of all earth others to calculation and utility.¹¹³⁴ Because Lowry's conceptual universe is organized by a dualistic paradigm imbued by an affective stance of hostility, wherein his mind can only "process information almost solely through analogy and categorization," he is threatened and "defeated when presented with something that fits no category and lies outside of the realm of...analogies."¹¹³⁵

Lowry's true motivation for domination is to repress the imperceptible affective communications that Area X has left as a trace within his psyche. While trapped in Area X he reports feeling the organism-as-assemblage's chemical/affective communications in a mode that resembles Deleuze and Guattari's description of the contagious influence of subversive m/other natures over master subjects: "It is the effectuation of a power of the pack that throws the self into upheaval and makes it reel. Who has not known the violence of these animal sequences, which uproot one from humanity, if only for an instant, making one scrape at one's bread like a rodent or giving one the yellow eyes of a feline? A fearsome involution calling us toward unheard-of becomings."¹¹³⁶ Lowry refuses to acknowledge the "fearsome involution calling" him "toward unheard-of becomings" or let Area X's "erotic

¹¹³³ VanderMeer, *Authority*, 147.

¹¹³⁴ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 1-3.

¹¹³⁵ VanderMeer, *Authority*, 114.

¹¹³⁶ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 240.

aerials of the psyche” “interlace their borderlinks” with him “in metramorphosis on the matrixial resonance field,” to borrow Ettinger’s terms.¹¹³⁷ For example, Lowry venomously rejects his colleague Gloria’s hypothesis that Area X may come looking for him, that it has unfinished business with him: “It wants to talk to you, Jim. Area X wants to talk to you. It wants to ask you a question, doesn’t it?”¹¹³⁸ He attempts to suppress the matrixial, human trans-subject’s capacity for sympathetic dwelling or imaginative embodiment, for extrapolations of wit(h)nessing and co/in-habit(u)ating into the nonhuman world. Through a program of psychic reengineering, he tries to destroy this human potential for dwelling with alien difference. He tries to replace it with a “‘pearl of surveillance and recall.’ Some tiny subset of the silver egg that is Central, passing first through Lowry’s deforming grip” with the effect that he “make[s] a man *not himself*.”¹¹³⁹

Lowry refuses to acknowledge the always already breached boundaries between human and animal, the way the animal reveals itself as agential, articulate, and intentional: “They didn’t notice us at first. But, then, gradually, they began to peer in at us...because we just couldn’t stop” manipulating and objectifying.¹¹⁴⁰ When Gloria presents Lowry with “‘evidence of contact’” that suggests that Area X is directly attempting to communicate with humans in a way that “‘indicates recognition and understanding of some kind’” Lowry dismisses her speculations with a curt “‘No—random. Random. Random.’”¹¹⁴¹ This provokes her into sharing her suspicion that Lowry is in denial that he is “‘corrupted data’” in the sense that she wonders, “[i]f we used your own techniques on you, Lowry, what

¹¹³⁷ Ettinger, “Matrixial Trans-subjectivity,” 220.

¹¹³⁸ VanderMeer, *Acceptance*, 302.

¹¹³⁹ VanderMeer, *Acceptance*, 221.

¹¹⁴⁰ VanderMeer, *Acceptance*, 251.

¹¹⁴¹ VanderMeer, *Acceptance*, 301.

would we find in your brain? Coiled up in there?”¹¹⁴² The Man2 within Lowry responds with “trembling anger” and a confessional outburst: “[Y]ou’ll never really understand what it was like that first time, going out through that door in the border, coming back. Not if you cross the border a thousand times. We were offered up and we were *lost*. We were passing through a door of ghosts, into a place of spirits. And asked to deal with that. For the rest of our lives.”¹¹⁴³ These lines suggest that Area X “asked” Lowry to wit(h)ness its own traumatic experiences of deadened and foreclosed non-I(s), but also perhaps to wit(h)ness the dissolution of Man2. These lines also show how he puts a concerted effort into avoiding reality by refusing to narrate his metamorphic quest and therein cognize its anamnesis with Gloria as a wit(h)ness-Thing. Instead, he defends against this threatening possibility and “stalks off without even a glance back.”¹¹⁴⁴ But right before he shuts down the possibility of a m/other productively fragilizing-transforming his destructive habit of being by wit(h)nessing and rejuvenating his foreclosed non-I(s), Gloria catches a glimpse just at the right moment when “[s]omething ancient shines out of his eyes, peers out” at her.¹¹⁴⁵ She is left with the odd sense that he is in denial about the guilt he feels for betraying Area X’s “emotional bid” for epistemic trust and wit(h)nessing.

Just as Lowry (un)consciously chooses to construct Area X as inscrutable, unfathomable to defend against the knowledge of his matrixial trans-subjectivity, so does he conceive the playful “talking” of an otter that he encounters outside of his laboratory as threatening: “The otter that has been trailing you has come closer. Its constant chattering monologue of clicks and whistles Lowry finds somehow disrespectful, perhaps because of

¹¹⁴² VanderMeer, *Acceptance*, 301.

¹¹⁴³ VanderMeer, *Acceptance*, 302.

¹¹⁴⁴ VanderMeer, *Acceptance*, 301.

¹¹⁴⁵ VanderMeer, *Acceptance*, 302.

prior encounters. He starts yelling at the otter and the otter keeps ‘talking’ and popping up somewhere unexpected so Lowry can never adjust to throw the pebble he plans on caroming off the otter’s head.”¹¹⁴⁶ As a materialization of his mindset, Lowry’s kinaesthetic stance toward the otter is aggressive and antagonistic, standing as he does “with one hand on his hip, the other a fist around a rock, searching for a ripple in the water.”¹¹⁴⁷ This “game” becomes uninteresting to the otter, such that he “never reappears,” and “Lowry’s left standing there, holding a rock.”¹¹⁴⁸ As the figure of the Cartesian, master subject, Lowry short circuits any possibility of deconstructing self and other into a novel interspecies interface. Instead, he defensively lapses into the silence, solitude, and dead-endedness of a dismissive, unqualified (mis)understanding of incommensurability.

Trans-species Metramorphic Borderlinking: The Salutary Intercorporeal Style of Eco-phenomenological Methods

In contrast to Lowry, the novels call for an eco-phenomenological subject who recognizes the nonhuman world as agential and articulate. The novel’s hopeful emphasis on the biologist’s “new” eco-phenomenological science parallels Behnke’s suggestion that there is a possible exit from reproducing the “body of violence,” or the deaf, blind, and numb body of the Cartesian subject; that there might be a “healthy intercorporiety” or an “interkinaesthetics of genuine mutual responsivity.”¹¹⁴⁹ She argues that one can actively, consciously perform the sedimented intercorporeal styles and gestures “rather than letting [them] play...out anonymously within” oneself.¹¹⁵⁰ Behnke describes the “choreography” of

¹¹⁴⁶ VanderMeer, *Acceptance*, 298-299.

¹¹⁴⁷ VanderMeer, *Acceptance*, 299.

¹¹⁴⁸ VanderMeer, *Acceptance*, 299.

¹¹⁴⁹ Behnke, “Ghost Gestures,” 196.

¹¹⁵⁰ Behnke, “Ghost Gestures,” 198.

the “communal body” or dominant “styles of intercorporeal interaction” as dependent on a diverse array of bodily micromovements individual bodies perform—that is, the “habitual bodily comportment[s]” that “sustain certain modes of responsivity” are appropriate and specific to various sociohistorical contexts.¹¹⁵¹ For example, Behnke describes the way gender, race, and class influence the normalized postural alignments and muscular tensions that communicate a stance of so-called friendliness. She notes that the habitual comportments of (compulsory, patriarchal) “heterosexual desire” manifest as the micromovements of “‘modesty’ on the part of a woman and ‘respectful restraint of passion’ on the part of a man.”¹¹⁵² She also points to the example of the “ever-ready social smile, meant to be graciously produced on any and all occasions” by those in “service occupations.”¹¹⁵³ Behnke describes the intercorporeal styles of the “braced and frozen bodies of victims and survivors of violence” and the “body that can do violence to others (or witness violence done against others) and remain unmoved.”¹¹⁵⁴ But if the “shrinking” micromovements displayed by some survivors in response to immovable tormenters count as an intercorporeal style that promotes certain modes of self/other responsivity, then so does the intentional suspension of movement into what Christopher Bollas calls the “dead face” as a subversive political weapon. In other words, the intentional removal of facial expressions and the arrest of other bodily micromovements that might betray vulnerability or affectivity is to “oppose incarceration in the friendly but unconsciously proprietorial gaze of the other, who does not wish to see the self return a smile, but demands it as a condition

¹¹⁵¹ Behnke, “Ghost Gestures,” 181.

¹¹⁵² Behnke, “Ghost Gestures,” 190.

¹¹⁵³ Behnke, “Ghost Gestures,” 190.

¹¹⁵⁴ Behnke, “Ghost Gestures,” 195-196.

of social congress.”¹¹⁵⁵ As Bollas summarizes the point, “[t]o be without expression is to rise above this oppression in an act of disconcerting defiance.”¹¹⁵⁶ This could be the reason for the biologist’s deadened and withdrawn affect vis-à-vis master subjects.

Behnke’s theory echoes Judith Butler’s argument that the performance of gender entails the imperfect imitation of a standardized ideal or norm of masculinity/femininity that results in repetition with difference, which “in turn can open up alternative styles of movement and micromovement in a ‘productive movement’ that need not simply re-produce what has gone before.”¹¹⁵⁷ Applying this idea to the scientific personae described above, the ego-identifying individual’s embodied affect towards the nonhuman “object” of interest is not necessarily limited to the impoverished mode of non-communication, thought in terms of kinaesthetic incommensurability, that unfortunately results from an ideological mechanism that reduces m/other natures to the observer’s assumptions, desires, and projections. Rather than perform this sedimented “stance of prejudged superiority, of deafness, of closure,” the ecofeminist Val Plumwood describes the ethical intercorporeal comportment towards “earth others” as “a posture of openness, of welcoming, of invitation.”¹¹⁵⁸

Influenced by the care ethics of mutual reciprocity advocated by ecofeminists, science critics, theorists of multispecies semiotics, and animal studies theorists, an alternative ecological ideological paradigm and its associated kinaesthetic comportment and style of ethical flourishing might involve cultivating a consciousness and understanding of

¹¹⁵⁵ Christopher Bollas, *Meaning and Melancholia: Life in the Age of Bewilderment* (London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2018), 108.

¹¹⁵⁶ Bollas, *Meaning and Melancholia*, 108.

¹¹⁵⁷ Behnke, “Ghost Gestures,” 198.

¹¹⁵⁸ Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 176.

bodily postures and gestures as playing an essential role in the production of knowledge and positive interspecies encounters. An eco-phenomenological, biosemiotic approach to others would include developing an ecological conceptual framework and ethical code conducive to materializing a new “operative corporeal infrastructure.”¹¹⁵⁹ Like Félix Guattari’s emphasis on the essential reconstruction of the “processes of subjectification” in the era of global “ecological disequilibrium,” Plumwood calls for a “post-Cartesian reconstruction of the mind” in *Environmental Cultures*.¹¹⁶⁰ This subjectivity involves recognition of the intentional, agentic, and communicative capacities of “earth others.”¹¹⁶¹

In contrast to Heidegger’s assumption that only Man² can enact His realities, Plumwood’s view recalls the biosemiotic perspective sees “the human being as one among infinitely many instantiations of a universal semiosis.”¹¹⁶² The field of biosemiotics involves the study of nonhuman communicative exchange broadly understood as interpretive and interactive activities enacted by receptive systems, sensing bodies including at the level of unicellular life. These interpretive and interactive activities are characterized as a creative and intentional striving for joyful/life-full experience and the improvement of their conditions. For example, Jacob von Uexküll believes that each living creature represents and fills its “self-world” with “perceptions which it alone knows.”¹¹⁶³ Each non/human subject perceives, interprets, and acts within its own unique *Umwelt*, or the milieu that s/he/they

¹¹⁵⁹ Behnke, “Ghost Gestures,” 186.

¹¹⁶⁰ Félix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies* (London and New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2008), 27.

¹¹⁶¹ Plumwood, *Environmental Culture*, 177.

¹¹⁶² Jesper Hoffmeyer, “The Semiotics of Nature: Code-Duality,” in *Essential Readings in Biosemiotics: Anthology and Commentary*, ed. Donald Favareau (New York: Springer Science & Business Media, 2010), 603.

¹¹⁶³ Jacob von Uexküll, “A stroll through the worlds of animals and men: A picture book of invisible worlds,” *Semiotica* 89 no. 4 (1992): 319.

shape(s) according to their own values/norms, needs, and desires.¹¹⁶⁴ As Giovanni Colombetti theorizes in her book *The Feeling Body: Affective Science Meets the Enactive Mind* “all living systems are sense-making systems, namely...they inhabit a world that is significant for them, a world that they themselves enact or bring forth as the correlate of their needs and concerns.”¹¹⁶⁵ To put it another way, the “creation of the *Umwelt* occurs through the interpretative work of the organism, whereby the organism responds to certain signs that are significant to it, and likewise creates signs for others.”¹¹⁶⁶ The process whereby living forms are “responsive to certain signs that complement their own signs,” by interpreting those signs of their relational partners or aggressors, results in the overlap of animal and vegetable *Umwelten* in the form of symbiotic/parasitic couplings, “the system in which members of different species live in physical contact.”¹¹⁶⁷ Biosemiotic thinkers suggest that there is no such thing as an individual organism, only entities that participate in complementary unions or “symbiotic mesh[es] [that] lin[k] the two together in a manner necessary for the survival of both.”¹¹⁶⁸ If the inhabitants of the natural world effectively apply myriad numbers of interpretive lenses to their surroundings in order to enact mutually beneficial intersecting worlds with their creaturely neighbors, human matrixial trans-subjects are also not constrained to the destructive styles of Cartesian paralinguistic communication and ideological enframing. It is possible to construct and participate in harmonious representations and entangled interactions with the natural world.

¹¹⁶⁴ Georges Canguilhem, “The Living and Its Milieu,” *Grey Room* no. 3 (2001): 26.

¹¹⁶⁵ Giovanna Colombetti, *The Feeling Body: Affective Science Meets the Enactive Mind* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2014), 2.

¹¹⁶⁶ Brett Buchanan, *Onto-ethologies: The Animal Environments of Uexküll, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Deleuze* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 32.

¹¹⁶⁷ Lynn Margulis, *Symbiotic Planet: A New Look at Evolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1998), 5.

¹¹⁶⁸ Buchanan, *Onto-ethologies*, 33.

Trish Glazebrook suggests that a human subjectivity and phenomenological style sensitive to the biosemiotics of nature might entail the practice of an eco-phenomenological method that involves an “on-going attentiveness, a refusal to leave the object behind by abstracting to what can be theorized a priori.”¹¹⁶⁹ This attentiveness also entails an “empathetic looking” or an “exercise of imaginative embodiment in which one strives to approximate the experience of another being through a keen attentiveness to their gestures and actions.”¹¹⁷⁰ Such a practice results in the metamorphosis of the observer, the studied, and knowledge itself rather than the reproduction of the same, the reduction of the other and impoverishment of our perceptual and ontological possibilities. This understanding of nature as an agential, dialogical, and ethical partner allows for embodiments that allow one to “uninhabit threatening postures and gestures.”¹¹⁷¹ For example, Warkentin describes Behnke’s phenomenological “practice of peace” whereby she diffused the negative kinaesthetic field between her two antagonistic cats, an affective environment she had unconsciously been contributing to through micromovements of aggression and freezing. Instead she describes the process in terms of bringing calm to the center of her core, settling her weight and ““experientially ‘inhabiting’ the kinaesthesia of my own gaze; opening my heart; and not knowing what is going to happen next.””¹¹⁷² Colombetti also suggests that “intentionally (consciously) mimicking others...enhances prosocial behavior” and that an “important function of mimicry is precisely to make our experiences converge via phenomenal contagion, so that we feel more connected to one another.”¹¹⁷³ She argues there

¹¹⁶⁹ Glazebrook, “Gynocentric Eco-Logics,” 83.

¹¹⁷⁰ Warkentin, “Interspecies Etiquette,” 119.

¹¹⁷¹ Warkentin, “Interspecies Etiquette,” 117.

¹¹⁷² Elizabeth Behnke qtd. in Warkentin, “Interspecies Etiquette,” 117.

¹¹⁷³ Colombetti, *The Feeling Body*, 195.

is a natural tendency in lifeforms generally to respond to familiarity in the world, signs that seem salient to us, “to do as others do,” to move “together in coordination” to create material and “social cohesion” in terms of symbiotic couplings.¹¹⁷⁴ An eco-phenomenological method conducive to a salutary kinaesthetic style that promotes evolutionarily and ethically productive interspecies interfaces involves the rejection of dualistic thinking that inferiorizes feminized natures and instead promotes an image of earth others as fellow subjects. Such an eco-phenomenology demands an affective stance of wonder and vulnerability to becoming undone by destabilizing others; a patient, respectful acceptance of uncertainty and mystery in the face of alien others, which allows for the creation of new combinations of relations and connections across species.

This alternative, eco-phenomenological approach to knowledge and ethical interspecies encounters that is based on the acknowledgement and perception of the non/human world as articulate is essential because the violent and limited field of possible somaesthetic sensations and kinaesthetic styles (made conspicuous by an analysis of scientific culture but representative of the ideological and thus bodily comportment of the larger and general population), may prove catastrophic by stymying improvisational/creative/interactive encounters with nonhuman others because such interfaces function as the very virtual plane of potentiality for material (natural) and sociocultural evolution. Similar to Colombetti’s emphasis on “bodily ways of enhancing feelings of closeness between participants that capitalize on the bonding power of mimicry but also add an element of surprise, a ‘variation on the theme’... that preserves feelings of connectedness but also solicits the interest of the mimicked person,” the biosemiotic theorist

¹¹⁷⁴ Colombetti, *The Feeling Body*, 197.

Jesper Hoffmeyer offers a theory of evolution as a negotiation between genetic imperatives and epigenetic changes incurred by organisms during their lifetimes.¹¹⁷⁵ In his groundbreaking essay “The Semiotics of Nature: Code-Duality,” Hoffmeyer calls into question the neo-Darwinian doctrine that chance mutation is the only source of life’s variation or the genesis of forms of life. He also calls into question the idea that the only principle of selection operative in evolution is adaptation to external circumstances. For Hoffmeyer, the way out of the trap of evolutionary or genetic determinism is to acknowledge that the digital code of DNA *passively* determines certain genotypes and therefore phenotypical expressions. But it is also important to note that this process takes place through the interpretation of proteins as well as the analog, the improvisational, paralinguistic interplay of the organism and its environment.

Hoffmeyer rejects a strict functional split between digital and analog codes. His theory of code-duality claims that life on any biological level is characterized by “a recursive and unending exchange of information between analog and digital coding surfaces.”¹¹⁷⁶ He distinguishes between organisms as “analog codifications” that “recognize and interact with each other in ecological space” and genomes or “digital codifications” that are “passively carried forward in time from generation to generation (in sexually reproducing species, after recombination via meiosis and fertilization).”¹¹⁷⁷ Part of Hoffmeyer’s aim is to redefine the individual as an aggregate of self-others-milieu, as opposed to the misconceived, widespread notion of the organism as a robot-like vehicle for

¹¹⁷⁵ Colombetti, *The Feeling Body*, 199.

¹¹⁷⁶ Jesper Hoffmeyer, *Biosemiotics: An Examination into the Signs of Life and the Life of Signs*, edited by Donald Favareua (Scranton and London: University of Scranton Press, 2008), 80.

¹¹⁷⁷ Hoffmeyer, “The Semiotics of Nature,” 599.

the perpetuation of genes.¹¹⁷⁸ Rather than communication between these entities as a “machine-like exchange of information packets,” the natural system “strives,” “experiences,” and imbues its communicative behavior with a degree of creative intentionality.¹¹⁷⁹ Organisms are not “just instruments for the strategic interests of genes.”¹¹⁸⁰ Rather, according to Hoffmeyer, “parents certainly influence the life and survival chances of their offspring in many other ways than through delivering their sex cells.”¹¹⁸¹ In other words, styles of parental care and niche construction, in terms of the flexible adaptation of learning in the case of Darwin’s finches, point toward the possibility of individual intervention in the “evolutionary game of natural selection.”¹¹⁸² In contrast to the idea of a genotype determining the bird’s phenotypic behavior, for Hoffmeyer the bird has a “semiotic competence” in which it can learn to recognize novel uses for objects in its environment or “profit from its experiences in interacting with its milieu.”¹¹⁸³ He calls this a kind of taking of habits the tendency to develop new behavioral regularities as the result of ongoing interactions: “Living systems are anticipatory, in the sense that they systematically recognize and exploit (interpret) important regularities (causal relations) in their surroundings.”¹¹⁸⁴ Organisms emerge out of the process of dynamic interaction, rather than instinctually responding to genetic programming. Hoffmeyer suggests they emerge by learning and responding to external and internal stimuli to create interpretants (habits of

¹¹⁷⁸ Hoffmeyer, “The Semiotics of Nature,” 602.

¹¹⁷⁹ Hoffmeyer, “The Semiotics of Nature,” 587.

¹¹⁸⁰ Hoffmeyer, “The Semiotics of Nature,” 595.

¹¹⁸¹ Hoffmeyer, “The Semiotics of Nature,” 593.

¹¹⁸² Hoffmeyer, “The Semiotics of Nature,” 595.

¹¹⁸³ Hoffmeyer, “The Semiotics of Nature,” 594.

¹¹⁸⁴ Hoffmeyer, “The Semiotics of Nature,” 602.

being). Organisms are in perpetual process of self-calibration as they interact with their environments and in their constant negotiation with myriad others in communication.

Hoffmeyer's theory closely resembles Brian Massumi's concept of "life's tendency to surpass the given" in *What Animals Teach Us About Politics* (2014). Whereas Hoffmeyer theorizes nature's ability to "take habits" or to "develop new regularities as the result of its own ongoing interactions" and the way that "living systems are anticipatory, in the sense that they systematically recognize and exploit (interpret) important regularities (causal relations) in their surroundings," Massumi offers a speculative theorization and aesthetics of the behavioral and material evolution that occurs at intraspecies interfaces.¹¹⁸⁵ Massumi describes this interface as a "zone of indiscernibility" where two entities of similar or different species meet and through the contagious transmission of the vitality affect, or the supernormal tendency to surpass the given, they provoke each other into spirals of new becomings. Participating trans-species members "instinctually" induce improvising "lines of flight" from the congealed behavioral infrastructures that make up desire, embodiment, and ontology into the formation of new existential territories. Massumi thinks through this theory of evolutionary becoming by imagining the play between two wolf cubs. He suggests that play behaviors are "combat-esque" or of a style that references but does not denote combat gestures. Play, as an "improvisational expressivity of instinct," functions to introduce variations into the behavioral repertoire available for both fighting and playing.¹¹⁸⁶ To borrow Colombetti's formulation, this play resembles, at first, a kind of behavioral mimicry, which allows for the evolution of more complex symbiotic couplings:

¹¹⁸⁵ Hoffmeyer, "The Semiotics of Nature," 602.

¹¹⁸⁶ Massumi, *What Animals Teach Us*, 15.

Mimicry is what makes it possible to develop such complex forms of bodily interaction in the first place, by enabling us to attune to others, to bond with them via bodily similarity and action matching, and from this shared bodily affective space to move on to increasingly more intricate forms of attunement, with added variations, contrasts and oppositions, and eventually a capacity for sustained and diverse engagements with others over time.¹¹⁸⁷

This understanding of nature's ability to playfully, creatively improvise or to "take habits" is a productive speculative fantasy of the paralinguistic and kinaesthetic evolutionary trajectories and becomings that happen on a microdiscernable scale in everyday activities and communications between and across species. Massumi describes evolution as a relational process and situation in which an entity is confronted with the tension between a past-focused "genetic memory of adaptive imperatives of past situations" or "lived importance" and a future-oriented, creative-improvisational "tendency to surpass the given."¹¹⁸⁸ For Massumi, life is "stretched taut between its obligatory anchoring in the imperatives of a given situation, and the supernormal tendency, wringing from every twist and turn in the action a bid for freedom."¹¹⁸⁹ All embodied creatures, Massumi claims, are compelled by their "instinct" to intuitively navigate cooperation between an "acquiescence" to one's given circumstances and one's "appetitive mentality" or the "exuberant" and "vital" imperative or "self-driving tendency" to invent new expressions of being and desire in the mode of an "improvisational power of supernormal variation that pulls forward beyond the given, toward an excess of lived quality."¹¹⁹⁰ Such an imaginative variation in behavior is

¹¹⁸⁷ Colombetti, *The Feeling Body*, 201.

¹¹⁸⁸ Massumi, *What Animals Teach Us*, 30-31 & 33.

¹¹⁸⁹ Massumi, *What Animals Teach Us*, 29.

¹¹⁹⁰ Massumi, *What Animals Teach Us*, 20.

submitted to the test of adaptive selection, which determines whether that specific expression of “the tendency to supernormality will have effectively contributed to the evolutionary genesis of a lasting variation on a form of life.”¹¹⁹¹

Massumi is careful to highlight the importance of “sympathy” to the evolutionary success of a “supernormal twist” in a creature’s behavior. His evolutionary imaginary is distinctly relational, meaning he emphasizes the interactive dialogue, cooperation, and reciprocity necessary between interconnected entities as essential to the creation of new forms of life. Massumi defines sympathy as the “mode of existence” experienced by “two non-coinciding perspectives” dancing within the “zone of indiscernibility.”¹¹⁹² Sympathetic dwelling with the other involves a kind of careful, attentive watching and recognition of the communicative/kinaesthetic infrastructure of one’s counterpart in order to joyfully respond with a creative variation that attracts and sweeps up the other and thereby enlarges the “operational parameters of modes of existence” for both entities and their environmental context.¹¹⁹³ This sympathetic dwelling-with has structural parallels to the “empathetic looking” and exercise in “imaginative embodiment” discussed above. All of these perspectives involve the creation of a setting or location (i.e., “zone of indiscernibility”) wherein interconnected and permeable creatures might consider each other as agential and intentional subjects and thereby open themselves up to their improvisational potential in a perpetually forward moving dialectic between accepting given circumstances and destructuring one’s constraints into supernormal traits and eventually whole new symbiotic and parasitic ways of experiencing, perceiving, and being in the world. Massumi’s

¹¹⁹¹ Massumi, *What Animals Teach Us*, 20.

¹¹⁹² Massumi, *What Animals Teach Us*, 35.

¹¹⁹³ Massumi, *What Animals Teach Us*, 13.

multispecies sympathy resonates with Hoffmeyer's suggestion that we pay attention to the "complex reality of moment-to-moment lived reality" in which "fundamentally different organisms" sympathetically try to cooperate and "overcome a host of obstacles concerning the establishment of unambiguous reciprocal interactions at all levels, from chemistry to social behavior."¹¹⁹⁴ To my mind, a quote attributed to W.B. Yeats unites these perspectives with the bottom line of VanderMeer's narrative: "The world is full of magic things, patiently waiting for our senses to grow stronger."

The Southern Reach Trilogy explores such obstacles to discerning the magic of things, but also the trans-species reciprocity that results when those obstacles are successfully overcome. One way that the novels explore both sides of this dynamic is by representing speculations about possible evolutionary/adaptive advantages of scientific minds that empathetically and aesthetically pay attention to all beings of the material world as sense-making systems that enact, interpret, and inhabit semiotic worlds significant to them. For example, this scientific mindset is described as born from a paradigm shift inasmuch as s/he/they is similar to "the first astronomers," who, in order "to think of points of light not as part of a celestial tapestry revolving around the earth but as individual stars[,] had had to wrench their imaginations—and thus their analogies and metaphors—out of a grooved track that had been running through everyone's minds for hundreds of years."¹¹⁹⁵ The biologist, for example, wonders whether the "price" of hyperrational "purpose" and other outcome-driven methods is to "render invisible so many other things."¹¹⁹⁶ Similar to William Blake's formulation, the novels explore how to "cleanse" the "doors of perception,

¹¹⁹⁴ Hoffmeyer, "The Semiotics of Nature," 617.

¹¹⁹⁵ VanderMeer, *Authority*, 114.

¹¹⁹⁶ VanderMeer, *Acceptance*, 157.

” to wash away the influence of toxic modes of knowing as spread by the allegorical figure Lowry—the Newton-Man2 figure who has “closed himself up, till he sees all things thro’ narrow chinks of his cavern.”¹¹⁹⁷ That is, the novels speculate about how to “purg[e] from all the systems” the “details about the man known as Lowry,” the “doubling and mirroring” of his conceptual “reigns of terror” that take the forms of the “signs of his hand” and “will.”¹¹⁹⁸ Along these lines, Control’s reflections about how the way “our minds process information almost solely through analogy and categorization” often leads to defea[t] when presented with something that fits no category and lies outside of the realm of our analogies”” seem self-referential. And the biologist notes that if she does not have “real answers, it is because we still don’t know what questions to ask. Our instruments are useless, our methodology broken, our motivation selfish.”¹¹⁹⁹ Their reflections call attention to both VanderMeer and Shelley as thinkers with “the kind of mind needed to see something new” for the purpose of revitalizing language, science, and individual psyches.¹²⁰⁰ But as Shelley cautions in rather playful terms, the newness communicated by matrixial poetics can also be experienced like “a strain which distends, and then bursts the circumference of the hearer’s mind, and pours itself forth together with it into the universal element with which it has perpetual sympathy.”¹²⁰¹

Like Glazebrook’s characterization of gynocentric epistemology as the attempt to “nourish and protect growth, to nurture wisdom not authority, to think in differences not

¹¹⁹⁷ William Blake, “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell,” in *Blake’s Poetry and Designs: A Norton Critical Edition* 2nd ed., eds. Mary Lynn Johnson and John E. Grant (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company: 2008), 75.

¹¹⁹⁸ VanderMeer, *Acceptance*, 299.

¹¹⁹⁹ VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 192.

¹²⁰⁰ VanderMeer, *Authority*, 113-114.

¹²⁰¹ Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*, 515.

indifferences, to harbor empowerment not domination,” Control does not experience a “vicarious rush” from “spying on people” or rather, that rush “faded as he came to know his subjects better and invested in a sense of protectiveness meant to shield them.”¹²⁰² Some of the Southern Reach scientists also come to a joint recognition that resembles Control’s sentiment: ““There is some agreement among us now, reduced though we may be, that to analyze certain things, an object must allow itself to be analyzed, must agree to it. Even if this is just simply by way of *some* response, some reaction.”¹²⁰³ In fact, the theory of m/other natures as communicating agents who deserve respectful engagement is also represented by the privilege various characters grant to material expressions and gestural patterns in contrast to perspectives that limit communication/signification to the sphere of the written word. For example, Control becomes increasingly interested in what nonlinguistic information might be communicated via “the striations of the fur of a dead swamp rat” or “the vacant glass eyes of a marsh hawk, its curved beak. What susurrations or utterances might verbalize all unexpected from a cross section of tree moss or cypress bark. The patterns to be found in twigs and leaves.”¹²⁰⁴ However, the biologist remains skeptical that humans can move outside of their tendency for one-way projective communication, a tendency that she compares to “sending radio-wave messages into space and monitoring radio-wave frequencies to seek out other intelligent life in the universe.”¹²⁰⁵ She concludes that this circular expectation of mirroring means that the messages are not being received and demonstrates “[a]nother way people” are “bound by their own view of

¹²⁰² Glazebook, “Gynocentric Eco-Logics,” 94; VanderMeer, *Authority*, 43.

¹²⁰³ VanderMeer, *Authority*, 118.

¹²⁰⁴ VanderMeer, *Authority*, 126.

¹²⁰⁵ VanderMeer, *Acceptance*, 189.

consciousness.”¹²⁰⁶ Unbounded by Human psychic constraints, the biologist speculates about whether an “infection” is a “message, a brightness a kind of symphony” intended as a “defense” or perhaps as “odd form of communication.”¹²⁰⁷

The most emphasized form of m/other nature’s “odd form of communication” in the novels is Area X’s use of a contagious form of “brightness” to “transform the human into the non-human.”¹²⁰⁸ This brightness eventually comes to interweave with the biologist’s body as a kind of infectious message or “symphony.”¹²⁰⁹ This interspecies communication via symphonic transmission resembles Buchanan’s gloss of Uexküll’s proposition that the “animal is not an object or entity, but a symphony underscored by rhythms and melodies reaching outward for greater accompaniment.”¹²¹⁰ Prior to this symphonic “touching” by Area X’s erotic aeries of the psyche that induce the biologist into unbecoming in the passageway to newborn-ness, she describes her perceptive, empathetic capacity to see creatures differently in terms of a “mood” with a “dark glow” that “eclipsed sense.”¹²¹¹ For example, before the biologist enters the borders of Area X and is “contaminated” by the brightness, she recalls a memory of a “destroyer of worlds,” the apt common name for a species of “colossal starfish” that reaches out to her with its erotic aerial strings to touch her borderlinking potential. This triggers a traumatic learning experience for the biologist that leads to her cognitive and emotional growth. For instance, the encounter “teaches” the biologist that the more she dwells empathetically with the creature, “the less comprehensible the creature became. The more it became something alien to me, the more I had a sense that

¹²⁰⁶ VanderMeer, *Acceptance*, 189.

¹²⁰⁷ VanderMeer, *Acceptance*, 189-190.

¹²⁰⁸ VanderMeer, *Acceptance*, 190.

¹²⁰⁹ VanderMeer, *Acceptance*, 190.

¹²¹⁰ Buchanan, “Jacob von Uexküll’s Theories of Life,” 28.

¹²¹¹ VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 175.

I knew nothing at all—about nature, about ecosystems.”¹²¹² She further must confess to knowing “less than nothing” about her own “selfhood” while describing her fluid subjectivity as “melt[ing] into [her] surroundings,” as having trouble “remain[ing] *separate from, apart from*, objectivity a foreign land.”¹²¹³ The biologist’s late husband had captured this merging and metamorphosing aspect of her personality in the nickname of “ghost bird”: “A ghost bird might be a hawk in one place, a crow in another, depending on the context.”¹²¹⁴ The biologist is capable of matching with and harmonically varying the “rhythms” of other creatures in ways that help her transcend her acquired traits to become otherwise by borderlinking with the affective, chemical, and physical signs of other beings (i.e., their “brightness”). The biologist’s talent for survival lies in her openness to and tolerance of the oftentimes painful vitality affect of the pack or the erotic aeries of the psyche. This gives her the ability to allow places and beings to “impress themselves upon her,” to “become a part of them with ease” in the passageway to newborn-ness and in the holding of another presubject in the process of self-fragilization in need of wit(h)nessing.¹²¹⁵

After contamination, this brightness functions as a kind of erotic-euphoric epistemophilic drive that propels its hosts toward dissolution and jointness-in-co-emergence by aggravating their sense of loneliness. For example, the biologist becomes increasingly fluent in conversing with the internal and external presence of Area X. She experiences several phases of brightness where finally she can feel the organism-as-assemblage’s “physical presence under the earth with a clarity that mimicked that first flush of attraction,

¹²¹² VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 175.

¹²¹³ VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 173.

¹²¹⁴ VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 111.

¹²¹⁵ VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 110.

when you knew without looking exactly where the object of desire stood in the room.”¹²¹⁶
The creeping sensation of wellbeing exuded by the brightness is responsible for a drive that resembles “biophilia,” a symbiotic attraction to nonhuman others. E. O. Wilson defines biophilia as the pleasurable “innate tendency to focus on life and lifelike processes,” an inquisitive type of empathetic looking that promotes creative interspecies interfaces responsible for the ongoing evolutionary determination of the structure of our existence and “spirit.”¹²¹⁷ The biologist’s biophilia is accentuated by the brightness until she “become[s] so attuned to [her] environment that after a time no animal, natural or unnatural, shied away at [her] presence.”¹²¹⁸

The biologist’s wondering mindset and sensitive cognition of nonhuman expressivity continues to develop into a post-Human (post-Man2) matrixial trans-subjectivity, which leaves her open and vulnerable to both fulfilling and/or traumatic encounters with the nonhuman. She describes her first encounter with the monstrous human-animal-alien creature called the Crawler, for example, as initially one wherein she suspects that the creature is trying to protect itself from her notice by incorporating and mirroring back the nightmarish forms of her projections:

It might be beyond the limits of my senses to capture—or my science or my intellect—but I still believed that I was in the presence of some kind of living creature, one that practiced mimicry using my own thoughts. For even then, I believed that it might be pulling these different impressions of itself from my

¹²¹⁶ VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 157.

¹²¹⁷ Edward O. Wilson, *Biophilia: the human bond with other species* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1984), 1.

¹²¹⁸ VanderMeer, *Acceptance*, 177.

mind and projecting them back at me, as a form of camouflage. To thwart the biologist in me, to frustrate the logic left in me.¹²¹⁹

According to the biologist's view, the Crawler uses her own nightmarish assumptions about m/other natures as weapons against her. The Crawler could also be unconsciously accepting and performing the terms of the biologists "transference," so to speak. But perhaps the Crawler behaves like a prenatal subject who is trying to win her regard by displaying her psychic fantasies of m/other natures (without realizing they are horrifying). The Crawler could also be more like a "good-enough" attachment figure who initially tolerates and absorbs the presubject's progression through the normal stages of omnipotence and excessive projection, but increasingly intervenes in one-way projection at developmentally appropriate times.

Perhaps the biologist survives this encounter because she is more aware of her projective tendencies, and thus the Crawler sees her as a possible (future) communication partner with whom it can enter into metamorphic borderlinking. Regardless of the Crawler's motivation, the biologist describes how the attempt to treat the Crawler as an object of her analytic approach dissolves under the pressure of its gaze and affective/chemical "speech" patterns until her "free will was compromised."¹²²⁰ In a subversion/scrambling of the hierarchy of the human as knowing subject and the nonhuman as known object, the Crawler's matrixial gaze transforms her into "a receiving station" for "a series of overwhelming transmissions" (that the reader learns later may be its own traumatic non-I(s) in need of tolerance, metabolization, and wit(h)nessing).¹²²¹ However,

¹²¹⁹ VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 179.

¹²²⁰ VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 172.

¹²²¹ VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 172.

this is not a simple reversal. As a kind of emissary of Area X, the Crawler's gaze is not from any single point of view and instead "grafts trans-subjectivity in co-emerging entities into a relation woven in severality between appearing and the lack-to-being."¹²²² As the biologist notes in less sympathetic terms at the height of her paranoia and anxiety of transformation, "Here, too, grew the purple thistles, in a greater abundance, which I could not help thinking of as spies for Area X. Even if everything here spied and was spied upon."¹²²³ She anxiously speculates about whether "this was the beginning of the end" now that she is "recognizable to the Crawler" like "words it could understand."¹²²⁴ However, she primarily reports a sense of "relief of having passed a gauntlet, if barely. The brightness deep within was curled up, traumatized."¹²²⁵ In other words, the biologist realizes that this mysterious quality of brightness at the core of her being is what helps part of her identity survive even as she radically transforms to accommodate strange forms of "kinship" solidarity with the "monster[s]" of Area X.¹²²⁶ In contrast to the master subject, scientist figure and more in the mode of the negative capability of poets, the "floating eye" of her fragile and plastic subjectivity constantly wants to partially lose itself in metamorphosing encapsulation by m/others; it has "never truly been in control" or "wanted control" nor thought itself capable of knowing anything with absolute certainty.¹²²⁷ Both the Crawler's and biologist's brightness functions like the "metamorphic psychic net" that gathers I(s) and non-I(s) into

¹²²² Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, 153.

¹²²³ VanderMeer, *Acceptance*, 160.

¹²²⁴ VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 182.

¹²²⁵ VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 182.

¹²²⁶ VanderMeer, *Acceptance*, 160.

¹²²⁷ VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 173.

encounter-events and compels them to join in “compassionate alliance with otherness on the borderlines between non-life and life.”¹²²⁸

At the same time, the novels acknowledge and foreground the destabilizing and traumatic aspects of Blake’s claim that “[i]f the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, infinite.”¹²²⁹ For example, transformative communication can be a violently material experience: “Like, if the message were a knife and it created its meaning by cutting into meat.”¹²³⁰ After the biologist’s genetic material mixes with Area X to form a new being called Ghost Bird (who shares the memories of the “original” biologist) and the original biologist’s whole body mutates into a second being in the shape of a beautiful leviathan creature, the biologist has a second encounter with the Crawler as Ghost Bird. As Ghost Bird she can perceive how the Crawler’s writing is “ablaze with a richer and more meaningful light than she had ever seen, and worlds shone from them. So many worlds. So much light. That only she could see. Each word a world, a world bleeding through from some other place, a conduit and an entry point, if you only knew how to use them.”¹²³¹ She adds that “[e]ach sentence [is also] a merciless healing, a ruthless rebuilding that could not be denied.”¹²³² Control’s encounter with the Crawler is also painful yet desirable: “He was shivering, he was shaking, the reverberations of the creature’s passage creating a pain like cracks and fissures in his bones, the brightness trying to escape, the part of him that was lonely, that wanted to reach out.”¹²³³ As Serpil Oppermann puts the issue, this “narrative agency” of matter’s expressivity “denotes the vitality, autonomy,

¹²²⁸ Ettinger, “Matrixial Trans-subjectivity,” 221.

¹²²⁹ Blake, “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell,” 75.

¹²³⁰ VanderMeer, *Authority*, 106.

¹²³¹ VanderMeer, *Acceptance*, 287.

¹²³² VanderMeer, *Acceptance*, 287.

¹²³³ VanderMeer, *Acceptance*, 206.

agency...in nonhuman entities” that can take various forms, such as “how plants ‘talk’ to one another, how communication can occur in chemical form and through processes so invisible to human beings that the sudden visibility of it would be ‘an irreparable shock to the system.’”¹²³⁴ This description of the experience of what it would be like to perceive nonhuman communication is described as violent in the sense of the unnerving uneasiness that accompanies the vertiginous “cognitive crucifixion” of unbecoming in the passageway to newborn-ness. To put it differently, matrixial trans-subjects may experience nonhuman communication in a mode of wonder that feels like the rough and jostling birth-like experience of discerning a “tear in the fabric of the ordinary, an ‘uncanny opening.’”¹²³⁵ As I discussed earlier in Chapter 2, just as infants in the passage from the womb/matrix arrive into the “thrown-ness” of life and the pregnant subject becoming-maternal painfully transfigures, the wonder-induced unbecoming of the mature subject in the passageway to newborn-ness sometimes, but not solely, initially includes analogous distresses. But, in contrast to Lowry, the biologist’s key is to recognize, tolerate, and articulate this distress so as to avoid the sublime impulse “whereby the subject stages encounters with alienating difference only to reassert its supposedly ‘essential’ freedom from and superiority to the other.”¹²³⁶

Such one-way projective dynamics, that are meant to bolster Human superiority, cause disastrous mutations and anomalies that drastically differ from the many viable mutations born by an Area X “that had assimilated so much so beautifully and so

¹²³⁴ Serpil Oppermann, “From Ecological Postmodernism to Material Ecocriticism: Creative Materiality and Narrative Agency,” in *Material Ecocriticism*, eds. Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 31; VanderMeer, *Acceptance*, 219.

¹²³⁵ Sideris, *Consecrating Science*, 14.

¹²³⁶ Economides, *The Economy of Nature*, 25.

seamlessly.”¹²³⁷ The biologist describes one such anomalous creature with a face like a “mask of utter uncomprehending anguish, the mouth open in a perpetual O as it moaned out its distress, as its limbs gouged at the ground, as it made its wounded, halting progress in what amounted to circles. Its eyes had a white film over them that told me it was blind.”¹²³⁸ Such disastrously mutated forms obsessively pursue aimless and meaningless torturous quests of self-absorption that are completely different from the biologist, Ghost Bird, and the leviathan’s quests for communion and communication. This leads the biologist to wonder that “perhaps what this expedition member had brought to Area X had contributed to this final state.”¹²³⁹ As previously discussed in this chapter, Lowry had indeed surgically and psychologically removed expedition members’ capacities for nonhuman engagement and replaced them with an antagonistic desire for imposition (while unaware, the biologist had been protected from these interventions). The idea seems to be that if Area X mirrors human projections back at them, but also influences their material transformation, one becomes what one sees in m/other natures. It is as if humans transfer old assumptions and relations onto Area X who then performs them in kind but with its own supernormal twist (either compounding the nightmare or accentuating the dream): “There was nothing beautiful about the moaning creature, nothing that didn’t seem a ghastly intervention.”¹²⁴⁰ However, the idea could also be that some Human foreclosures are so irreversibly atrophied/decayed, so cauterized that Area X’s erotic aeries of the psyche cannot undo the damage—matrixial metaphors cannot revitalize after rigor mortis sets in. Early in the novels, the biologist is profoundly and negatively affected by this encounter: “I became resolved not to give in to

¹²³⁷ VanderMeer, *Acceptance*, 162.

¹²³⁸ VanderMeer, *Acceptance*, 162.

¹²³⁹ VanderMeer, *Acceptance*, 163.

¹²⁴⁰ VanderMeer, *Acceptance*, 162.

the brightness, to give up my identity—not yet. I could not come to terms with the possibility that one day I might put aside vigilance and become the moaning creature in the reeds. Perhaps this was weakness. Perhaps this was just fear.”¹²⁴¹

One-way projections of imposition and fantasies of sublime transcendence are only a few possible defensive responses to the fear of difference and the pains of change. The biologist’s initial fear also provokes a defensive response but one that is oriented toward her own physical safety and integrity and not contingent on the domination of m/other natures. She believes that she can survive in Area X in her human body if she hurts herself. She uses “pain to push the brightness back” and to give her “evidence” of her “ongoing existence” that she feels is constantly on the verge of disappearing into “nothing.”¹²⁴² Her rituals of self-harm are intended to “protect” her separate identity in the face of a m/other nature that seems to terrifyingly melt the human ego into “mammalian sweat and reptilian secretions and releases hot moist breath nourishing the floating microorganisms of the night air.”¹²⁴³ These masochistic rituals are also like the everyday defenses against knowing reality that we unconsciously think will protect us/keep us safe, but that actually cause severe damage by cutting us down and keeping us small.

But the biologist’s rituals of self-harm may also be motivated by her desire to stay connected with her owl companion who may or may not be a transformed version of her late husband, who was also lost within the borders of Area X. She finds the owl perched on the “outstretched branch” of a “stunted pine” and “surrounded by...cormorants sunning themselves.”¹²⁴⁴ She decides this is an “unnatural scene” especially because the owl does not

¹²⁴¹ VanderMeer, *Acceptance*, 163.

¹²⁴² VanderMeer, *Acceptance*, 180.

¹²⁴³ Lingis, “Ecological Emotions,” 181.

¹²⁴⁴ VanderMeer, *Acceptance*, 167.

fear her approach and does not look at her.¹²⁴⁵ She is pleased when the “owl turn[s] its fierce yellow gaze” upon her “at last” and perceives his “curious hollow hooting” as “playful” and “deeply irreverent” as opposed to “mysterious or threatening.”¹²⁴⁶ She wonders if the owl is her “husband in altered form” and eventually they form a “useful symbiosis.”¹²⁴⁷ She describes how “wordless on his end and based on the most basic principles of friendship and survival, this arrangement worked better than anything back in the wider world.”¹²⁴⁸ But it is significant, I think, that the owl is surrounded by cormorants because they bring to mind the figure of Satan who “Sat like a Cormorant” on the “Tree of Life” to gain a better vantage of Milton’s Paradise.¹²⁴⁹ On the one hand, Area X is like a tempting Satanic figure that whispers “inspiring venom” in the ear of Eve/the biologist in order to “taint” her “animal Spirits” into producing “distempered, discontented thoughts” and “Phantasms and Dreams.”¹²⁵⁰ In other words, like Satan taints the animal spirits to infect the brain with apparitions, Area X contaminates the biologist with brightness to trigger her transformation and bring her into alliance with its purposes. On the other hand, the owl could in fact contain aspects of her previous husband but intermixed with qualities of Area X. Thus, her intimacy with this creature over 30 years may have in fact been with many m/other natures (including her metamorphosed husband) in a trans-species community invisible to the biologist in her human form. Finally, the owl-husband could be understood as a projection that leads the biologist astray by keeping her rooted and loyal to Man2 at the cost of metamorphic growth

¹²⁴⁵ VanderMeer, *Acceptance*, 167.

¹²⁴⁶ VanderMeer, *Acceptance*, 168 & 170.

¹²⁴⁷ VanderMeer, *Acceptance*, 170-171.

¹²⁴⁸ VanderMeer, *Acceptance*, 172.

¹²⁴⁹ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, in *The Riverside Milton*, ed. Roy Flannagan (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1998), 441, Book IV, lines 194 & 196.

¹²⁵⁰ Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 467, Book IV, lines 803-805 & 807.

and potentially more fulfilling intimacies. If all three of the above interpretations coexist (and I think they do), then the biologist's self-harming ritual paradoxically represents both the efforts she goes to in order to deny/defend against communication bids by m/other natures and the melancholic psychic pain of acknowledging them and falling into a state of unbecoming.

The biologist endures 30 years of subjection to a regimen of self-harm meant to stave off the brightness in order to maintain her human identity. After her owl companion dies, she finally allows the “brightness to was[h] over [her] in unending waves” that “connec[t] [her] to the earth, the water, the trees, the air” as she “opened up and kept on opening.”¹²⁵¹ Area X reveals itself to her visually as “infinitesimal shifts in the sky” and through sensation of “a kind of breath or thickness of molecules.”¹²⁵² M/other nature returns the wit(h)nessing gaze to those who manifest epistemophilic/biophilic tendencies. This regard comes in the form of “Area X analyzing her from all sides.”¹²⁵³ This biophilic kinaesthetic comportment and affective stance allows for some of her genetic material, unknowingly shed as hair or skin particles perhaps, to creatively mix with Area X, out of whom emerges the biologist's doppelgänger, Ghost Bird. Additionally, the “original” biologist radically mutates into a beautiful leviathan: “An animal, an organism that had never existed before or that might belong to an alien ecology. That could transition not just from land to water but from one remote place to another, with no need for a door in a border.”¹²⁵⁴ Ghost Bird meets her twin leviathan in the third novel and notes her differences from the blind creature that moans in agony from the reeds. For instance, the leviathan's “blossoming” “many glowing eyes” are

¹²⁵¹ VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 160.

¹²⁵² VanderMeer, *Acceptance*, 178.

¹²⁵³ VanderMeer, *Acceptance*, 37.

¹²⁵⁴ VanderMeer, *Acceptance*, 196.

like “flowers or sea anemones spread open.”¹²⁵⁵ As a further distinction, the leviathan makes “sonorous moaning” sounds like “deep cello strings” that suggest a “seeking. A questing. A communication or communion. That, Ghost Bird recognized; that, she understood.”¹²⁵⁶

Once the biologist mutates/matures into the matrixial trans-subject called Ghost Bird, she functions as the holding matrix for fragile presubjects in unbecoming, most significantly for the Crawler in a second encounter that I referred to above. But in this matrixial form and caregiving role, Ghost Bird also interestingly shares qualities associated with the demonic maternal figure, Lilith, who both rejects gender-based subordination and the patriarchal reproductive imperative to “sicken” babies.¹²⁵⁷ The word choice “sicken” suggests Lilith refuses to socialize children according to the xenophobic, misogynist norms of toxic masculinity, or she tragically sees herself as a contaminating force rather than a source of creative difference that could change the world for the better. On the one hand, Ghost Bird’s choices provoke associations with the figure of Lilith because she contemptuously notices how the “lack of imagination” (i.e., the excessive use of one-way projection) prevents “human beings” from being able to “put themselves in the mind of a cormorant or an owl or a whale or a bumblebee.”¹²⁵⁸ Furthermore, Ghost Bird struggles with her doubts about

¹²⁵⁵ VanderMeer, *Acceptance*, 194-195.

¹²⁵⁶ VanderMeer, *Acceptance*, 194-195.

¹²⁵⁷ “After the Holy One created the first human being, Adam, He said: ‘It is not good for Adam to be alone.’ He created a woman, also from the earth, and called her Lilith. They quarreled immediately. She said: ‘I will not lie below you.’ He said, ‘I will not lie below you, but above you. For you are fit to be below me.’ She responded: ‘We are both equal because we both come from the earth.’ Neither listened to the other. When Lilith realized what was happening, she pronounced the Ineffable name of God and flew off into the air. Adam rose in prayer before the Creator, saying, ‘The woman you gave me has fled from me.’ Immediately the Holy One sent three angels after her. The Holy One said to Adam: ‘If she wants to return, all the better. If not, she will have to accept that one hundred of her children will die every day.’ The angels pursued her and overtook her in the sea, in raging waters, and told her God’s orders. And yet she did not want to return. They told her they would drown her in the sea, and she replied. ‘Leave me alone! I was only created in order to sicken babies.’” Jewish Women’s Archive, “Alphabet of Ben Sira 78: Lilith,” <https://jwa.org/media/alphabet-of-ben-sira-78-lilith>.

¹²⁵⁸ VanderMeer, *Acceptance*, 190.

whether she should “ally herself to such a lack.”¹²⁵⁹ But she also wonders whether she has a “choice,” either in the sense of whether or not some misguided remnants of species (speciesist) loyalty continue to (mis)direct her mutated being or in the sense that Area X has already claimed her for its purposes.¹²⁶⁰ However, she does believe that human beings do also deserve care and she does important ethical work when she physically holds Control as he recovers from his traumatic encounter with her “twin,” the leviathan.

But, on the other hand, Ghost Bird can be compared to the understanding of Eve as a mother who leads her children to a “fortunate fall,” so to speak.¹²⁶¹ For example, Ghost Bird cannot resist touching the Crawler, and this “first contact, or last contact” “trigger[s] a response.”¹²⁶² The Crawler presents her with a floating, “drooping golden pearl as large as her head” that reads her “with a kind of warmth that felt like sunburn.”¹²⁶³ But she “is not afraid” because “Area X had made her. Area X must have expected her” so she reaches out and “pluck[s] the golden pearl from the air” and holds it “warm and tender in her hand” like a juicy apple.¹²⁶⁴ This act allows Area X to “pee[r] in at her” and plung[e] into her heart,” to give her an apocalyptic vision of a “cataclysm” in the form of a “rain of comets that had annihilated an entire biosphere remote from Earth.”¹²⁶⁵ Area X is like a presubject in self-

¹²⁵⁹ VanderMeer, *Acceptance*, 190.

¹²⁶⁰ VanderMeer, *Acceptance*, 190.

¹²⁶¹ “Harken, O Eve, Mother of us all, greatest and grandest of women: you who have been maligned all down the ages, know at least that one of your daughters blesses you, and proclaims your choice good. To you, oh Eve, we owe it that we are as gods, and not as children playing in the garden – that we know the good and evil and are not lapt in ignorance and lust. Man had stayed ever in uninquiring peace, but to you was given strength to grasp the apple, to proclaim that woman at least prefers wisdom and the wilderness to idle lasciviousness in Eden.” Honor Marten qtd. in Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women, 1850-1920* (United Kingdom: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 1.

¹²⁶² VanderMeer, *Acceptance*, 286.

¹²⁶³ VanderMeer, *Acceptance*, 286.

¹²⁶⁴ VanderMeer, *Acceptance*, 286.

¹²⁶⁵ VanderMeer, *Acceptance*, 286-287.

fragilization in need of a wit(h)ness-Thing because it makes the biologist “witness how one *made* organism had fragmented” in a vast exodus to participate in a “merciless healing, a ruthless rebuilding” on Earth “that could not be denied.”¹²⁶⁶

Ghost Bird’s mature matrixial trans-subjectivity is also apparent in this second encounter with the Crawler because she notices that she can understand the creature’s living, vegetative writing. She speculates that the creature must be a kind of messenger sent by Area X to communicate the following words: “*Where lies the strangling fruit that came from the hand of the sinner I shall bring forth the seeds of the dead.*”¹²⁶⁷ These lines echo the sentiments of “O felix culpa,” “O happy sin,” or the belief that “out of sin a greater good should proceed.”¹²⁶⁸ In Milton’s *Paradise Lost* for example, Adam’s celebratory proclamation emphasizes that “evil” will “turn to good” and that paradise will mutate into something “more wonderful / Then that which by creation first brought forth / Light out of darkness!”¹²⁶⁹ Thus, Adam shamelessly states in terms very similar to those used by Ghost Bird:

Full of doubt I stand,
Whether I should repent me now of sin
By mee done and occasioned, or rejoyce
Much more, that much more good thereof shall spring,¹²⁷⁰

Since Area X borderlinks to creatively interweave with the contents of human minds in order to form trans-species matrixial trans-subjectivities, the Crawler’s writing reflects a

¹²⁶⁶ VanderMeer, *Acceptance*, 287.

¹²⁶⁷ VanderMeer, *Acceptance*, 285.

¹²⁶⁸ Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 704, Book XII, footnote 138.

¹²⁶⁹ Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 704, Book XII, lines 471-473.

¹²⁷⁰ Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 704, Book XII, lines 473-476.

viable mutation of human biblical narratives into a new trans-species story. The story implicit in those lines explains that the fruit that tempted Eve into consumption and thereby led to her choking, strangled death (literally and figuratively), fell from her hand onto the soil. The “I” voice of Area X explains that it will mingle and mix with the soil, the body of Eve, and the toxic “fruits” (e.g., customs/norms that sicken/strangle both minoritarian m/other natures and master subjects). And in so doing, Area X suggests that together these beings, soils, and fruits will bring into existence new trans-species homeplaces of co/inhabit(u)ation wherein matrixial trans-subjects can do the work of wit(h)nessing all the denied, dead(ened), and foreclosed non/human non-I(s) that “the Human” systematically suppressed in individual, sociohistorical, and ecological memory. These lines leave Ghost Bird uncertain about whether this organism will “destroy the planet or save it,” and she is entirely ambivalent about whether she should “plead for people she had never met who lived in her head.”¹²⁷¹ But because the Crawler/Area X recognizes her she decides that she will not intervene in the creature’s plans and even protects it from a violent attack: “In its recognition of her, Ghost Bird knew that something would survive, that she would survive.”¹²⁷² It is in this sense that Ghost Bird’s choice can be understood as a fortunate fall that guides the human species away from (re)producing the mistakes of Man2 and toward a new therapeutic planet populated by a matrixial lineage of wit(h)nessing and co/inhabit(u)ating monstrous m/other natures.

The biologist’s viable mutation in human being is the outcome of imaginative embodiment and respectful attentiveness. The novels suggest that such an epistemophilic orientation and imaginary allows humans to “put themselves in the mind of a cormorant or

¹²⁷¹ VanderMeer, *Acceptance*, 287.

¹²⁷² VanderMeer, *Acceptance*, 287.

an owl or a whale or a bumblebee” in order to unlock the exuberance of animal life, stimulate the supernormal tendency into expression, and drop the law of the father and open to the matrixial brightness of (un)becoming.¹²⁷³ Indeed, as Control enters a “Tower” made by Area X, he is shocked to note that it paradoxically sinks downward into the metamorphic resonance chamber of earthy non-life. The part of Control that still identifies with Man2 “pants,” “sinks,” “trembles,” and “expires.”¹²⁷⁴ Despite his fear, in other words, Control’s epistemophilic drive to descend into the matrix of Area X results in his becoming-wolf:

His father’s carving fell from his hand, clattered onto a step, came to a halt on the stairs, alongside the signs and symbols left by his predecessors. A scrawling on the walls. An empty boot.

He sniffed the air, felt under his paws the burning and the heat, the intensity.

This was all that was left to him, and he would not now die on the steps; he would not suffer that final defeat.

John Rodriguez elongated down the final stairs, jumped into the light.¹²⁷⁵

Even the most fatalistic interpretation of humanity’s genetic conditioning, that construes the technological disclosure of beings as an acquired trait (i.e., “hardwired”), is deconstructed/mitigated by the presence of analog codes or paralinguistic and kinaesthetic communications (i.e., visceral sensibilities, movements, muscular knowledge, energetics, intensities, and emotions) that intervene into a world fated to be transformed into waste. As a disclosing being, humankind is not bound to a single, destructive mode of revealing its

¹²⁷³ VanderMeer, *Acceptance*, 190.

¹²⁷⁴ Shelley, *Epipsychidion*, 407, line 591.

¹²⁷⁵ VanderMeer, *Acceptance*, 312.

existence. Further eco-phenomenological and affect/semiosis-attuned possibilities for the disclosure and life-presencing of beings are possible, such as those offered in literature, art, and ritual. Such imaginative methods might grant more species and human groups the opportunity to unfold according to formerly foreclosed and novel internal possibilities inspired by encounters with attractive neighbors. In so doing, the engine of evolution might reorient in a way that would produce a safety net(work) composed of biological and cultural diversity and increasingly fulfilling, sustainable, and complex multispecies entanglements.

Chapter 8. Mentalizing M/Others and Monsters in Jeff VanderMeer's *Borne* and *The Strange Bird: A Borne Story*

Science fiction studies frequently distinguish between “soft” and “hard” science fiction.¹²⁷⁶ Acknowledging that genre rules are always violated to some degree, soft and hard science fictions are defined with respect to their scientific counterparts. Whereas hard science fiction texts draw primarily from the “hard sciences” (e.g., physics, chemistry, engineering, etc.) to imagine future technological developments, soft science fiction texts draw from the “soft sciences” (e.g., psychoanalysis, sociology, ecology, psychology, anthropology, etc.) to develop themes on the relations between the individual mind and the environment. Such speculative explorations of “abnormal” and “normal” psychology, that belong to the soft sci-fi genre, span such classics as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) to Phillip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968) and Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003). From this perspective, Jeff VanderMeer might be aptly nicknamed the Anthropocene era's “eco-psychological theorist of the post-human” because the alternative biologies, psychologies, and societies of his stories are not reducible to only predictive extrapolations from present “soft” sciences and technologies, but are also fantasies and speculative descriptions of psychological reality in relation to multi-scalar environments of collapse. His texts are extended thought experiments about the relationships between our present intrapsychic, interpersonal, and external worlds.

The shared, post-apocalyptic storyworld of VanderMeer's novel *Borne* (2017) and novella *The Strange Bird: A Borne Story* (2018) intervene in the anonymizing, universalist,

¹²⁷⁶ Peter Nicholls, “Hard SF,” in *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (2019), http://www.sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/hard_sf.

and technological deterministic Anthropocene discourse—largely identifiable by the abstract vastness of its spatiotemporal logics and sites of analysis—by scaling back down to speculate about individual psychology and the biopolitical minutiae of the *personal*. VanderMeer’s fiction returns to questions about identity formation but with a particular focus on emergent developmental mechanisms that reciprocally influence human, nonhuman, and planetary life practices and organizations in the present globalized, late-capitalist milieu. VanderMeer re-imagines kinship networks as phenomena that are responsive to global forces associated with the Anthropocene, but he brings home these forces by focusing on identity formation as a key concern of any truly potentially salutary green politics. Theorists of the Anthropocene should take such factors into account in order to avoid facile technological “solutions” to eco-social problems which overlook the role that developmental psychology and identity politics play in the assumed “subject” that wields scientific power in modernist emancipation narratives.

VanderMeer’s fiction offers compelling representations of the global-scale effects of the dynamic qualities of everyday “familial” entanglement that we dismiss as negligible at our peril. His fiction engages with tropes from ecofeminism and queer theory as well as contemporary mentalization-based psychoanalysis to rethink models of subject development beyond the value-hierarchical, dichotomous parameters of the patriarchal, modernist paradigm for identity formation. VanderMeer’s stated goal to “bring the reader or viewer back to understanding that the under-meaning of what they think is mundane is not really that mundane and is also incredibly complex” manifests in his return to the setting of the “family” or “household” as the initial site of the ongoing process of identity formation that

occurs throughout the lifecycle.¹²⁷⁷ Within the domestic sphere of personal life, VanderMeer's texts highlight developmental processes by which embodied subjectivity unfolds within that sociopolitical and interpersonal microcosm to produce old and new versions of the identity categories of species, race, and gender/sexuality. Paying attention to the significance of these so-called mundane social relations brings VanderMeer's fiction in dialogue with contemporary psychoanalytic discourse to highlight how identity formation is a sensitive and complex biocultural creation, amenable to responsible re-creation for revolutionary purposes. In particular, mentalization-based psychoanalysis and VanderMeer's texts speak to one another in their shared historical moment and implicit theorizations about the possibility and effects of transformations in our kinship practices, epistemophilic sensibilities, and identities within the context of ecological dislocation.

The Multi-Scalar Logics of Anthropocene Discourse: From the "Man in Space" to the "Man in the Mesh"

Just as narratives about the place/relation of human selfhood in the cosmos were formulated in the wake of discoveries by Copernicus, Darwin, and Freud, so too should a proliferation of new mythologies and mechanisms for identity reformations flow from confrontations with a new geological epoch called the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene signifies Anthropos' discovery of the "golden spike," a currently undecided geological signal that transcribes humans spatially and temporally as a planetary force. Currently, there are several candidates competing for this single geological signal that will solidify in the collective imagination the human species' planetary-scale effects, including the dissolving

¹²⁷⁷ Jeff VanderMeer and Timothy Morton, "A Conversation between Timothy Morton and Jeff VanderMeer," in *Los Angeles Review of Books* (2016), <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/a-conversation-between-timothy-morton-and-jeff-vandermeer/>.

Great Barrier Reef and a band of radionucleotides embedded in Earth's crust, among other melancholy possibilities.¹²⁷⁸ Yet as Matt Edgeworth, an archaeologist at the University of Leicester, has pointed out, "[t]he stratigraphic evidence overwhelmingly indicates a time-horizon."¹²⁷⁹ In other words, this simplifying hunt for a striking, single image of Anthropocene Man "impedes rather than facilitates scientific understanding of human involvement in Earth system change."¹²⁸⁰ Such parsimonious, single-variable logic is also complicated by environmental discourses that incorporate multiple scales, temporalities, and systems.

In line with the aforementioned trinity of scientific revolutions, recognition of the Anthropocene timeline inflicts a fourth "humiliating" blow to the possibility of human progress, agency, and exceptionalism.¹²⁸¹ In this sense, the "golden spike" may function like an oedipal prohibition against "our" destructive impulses in order to decouple the economy of desire from violent structures of excess that depend on the organized subjugation of "nature" and marginalized others into standing reserve. On the other hand, the more-or-less innocent attempt to read the golden spike as just a golden spike highlights the consequences of attempting to propose a gender-neutral concept of the Anthropocene in order to prompt

¹²⁷⁸ Meera Subramanian, "Anthropocene now: influential panel votes to recognize Earth's new epoch," in *Nature: International Journal of Science* (2019), https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-01641-5?fbclid=IwAR1yW-b2GG1kusX9Evun-ynWXtiYpcvjazsqGrcNIFls5mjluREv0h04_Lo.

¹²⁷⁹ Matt Edgeworth quoted in Meera Subramanian, "Anthropocene now."

¹²⁸⁰ Edgeworth qtd. in Subramanian, "Anthropocene now."

¹²⁸¹ Timothy Morton, "Thinking Ecology: The Mesh, the Strange Stranger and the Beautiful Soul," *Collapse* 6 (2010): 265. I am suggesting that knowledge of the Anthropocene may function similarly to Morton's notion of scientific revolutions as humility checks. However, an environmental ethics motivated by "humiliation" should be highly suspect in light of feminist theories on how the patriarchal politics of gendered shame "may form a disciplining device operating through structures of oppression." Clara Fischer, "Gender and the Politics of Shame: A Twenty-First-Century Feminist Shame Theory," *Hypatia* 33, no. 3 (2018): 371. A gendered politics of shame does not discipline equally and with the same effects across difference begs the question of who stands to experience, let alone, benefit from the feeling of a kind of moral humiliation.

responses to our most serious ecological dislocations. This gender-undifferentiated form of the Anthropocene concept, present for example in Dipesh Chakrabarty's universalized calls for collective-species flourishing organized around a supposedly "shared sense of catastrophe," could obfuscate and thereby reproduce the same social practices and processes of "civilization" that originally generated the planetary crises that disproportionately affect disenfranchised-others (i.e., animals, women, ethnic minorities, indigenous peoples, etc.).¹²⁸² A similar analytic tendency toward social flattening shows up in Bruno Latour's *Down to Earth*, which also argues problematically that "disorientation" in the Anthropocene has now become so generalized that everyone feels the same effects, not just historically displaced people and cultures.¹²⁸³

Much deep ecological and posthuman-oriented discourse of the past few decades has tended to unravel, extend, and dilute the human subject across vast scales of deep time and space in an attempt to imagine utopian forms of coexistence, but at the expense of reimagining the non/human positions at the personal and political-historical scale of the individual. Environmental discourse that suggests that an awareness of the Anthropocene has a humbling effect on the human species is often paired with demonstrations or endorsements of a sense of continuity among creaturely existence, a "species consciousness" of human-nature interconnectedness and interdependency. For example, *The Ecological Thought*—Timothy Morton's attempt to articulate a style of ecological thinking necessary in the context of the Anthropocene—is a phenomenological encyclopedia of various experiences of interconnectedness that purport to be the ideal foundation for new, salutary

¹²⁸² Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses," *Critical Inquiry* 35 (2009): 222.

¹²⁸³ Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), 7-9.

forms of existential norms, eco-consciousness, and political activism. But unfortunately, the fact that “interconnection implies separateness and difference” becomes dangerously lost in copious descriptions of how the “mesh” is “vast yet intimate” and composed of the “entanglement of all strangers.”¹²⁸⁴ Juxtaposed against these abstractions of intimacy and identity it seems strange to recall with Donna Haraway a time when we were “excruciatingly conscious of what it means to have a historically constituted body.”¹²⁸⁵

More recent approaches to the Anthropocene from feminist angles have recognized the need to link the personal to the global to enable a fuller understanding of the sociopolitical practices and biological processes that made us Anthropocene humans in the first place, as well as those that might make us otherwise.¹²⁸⁶ But ecofeminist critics and feminists of color have long problematized homogenizing calls for solidarity and “unity” as necessary for political action, all the while bearing the tension of acknowledging the importance of political representation. For example, although Hélène Cixous’s main political project is to give shape to the historically erased “universal woman subject,” she is also careful to emphasize that there is “no general woman, no one typical woman.”¹²⁸⁷ Cixous also suggests that the articulation of the complexity of identities —the “richness of their individual constitutions”—is key to political expression and representation.¹²⁸⁸ Similarly, Judith Butler is well known for questioning the necessity of unity for political action, and suggests that insisting on unity most likely leads to a premature fragmentation of

¹²⁸⁴ Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 40 & 47.

¹²⁸⁵ Donna Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto,” in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Woman: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 157.

¹²⁸⁶ Richard Grusin, “Introduction. Anthropocene Feminism: An Experiment in Collaborative Theorizing,” in *Anthropocene Feminism*, ed. Richard Grusin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), vii-xix.

¹²⁸⁷ Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” *Signs* 1, no. 4 (1976), 876.

¹²⁸⁸ Cixous, “The Laugh,” 876.

budding coalitional politics.¹²⁸⁹ But before we can continue the classical feminist tradition of thinking about “[w]hat kind of politics could embrace partial, contradictory, permanently unclosed constructions of personal and collective selves,” we need to sensitively and imaginatively pay attention to real and fictional accounts of the complexities surrounding the formation and sustainable maintenance of individual persons incubated within particular kinship circles.¹²⁹⁰

A careful reimagining of the mechanisms of subject development in relation to our intimate others must necessarily accompany the shift in the understanding and representation of social reality in terms of the Anthropocene. In a related way, Donna Haraway has argued in favor of the political effectivity of myth in suggesting the heuristic figure of the cyborg for the purposes of social transformation. The cyborg is a creature composed of blended value-hierarchical dualisms such as man/woman, machine/organism, human/animal, etc. and meant to provide for collective identification a new, “world-changing” political construction. Born of the oedipal couple but outside of the “oedipal calendar,” the cyborg is immune to such politically seductive solutions to global crisis as the “oral symbiotic utopia or post-oedipal apocalypse” because the cyborg is “embodied in non-oedipal narratives with a different logic of repression, which we need to understand for our survival.”¹²⁹¹ Haraway has helped to describe our sense of identity in terms of “cyborg individuals”—the “illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism,” but who are also distinct from the “ultimate self untied at last from all dependency, a man in space.”¹²⁹² However,

¹²⁸⁹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 20.

¹²⁹⁰ Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto,” 157.

¹²⁹¹ Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto,” 150.

¹²⁹² Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto,” 151.

environmental discourse needs a model of identity that represents the multivariable composition of the human that includes dynamic psychological interactions between significant human others, nonhuman others, biology, ecology, and culture because “it matters how kin generate kin.”¹²⁹³ A theory and representation of how Anthropocene-era “cyborgs” come to intimately know and interact with the objects and realities of their mundane worlds might simultaneously draw upon various perspectives that explain multiple contributions to identity formation, from the individual psyche and interpersonal relations to the environmental context full of nonhuman objects.

Research involved in the “environmental turn” of contemporary psychoanalysis has been particularly useful for building upon the limitations of critical social theories like “cyborg” models for identity and ecofeminist critiques of how structural inequality “depends on enforcing hierarchical dualisms between dominant and oppressed entities.”¹²⁹⁴ This emergent “green” psychoanalytic tradition comes out of the growing consensus that “psychoanalytic thinking and psychology more broadly” cannot continue to ignore the “impact of the socioeconomic environment on the individual psyche.”¹²⁹⁵ Donna Orange has described this shift in thinking as motivated by “feeling the intrusion of the ‘outside’ world into clinical work” as well as the suddenly striking sense that “relationality involves more than two people: it evokes world poverty, racism, economic inequality, climate crisis, and much more.”¹²⁹⁶ Similarly, Joseph Dodds has coined the term “eco-psychoanalysis” as the “eco-psycho-social perspective” he hopes to develop for psychoanalytic research that would

¹²⁹³ Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 103.

¹²⁹⁴ Richard Grusin, “Anthropocene Feminism,” ix.

¹²⁹⁵ Fonagy, et al., “Reconciling Psychoanalytic Ideas,” 797.

¹²⁹⁶ Donna Orange, “My Other’s Keeper: From Intersubjective Systems Theory to the Ethical Turn in Psychoanalysis,” Literature and the Mind Research Center (workshop, University of California, Santa Barbara, March 6, 2017).

more fully engage with the psychodynamics involved in ecology and environmental issues.¹²⁹⁷ This emerging critical discourse seeks to identify loci of psychic intervention through an understanding of the unconscious dimensions of the structural links between subject development under late-capitalism, epistemes of violence, and ecological destruction. Eco-psychoanalysis is a novel humanistic approach and an important perspective to add to debates about how the conditions of the Anthropocene shape minds, natures, and societies.

In the same way that the pioneering field of eco-psychoanalysis focuses on the ecologies of the early emotional environment, Jeff VanderMeer's *Borne* and *The Strange Bird* deploy the very old analytic unit of the "myth of the family" to imagine how gendered, racialized, sexualized, and species-differentiated being has emerged, and might emerge differently, from a history that is bound up with social and ecological violence and depletion. By representing the ontogenetic developmental history and potential of the "human," "posthuman," and multispecies alliances in the context of ecological degradation, VanderMeer's representations of the way "dominion, domestication, and love are deeply entangled" bring us back home from lofty geological scales of questionable heuristic power.¹²⁹⁸ VanderMeer's texts reimagine the "Anthropocene family" and theorize about the possibility and effects of transformations in our kinship practices and ideologies within the context of ecological dislocation.

***How do I love thee, [monster]? Let me count the ways.*¹²⁹⁹**

¹²⁹⁷ Dodds, *Psychoanalysis and Ecology*, 13.

¹²⁹⁸ Tsing, "Unruly Edges," 141.

¹²⁹⁹ Elizabeth Barrett Browning, "How do I Love Thee? Let Me Count the Ways," in *The Longman Anthology of British Literature: The Victorian Age* 4th ed., vol. 2B, eds. Heather Henderson and William Sharpe (Pearson Education, Inc., 2010), 1148.

Insomuch as slogans such as Bruno Latour's "Love Your Monsters" function as political calls for increased acknowledgement of infinite scales of interconnectedness, they also foster neutralized networks of disembodied attachment, and disguise the perpetuation of systems of domination in the name of neo-liberal techno-innovation and the language of neo-colonial benevolence. Latour's paper "Love Your Monsters: Why We Must Care For Our Technologies As We Do Our Children" (2011) introduces a collection of essays sponsored by the "eco-modernist" Breakthrough Institute, which celebrates the continuation of "modernization" via technological development as the route to our "salvation."¹³⁰⁰ Latour draws upon Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) to offer a techno-scientific liberation of sorts by deconstructing the popular notion of her novel as a "cautionary tale against technology."¹³⁰¹ If Victor Frankenstein's true crime was the abandonment of the creature, allegorized as the way we have "failed to love and care" for our technological creations, our lack of "follow through with the education of our children," then Latour suggests that the solution to this problem is increased awareness that "we, our technologies, and nature can no more be *disentangled* than we can remember the distinction between Dr. [sic] Frankenstein and his monster (emphasis added)."¹³⁰² According to Latour, we conflate the creator and the creature just as we are confused about the fact that Victor's sin was not hubristic technological innovation but the abandonment of a benevolent and good being.¹³⁰³ But he does not emphasize that this being was made a "fiend" specifically by the "misery" of

¹³⁰⁰ Bruno Latour, "Love Your Monsters: Why We Must Care For Our Technologies As We Do Our Children," in *The Breakthrough Institute* (2012), <https://thebreakthrough.org/journal/issue-2/love-your-monsters>.

¹³⁰¹ Latour, "Love Your Monsters."

¹³⁰² Latour, "Love Your Monsters."

¹³⁰³ We conflate Victor and the creature mainly because of the film versions, not the novels. Also, Mary Shelley's Victor was awarded neither the Doctor of Philosophy degree nor a medical doctorate. He was essentially a college dropout.

Victor's initial rejection and ultimate refusal to really "hear" vital aspects of the creature's story, such as his unbearable loneliness.¹³⁰⁴ Reading this text alongside the psychoanalytic "mentalizing model" suggests that the creature becomes a monster because of his total lack of an emotional regulation strategy to reduce attachment distress, which results from Victor's mentalizing failures and neglect. Victor refuses to *recognize* the intricate beauty of the creature's mind and *tolerate* its places of ugliness, basic kinds of attachment-figure mentalizing which all children require to develop into resilient adults. Does this rhetorical call for increased awareness of our entanglement truly enable us to know or commune with our monsters—or produce anything other than monsters? Who does Latour's concept of entanglement benefit? While entanglement (i.e., trans-species interdependence) may be the condition upon which our existence is based, entanglement is not necessarily and always such a boon. In fact, disentanglement is perhaps the first step toward healthy expressions of intimate entanglement, that is—disentanglement, in the sense of healthy individuation and deconstructive dissolution of damaging systems of thought and being, helps to sustain and mend our entangled ecologies.

Latour's discomfort over the way that "green politics has succeeded in leaving citizens nothing but a gloomy asceticism, a terror of trespassing Nature, and a diffidence toward industry, innovation, technology, and science" leads him to the belief that the answer to our problems is to accelerate the "modernist story of emancipation" by entering into the "process of becoming ever more attached to, and intimate with, a panoply of nonhuman natures."¹³⁰⁵ He advocates turning away from the "principle of abstention" (i.e., scientific

¹³⁰⁴ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein: Annotated for Scientists, Engineers, and Creators of All Kinds*, eds. David H. Guston, Ed Finn, and Jason Scott Robert (Cambridge & London: MIT Press, 2017), 80.

¹³⁰⁵ Latour, "Love Your Monsters."

innovation of and intervention into nature) and toward approaching the environment as something that “should be even more managed, taken up, cared for, stewarded, in brief, integrated and internalized in the very fabric of the polity.”¹³⁰⁶ In this context, loving our monsters also means the wholesale colonization and conversion of nature into organic and inorganic technological monsters that we now have moral permission to “love” via unqualified exploitation, free of guilt, as well as without any real understanding or appreciation of the qualities and dynamics composing the inner worlds of those monsters. He goes on to claim that we *can* continue these old programs under new signs by merely “re-describing” the modernist developmental agenda of total mastery over nature as the “increasing attachments between things and people at an ever-expanding scale.”¹³⁰⁷ But what do these homogenized, escalating attachments look and feel like at the level of the individual and interpersonal, everyday life practices?

He comes to the politically ambiguous conclusion that “the sin is not to wish to have dominion over Nature, but to believe that this dominion means emancipation and not attachment.”¹³⁰⁸ Latour’s call for attached domination that is couched in the vocabulary of “sin” should give pause in its uncanny resemblance to a neo-liberal version of the “White Man’s burden” where imperial violation and the reduction of self-sufficient cultures to the status of “new-caught sullen peoples, / Half devil and half child” is mistaken as philanthropy.¹³⁰⁹ His suggestion that all that is needed is a change in perspective, “a change in the way *any action* is considered,” ignores decades of eco-feminist scholarship dedicated

¹³⁰⁶ Latour, “Love Your Monsters.”

¹³⁰⁷ Latour, “Love Your Monsters.”

¹³⁰⁸ Latour, “Love Your Monsters.”

¹³⁰⁹ Rudyard Kipling, “The White Man’s Burden,” in *The Longman Anthology of British Literature: The Victorian Age* 4th ed., vol. 2B, eds. Heather Henderson and William Sharpe (Pearson Education, Inc., 2010), 1777-1778.

to highlighting how the modernist project is erected upon an ideological structure of inequality organized around the unconscious conceptual conflation of the categories of “other” and “nature.”¹³¹⁰ Or we might question Latour’s claims in Haraway’s terms: “Intending to make kin while not seeing both past and ongoing colonial and other policies for extermination and/or assimilation augurs for very dysfunctional ‘families,’ to say the least.”¹³¹¹

For Latour the conflation between the creature and creator is meant to support his point about our entanglement with the nonhuman world, which is a way of saying “we are our monsters” and so therefore we should “love and care” for them as we do ourselves.¹³¹² But Latour does not map out the resistances against or the metaphorical and concrete significances of what it might mean to love or to recognize ourselves in our monstrous children. Latour’s goal of political ecology as increased innovation, invention, creation, and intervention ignores the subjective and social dimensions of our interactions with nature nor does it substitute for a social program for loving, caring for, or educating our monstrous children, ourselves. Descriptively insisting on the reality of interconnected intimacy with non/human others is not the same thing as being in and living intimate relations of sensitivity, sustained-attention, and recognition with monstrous others/ourselves. Romanticized notions of entangled love with ideal monsters even if for the purposes of fostering increased eco-activism is loving nothing at all and learning to love nothing at all.

¹³¹⁰ Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990); Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

¹³¹¹ Haraway, “Making Kin,” 207n12.

¹³¹² Latour, “Love Your Monsters.”

If we are to take Latour at his word that “our sin is not that we created technologies but that we failed to love and care for them,” then, instead of the ambitious heights of Victor’s grand laboratory, we might find the creature’s wonderfully inquisitive and tragically catastrophic encounter with the De Lacey household as the richer heuristic scene for recognizing and nurturing the delicate intersubjective microprocesses that structure our monstrous selves. To love our monsters abstractly—as a way to clear all emotional and complicating obstacles from the pathway to the perfect technofix for our dying world—is escapism and offers little constructive hope as a crisis-management strategy. Increased attention to the abstract notion of “entanglement” does not inevitably lead to active education of or better interactions between self and non/human others, nor does it necessarily entail increased intimacy or supportive social relations on the level of every day and politicized life practices.

Love as Recognition: The Importance of the Mentalizing Capacity for the Development of Secure Self-Other-World Attachments in Jeff VanderMeer’s The Strange Bird (2017)

To imagine new, ethical kinds of love in ecological valences it is useful to recall how early emotional experience and/or adult interpersonal dynamics involve different kinds of communicative strategies and defenses that un/re/congeal into distinct styles of (not) knowing and relating to the self and the world. In the context of environmental concern, psychoanalysis offers a useful “mentalizing model” of “healthy” mechanisms and “pathological” divergences involved in the projection of these relational and epistemic styles onto our representations of self and others throughout the lifecycle. I argue that VanderMeer’s novels *The Strange Bird* and *Borne* are usefully understood as reformulations of non/human relations that address the question of the methodological transferability of

mentalization theory—of whether more reflexive mentalization and secure attachment in human relationships would necessarily create grounds for more potentially salutary environmental politics and ethical relations with nonhuman animals and plants. The novels also explore to what extent can adult “therapeutic” experiences of sustained mentalization, both given and received, rupture and transform unproductive epistemophilic orientations, attachment styles, and narrative frameworks regarding all four types of love.

Jeff VanderMeer’s *Borne* (2017) and *The Strange Bird* (2017) are answers to intertextual questions about what it would mean to update the narrative of *Frankenstein* to account for the interpersonal stresses of our Anthropocene times. Shelley’s plot is “updated” in this way to replace the cruel creator figure with a good-enough attachment figure for the creature in the case of *Borne*, while *The Strange Bird* recycles the cruel creator trope in the form of a demonic series of De Lacey families, so to speak, while also transforming the creature into a powerless, feminized victim. *Borne* represents the ways in which minorities are disproportionately affected by environmental pollution and destruction through the protagonist Rachel’s maternal, benevolent adoption of the title character Borne—a scientific externality of the capitalist market mechanism represented in the novels of potentially monstrous proportions who was bioengineered by a biotech firm called the Company. Meanwhile, the influence of early attachment on our psychic functioning is made apparent through the narrative of the sentient and emotional *Strange Bird*’s harrowing journey of tortuous exploitation—a test of psycho-spiritual endurance in which she remains resilient. By an accident of fortune she finds intimacy with the companion that her creator had made in the image of a former colleague and lover. Intimate recognition is the very thing Victor refuses his own creature by destroying his female companion, but also by destroying the

creature's very capacity to love. VanderMeer seems to suggest that despite the Strange Bird's highly imperfect early attachment environment, her later supportive self-other relations are strong enough to rejuvenate her capacity for love even after undergoing horrific abuse. In contrast, Victor's creature is not given the opportunity to rebuild his sense of selfhood that originated from his "mother's" revulsion, which is represented to him by the toxic ostensive cues of "breathless horror and disgust."¹³¹³

After they each flee from the laboratories of their birth, Victor's benevolent creature and the Strange Bird both quest for kinship that goes unrecognized and unreciprocated by the individuals they encounter. But whereas the creature is misrepresented in the minds of strangers as a fiend worthy of only violent treatment, the Strange Bird is perceived as an exceptionally beautiful creature but still worthy of a no less violent series of treatments. In a world in which all are artificially constructed rather than born, Western mechanisms of ethical privilege or oppression based on the identity categories of masculine/feminine, human/animal, white/Black, etc. have become defunct, rendering all creatures potentially both monster and victim in the new landscape of universal exploitation. In such a world, intimate recognition and secure attachment relationships are reduced to uncertainty and ambivalence as love is twisted away from the "fierce joy" of communal struggle, and is transformed into the alienating pursuit of immortality through the projection of the self into the genetic manipulation of life.¹³¹⁴ As a society frozen in a state of sterile encapsulation, the perpetual generation of new bioforms suggests the unconscious motive and futile effort to steal life parasitically from vulnerable others in order to compensate for feelings of deadness. The healthy cycle of projective identification—which involves the developing

¹³¹³ Shelley, *Frankenstein: Annotated for Scientists, Engineers, and Creators of All Kinds*, 42.

¹³¹⁴ Jeff VanderMeer, *The Strange Bird* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018), 82.

mind's increasing capacity to imitate the "containing" figure's reception and return of the transformed intolerable affects for the self and others—is distorted into self-centered fantasies of taking over the other's cherished traits and capacities. And these psychological fantasies find expression in the privileged activities of cultures.¹³¹⁵

The Strange Bird's life begins in a biotech laboratory similar to the Company—the separate bioengineering firm that created the giant flying bear Mord as a technofix solution to the collapsing world. But Mord backfires as a technofix and becomes the murderous tyrant of the city. The Strange Bird also seems to be a kind of technofix for the increasing confrontation with mortality and the impossibility of love in the impoverished, post-apocalyptic setting of the brutal storyworld of the novel. For example, the Strange Bird's fifth dream provides a snapshot of the traumatic events she witnessed and experienced inside the "vast blood room" of the laboratory.¹³¹⁶ Sanji, her bioengineer-creator, explains the reasoning behind the Company's investment in organic technofixes. Her explanation recalls the way Latour simultaneously cautions against the abstentions of the "beautiful souls" of the environmental movement while also failing to see the error in the concept of "attached domination"—unbridled and unqualified interpenetration disguised as the salve of innovation: "We gave up luxuries before they were gone, because we knew they would be gone soon...[.] We knew it would be harder if we waited until they became extinct. We knew we would never survive that. So we made do with less and less. Not just luxuries but more beside. We put more of ourselves into other things."¹³¹⁷ Sanji's attempts to justify brutality in terms of virtue suggests a new kind of distressed psychology arising within the

¹³¹⁵ Evelyn Fox Keller, *Reflections on Gender and Science* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

¹³¹⁶ VanderMeer, *The Strange Bird*, 35.

¹³¹⁷ VanderMeer, *The Strange Bird*, 90.

transition in socioeconomic paradigms from a disciplinary society organized around the accumulation of inanimate “things” to an information-based hegemony invested in “the translation of the world into a problem of coding.”¹³¹⁸ While the organizing principle for self-other relations in both of these paradigms is the logic of exploitative consumption and the pursuit of a sense of omnipotence, the former comes to expression in the consumption of luxury goods and the latter in the colonizing, excessive projection into lifeforms as living arks.

The Strange Bird responds to Sanji with the insight that those who had been in power put themselves into “other things” such as herself in a distinctly non-dialogic way without showing her any “kindness or consideration.”¹³¹⁹ But Sanji dismisses the Strange Bird’s emotional experience and asks only to be recognized: ““Imagine being confronted by the end of the world. Imagine having the person you cared about so distant at a time when you needed not just her but what she was working on. Imagine everything going dark and not being able to talk to that person, even as you held part of the key. Imagine struggling so desperately hard and long to put it right.””¹³²⁰ Sanji betrays an inability to hold another’s mind in her own because of her own desperate hunger to have her desire and anxiety recognized and understood. She is “interpersonally inaccessible” to being changed by others. Her cruel treatment of the Strange Bird reveals her “interpersonally inaccessible” status as well as a reactive distrust of others as a source of valid knowledge that might enrich and reshape her impoverished life: “[I]n the absence of trust the capacity for change is absent”

¹³¹⁸ Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto,” 164.

¹³¹⁹ VanderMeer, *The Strange Bird*, 91.

¹³²⁰ VanderMeer, *The Strange Bird*, 91.

and the “information presented is not used to update the individual’s social understanding” for “the person has (temporarily) lost the capacity for learning.”¹³²¹

After a traumatic early life in the laboratory, the Strange Bird encounters ravenous little foxes, an aggressive flock of songbirds, and the dangerous “Dark Wings”—bioengineered creatures that function as surveillance satellites—before she falls into the clutches of the “Old Man” and, finally, the Magician. The latter two of her captors are additions to the long succession of emotionally “hard to reach” individuals who are much like “broken-down version[s] of the chaplain in the laboratory, who would spend so much time in senseless talking to the animals.”¹³²² Like Sanji, the Old Man and the Magician also have a limited mentalizing capacity as identifiable in their defensive avoidance of thinking about the Strange Bird’s mind. She is merely a receptacle for their projections of disappointed fantasies of recognition by an attachment figure, which have become distorted into self-other relations of objectifying domination in the misplaced attempt to fill the absence of unsatisfied desire.

The Strange Bird is “rescued” by the Old Man after she becomes compromised by a desert sandstorm. Their relationship resonates with cases in which the infant’s experience of attachment-figure mirroring is incongruent and results in the internalization of a representation that does not match his or her internal state. This internalization of the attachment figure’s self-absorbed image of the other may lead to the establishment of a false self, or a distrust in one’s own subjective experience and the other as a source of benevolent knowledge:

¹³²¹ Fonagy, et al., “Reconciling Psychoanalytic Ideas,” 796.

¹³²² VanderMeer, *The Strange Bird*, 27.

The Strange Bird remained silent, for she did not want her captor to know that she understood, nor that she could, when she wished, form human words, even if she did not understand all those words. Instead, she squawked like a bird and flapped her wings like a bird, while the Old Man admired her. In all ways, she decided to be a bird in front of him. But always, too, she watched him.¹³²³

Her behavior parallels traits that characterize anxious attachment styles in which individuals sacrifice their own needs in the face of the fear of losing the support of their insecure attachment figure.

And yet, the Strange Bird's constant watching suggests a depth of mentalizing capacity, which recalls Jessica Benjamin's critique of the way patriarchal social relations place the primary responsibility of recognition on the feminine gender role.¹³²⁴ The Strange Bird carefully listens to the Old Man's lament over the destruction of the old world and his lost lover, Isadora, whom he names her after and attempts to project into her: "The Old Man could mumble like this for hours, sometimes rant and rave and become other than what Isadora thought he was. But even this the Strange Bird welcomed, for she understood him better and better through his repetition and she began to know not just his speech but his moods, to recognize the self-inflicted wound at the heart of him."¹³²⁵ The Strange Bird comes to theorize that his repetitive compulsive ranting "helped the Old Man forget the trauma of what he did not want to remember."¹³²⁶

¹³²³ VanderMeer, *The Strange Bird*, 18.

¹³²⁴ Jessica Benjamin, "The Bonds of Love: Rational Violence and Erotic Domination," *Feminist Studies* 6, no. 1 (1980): 144-174.

¹³²⁵ VanderMeer, *The Strange Bird*, 27.

¹³²⁶ VanderMeer, *The Strange Bird*, 28-29.

The Strange Bird also comes to realize that the Old Man offers her “no such outlet” for her own trauma that “lived within her every moment.”¹³²⁷ Later during her captivity, in a desperate bid for intimacy the Strange Bird imitates the voice of Isadora that she has heard from a recording the Old Man repeatedly plays: “She had learned the trick in the lab, where she had learned all else. It had pleased the scientists; she hoped it would please the Old Man.”¹³²⁸ But the Old Man violently rejects the Strange Bird’s attempt to share her own story through the voice of Isadora: “If I must, I will kill you, Isadora, rather than be mocked by you.”¹³²⁹ This outburst displays the Old Man’s investment in Isadora as an idealized object not a subject in her own right. His omnipotent sense of self seems to be so fragile that he has no trust of information asserted by strangers or of his own capacities for emotional regulation. His understanding of intimacy can only be a one-sided projection of his nostalgic desires onto the Strange Bird, desires around which she must organize herself by mutilating her own psychological and emotional needs.

The Magician acquires the Strange Bird after Charlie X (her Human-Chiroptera, trans-species accomplice) murders the Old Man for his treasure. The Magician has no concept whatsoever of love and attachment based on mutual recognition and accommodation. Her understanding of self-other relations entails the total domination of others into resources for furthering her ambition to “save the world” by destroying Mord and ruling in his place. The Magician finds the Strange Bird to be a “lovely thing” but one that “can be more beautiful still...and more useful.”¹³³⁰ She ignores the Strange Bird’s enigmatic message that “the seeds of me are the seeds of you” as she sets to transforming this “made

¹³²⁷ VanderMeer, *The Strange Bird*, 29.

¹³²⁸ VanderMeer, *The Strange Bird*, 33.

¹³²⁹ VanderMeer, *The Strange Bird*, 35.

¹³³⁰ VanderMeer, *The Strange Bird*, 62.

thing” into something that she is emphatically not made to be.¹³³¹ The Strange Bird is transformed in the name of world salvation, a method and justification similar to those used in the laboratories of her early life, where they “added, subtracted, divided, multiplied, as if there were a way, in referring to the math of it, the acts became abstract, not about flesh and blood at all.”¹³³² The Magician turns the Strange Bird into a defensive weapon and celebrates her own future invulnerable anonymity at the expense of the mutilated creature: “No one will see me approaching. I will be invisible wrapped in you, and for that I thank you, though I doubt you will enjoy it. But that is the price of change. Someone always pays.”¹³³³ The Magician’s rhetoric is based on a radicalized utilitarian calculus and logic of sacrifice that understands progress as only possible at the expense of a supposedly few disposable others. The Magician’s mindset of “attached dominion” is further inculcated by the false justification that accelerated innovation requires forcibly sacrificing wild m/other natures in order to restore the biosphere.

Earlier in the novel, the Strange Bird has the desire to mentalize others. For example, she wants to set the Dark Wings free, to help them “drop out of their orbits and think for themselves, in their way, and rejoin the landscape beneath them,” and thereby save them from “slipping into the old, familiar pattern, ...their preordained routes, performing functions for masters long dead.”¹³³⁴ Similarly, once the bioengineer Wick finally acquires the Strange Bird he is able to give her the feeling for the first time of having her subjectivity understood—of being mentalized: “Their silence, the weariness on their faces, was the Strange Bird’s weariness, too. For the bloodshed, for the senseless acts in the name of order,

¹³³¹ VanderMeer, *The Strange Bird*, 62.

¹³³² VanderMeer, *The Strange Bird*, 63.

¹³³³ VanderMeer, *The Strange Bird*, 66.

¹³³⁴ VanderMeer, *The Strange Bird*, 10-11.

the name of the city's resurrection."¹³³⁵ Wick refuses to look away from her overwhelming emotional truths or to use her as a mirror for his own desire. He is committed to recognizing the creature's complex and intolerably cruel subjective experience, her nature and painful history, rather than projecting his needs onto her: "There are things gone forever and things I can't replace and things I don't understand. But I can stay true to what she was meant to be. I can strip away the conditioning. The coordinates will remain, but what I fashion out of this...this mess...will be able to choose for itself what it does, where it goes. This creature hasn't had that for a long time."¹³³⁶ Wick's recognition that she was once a "powerful bird" who was "*made...into a cloak*" provides the mentalization—the experience of being held by another mind—that she needs to rejuvenate her perception of herself and her social world.¹³³⁷ Because Wick remains sensitive to the Strange Bird's dampened and latent emotional and epistemic capacities, he transforms her into a tiny bird who is able to sing with joy. At the end of the novel she finds a companion in a second Strange Bird bioengineered by Sanji, "[n]ot because she had not suffered or been reduced," but because "she was finally free" to communicate in the "intimate language" of mutual recognition.¹³³⁸

Epistemic Trust and Desire in Jeff VanderMeer's Borne (2017)

Some groups of individuals in the western global north reproduce white supremacist oedipal narratives and developmental procedures in ways that circumscribe epistemophilia to detrimental expressions like the capture-and-extract logic of capitalist instrumentality. In contrast, contemporary mentalization-based psychoanalysis and Jeff VanderMeer's science fiction work to imagine different "good-enough environments" (i.e., a different set of

¹³³⁵ VanderMeer, *The Strange Bird*, 96.

¹³³⁶ VanderMeer, *The Strange Bird*, 98.

¹³³⁷ VanderMeer, *The Strange Bird*, 95.

¹³³⁸ VanderMeer, *The Strange Bird*, 108-109.

imagined environmental conditions and adult-applicable object relations) able to guide the epistemophilic “instinct” toward expression into a more egalitarian set of identities, values, ethics, and politics.

The absent articulation of the psychosexual aspects of “entanglement” in Anthropocene discourse exacerbates and re-enacts the old prohibitions and constraints on human desire that have distorted our relationship to the planet. However, wit(h)nessing/holding or mentalizing the excess, enigmatic psychosexuality of individuals in therapeutic, fictional, and other interpersonal settings may help to shift structures of desire and knowledge production into less detrimental forms. Careful attention to individual psychosexuality enables the recognition of “non-normative” desires and modes of knowing that have been foreclosed, “lost,” and/or that exist quietly and have yet to show up on our un/conscious radar. *Borne* suggests that such new modes of psychosexuality and knowledge production may include a biophilic relation to the planet in the human economy of desire. In other words, there are important psychosexual dimensions to loving the wild m/other natures of our monsters in the era of the Anthropocene. The theory of the “normal” distortion/oversaturation of presubjects’ sexuality and subjectivity in response to attachment figures’ enigmatic messages complicates straightforward understandings of the “Anthropocene family” theorized only in terms of oedipal structures.

Theories of the “normal” distortion/oversaturation of presubjects’ sexuality and subjectivity in response to attachment figures’ “enigmatic messages” complicates straightforward understandings of the “Anthropocene family” theorized only in terms of oedipal structures. Forms of desire are foreclosed or inaugurated by the presubject in response to the dynamics and outcomes of early attachment relations embedded in particular

normative contexts. But whereas classical Freudian psychoanalysis located the “normative” differentiation of heterosexual identity in the resolution of the oedipal conflict, recent psychoanalytic theory that builds from Jean Laplanche’s concepts of “primal seduction” and the “enigmatic signifier” has increasingly focused on the enigmatic core and creative potential of psychosexual desire for its “constant undermining of all sexual and social identities.”¹³³⁹ From the point of view of mentalizing-based psychoanalytic theory, human desire is formed because it is refused recognition by the attachment figure, and in this way becomes “characterized by the same sense of incongruence and striving to be fully experienced” that is visible in the compulsive pursuit of recognition by individuals with insecure attachment styles.¹³⁴⁰ Perhaps similar to how Bollas’ “first aesthetic” functions as a kind of epistemophilic “instinct,” this psychosexual desire for recognition is thought later to “driv[e] interpersonal experiences because the power relationships of early infancy gave the infant’s desire no meaning.”¹³⁴¹ Thus, in terms of the unique possibilities of individual desire, we are all left with a “gap, a failed definition, a rupture of the *epistemic trust* of our pedagogic stance (the social contract which obliges the adult to teach, to acculturate the child into the mysteries of social meanings).”¹³⁴² Instead our strange, infantile sexualities are ignored, repulsed, or dangerously reciprocated, causing them to become “a pattern of desire shaped and constrained by the non-response of the object, to be made unreal, forever to be experienced with trepidation and uncertainty, and imbued with...the enigmatic.”¹³⁴³

¹³³⁹ Peter Fonagy and Elizabeth Allison, “A Scientific Theory of Homosexuality for Psychoanalysis,” in *Sexualities: Contemporary Psychoanalytic Perspectives*, eds. Alessandra Lemma and Paul E. Lynch (London: Routledge, 2015), 133.

¹³⁴⁰ Fonagy and Allison, “A Scientific Theory,” 133.

¹³⁴¹ Fonagy and Allison, “A Scientific Theory,” 133.

¹³⁴² Fonagy and Allison, “A Scientific Theory,” 134.

¹³⁴³ Fonagy and Allison, “A Scientific Theory,” 134.

Developmental psychoanalyst Mary Target has found that while “no mother reports ignoring an infant smiling and over 90% report always responding by smiling or laughing, the most common response to indications of sexual arousal is to ignore or look away.”¹³⁴⁴ Although Target believes that the “denial and distortion of sexuality by an adult unwilling to recognize it” is a normal “failure of mirroring...in the context of sexual feelings...between parent and child,” she also believes that this is a “blind-spot” in need of therapeutic attention.¹³⁴⁵ As discussed above, when attachment figure mirroring is “inaccurate or unmarked,” the individual is “unable to find himself in the other and thus unable to achieve control or understanding of his self-state.”¹³⁴⁶ The individual then is “forced to internalize the representation of the object’s state of mind as if it were a core part of himself,” which causes the construction of an internal “alien self” or “false self,” in Winnicott’s terms, that is partially defensively dealt with through the mechanism of projection, or the expulsion of this alien aspect, into any and all intimate relationships in the desperate attempt for recognition and self-understanding.¹³⁴⁷ The development of sexuality unfolds as an internalized misrepresentation of our misshapen desire by an uncomfortable/prohibiting, indifferent, and/or excessively projecting attachment figure. Because we were not helped to find appropriate representations for these enigmatic phenomenal experiences of desirous excitement, “we are driven to find partners with whom we can externalize them in order to experience them fully.”¹³⁴⁸ Thus, according to this perspective, while (distorted) early “human reflection from another appears developmentally to tame our desire by gradually

¹³⁴⁴ Mary Target, “Is Our Sexuality Our Own? A Developmental Model of Sexuality Based on Early Affect Mirroring,” *British Journal of Psychotherapy* 23, no. 4 (2007): 522.

¹³⁴⁵ Target, “Is Our Sexuality Our Own?”, 529.

¹³⁴⁶ Target, “Is Our Sexuality Our Own?”, 522.

¹³⁴⁷ Target, “Is Our Sexuality Our Own?”, 522.

¹³⁴⁸ Fonagy and Allison, “A Scientific Theory,” 133.

creating symbolic representations of the experience that help [us to] regulate,” we spend our lifetimes searching for others who can recognize the gap in our desire because of these early failures or refusals in recognition by our caregivers.¹³⁴⁹ In this way, throughout the lifecycle, we draw others into the confused vortex of our being in the hope of finding in their minds both “clarifying” and wildly liberating representations of our psychosexual selfhood. But perhaps on some level, clarifying and liberating forms of recognition are always-already failures because we are “always coming too early” to help the other “to be what they should become, and too late” to help them “remain what they would have been.”¹³⁵⁰

However, according to Ladson Hinton’s summary of Laplanche’s theory of the enigma, desire and subjectivity are not wholly reducible to unconscious “parental symptoms” or more conscious forms of parental indoctrination/socializing prohibition. Neither is the individual solely determined by the influences of the Other, family, community, socioeconomic milieu, or environment. “The developing individual is immersed in an ocean of signification from the beginning, and subjectivity develops from that enigmatic matrix.”¹³⁵¹ While all of these forces play a part in shaping the desiring subject, Laplanche emphasizes the creative agency of the infant presubject who, according to her/their/his unique personality/disposition, tries to “interpret” the m/other’s unknown language and affect, her un/conscious, in/direct communications. In other words, whereas other analysts such as Winnicott and mentalization-based theorists tend to put primary stress on the role of the “good-enough” m/other for “optimal” developmental outcomes in early

¹³⁴⁹ Fonagy and Allison, “A Scientific Theory,” 134.

¹³⁵⁰ Brian Massumi, Afterword, “Painting: The Voice of the Grain,” in *The Matrixial Borderspace*, ed. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2006), 204.

¹³⁵¹ Ladson Hinton, “The enigmatic signifier and the decentered subject,” *Journal of Analytical Psychology* 54, no. 5 (2009): 639.

life, Laplanche foregrounds how subjectivity is also the product of the “creative activity of the nascent subject” who attempts to “translate” and “bind” the m/other’s enigmatic/seductive messages, “experiences[,] and fantasies” that are “far beyond the comprehension of the infant.”¹³⁵² The presubject experiences these “gestures, actions or words of the other” as an “excess of enigmatic stimuli” that are “excessive in terms of what the ego can assimilate.”¹³⁵³ Because the m/other’s unconsciously seductive speech remains ineffable and unresolvable (because unmetabolized by the m/other) so does the nature of her desire vis-à-vis the presubject. This mysterious unknown manifest as the difference of the m/other from the self becomes the enigmatic signifier or the center around which the “unconscious core” of the infant’s subjectivity is formed. As in other depictions of bewildering experiences of wonder, this confrontation with the “otherness that one already is” creates the “enigmatic core” of subjectivity that also functions throughout life as turbulent “upsurge[s] of desire” that “create new openings in relationships and world.”¹³⁵⁴ But enigmatic messages are also destabilizing because they undermine illusions of unity by foregrounding a mysterious “gap” separating the self and m/other. Similar to the master subject’s anxiety over “black *mater*” that he “perceive[s] void,” the presubject experiences anxiety over the “black hole” of the m/other’s enigmatic messages that paradoxically draws in/collapses their knowledge of “reality” and structures the very limits of “thought and representation.”¹³⁵⁵ In addition to anxiety, the destabilizing enigmatic message also “evoke[s] a sense of loss and melancholy” that “provokes the development of an ego that seeks to ‘bind’ the over-stimulating input” into classifiable desires and stable, coherent

¹³⁵² Hinton, “The enigmatic signifier,” 640 & 642.

¹³⁵³ Hinton, “The enigmatic signifier,” 640 & 652.

¹³⁵⁴ Hinton, “The enigmatic signifier,” 640 & 652.

¹³⁵⁵ Jackson, “Theorizing in a Void,” 632.

identities and roles that, ultimately, leave the master subject feeling deadened and his m/other objects dead/void or idealized. However, analytic/literary contexts wherein both patient/reader and analyst/author are able to tolerate the enigma within and refuse to “resolve” the self or other into “knowable” “interpretations” and “histories,” enable “imaginative re-translations” of imprisoning behavioral patterns and breathe new life into habituated existence.¹³⁵⁶ In this way, the enigmatic core at the heart of matrixial trans-subjectivity drives the oscillation between the uncanny desire for the dissolution of “old structures” and the playful hope “that new patterns may be created that enable a fuller life.”¹³⁵⁷ In this sense, Laplanche’s concept of the enigmatic signifier resembles Ettinger’s *link a* that drives the desire for metamorphic borderlinking—the desire for the non-life of the matrix wherein the subject can undergo creative unbecoming in the passageway to newborn-ness.

Borne is a study of exactly the above psychosexual potential of Anthropocene family dynamics for identity formation if oriented towards a more mentalizing-based, matrixial, and enigmatic economy of desire. Rachel, the scavenging protagonist of the novel, first finds Borne, a throbbing, shape-shifting blob of light, tangled within Mord’s rotting fur. Rachel names the creature Borne, after an organism her partner Wick had created while working as a bioengineer for the Company. Borne’s name is inspired by Wick’s description of the creature he created as one who was “born” but had been “borne” by him.¹³⁵⁸ The style in which Borne is “borne” by Rachel is distinct from Wick’s perspective of him as a mistake unworthy of reciprocal engagement. Rachel experiments with her expectations of Borne’s

¹³⁵⁶ Hinton, “The enigmatic signifier,” 641.

¹³⁵⁷ Hinton, “The enigmatic signifier,” 644.

¹³⁵⁸ Jeff VanderMeer, *Borne* (London: Farrar, Staus, and Giroux, 2018), 17.

nature. First, he is treated as a plant, which could be read as a metaphor for the way the “normal” “state of affairs” of human development always involves various degrees of misrepresentation, miscommunication, incongruence, and alienation since no attachment figure is “contingent in her mirroring of affects in general more than 50% of the time.”¹³⁵⁹

After Rachel brings Borne home to the Balcony Cliffs, he gradually becomes “comfortable enough to relax and open up,” to elicit communication from his external environment.¹³⁶⁰ Rachel describes the precarious process of mirroring a developing mind: “He was sitting on the table in front of me, as enigmatic as ever. Then...I heard a whining noise and a distinctly wet pucker. As I set down the packet, the aperture on top of Borne widened, releasing a scent like roses and tapioca. The sides of Borne peeled back into segments to reveal delicate dark-green tendrils that even in their writhing protected the still-hidden core.”¹³⁶¹ She then reacts to this vulnerable display without reflection, and demands that he conform to her own desire of him as a “plant!” and “not a sea anemone at all.”¹³⁶² Borne is damaged by the shock of her admonishment and impingement and responds by “snapping back” into what she calls his “defensive mode.”¹³⁶³ In this mode he attempts to integrate his experience in parallel to the responses of his strange environment in the best patchwork he can emotionally conjure. Later Rachel comes to update her image of Borne into that of an animal but still denies him any conscious intent. She also begins to reflect on her tendency to project affects onto him, as for example when she thinks she senses Borne’s

¹³⁵⁹ Target, “Is Our Sexuality Our Own?”, 524.

¹³⁶⁰ VanderMeer, *Borne*, 17.

¹³⁶¹ VanderMeer, *Borne*, 18.

¹³⁶² VanderMeer, *Borne*, 18.

¹³⁶³ VanderMeer, *Borne*, 18.

“amusement” over her surprise at finding a plant that can transport itself to different rooms without her notice.

She slowly becomes more conscious of the way her intervening inscriptions transform Borne from a blank slate to an archive as she confesses her growing love for him: “...I liked Borne too much. [...] The more personality Borne showed, the more I felt attached to him.”¹³⁶⁴ These lines also demonstrate the presubject Borne’s active role in translating Rachel’s “enigmatic messages” that subtly communicate her desires for his subjective unfolding into specific modes and paths. While Rachel “ignores Wick’s attempts to engage” her on the “subject of Borne as a threat or a creature that required caution,” she continues to use masculine gender pronouns to refer to Borne.¹³⁶⁵ As she contemplates the “most basic and troubling puzzle” of Borne’s peculiar digestive system, she arrives at the unthought known that “[e]ven though so much went into Borne,” both physically *and* psychologically, “nothing came out of Borne.”¹³⁶⁶ Like the presubject hungrily consumes the enigmatic messages that the m/other remains largely unconscious of sending, “Borne ate a lot of what I would have discarded as trash and in a sense made a compost pile redundant. I think he would’ve eaten a garbage can if he’d been hungry enough.”¹³⁶⁷ Like other presubjects, Borne’s undeveloped mind renders him unable to tell the difference between the beneficial and detrimental information that blurs and swirls within the excess of the m/other’s messages. Although the “immature” non/human “cannot fully metabolize such

¹³⁶⁴ VanderMeer, *Borne*, 23.

¹³⁶⁵ VanderMeer, *Borne*, 24.

¹³⁶⁶ VanderMeer, *Borne*, 23.

¹³⁶⁷ VanderMeer, *Borne*, 23.

[human] adult messages,...through ‘primal repression’ they remain as the unconscious core of subjectivity.”¹³⁶⁸

Rachel begins to become more aware of the way her expectations and communications are both internalized and creatively scrambled by Borne: “Even calling Borne a ‘he’ began to feel faintly ridiculous as he didn’t exhibit the aggression or self-absorption I expected from most males. Instead, during the early days Borne had become a blank slate on which I had decided to write only useful words.”¹³⁶⁹ Rachel continues to carefully speculate about his changing appearance, which functions as a metaphor for a slowly integrating psyche, how he comes to discard his “sea-anemone shape in favor of resembling a large vase or squid balanced on a flattened mantel.”¹³⁷⁰ Though Rachel “hadn’t wanted to admit it at first,” eventually she can “no longer deny that Borne had tripled in size” like the presubjective mind of the “child becoming an adult” incorporates and swells into an archive of its history of self-other relations.¹³⁷¹

As Rachel heals from her injuries after an attack by the sadistic feral children that roam the post-apocalyptic landscape, she unintentionally projects more of her own mind into Borne by sharing the story of her traumatic life because the severity of her condition leaves her without the common censorship of health. Doing so apparently “saves her life” because her psychic hunger for the emotional containment of an other’s mentalizing function is nourished and gives rise to biophysical health benefits: “Delirious, raving, wondering if I was in a nightmare or just now entering one. All the things in my past that I tried not to think about rose to the surface, spilled out of my mouth, and Borne stood there, listening. I told

¹³⁶⁸ Hinton, “The enigmatic signifier,” 637.

¹³⁶⁹ VanderMeer, *Borne*, 24.

¹³⁷⁰ VanderMeer, *Borne*, 43.

¹³⁷¹ VanderMeer, *Borne*, 24.

him everything about me. Things I hadn't admitted to myself, that had been bottled up for so long I had no control over them."¹³⁷² Indeed, part of Borne's genetically-inscribed nature is to "internalize" external others for the purposes of collecting genetic information for the Company. But Borne tries to rebel against the consumerist logic of his nature in his desire for intimate and collaborative knowledge. She realizes that Borne "would have smelled different to someone else, might even have appeared in a different form" in his attempt to elicit affection, recognition, and life-support from Rachel but also to give her pleasure and joy.¹³⁷³ Borne continues to transform in ways that please his "mother" and in direct proportion to the intimate, caring encounters he has with Rachel. They spend most of their time in Socratic dialogue about the nature of personhood, the cosmos, and nuclear "hauntings"—Borne's expression for the feeling of nuclear contamination. Rachel gives off appropriate ostensive cues to Borne to signify their mutual vulnerability and her interest in learning from and providing him with beneficial information about the world. But she also unconsciously and/or unintentionally communicates desires and anxieties in excess of the positive terms of mentalization.

A genuinely matrixial and mentalizing approach to psychosexual subjectivity can, in part, inhibit the reproduction of old erotophobic and ecocidal logics and behaviors by enabling the recognition and survival of diverse desires through the caregiver's communication of "minor resonance without reciprocal excitement, without denial or distortion."¹³⁷⁴ The developmental procedures that derive from phobic logics involve the differentiation of the self from the human mother, which is also a separation of the self from

¹³⁷² VanderMeer, *Borne*, 37.

¹³⁷³ VanderMeer, *Borne*, 6.

¹³⁷⁴ Target, "Is Our Sexuality Our Own?", 517.

the object-world (nature) and same sex attraction.¹³⁷⁵ This process forecloses the possibility of biophilia (through the repudiation of feminine-nature from subjectivity in patriarchal cultures), as well as of queer desire.¹³⁷⁶ But the social inscription of acceptable desire should not be permitted to foreclose the possibility and necessity of acknowledging these “taboo” desires. Such a mentalizing approach to psychosexuality would leave room for the discovery of unknown desires, as when Rachel considers Borne’s beautiful displays of alien social-erotic content:

The aperture at the top had curled out and up on what I chose to interpret as a long neck, sprouting feather filaments, which almost seemed like an affectation. The filaments, with a prolonged soft sigh, would crowd together and then pull apart again like bizarre synchronized dancers. He was tall enough now that the top of him loomed a good two feet above the bed. Colors still flitted across his body, or lazily flouted in shapes like storm clouds, ragged and layered and dark. Azure. Lavender. Emerald. He frequently smelled like vanilla.¹³⁷⁷

But Rachel and Wick cannot tolerate Borne’s strange desire and epistemic longing that takes the form of absorbing other life forms into his own ever-expanding body. A boundary is crossed when they misrepresent in oedipal terms Borne’s desire, as it is expressed in his attempt to mirror and mentalize them by physically imitating them and then interacting with each of them disguised as the other: “...once upon a time a person named Borne put on the skins of two people he admired and pretended to be those people. Maybe his cause was just,

¹³⁷⁵ Benjamin, “Bonds of Love,” 148; Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 137.

¹³⁷⁶ Mortimer-Sandilands, “Melancholy Natures, Queer Ecologies,” 331-358.

¹³⁷⁷ VanderMeer, *Borne*, 43.

maybe his reasons were sound. Maybe he thought he was doing something right for a change. Maybe.”¹³⁷⁸

After Borne is banished from their home at the Balcony Cliffs like a veritable Oedipus-Electra hybrid, Rachel catches him running along the polluted, yet beautiful, river in her own delicate body as “strange animals followed in his wake.”¹³⁷⁹ As the boundaries between mothers and monsters blur again, her heart is broken “all over again,” she feels as though she “was down there, looking out through Borne’s eyes, and not up on the balcony in [her] own skin.”¹³⁸⁰ At last, Rachel is able to see the world “through Borne’s eyes” instead of trying to fit Borne into an oedipal family arrangement to satisfy her own needs. Rachel’s response to seeing her Borne-doppelgänger running in the distance goes beyond her earlier “misrepresentation” of Borne in oedipal terms. The concrete image of Borne’s loving recognition and deep understanding of the most secret aspects and unconscious intricacies of her identity shocks her into registering the mentalizing function he had provided for her all along. Borne’s joyful metamorphosis into Rachel’s image helps her to see that indeed “kin making is making persons” but not in the top-down, intergenerational power struggle of oedipal and colonial power relations.¹³⁸¹

In other words, a mentalizing approach to multispecies kinship recognizes the socially and historically situated, mutual capture and metamorphosis at the heart of sustainable methods for growing minds, so to speak. This strange and beautiful moment in the novel also emphasizes how “making—and recognizing—kin is perhaps the hardest and most urgent part” of any politics for “multispecies ecojustice, which can also embrace

¹³⁷⁸ VanderMeer, *Borne*, 179.

¹³⁷⁹ VanderMeer, *Borne*, 192.

¹³⁸⁰ VanderMeer, *Borne*, 192.

¹³⁸¹ Haraway, “Making Kin,” 103.

diverse human people.”¹³⁸² Making new alliances requires the capacity to deconstruct old habits of mind. For example, when Rachel first spots her Borne-doppelgänger, she can only see in the old terms of nature, red in tooth and claw, and so believes that the animals might be hunting him. She quickly realizes that his relation to diverse others is quite beyond this reduction, and that in fact “Borne was somehow leading them. All the forgotten and outcast creatures, beneath the notice of the city... While the river continued on its course, carrying all of us with it.”¹³⁸³ Truly acknowledging, imagining, and inhabiting Borne’s “polymorphous perversity” as a kind of “psychology of liberation” or matrixial trans-subjectivity may help us begin to listen to and speak together in the entangled discourse of care necessary for making it through the Anthropocene.

Conclusion: Toward a Mentalization-Based Anthropocene Discourse for Pedagogy at the End of the World

Victor’s creature, Borne, and the Strange Bird all highlight a universal vulnerability to disordered, anxious, and avoidant attachment styles and the associated epistemic paralysis that they cause. All individuals experience failures of mirroring with their caregivers to a greater or lesser extent—who are themselves shaped by their own socioeconomic contexts of misattunement and early environments of adversity—and these encounters also leave their traces in the in/coherencies of the self-identities that individuals construct. In this sense, the mentalization model is not a “deficit theory” because it emphasizes how “a particular attachment style should be seen less as a measure of the extent to which the caregiver succeeded in generating infant attachment security but, more broadly, as learning of the most appropriate method for the child’s social survival in a complex interpersonal

¹³⁸² Haraway, “Making Kin,” 102.

¹³⁸³ VanderMeer, *Borne*, 193.

world.”¹³⁸⁴ Yet in our precarious historical moment of climate dysregulation and mass extinction events, it is especially important to consider that “attachment not only establishes a lasting bond, but also opens a channel for information to be used for the transfer of knowledge between the generations.”¹³⁸⁵ Along this line of thought, we would do well to remember VanderMeer’s warning about the absence of our monstrous familial entanglements:

Other than Mord, the poison rains, and the odd discarded biotech that could cause death or discomfort, the young were often the most terrible force in the city. Nothing in their gaze could tell you they were human. They had no memories of the old world to anchor them or humble them or inspire them. Their parents were probably dead or worse, and the most terrible and transformative violence had been visited upon them from the earliest of ages.¹³⁸⁶

Co-creative, reflexive, and metamorphic dialogue is the key underlying engine for sustaining our trans-species communities. And certain types of emergency milieus could foreclose the possibility of the type of “intergenerational transmission of knowledge and...learning that is specific to human beings” by destroying our mentalizing, attachment, and epistemic capacities in one blow.¹³⁸⁷

As environmental humanities scholars, a better mode of communicating our ecological concerns may be in a rhetorical style that is politically galvanizing because it is personally compelling (e.g., speaks to the particular interests and needs of subjectivities

¹³⁸⁴ Fonagy, et al., “Reconciling Psychoanalytic Ideas,” 796.

¹³⁸⁵ Fonagy, et al., “Reconciling Psychoanalytic Ideas,” 795.

¹³⁸⁶ VanderMeer, *Borne*, 30.

¹³⁸⁷ Fonagy, et al., “Reconciling Psychoanalytic Ideas,” 788.

inscribed by class, race, gender, and species, with an eye towards the emancipatory re-inscription of these categories). For it should now be apparent that “‘felt truth’ can come from biological as well as from social accounts” but that such accounts are often less compelling because of their relative abstraction from what is/appears to be personally relevant.¹³⁸⁸

If, as the mentalizing model suggests, the capacity for mentalizing arose as an evolutionary adaptation to “enable our survival in increasingly complex social situations involving matters of hierarchy, cooperation, exclusion, and inclusion” and that such “representations of ourselves and those around us should calibrate the extent to which we are experiencing social isolation, alienation, or inferiority,” then perhaps our representations of self-other relations in Anthropocene discourse are also indices of socialized and group attachment styles as well as of epistemic style.¹³⁸⁹ In other words, Anthropocene stress and trauma may activate our early attachment systems that are often represented in works of literature, politics, and rhetorical structures. These other structures (literature, politics, and rhetorics) also arguably function as attachment models that either reinforce and/or reform early attachment styles. On the one hand, we need to further consider in what ways our Anthropocene discourses betray emotional strategies aimed at the deactivation of attachment and mentalization and therein promote political paralysis and/or mayhem. On the other hand, Anthropocene discourse also could begin to enact a model of “interpersonal resilience,” which involves the ability to “mentalize even under considerable stress” and “leads to so-called ‘broaden and build’ cycles of attachment security, which reinforce

¹³⁸⁸ Fonagy and Allison, “The Role of Mentalizing,” 376.

¹³⁸⁹ Fonagy, et al., “Reconciling Psychoanalytic Ideas,” 797.

feelings of secure attachment, personal agency, and affect regulation ('build') and lead one to be pulled into different and more adaptive environments ('broaden')."¹³⁹⁰

I have tried not to propose a "normative" theory here, and so it is worth acknowledging that it is possible to achieve a variety of political action plans, social practices, and pedagogical interventions that promote psychosocial resilience. But works of literature, community practices, and interpersonal dynamics that specifically promote the sense of epistemic trust and solid attachments via reflexive mentalization may help address Anthropocene stresses, insecurities, and traumas in socially just and environmentally beneficial ways by encouraging us to consciously undertake, individually and collectively, the "metramorphic quest and the cognition of its anamnesis." In collaboration with intersectional feminist theories of pedagogy, for example, we might imagine mentalizing pedagogical interventions inspired by "security-based attachment strategies" that "rela[x] normal strategies of interpersonal caution" to give the reader/student "in the face of stress" the feeling that s/he is being recognized, which also stimulates other "behavioral systems that are involved in resilience, such as exploration, affiliation, and caregiving."¹³⁹¹ To give an example, UCSB's "Racing Minds" research initiative has developed the "Working Group on Trauma-Informed Pedagogy" that could productively engage with intersectional theories of mentalizing recognition and matrixial wit(h)nessing to foster epistemic trust and positive epistemophilia in the classroom:

This working group acknowledges the university "learning environment" as often traumatizing, due to the fact that it is structurally racist, and recognizes that many of our students are dealing with sexual, racial, and anthropogenic

¹³⁹⁰ Fonagy, et al., "Reconciling Psychoanalytic Ideas," 793.

¹³⁹¹ Fonagy, et al., "Reconciling Psychoanalytic Ideas," 793.

forms of trauma—not to mention a global pandemic—when they enter the classroom. These realities can make it difficult for students to focus their minds. This working group aims to explore pedagogical interventions and engage with scholarship that will enable us as students and educators to foster trauma-informed classroom environments that are inclusive, equitable, and supportive.¹³⁹²

To my mind, these goals potentially connect with theories on (un)learning and mitigating racial melancholia via acts of mentalizing recognition by “therapeutic” m/other natures, caregivers, lovers, educators, etc. who effectively show mindfulness about the mental states of presubjects and traumatized subjects.¹³⁹³ In other words, thinking with intersectional psychoanalytic theories for the purpose of fostering a sense of psychic safety in the classroom would potentially encourage students to more creatively and collaboratively engage with the speculative literatures we read and produce about the world in ways that do not deny or avoid the realities of our age of horrific social dysfunction and climate crisis. But as the eco-psychoanalyst Joseph Dodds qualifies the point, “[p]sychoanalysis cannot provide the answer to how we should respond [to these crises], but it can help us to think about the difficult questions and to avoid overly simplistic and reassuring answers.”¹³⁹⁴ The psychic strength of positive epistemophilia can help us metabolize the deprivation,

¹³⁹² Julie A. Carlson and Sowon Park, “Trauma-Informed Classrooms,” *Literature and Mind* (UC Santa Barbara, 2022), <https://www.literatureandmind.com/racing-minds-initiative>.

¹³⁹³ Relatedly, the working group “posits that racialization and trauma are linked because complex trauma snowballs when there is no social recognition of the injustices that cause damage to the individual and when the cause of trauma is internalized and remains unprocessed. Our plan is to develop pedagogical practices that make learning more possible and bearable for an array of students by concretely acknowledging this situation.” Julie A. Carlson and Sowon Park, “Welcome to ‘Racing Minds,’” *Literature and Mind* (UC Santa Barbara, 2022), <https://www.literatureandmind.com/racing-minds-initiative>.

¹³⁹⁴ Dodds, *Psychoanalysis and Ecology*, 53.

discomfort, and trauma of (un)thinking and (un)learning that stems from systemic misrecognition, neglect, and abuse, but that also necessarily follows from the metamorphic wit(h)nessing of and co/in-habit(u)ating with m/other natures. Sensitively teaching the capacity to tolerate and process the painful trouble (and pleasure) of (un)learning may propel more playful, creative, and realistic dreams and speculations about ways to establish a therapeutic planet that mends, nourishes, and sustains our entangled ecologies.

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