Borderlands of the Sacred

Bio-Cognitive Mapping in the Age of Apocalypse

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Abstract

As Fredric Jameson famously said, "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism."[1] Now that the climate crises ensures that the end of the world is no longer a theoretical abstract, perhaps we no longer need to only imagine the end of capitalism; perhaps the end of the world can be something radically different from its usual conception. I will begin this thesis by reading Yeats's "The Second Coming" through the lens of Walter Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History* and within the context of contemporary scholarship on the climate crisis in order to reconceptualize apocalypse as a moment of radical transformation, rather than cataclysm, that affords us the opportunity to build a better world in the ruins of the old.

The necessary question this raises is, what philosophical and cultural changes are necessary to navigate this transformation? In order to argue for biocentrism as an organizing principle, I will explore the historical contingency of anthropocentrism as an outgrowth of Enlightenment rationality via a Foucauldian reading of Pynchon's masterpiece, *Mason & Dixon.* I will combine this with a reading of Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony,* to show how this novel imagines a biocentric reunification of the human and the biosphere and the healing that offers to both. I will argue that this provides us the framework to reimagine a humanity that is no longer constructed as the *Anthropos,* and prefigures how we might live after the anthropocene.

I will conclude by relating both of these to the present moment of global pandemic. I will explore how contagion disrupts our understanding of borders between nations, as described by Pricilla Wald, and as dramatized by Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*. Where Wald and Mpe's work falls short, in my estimation, is that both envision a cosmopolitanism which is strictly humanistic and thus anthropocentric. I will thus attempt to expand on this scholarship to illustrate how contagion is the basis for an eco-cosmopolitanism. While Wald's and Mpe's own work already contain the potential for eco-cosmopolitanism, examining contagions as sites of trans-corporeal exchange further destabilizes the *Anthropos* and further locates the human within the global biological community. I therefore argue that the climate crisis and the pandemic are best understood as mutually informative, and belonging to a shared discourse of global ecology.

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[1] Jameson, "Future City."

Introduction

Smoke plumes rise like alien fungus over the Rocky Mountains and the California coast. Along the front range, the ash from forest fires falls like snow along the Front Range, and last week my roommate casually texted me "It's apocalyptic today." Environmental collapse was once considered a distant possibility, the stuff of speculative fiction. Today we recognize it as a steadily encroaching reality which, with every burnt gallon of petroleum, slouches ever closer. Every summer and winter bring record temperatures, once-in-a-lifetime storms strike in twos and threes, and entire species vanish forever on a daily basis, while we inhale and imbibe toxic chemicals from a poisoned and dying planet. The reckless greed of capitalist logic, the drive towards infinite growth on a finite planet, has forged a Damocles sword which hangs above the neck of each new inheritor of this global estate. The question of environmental catastrophe is no longer "if" but "how bad," or, as the title of Roy Scranton's recent book puts it, "We're Doomed. Now what?." We've created a society where the status quo is untenable, and the hegemony of capitalist realism has ensured that the only alternative we dare to imagine is the kind of post-apocalyptic wasteland popularized by dystopian science fiction. As Fredric Jameson famously said, "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism"[2]. Now that the end of the world is no longer a theoretical abstract, perhaps we no longer need to only imagine the end of capitalism; perhaps the end of the world can be something radically different from its usual conception. If we reject the assumption of dystopic fiction, that the end of the world as we know it is a purely destructive event, then we can reimagine the apocalypse as that which affords us the opportunity to build a better world in the ruins of the old.

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[2] Jameson, "Future City."

Apocalypse, as it is conventionally understood—particularly in a handful of eschatological traditions which I will briefly discuss—is a cataclysm which marks the binary division between the world as we know it now, and a destroyed world. This reduces all possible actions into a similar binary of those which maintain the status quo and those which hasten the cataclysm. Past crises have been more amicable to this notion. The Cold War for example presented a real possibility of nuclear armageddon, but it was an armageddon which had to be actively created. Consequently, it was possible to simply maintain the world as it was in order to avoid destruction. This is not so with the climate crisis. It is exactly the status quo that is bringing us to a cataclysm which requires only our passivity. If we broaden our understanding of the apocalypse to the moment of rupture between a world which operates in all the familiar patterns, and a radically different world whose character is yet to be determined, the field of action is expanded to include actions which do not maintain the world which is, but usher in the world that may yet be.

The first section of this thesis will use the writings of Naomi Klein and Dahr Jamail, as well as interviews with Noam Chomsky and Roy Scranton, to form an understanding of the impending climate disaster which motivates this paper. It will be shown that this is a crisis which requires us to create wholly new models of understanding the historical moment of apocalypse as well as our understanding of the role of humanity in the biosphere. To this end, the bulk of this section will focus on critiquing the apocalyptic imaginary and developing a new model for conceptualizing apocalypse. By reading Yeats's "The Second Coming" (1920) in connection with Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1940), and within the context of contemporary scholarship, I will explore how these texts respond to the same concerns. Their readings can inform one another, and work towards a more expansive understanding of apocalypse that allows us to better approach the current climate crisis.

The necessary question this raises is, what philosophical and cultural changes are necessary to navigate this transformation? In the third and fourth sections of this paper I will pursue close readings of key texts to argue for biocentrism as the necessary organizing principle. Biocentrism does not place humanity in a paternalistic relationship with the earth, but rather locates humanity as an embedded part of the biosphere existing alongside non-human animals in a non-hierarchical mutualistic existence. Climate change requires such an understanding because its most sensational effects are often distant. Biocentrism, because it locates the individual as an essential part of the biosphere, generates a universal responsibility without relying on the hierarchies of other environmentalisms which reproduce the anthropocentrism that created climate change in the first place. Only by discarding the *Anthropos* and accepting the environmentally embedded humanity of the *Bios,* can we rightly recognize our place in the global ecological network and begins a process of healing for the whole of the biosphere.

In the third section I will be employing Foucauldian critique of anthropocentrism as an outgrowth of Enlightenment rationality via a reading of Pynchon's masterpiece, *Mason & Dixon* (1997), which has distinguished itself as an indispensably insightful critical representation of the historical conditions out of which anthropocentrism arose and transformed the earth from a fertile home into a commodifiable resource. In particular I will be examining how the Enlightenment/colonial épistèmé manifests in this work as the mathematizing of nature, and how this *mathesis* was employed in land enclosure in eighteenth century England and the colonization of North America. The exploitation of the planet is reliant on anthropocentrism to justify its self, so calling anthropocentrism into question destabilizes the foundations of capitalist exploitation.

Following my analysis of *Mason & Dixon,* I will turn to Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977) as a novel which thoroughly explores and critiques the Enlightenment épistèmé's effects on

the people and land of North America. More importantly, *Ceremony* presents an alternative to the anthropocentric rationality that *Mason & Dixon* critiques. Namely, it exemplifies an indigenous narrative praxis in direct struggle with colonial/capitalist hegemony, and offers an alternative ecological ethos rooted in a recognition of what Timothy Morton calls the "symbiotic real,"[3] in which humanity, the biosphere, and their respective survivals are entangled in an indivisible bio-centric whole. While the era of ecological crisis portends the end of the Anthropocene, Silko's novel creates the space to reimagine a humanity that is no longer constructed as the *Anthropos,* and prefigures how we might live after the Anthropocene.

To discuss the era of global crisis without considering the present historical moment of global pandemic would seem to me, at best, negligent. Communicable diseases often heighten fears of the other as contact with anyone perceived as an outsider becomes a possible vector of transmission. Certainly COVID-19 has sparked widespread xenophobia. However, communicable disease also makes visible the networks of connection which constitute us as a community, while simultaneously showing the arbitrary nature of spatial borders, such as those around nation-states. *Contagious* (2008), Priscilla Wald's book-length study of outbreak narratives, studies how communicable disease can be used to reinforce xenophobic fears but also makes the connections that constitute communities visible. This community forming capability is dramatized in Phaswane Mpe's novella *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* (2011). Mpe's book shows how contagion can explode the borders we place around communities by exposing lines of commerce and connection which openly defy the division and discretization of space. Reading *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* as a contagion narrative, borders, which are already tenuous constructs, are shown to be even more arbitrary as a result of their inability to contain outbreaks. AIDS in *Hillbrow* passes easily across

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[3] Morton, *Humankind,* Introduction.

national borders, tracing a network of connection which is itself a representation of the global real. Where Wald and Mpe's work falls short, in my estimation, is that both envision a cosmopolitanism which is strictly humanistic and thus anthropocentric. Contagions do not suddenly appear in a human population, but often they come to us via other species. For this reason, I will be looking at Stacy Alaimo's work on Trans-corporealism as a compliment to Wald's work. Trans-corporealism examines the exchange of matter between the body and the environment, and how this complicates a vision of the human body as an object distinct from its environment. Considering viral matter, such as COVID-19, as site of trans-corporeal exchange, we see that contagion permeates the arbitrary border between the *Anthropos* and the environment in the exact way that Wald formulates it as permeating the arbitrary borders between nations.

Writing on *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, Emily Davis observed, "In the era of global migration, spurred on by the circulations of global capital, contagion offers a more realistic model for understanding global interconnection. In this narrative, you are already part of a cosmopolitan community; your body is vulnerable to its shared weaknesses whether you like it or not"[4], but it is not just the cosmopolitan community that makes us vulnerable. The global pandemic has made it clear that we collectively and individually share in the vulnerabilities of the biosphere as a whole; the wellbeing of the most bio-isolated urban community—such as the concrete landscapes of Los Angeles or New York City—becomes inseparable from the status of the global ecosystem when a disease can jump from a population of animals in one country to cover the globe in a matter of weeks. The pandemic thus becomes an undeniable representation of humanity's inextricable embeddedness within the biosphere. For this reason I will argue that the cosmopolitanisms pre-

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[4] Davis, "Contagion, Cosmopolitanism," 103.

sented by both Wald and Mpe contain an unrealized potential to be biocentric eco-cosmopolitanisms.

This understanding of the pandemic becomes deepened when we look at it through a trans-corporeal lens. Trans-corporealism shows that the human body is not a closed, abiological object but is instead always already constituted by, and thus both in and of, its environment. Just as contagion makes networks of human connection, it also makes visible the transmission of (viral) matter between the body and the biosphere. COVID-19 is therefore understandable as a site of transmission between species where the closed category of the anthropomorphic body becomes the porous body in-and-of the biosphere. The human body is, on a cellular level, not separable from the non-human. Consequently, the narratives and arguments employed by Wald and Mpe to describe the humanist cosmopolitan potential of contagions, such as AIDS or SARS-COV-2, are directly translatable into a post-humanist eco-cosmopolitanism.

Finally, I want to take a moment to address the unusual form of this thesis. It is not separated into chapters, rather it is structured as a single long essay, divided into sections. In the 2014 presidential address to the ACLA, Eric Hayot brings into question the standard forms of academic writing. In particular he mentions the at most 9,000 word essay, the 90 page small book, and the 50 page book chapter. He argues that if an idea takes 50 pages to explore then it would have to be in some way changed to fit into one of these forms, so "so what you write is before the fact operating within a set of constraints…here minimally a set of constraints that say: ideas can be this long, or this long; otherwise it's too long, or not long enough."[5] Taking my cue from Hayot, I decided to be more deliberate about the form of my thesis. To begin with, not each idea in this work takes the same time to explore, and so a series of chapters of roughly equal length would

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[5] Hayot, "On the Lack of Curiosity," 483.

have required some sections be either expanded or cut down, and I did not think it fair to my subject matter to compromise the content in favor of the form. The sections on Pynchon and Silko, in particular, were originally conceived of as a single chapter, which would have dwarfed the chapters preceding and following it unless substantial cuts were made, and neither half of the section would have been as successful as a self-contained chapter.

Hayot makes this critique not to suggest that the familiar forms are bad, but to question whether they should be accepted as necessary, or even the best, ways of doing scholarly work. Hayot asks of the reader:

> is it too much to spend some of the same attention we spend on literature on the institutional, rhetorical, and logical parameters of our own prose?…Would it be crazy to wonder what would happen if we treated ourselves with enough respect as writers to imagine that our prose was capable of more, sometimes, than the communication of the results of our research? Do we really think — as we honestly seem to, if you look at the way we behave — that our writing is somehow exempt from the theories of language that we apply so easily to literature? Is it because we think that we're doing "science"? We mostly don't believe science is doing "science" . . . .[6]

It would not be radical, by any stretch, to suggest that the form of a literary work be reflective of its content[7], so, following from Hayot's argument, it should not be radical to propose that the form of a scholarly work take its cue from the content. A central idea which I continued to return to in the writing of this work was the necessity of unbordering. Artificial boundaries such as the property lines of enclosures, the borders of nation-states, the conceptual borders between species

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[6] Hayot, 484.

[7] A famous example would be Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*.

and between the crises of climate change and global pandemic, arose time-and-again as inimical to the project of human survival in the age of apocalypse. In light of this, I wanted the form of my paper to reflect this drive towards unbordering. As humanity exists in continuity with the biosphere, and this reality is inseparable from the anthropogenic climate emergency, which is itself continuous with the pandemic, it seemed only appropriate that I present these ideas not as related but separate chapters, but as an irreducible whole. My hope is that this proposal does not seem so radical a departure from the typical academic form as, say, a work of criticism written as an epic poem, but that it seems to the reader a meaningful, and productive decision towards a form which reflects and, I hope, actively contributes to the substance of the work.[8]

Finally, the form of academic writing is an important consideration not only for how we operate within the academe, but for the relationship between academics and the public. Although enrollments have declined, the relevance of the humanities hasn't waned. Indeed, a public-facing academe is needed now as much as ever, so we need to consider that perhaps the institutional promotion of traditionally academic forms are not only too narrowly read but too narrowly readable. The monograph may be the height of academic writing, but it's hardly the most accessible. Perhaps the accessibility of our work ought to be proportionate to its public import. Climate change, which I plan to focus on in my future academic work as well, is a matter of great public concern, and so it merits a scholarship that is both academically rigorous and widely readable. By loosening our commitment to traditional forms (which isn't to say we should abandon them entirely) we might better promote writing which bridges the gap between academic discourse and public discussion.

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[8] If nothing else, it is an experiment undertaken with the understanding that the purpose of experimentation is not to succeed but to explore what is possible.

Comporting Ourselves in the Age of Failure

In a recent interview from October of 2019 Noam Chomsky said, "The current moment … is the most grim moment in human history."[9] Chomsky gives several reasons for this, but the greatest is climate change. Climate change is an unprecedented threat to the existence of our species because it demands action, it rules out those actions which only maintain the status quo, and it places an absolute time constraint on those actions. Now that we are threatened with global catastrophe, we need to rethink what it means to face apocalypse. If we consider the apocalypse in its usual sense, namely as a moment of catastrophe, there is only a binary between the world as it is now and the world destroyed, and our possible actions are reduced to maintaining the status quo. To confront a crisis which rules out the status quo a priori we need to reconsider the apocalyptic imaginary. The project of this chapter will be to look at the apocalypse as it is typically considered, and how it has been considered in past moments of crisis, to formulate a new conception of it which makes room for imagining a new kind of world, broadens the field of action, and introduces new ways to face the oncoming climate crisis.

The climate crisis is among the greatest existential threats faced by our planet. In "Climate Disaster is Upon Us,"[10] Dahr Jamail outlines exactly what we could be facing if we allow the climate to continue to change, and it is beyond dire. On the low end, a 1.5°C increase (only 0.5°C more than the 1°C increase we've already caused) would "significantly worsen extreme heat, flooding, widespread droughts, and sea-level increases, among other grim phenomena."[11]

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[9] Chomsky, "Deconstructed Special," 00:34:13.

[10] Jamail develops this work further in his book length project, *The End of Ice* (2019).

[11] Jamail, "Climate Disaster is upon Us."

The consequences only worsen with each degree. "Just a two degree rise will leave dozens of the world's coastal mega-cities flooded…There will be 32 times as many heatwaves in India and nearly half a billion more people will suffer water scarcity. At three degrees, southern Europe will be in permanent drought and the area burned annually by wildfires in the United States will sex-tuple."[12] Beyond that, "a five-to-six-degree Celsius rise in average global temperatures might be enough to annihilate most of earth's living creatures."[13] So how much damage are we on track to inflict upon ourselves? According to Jamail:

> In fact, even best-case scenarios show us heading for at least a three-degree warming and, realistically speaking, we are undoubtedly on track for far worse than that by 2100, if not much sooner…The International Energy Agency has already shown that maintaining our current fossil-fueled economic system would virtually guarantee a six-degree rise in the Earth's temperature before 2050.[14]

What Jamail is describing is nothing less than the apocalypse. For some ecosystems apocalypse is already a reality. The Great Barrier Reef, for example, has already lost half of its corals since 1995[15] as a result of mass bleaching events which are only accelerating in frequency.[16]He follows this by saying, "The question is no longer whether or not we are going to fail, but how are we going to comport ourselves in the age of failure?"[17] To answer this question we must understand what it means to fail.

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[12] Jamail.

[13] Jamail.

[14] Jamail.

[15] "Great Barrier Reef," *BBC News.*

[16] Warne, "Can New Science Save Reefs?"

[17] Jamail.

At this point, I think it necessary to entertain a digression into the realm of eschatology. Contemporary notions of apocalypse are firmly rooted in religious eschatological traditions, and these traditions have also had significant influences on this section's primary texts. Eschatology, which comes from the greek *eschatos,* literally "the last," is the study of the end of creation[18]. For the purposes of this paper it will be useful to establish the eschatologies of the traditions from which Benjamin and Yeats were drawing, as well as eschatologies which hold major sway today. While eschatological beliefs vary greatly both between and within religions, major patterns emerge that allow us to discuss broad trends. In particular, I will be looking at features of the Jewish eschatology, Christian eschatology, Millenarian eschatology (which is often but not always Christian), and pop-eschatology. The last of these is not itself a religious category, but the representations of the end of the world in popular media, which, though secular, draw on religious influences. While this is not a comprehensive survey, it references those frameworks most pertinent to the materials in this thesis.[19]

The Jewish eschatological tradition foregrounds three major concepts: the world to come, the resurrection of the dead, and the Messiah[20]. David Novak, a scholar of Jewish studies, argues that the primary problematic which motivated Jewish speculation on the afterlife, especially after the exile of the Jewish people from Israel, "can be located in the question of why the righteous, namely, those who keep God's commandments, too frequently suffer rather than prosper in this world, and why the wicked prosper much too frequently rather than suffer in this world as they

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[18]Walls, Introduction, 3.

[19] To the interested reader, I recommend *The Oxford Handbook on Eschatology* for a detailed account of global eschatologies.

[20] Novak, "Jewish Eschatology," 114.

deserve."[21] The world to come provides a solution: the good will be rewarded and the wicked punished in the next world. This is a common trend in the religious eschatologies discussed later, and one can see its influence on Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History," specifically where he discusses the redemption of the past[22]. However, Novak points out that in the Jewish tradition, the keeping of commandments isn't done because of the prospect of reward in this world or the next, but because it is good in and of itself, and because individuals are never meant to be certain of their own righteousness. Rather, "the Talmud points out that all of us should look upon ourselves as 'borderline cases,' so that the very next deed before us could tip the balance one way or the other should that deed be our last."[23] This is an important distinction between Jewish and Millenarian eschatologies. The latter is based on the assumption that a select in group has already been marked for salvation and anyone who rejects their specific teachings is damned.[24] It contains an individual certainty of righteousness, absent in the Jewish tradition, which has in some cases (such as Aum Shinrikyo or the Branch Dividians) been used as a justification for violence.[25] Furthermore, Novak characterizes the resurrection of the body as "the centerpiece of classical Jewish eschatology"[26], and stresses that it refers to the literal resurrection of the body, not only the immortality of the soul. Finally, Novak concludes by pointing out that the Messiah is one of the more contested features of Jewish eschatology. In the nineteenth century, for example, reform Jews moved away from the

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[21] Novak, 115.

[22] Benjamin, "Theses," 254.

[23] Novak, "Jewish Eschatology," 116-17.

[24] Partridge, "The End Is Nigh," 205.

[25] Partridge, 201.

[26] Novak, "Jewish Eschatology," 122.

notion of a personal Messiah towards a belief in a messianic age, "thus changing the quest for a 'Redeemer' (*go'el*) to the quest for 'redemption' (*ge'ulah*)."[27]

Christian eschatology, while nominally rooted in Jewish eschatological beliefs, is markedly different. Most obviously, the Messiah is the least contentious aspect since the unifying feature of all Christian practices is the acceptance of Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah. Like Judaism, Christianity includes a belief in a period of immanent Messianic rule on Earth before the transcendental world to come.[28,29] Where eschatology came later to Judaism, it is, according to Walls, a necessary feature of Christianity. The resurrection of Christ is the event which validates the entirety of the faith, and it's the return of Christ during the eschaton which proves the resurrection and will "complete the circle and provide definitive confirmation of the beliefs which imply it."[30] While Yeats adhere's more or less to his Christian faith, best exhibited by the birth of Christ being the central event of his cosmology, he breaks from this tradition is in his assertion of a cyclical history in *A Vision* (1937). In this work Yeats lays out a system of history envisioned as two opposing gyres nested within one another. As history reaches the point where one gyre is at its greatest point of expansion, and the other at its point of greatest contraction, it reverses course back to its starting point where the cones were narrowest and widest respectively. At this point one historical age ends and another begins. Yeats envisioned history to be nearing the end of a two thousand year cycle beginning with the birth of Christ and moving into an age which would be its antithesis[31]. In this way, Yeats seems to echo the Millenarians who were just coming to

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[27] Novak, 127.

[28]Novak, 118.

[29] Walls, Introduction, 6-7.

[30] Walls, 7.

[31] Yeats, *A Vision,* 28-29.

prominence in the US at the start of the 20th century and were defined more than anything by their belief in the coming of a violent era which would proceed the return of the Messiah[32].

Millenarianism is an exceedingly broad category, even within eschatology, encompassing everything from the more mainstream Jehovah's Witnesses, to more marginal groups like the Branch Dividians in the United States and Aum Shinrikyo in Japan. What distinguishes Millenarian beliefs from other Christian eschatologies is the belief that the world will be not only transformed by the eschaton but destroyed, often violently, before the Messiah returns to renew it. Partridge identifies the emergence of Millenarianist beliefs as beginning in the nineteenth century with the emergence of groups like the Millerites, who, in 1818, believed that the world would end in 1843, and the Jehovah's Witnesses, who, in 1877, believed the world would end in 1914.[33] The common features of these groups include the belief in an imminent Armageddon, which must be prepared for; the belief that the groups is under siege from a world that has been fundamentally corrupt (which results in any attack, or perceived insult, on the group and its faith to be seen as a conformation of its persecution and hence its beliefs)[34]; and the conviction that the corruption of the world can only be righted by its destruction.[35] The surviving group will survive in order to bring about the promised Messianic Age. Where these groups differ are in the details of this general narrative, such as whether Armageddon will be brought about in the manner of the Book of Revelations, nuclear warfare, alien invasion, or other contemporary forms of catastrophe, e.g.

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[32] Partridge, "The End is Nigh," 192.

[33] Partridge, 194-95.

[34] Partridge, 199.

[35] Partridge, 193.

climate change, and who the Messiah will be.[36] Millenarianism makes two significant contributions to my discussion of apocalypse: first, it has played a significant role in shaping the popular eschatological imaginary, and second it encapsulates much of what I want to contradict in my own formulation of apocalypse.

Pop-eschatology is both the simplest and most familiar tradition. On its face its a secular apocalypse, but I argue that it is better understood as patterned after religious eschatologies without the prospect of transcendental renewal. For example, consider the unstoppable hoard of zombie movies and franchises that have followed George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968). The zombie as a reanimated corpse (though often traced to Vodou beliefs) resemble the bodily resurrection of the Jewish eschaton without the resurrection of the soul. The apocalypse of the Terminator franchise is the millenarian armageddon brought on by a corrupt and violent world, but with the age of the Messiah replaced by the age of Skynet. Even though this franchise features a Messiah and his revered mother, John Connors is at best a secular savior, who can win a war for human independence from Skynet, and his mother is certainly not portrayed as a holy virgin. Connors resembles, if anyone, the 2nd century false Messiah Simeon bar Kokhba, who was supposed to fulfill the role of a "projective" Messiah by leading his people to independence from the Romans, but failed and was martyred.[37] Furthermore, pop-eschatons don't typically involve a complete end to the material world, or an ascension to a transcendental world. However, they still depict worlds defined by the eschaton. That is, these worlds are defined by what has been lost in the cataclysm rather than what has been built afterwards. For this reason, I contend

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[36] Whether aliens, Matsumoto Chizuo, the Christ of the Bible, an agent acting on his behalf—David Koresh in the case of the Branch Dividians, or Donald Trump in the case of Q-Anon. Much discussion around Q-Anon has framed it as a conspiracy theory, but more recent analysis has understood it as a new religion, one which is alarmingly comparable to Aum Shinrikyo.

[37] Novak, "Jewish Eschatology," 125.

that it is still more accurate to consider them as eschatons than as transformations of a continuing world.

In each of these traditions, the eschaton is the definite endpoint of the world. The millenarian and pop-eschatological visions of a destructive cataclysm fit Jamail's prognosis particularly well, but this vision leaves me dissatisfied. If the apocalypse is only what I will henceforth refer to as cataclysm (in order to distinguish it from the more optimistic view of apocalypse I'm advancing) then history exists in two phases, pre- and post- cataclysm. Critically, the character of these ages come pre-defined. We know well enough what it is to live pre-cataclysm, and we have no shortage of fiction imagining what it might look like to live post-cataclysm (indeed authors like Paolo Bacigalupi have defined their careers by writing post-cataclysmic fiction). The problem is that in this model actions can be completely sorted into those which maintain the pre-cataclysmic status quo and those which hasten the cataclysm.

This model has served us well enough in past crises. In the early twentieth century, when a rising tide of fascism threatened to drown the world, it was enough to stave it off and maintain the old order. Later, when global super powers threatened each other with nuclear armageddon, it was enough that they simply hold off destroying the world until cooler heads could prevail. Both eras resulted in massive, bloody conflict, but neither one brought about the end of the world. This is where climate change distinguishes itself. In the framework of the climate crisis, the maintenance of the status quo is not the solution, it is the entire problem. As Jamail points out, maintaining our current system will virtually guarantee not only our own destruction but that of nearly every species on the planet—unless we discover extraterrestrial life, that means almost all known life in the universe. If we can't maintain the status quo, what does the cataclysmic dichotomy leave us? In the aforementioned interview, Chomsky made that answer clear:

> Some months ago, maybe a year ago by now, one of the Trump bureaucracies the National Transportation Administration came out with what I think is the most astonishing document in the entire history of the human species. It got almost no attention. It was a long 500-page environmental assessment in which they tried to determine what the environment would be like at the end of the century. And they concluded, by the end of the century, temperatures will have risen seven degrees Fahrenheit, that's about twice the level that scientists regard as feasible for organized human life. The World Bank describes it as cataclysmic. So what's their conclusion? Conclusion is we should have no more constraints on automotive emissions. The reasoning is very solid. We're going off the cliff anyway. So why not have fun?[38]

We're going off the cliff anyway, so why not have fun? I agree with Professor Chomsky, the reasoning is indeed very solid. The apocalypse qua cataclysm reduces the field of action to maintaining the status quo, or accelerating off the cliff. We can't maintain the status quo, so all that's left is the cliff. But what if that isn't all there is? As Roy Scranton, a professor of environmental humanities, said in a discussion with the Sierra Club, "We need to be having a conversation about how this civilization changes into something else. The more we try to hang on to an old way of doing things, the more unprepared we're going to be for the change that's coming."[39] To imagine what this civilization could become, we might begin by imagining what else the apocalypse could become.

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[38] Chomsky, "Deconstructed Special," 00:35:13-00:36:10.

[39] Scranton, "A Future Defined by Climate Change."

How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Apocalypse

In the early twentieth century, modernist writers wrote prolifically of their visions of apocalypse. From, T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) to W.B. Yeats's "The Second Coming" there was a profound and widespread feeling that the world, or at least some crucial part of it, was ending. However, not all of these visions of the apocalypse are useful to us in our present condition. Some of these figure the apocalypse as having already passed, as in Eliot's characterization of Europe as a wasteland, or imagine the apocalypse as cataclysm. Yeats's "The Second Coming," on the other hand, retains an imaginative vision of the apocalypse, without losing sight of its cataclysmic potential, and describes it in terms all too fitting to the present moment.

"The Second Coming" operates in a space of imminence which feels dreadfully familiar. It presents the historical moment just before the apocalypse, the moment when, poised on the edge of a cliff, the car hangs suspended, just about to succumb to gravity. A moment much like the one we are living in. Reading this poem, it is difficult not to recognize its continued relevance fully a century after its publication. The first stanza depicts society in a state of cataclysm:

> Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
> Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
> The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
> The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
> The best lack all conviction, while the worst
> Are full of passionate intensity.[40]

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[40] Yeats, "The Second Coming," 187.

Certainly the first line signals the same unsustainable status quo that we face now. Similarly, the final two lines seem painfully applicable. Take the massive efforts by oil executives and lobbyists to suppress knowledge of climate change, and consider it alongside Jamail's assertion that "new data suggest that the possibility of political will coalescing across the planet to shift the global economy completely off fossil fuels in the reasonably near future is essentially a fantasy,"[41] and the last three lines of the stanza become a pretty accurate description of the current state of affairs. However, "The Second Coming" is not just about the apocalypse qua cataclysm.

When Yeats wrote this poem, in 1919, Europe was only just beginning to recover from WWI, England and Ireland were on the brink of war, and fascism was on the rise. Writing to a friend in 1936, Yeats said, "['The Second Coming'] was written some sixteen or seventeen years ago & fortold what is happening,"[42] suggesting that the poem was a response to just these social tensions. It was written under a condition of extreme anxiety and fear that the world was about to tear itself apart. What is predicted in Yeats's poem is not the literal coming of the messiah and the biblical end of days, but the radical upheaval of the world as we know it.

Where traditional eschatologies envision the complete end of the material world, Yeats is instead describing only the end of the world *as we know it*. The historical model described in *A Vision* is cyclical, not teleological, so the end of this historical epoch is necessarily the beginning of another. Therefore when we read, "…now I know / That twenty centuries of stony sleep / Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,"[43] we can understand this to be describing a 2000 year period of history coming to its close with the birth of a new epoch. Put another way, Yeats is

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[41] Jamail, "Climate Disaster is upon Us."

[42] Yeats, quoted in Ellman, *The Man and the Masks*, 278.

[43] Yeats, "The Second Coming," 187.

describing a *fin-de-siècle* (a term I've chosen to use here for both its evocation of the modernist tradition in which Yeats was writing and its connotation of transition from one era to another rather than the absolute, teleological end of an eschaton) event which will so radically upend the historical machine that it brings about a new historical epoch.

The *fin-de-siècle* is an alternative conception of apocalypse to the cataclysm. When we thus consider the apocalypse, we remove from it the binary limitations of the cataclysm. Instead of the post-apocalypse being defined *a priori* as the post-cataclysmic world, which must always be avoided, and the only alternative being the status quo, the post-apocalypse remains as yet undefined. In reading "The Second Coming" we must recognize that the certainty of the first stanza, with its definite, present-tense declarative statements, is supplanted by the indeterminism of the second stanza. A "revelation is at hand" but it has not yet been delivered. The speaker describes a vision of "A shape with lion body and the head of man" but must still ask, "…What rough beast, its hour come round at last, / Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?" While the poem's use of Bethlehem certainly reflects Yeats' Christian influence, it is not the Christian messiah which is about to be born. Yeats saw his historical epoch as having begun with the birth of Christ, so the coming era would have its own counterpart. It is absolutely critical that the poem ends with the nature of the beast still undefined, just as I propose the future remains undefined after the apocalypse qua *fin-de-siècle*.

There are two questions which we might now ask of this argument as it has been presented so far. First, it is beyond doubt that the time in which we live is dire, but is it not hysterical to say that it is the end of history, especially since this is not the first time the world has seemed on the brink of chaos? I contend that it is not hysterical to make this claim and that climate change is a fundamentally different crisis, but it's worth entertaining this line of thought. Second, if we

accept the imminence of the apocalypse, what is to be done if not avoid it? To answer both of these, we ought to look to Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History." Benjamin is the natural progression from Yeats because both writers conceptualize history and its end in religious, messianic terms. Just as Yeats uses the second coming of the Christian messiah to conceptualize the end of the present historical moment, Benjamin imagines the end of history in terms of the coming of the Jewish messiah. Furthermore, Yeats and Benjamin were writing in response to similar societal conditions. "The Second Coming" was written in 1919, printed in a magazine in 1920, and first included in a book in 1921. During these years Hitler and Mussolini formed their political parties and fascism was quickly becoming an unignorable presence, and, as previously mentioned, in a 1936 letter Yeats acknowledged the events of the intervening years as being exactly what "The Second Coming" was predicting. Benjamin wrote "Theses on the Philosophy of History" in 1940 as a direct response to the rise of Nazism, during a period when he himself was a refugee fleeing the Nazi regime. Thus the historical philosophy and societal concerns of Yeats find a continuation in Benjamin.

Turning now to the first question, we might consider our moment in comparison to past moments of crisis. Let us take, for example, two past moments which may have been defined by the same imminence that Yeats's poem communicates. The first must naturally be the twentieth century rise of fascism[44]. The second is the height of the Cold War. Each of these periods seemed as though they were about to pitch humanity into a new age of darkness, as though they might at any moment loose the "blood dimmed tides."[45] While nuclear warheads did not rain

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[44] Here we will consider this period to run from the end of the first World War in 1918 to the end of the second World War in 1945, as this is the period in which the existential threat of fascism was most fully embodied. While fascism by no means disappeared after 1945, its reemergence and continuation is the subject of another paper entirely, and indeed much exists on that topic.

[45] Yeats, "The Second Coming," 187.

down on the US and the USSR, fascism rose to a horrific scale and threatened to pitch the world headfirst into, if not “mere anarchy," the worst kind of order. This moment, in retrospect, was nearly the realization of what Yeats had prophesied. Herein lies the key issue, that of posterity.

In “Theses," Walter Benjamin wrote, “To historians who wish to relive an era, Fustel de Coulanges recommends that they blot out everything they know about the later course of history.”[46] According to this reasoning, to understand the moments of the past they must be viewed as from inside themselves, as thought the whole of history since then were as monstrously blank as the future is now to us. Viewed from within, these moments hold no secret hint which, if found, would give up the game and reveal the moment for what it is: no singular event but simply a step in the progression of history. There was no way to say in October of 1962 that the Russian missiles in Cuba would not fire, no way in 1940 to say for certain that Nazi Germany would not win the war. In this we find hope. That we see no secret, glimmering in the mud, which unmasks our emergency, makes our present very much like the past. This would suggest that we too are just as likely to pass, if not unscathed, then certainly undefeated into the future, and that it is indeed hysterical to consider the present moment apocalyptic. Of this method of Coulanges’s Benjamin says, “There is no better way of characterizing the method with which historical materialism has broken.”[47]

In Thesis X, Benjamin writes:

> The themes which monastic discipline assigned to friars for meditation were designed to turn them away from the world and its affairs. The thoughts which we are developing here originate from similar considerations. At a moment when the politicians in whom the

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[46] Benjamin, “Theses,” 256.

[47] Benjamin, 256.

> opponents of Fascism had placed their hopes are prostrate and confirm their defeat by betraying their own cause, these observations are intended to disentangle the political worldlings from the snares in which the traitors have entrapped them. Our consideration proceeds from the insight that the 'politicians' stubborn faith in progress, their confidence in their "mass basis," and, finally, their servile integration in an uncontrollable apparatus have been three aspects of the same thing. It seeks to convey an idea of high price our accustomed thinking will have to pay for a conception of history that avoids any complicity with the thinking to which these politicians continue to adhere.[48]

While Benjamin here writes about fascism specifically, this same argument can be applied to the climate emergency. The purpose of the preceding paragraph is much the same as Benjamin's description of the objects of monastic study, viz. to present exactly that thought which we must reject. To place our hope in the continuation of our present society simply because we have collectively avoided destruction thus far, to believe that we will simply continue to grow and progress, as if by some automatic mechanism, through the present crisis is to imitate exactly the behaviors of the politicians whom Benjamin criticizes in the above passage. The difference is that in the twentieth century's fight against fascism it was sufficient to restore the status quo[49], but this had to be fought for, not merely trusted to automatic progress in which the politicians had placed their "stubborn faith." As has been discussed, the status quo is no longer something which can be sustained either by vigorous effort or by automatic process. Benjamin's project to "disentangle the political worldlings from the snares in which the traitors have entrapped them" becomes in this

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[48] Benjamin, 258.

[49] Of course much could also be said about the antifascist efforts of revolutionaries in this period who had no interest in a return to the status quo. In particular one might consider the efforts of the Spanish Anarchists and their revolutionary project which coexisted with the fight against Falangism.

instance the freeing from a belief in the necessity of the pre-cataclysmic world, that it is something which will continue to exist for no other reason than it must. To hold fast to the world-that-is and to trust that it will continue to work as it always has, to hold fast to "our accustomed concept of history," would render us complicit in our own destruction.

Now to address the second, more pressing question. Simply put, what is to be done? In Thesis IX, Benjamin describes "The Angel of History" thusly:

> His face is turned towards the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet … a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the Angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward.[50]

If we look at history as the angel does, we see that what Benjamin calls the "'state of emergency' in which we live"[51] is not a spontaneous emergence but arises as the product of the whole of history before it. Our project then is to escape the historical processes which have brought us here, to, in a sense, end history. Benjamin hints at this when he describes French revolutionaries firing at clock towers. He writes:

> The awareness that they are about to make the continuum of history explode is characteristic of the revolutionary classes at the moment of their action…in the July Revolution an incident occurred which showed this consciousness still alive. On the first evening of

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[50] Benjamin, 257-58.

[51] Benjamin, 257.

> fighting it turned out that the clocks in towers were being fired on simultaneously and independently in several places in Paris.[52]

In firing at the clock towers, the revolutionaries (at least symbolically) halted history and brought about what Benjamin calls "a present…in which time stands still and has come to a stop."[53] He refers to this moment as the "messianic cessation,"[54] meaning the moment in which the familiar course of history is brought to a halt by intentional intervention. The intentionality involved in the messianic cessation is an important difference between it and the *fin-de-siècle* as described by Yeats, which he envisions as a necessary feature of his cosmology. Here we can find another potential which is contained within the apocalypse. Instead of arriving as the cataclysm, the apocalypse can be the messianic cessation, the moment in which the winds of progress fall still and the Angel of History is arrested mid-flight. This moment, however, does not present itself of its own accord: "Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a *weak* messianic power."[55] Our role in the apocalypse is no less than to recognize and to seize upon our own innate messianic power and, like the revolutionaries who shot the clock towers, to bring about the cessation.

We come now very close to the final conception of the apocalypse that I wish to achieve. In his own notes to "The Second Coming," Yeats wrote, "the end of an age, which always receives the revelation of the character of the next age, is represented by the coming of one gyre to its place of greatest expansion."[56] In reading "The Second Coming" it is already obvious that the

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[52] Benjamin, 261-62.

[53] Benjamin, 262.

[54] Benjamin, 263.

[55] Benjamin, 254.

[56] Yeats, quoted in Finneran, "The Collected Poems," 493.

apocalypse occurs at the widest point of the expanding gyre, so we ought to consider this revelation of character. Now let us call to mind the linguistic origin of "apocalypse." The greek word "apocalypse" (ἀποκάλυψις) literally means "revelation." Recall the line "Surely some revelation is at hand," which begins the second stanza. The revelation is then a further development in our understanding of the apocalypse. The *fin-de-siècle* captures the ending, which is not necessarily cataclysm, and Benjamin's cessation describes the intentional halting of historical processes, but these alone leave out the revelatory character that I hold to be the most critical element, the keystone which maintains the structure of the whole.

The principal character gained by adding this revelatory aspect is its indeterminism. Unlike the cataclysm, in which the future exists pre-determined, until the final revelation is delivered the future remains formless and as such, full of possibility. This too is reflected in Benjamin's writing, in particular in the final lines of his "Theses":

> We know that the Jews were prohibited from investigating the future. The Torah and the prayers instructed them in remembrance, however. This stripped the future of its magic, to which all those succumb who turn to the soothsayers for Enlightenment. This does not imply, however, that for the Jews the future turned into homogenous, empty time. For every second of time was the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter.[57]

By turning away from the cataclysmic conception of the apocalypse, which predetermines the future, we leave the post-apocalyptic future to the possibility of messianism. In the revelatory conception of the apocalypse, the field of action expands beyond maintenance of the world-that-is is. Here we find at last the possibility of our salvation. In the revelatory apocalypse we are no longer consigned to a failing status quo. What now presents itself to us is the project of determin-

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[57] Benjamin, "Theses," 264.

ing the character of the coming age. Yeats's rough beast will be shaped by our hands. What form it takes will depend on, to use Jamail's words, how we "comport ourselves in the age of failure."[58] As the world-that-is ends, we can begin creating the world-to-come.

In the Sierra Club interview, Scranton concludes with an injunction: "We need to be having a conversation about how this civilization changes into something else. The more we try to hang on to an old way of doing things, the more unprepared we're going to be for the change that's coming."[59] So let us now do exactly that, and imagine the kind of character we could create for the next age of humanity. One reaction to climate change which has been espoused by hyper-capitalist technocrats such as Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos, is to pillage the earth for all that it's worth and then escape to another world. I reject this out of hand. Aside from the implications of who would actually be able/allowed to evacuate a dying earth, we might consider how this would shape the character of the next age. The next era would be defined by the same rapaciousness which brought us to the present crisis, and it could be nothing other than age of exploitation, running from one crisis to another.

Instead, we might consider Naomi Klein's "Capitalism vs. the Climate"[60] (2011). In this essay Klein blames the climate crisis on capitalism's "central fiction," namely "that nature is limitless, that we will always be able to find more of what we need, and that if something runs out it can be seamlessly replaced by another resource that we can endlessly extract."[61] Klein goes on to say that the present crisis, "does not just demand green products and market based solutions; it

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[58] Jamail, "Climate Disaster is Upon Us."

[59] Scranton, "A Future Defined by Climate Change."

[60] Klein develops the work of this essay in her book *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate* (2014).

[61] Klein, "Capitalism vs. the Climate."

demands a new civilizational paradigm, one grounded not in dominance over nature but in respect for natural cycles of renewal—and acutely sensitive to natural limits, including the limits of human intelligence."[62] Klein's argument coincides exactly with the notion that the apocalypse opens the way to radical political action, and, unlike the technocratic vision, suggests the creation of a society founded on reciprocity and sustainability.

The spirit of Klein's vision is very much alive in recent political calls for a "Green New Deal," especially the comparably radical (by the standards of twenty-first century U.S. electoral politics) version supported by Sen. Sanders whose campaign website, during his bid for the Democratic Party's presidential nomination in 2020, stated clearly: "The climate crisis is not only the single greatest challenge facing our country; it is also our single greatest opportunity to build a more just and equitable future, but we must act immediately." As progressive as Sen. Sanders's polices were, they fell short. Until the fundamental systems which have brought about this crises —capitalism and anthropocentrism in particular—are undone, we cannot expect anything less to bring about the revelation of the messianic character of the next age. Furthermore, the strong reaction against Sanders's campaign by the majority of the American political apparatus showed that the radical change necessary to survive this crisis is not achievable within the existing social, political, and economic systems. Fredric Jameson famously said, "Someone once said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism."[63] What is less often quoted is the following sentence: "We can now revise that and witness the attempt to imagine

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[62] Klein.

[63] Jameson, "Future City."

capitalism by way of imagining the end of the world."[64] Now that we need no longer merely imagine the end of the world, perhaps we need not merely imagine the end of capitalism either.

As Klein discusses, the radical restructuring of our economy will need to be accompanied by the equally radical reconfiguration of our values. One way we might imagine this is a new structure of cognitive mapping. Fredric Jameson describes cognitive mapping as, "a pedagogical political culture which seeks to endow the individual subject with some new heightened sense of its place in the global system"[65]which serves "to enable a situational representation on the part of the individual subject to that vaster and properly unrepresentable totality which is the ensemble of society's structures as a whole."[66] While Jameson was motivated by a need to represent the individual's location within the complexities of global capitalism, he neglects to consider the relation between global capitalism and the biosphere and the location of the individual within this latter network. I argue that creating an aesthetic of bio-cognitive mapping in the present moment must also locate the individual, and the society, not only as related to the biosphere, but as fundamentally enmeshed in it, as much so as a forest or a flock of geese. We may see efforts to create an aesthetic of ecology, which integrates into our immediate surroundings an awareness of our greater surrounding ecology, such as the architectural efforts discussed by Gobster et al. in "The Shared Landscape," as the beginnings of creating an aesthetic of bio-cognitive mapping. Perhaps, when we recognize the absolute interdependence between our existence and that of uncountably many organisms, and develop the tools to fully cognize our positions within all these

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[64] Jameson.

[65] Jameson, *Postmodernism,* 54.

[66] Jameson, 51.

interrelated systems, we can prefigure an age in which we exist not by the exploitation of the natural world, or of each other, but in a condition of mutual stewardship with the land.

In the days and years to come we will face unprecedented disaster. How we choose to face these disasters will define the future of our species. Chomsky has said, "We have two choices: to abandon hope and ensure that the worst will happen; or to make use of the opportunities that exist and contribute to a better world. It is not a very difficult choice."[67]We must make sure that "The best lack all conviction, while the worst / are full of passionate intensity," does not define us in the coming years lest the apocalypse reveal itself as cataclysm. If, instead, we recognize fully the possibilities contained within the apocalypse, as well as our own "messianic power" to define the character of the next age, then we open up a world of possibility. In the coming period of disaster, radical action will increasingly be not only a moral imperative but an existential necessity. In the age of apocalypse, we have nothing to lose but our demise.

"Isn't This Suppos'd to Be the Age of Reason?"
The Historically Contingent *Anthropos* in *Mason & Dixon*

The drive for infinite growth on a finite planet has brought us to an era which will be defined by cataclysmic climate change. The apocalypse is now, and this opens the question: What will be the next epoch? To see the present not as a sudden emergency but as part of the "one great catastrophe"[68] of history, we need to orient ourselves like the Angel of History: backwards. To this end, I propose a critical investigation into the historical contingency of the Anthropocene, a "critique that takes the form of a possible transgression."[69] The Anthropocene, functions on the

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[67] Chomsky, *Choosing Hope.*

[68] Benjamin, "Theses", 257.

[69] Foucault, "Enlightenment," 45.

ontology of anthropocentrism, the philosophy that positions humanity as being something apart from, and above, the rest of the biosphere. Through a historical critique of the epistemic origins of anthropocentrism, we might "separate out, from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think."[70] The aim then is to better understand how the *Anthropos* is constructed in order to see how we could be otherwise. In so doing, we open the possibility of a bio-cognitive mapping to "endow the individual subject with some new heightened sense of its place in the global system,"[71] particularly the global biosphere. In such a global understanding the *Anthropos* is replaced with the *Bios,* a post-human subject which exists in a non-hierarchical relation of interdependence with the whole of the living biosphere. By exploring biocentric epistemic and literary practices, we can imagine a future epoch that recognizes the embeddedness of humanity in a global biosphere, living and struggling alongside the non-human—an epoch we might call the Biocene.

In striving to free ourselves from the confines of *Anthropos,* we should first recall that, according to Foucault "the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them."[72] This section will therefore pursue a historical critique of anthropocentrism through a reading of Thomas Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon*. Pynchon explores the cartographic formation of America with unparalleled insight into systems of power/knowledge that transform the relationship between humans and nature. These systems create borders that transform the land from a home to a resource and separate man from nature. *Mason & Dixon* is not a historical document, however it is a novel deeply concerned with critiquing the present through an understanding of

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[70] Foucault, 46.

[71] Jameson, *Postmodernism,* 54

[72] Foucault, Enlightenment, 50.

the past. By situating a contemporary critique in the past the novel better enables us see history like Klee's angle, as one continuous catastrophe, and to enact a critique which aims, a Foucault puts it, "to analyse the present by discussing the past, …by treating it as if it were more like the past, in all its strangeness."[73] Indeed Pynchon suggests that an actual history could not do this job as well as fiction. As the narrator, Wicks Cherrycoke, says in *M&D*:

> Who claims Truth, Truth abandons. History is hir'd, or coerc'd, only in Interests that must ever prove base. She is too innocent, to be left within the reach of anyone in Power, — who need but touch her, and all her Credit is in the instant vanish'd, as if it had never been. She needs rather to be tended lovingly and honorably by fabulists and counterfeiters…Masters of Disguise to provide the Costume, Toilette, and Bearing, and Speech nimble enough to keep her beyond the Desires, or even the Curiosity, of Government.[74]

History is always formed within a relationship of power/knowledge; fiction is at least honest about having been written, not discovered. This leaves the possibility for alternate, subjunctive narratives and for the to reclamation of truth from power. Pynchon's fictionalization of Mason & Dixon's journey is therefore just the thing for critiquing the forms of power/knowledge foundational to the American cultural imaginary.

"Pynchon's late masterpiece"[75] makes a cartographic odyssey out of the lives of the historic personages of the astronomers Charles Mason and the surveyor Jeremiah Dixon. It begins by describing their meeting and goes on to narrate, at length, their expedition to observe the transit of Venus from the Cape of Good Hope. It then tells of Mason's time working on St. Helena with future Astronomer Royal Nevil Maskelyne and followed by a short interval where

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[73] Mils, *Michel Foucault,* 79.

[74] Pynchon, *Mason & Dixon,* 350.

[75] Bloom, Preface, vii.

Charles and Mason resided in England again. They then set off to the North American continent to survey the borders between the Pennsylvania, Maryland, Delaware, and Virginia colonies, which is the subject of the entire second half of the novel. Pynchon's novels form a sort of narrative history of the United States, with *Against the Day* taking place in the last decade of the 19th century and the first two of the 20th, *V.* spanning the end of the 19th century into the 1950s, *Gravity's Rainbow* being set in the '40s, *The Crying of Lot 49* in the '60s, and *Inherent Vice* in 1970, to name a few. With *Mason & Dixon,* Pynchon retroactively creates the foundation for this chronology.[76] *Mason & Dixon* narrativizes a foundational act of mapping which shaped the nascent country and cemented the political and cartographic boundary that would come to predetermine much of the following history. By framing it as a story told in a post-revolutionary America, Pynchon ensures that *Mason & Dixon* is part of his literary America as well as implying that the significance of the Line is appreciable only within the posterity of an American context.

Of particular interest is the attention *Mason & Dixon* draws to the enclosure of the commons. Dixon's career prior to joining Mason was primarily surveying the borders of enclosures, and upon their first meeting Dixon says, "Surveyors are runnin' about numerous as bedbugs, and twice as cheap, with work enough for all certainly in Durham at present, Enclosures all over the Country, and North Yorkshire,—eeh! Fences, Hedges, Ditches…all to be laid out."[77] As soon as Dixon is introduced to the narrative, we are reminded that his profession, as well as the historical-economic reality of the moment, is defined by the enclosure of land. It is not a stretch then to see enclosure as one of the driving forces of the story. What is the Line if not a giant act of enclo-

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[76] In addition to forming a historical beginning for Pynchon's America, *Mason & Dixon* also inserts elements which will evolve with Pynchon's America, such as the Line and the Wedge which can be seen as precursors to the arc and the Zone of *Gravity's Rainbow.*

[77] Pynchon, *Mason & Dixon,* 17.

sure? The motive behind Mason's and Dixon's surveyance was to mark the boundary between the land of the Penn family and that of the Calvert family, just as the surveyors back in Dixon's native County Durham were putting fences and ditches between the plots of local landholders. Even Colonel (later, President) Washington discusses Mason's and Dixon's project explicitly in the terms of enclosure, saying, "have ye consider'd how much free surveying ye'll be giving away,—as the West Line must contribute North and South Boundaries to Pieces innumerable?"[78] Our understanding of the Line, vis-a-vis capitalism and anthropocentrism, would thus be improved by reading it as an act of enclosure on a grand scale, so all further discussion of enclosure should be understood to implicate the Line as well.

Enclosure was the process, in Europe, by which land that had been owned in common by the communities that farmed and grazed livestock on it, was divided and transferred into the private ownership of the wealthy. While enclosure had been occurring in Europe for a few centuries, by the time of this novel it was in the midst of what Simon Fairlie, environmentalist and editor of The Land magazine, called "The final and most contentious wave of land enclosures in England."[79] The historical context of this later period of enclosure is the development of industrial capitalism. The commons were a barrier to the growth of capitalism because they provided the people with a means for subsistence other than wage labor. While landowners applied other justifications, which will be discussed later, proletarianization became a justification for enclosure in its own right, not merely a side effect.[80,81] Though enclosure in England did not begin in the

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[78] Pynchon, 276.

[79] Fairlie, "A Short History of Enclosure," 24.

[80] Fairlie, 24.

[81] Neeson, *Commoners*, 27-28.

late 18th century, this was the most vigorous period of it[82] and is of course the period which concerns *Mason & Dixon,* so I argue that capitalism is an unignorable driving force behind enclosure and the Mason-Dixon Line.

The central assumptions of anthropocentrism is that humans are fundamentally separate from, and superior to, the rest of the biosphere. This assumption is both required and reified by the process of enclosure. The collective connection between the community and the land is severed. It is replaced by the singular relationship between the landlord and the property, the owner and the commodity. It's critical to understand how these relationships are formed and how they affect our actions because, as Fairly argues, "the common ownership of land, and the history of its enclosure, provides a template for understanding the enclosure of other common resources, ranging from the atmosphere and the oceans to pollution sinks and intellectual property."[83] Therefore, by advancing our understanding of enclosure and what *Mason & Dixon* has to show of its enshrinement in our cultural imaginary, we can better understand the relationality which gave rise to the anthropocene.

By elevating humanity above the biosphere, anthropocentrism gives humans license to exploit the land for our own gain—or more properly, it give corporations, landlords, etc. license to exploit it for their own gain. The basic condition for this exploitation is commodification. The land must be transformed from something with the intrinsic value of that-which-gives-life, to the imagined value of the commodity fetish. To this end, it must necessarily be broken from the commons, and set aside for private use, ownership, and sale as parceled off segments, by means

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[82] According to Fairlie, "Between 1760 and 1870, about 7 million acres (about one sixth the area of England) were changed, by some 4,000 acts of parliament, from common land to enclosed land" (25).

[83] Fairlie, "A Short History of Enclosure," 16.

of inscribing borders into the earth and constructing artificial boundaries around these parcels. The land, once a provider and caretaker for human residents and a fecund home for non-human neighbors, becomes a stockpile of dead resources at the service of capital. All this was understood by the people who were having their means of survival stripped from them. In 1649 Gerrard Winstanley and his fellow Diggers, or True Levelers as they called themselves, occupied enclosed land in England. They tore down the fences and hedges, filled in the ditches (hence the name Levelers), and cultivated the land as a commons. In a manifesto, published in 1649, defending their occupation of George Hill in Surrey, England, they proclaimed:

> The earth (which was made to be a Common Treasury of relief for all, both Beasts and Men) was hedged into Inclosures by the teachers and rulers, and the others were made Servants and Slaves … Take note That England is not a Free people, till the Poor that have no Land, have a free allowance to dig and labour the Commons, and so live as Comfortably as the Landlords that live in their Inclosures."[84]

What I find particularly interesting is the Diggers' recognition that the "Common Treasury" belongs to "both Beasts and Men." While the Diggers elsewhere recognize the *Anthropos* as being divinely placed above non-human animals, this hierarchy is not absolute, which suggests that humanity has an obligation towards the non-human which cannot be fulfilled when the land is made into a privately held commodity. This is not true biocentrism, but it is at least the beginnings of a biocentric awareness. Capitalism can be understood as amplifying anthropocentrism by legally enshrining it in the practice of enclosure.

Enclosure not only removed the people's means of subsistence, but it severed their relationship to the land. When the land was theirs in common, and unbordered from the rest of the

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[84] Winstanley et al., *The True Levelers Standard Advanced.*

biosphere, it was theirs to take care of. The people and the land sustained *each other.* So, when one reads Dixon's assertion that, "Perhaps if the Tools of thy trade had ever belong'd to thee, instead of to the King, tha might at least once have felt this simple, sentimental Bond,— quite common among the people in fact,"[85] one cannot help but to consider how the relationality of ownership, here being applied to a surveyor and their tools, might apply just as well to a community and the land they inhabit. The land prior to enclosure was not the private property of anyone, and was maintained in common by everyone. While Hardin's famous essay, "The Tragedy of the Commons" characterized this as an unstable and disastrous state of affairs, this has been thoroughly criticized "by anthropologists and historians who cited innumerable instances where limited common resources were managed satisfactorily."[86] This same argument was made contemporaneously by Winstanley and the Diggers who, in another work, reference similar claims (that common use would ruin the land) by the very same "Lords of Manors … and rich Free holders"[87] who were over using and privatizing the land. It was not its common usage but rather its transformation from commons to commodity that was the land's ruin.

Enclosure and anthropocentrism were simultaneously indebted to the epistemic conditions of the Enlightenment, in particular its emphasis on scientific reason. This context is frequently reinforced in *Mason & Dixon,* as in the frequent invocations of Newton with Dixon even declaring "Newton is my Deity."[88] Sean Ireton, whose scholarship explores the intersections between German philosophy and literature, applies Heidegger's philosophy to an extremely instructive reading of *Mason & Dixon,* and his arguments can also be applied to a discussion of enclo-

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[85] Pynchon, *Mason & Dixon,* 472.

[86] Fairlie, 18.

[87] Winstanley et al., *A Declaration.*

[88] Pynchon, *Mason & Dixon,* 116.

sure. As Ireton points out, it's "no coincidence that Mason and Dixon are sponsored by the Royal Society of England, itself an agency of Enlightenment science,"[89] the entire project of the Line is therefore characterized by the Enlightenment, from it's sponsors to its executors, and it's the Enlightenment épistèmé that provides the critical context to understand anthropocentrism.

First, it's worth defining a few useful terms in order to clarify different ways that locations are conceptualized: place, space, and land. For the first two, I will borrow from Edward Casey, and define place as a finite and heterogenous region which can only be known by the experience of it. A place may be home to a living biome, and to be in a place is to be a part of that biome. Space, conversely, is infinite and homogenous, and any point in space is reducible to, and knowable by, a set of coordinates.[90] To be in space requires nothing, and no membership of any other system. Space is quite obviously an epistemic category created by the rationalization of nature. Place, as the obverse of space, is not however "truth in opposition to … false consciousness"[91]—such a conception was neither the focus of Foucault's work nor this work because any supposed truth is necessarily a further construction. It is rather another epistemic category. For this reason I find it useful to include the category of *land* in order to reference that which is being known by either the spatial or emplaced epistemic practices. These distinctions are critical to understanding the epistemic context of Pynchon's novel because:

> Integral to the genius of early modern thinkers from Descartes to Leibniz is a disdain for the genius loci: indifference to the specialness of place…Western philosophers and scientists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries assume that places are merely momentary subdivisions of a universal space quantitatively determined in its neutral homogene-

[89] Ireton, "Lines and Crimes," 149.

[90] Casey, *The Fate of Place,* 238.

[91] Mils, *Michel Foucault*, 75.

> ity. Places are at best convenient and expedient pockets in the vast intact fabric of what Newton called "absolute space" in 1687.[92]

Having defined these terms, we can proceed more productively to examine how surveyors and astronomers act as agents of the Enlightenment épistèmé to transform land into space, and how Pynchon resurrects knowledge of the land as place.

Enclosure and Mason and Dixon's Line both impose a grid onto the land. What Heidegger would call a *gestell* or enframing. Enframing reduces the world to a *bestand*, a "standing reserve or stockpile,"[93] in the same way that enclosure transforms a living commons into an inert commodity. Indeed, when Ireton clarifies that, "Ge-stell denotes a frame, network, or systematized grid laid out for our own anthropocentric designs. And within this framework nature finds itself contained, indeed entrapped,"[94] he'd just as well append "even enclosed." By exploring how the Line functions as an act of enframing, we can better understand how enclosure turns a living place into a stockpile of resources.

Necessary to an understanding of the enframing and mathematizing of nature is the idea of mathesis. According to Heidegger, mathesis "…is that 'about' things which we really already know. Therefore we do not first get it out of things, but, in a certain way, we bring it already with us."[95] Mathesis is the abstraction which can be known a priori to the experience of the place. Mason, while retelling a conversation between two other astronomers, relates one of them saying, "[Stars] betray us not, nor ever do they lie,— they are pure Mathesis…each exists as but a di-

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[92] Casey, *The Fate of Place*, 164.

[93] Ireton, "Lines and Crimes," 145.

[94] Ireton, 145.

[95] Heidegger, *What is a Thing?,* 74.

mensionless Point,— a simple pair of Numbers."[96] Of course, stars are vast, real objects but Mason's profession reduces them to mathematical ideals, as does Dixon's to the land. To survey the Line according to the "pure mathesis" of the stars, is to project that mathesis onto the ground, thereby bringing the land into the same mathematical realm as the stars. As Ireton puts it, "The physical terrain in which they conduct their work (forests, hills, river valleys, and so on) is merely an obstacle that stands in the way of, and must eventually yield to, measurements based on the laws of astronomy."[97] As much as the book sets up an apparent dichotomy between the star gazing, melancholic, Londoner Mason and the ground focused,[98] free spirited, Geordie Dixon, it is rather the case that both are engaged in the same process of mathematizing nature. As another scholar has put it:

> These mutually fortifying pursuits—think of astronomy as landscaping at a higher altitude—mark the two men as master empiricists, devotees of computation, and true children of the Age of Enlightenment. Surveying and astronomy are disciplines inspired by discipline, whereby countryside and cosmos alike may be realized as English gardens.[99]

We may then understand the Line as a *ge-stell,* an enframing of the land, an effort to mathematize the land and reduce it from a living place to a controlled, inert space.

Understanding the Line as enframing, I'd like to return to the point that that enclosure is a transformative act for the land and people's relationship to it. As a surveyor, Dixon's familiarity makes his perspective particularly interesting:

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[96] Pynchon, *Mason & Dixon,* 194.

[97] Ireton, "Lines and Crimes," 149.

[98] Being both a surveyor and a son of a mine owner, and having explored subterranean tunnels in his youth.

[99] Saltzman, "'Cranks of Ev'ry Radius'," 64-65.

> "I was only comfortable in the towns," Dixon would one day admit, "or in Raby, protected by the Castle,—yet never car'd for the territory between."
>
> Mason looks on in some perplexity. "Rum affliction for a Surveyor, isn't it?"
>
> "Say that it provided me an incentive, to enclose that which had hitherto been without Form, and hence haunted by anything and ev'rything, if you grasp my meaning,— anything and everything, Sir."[100]

The unenclosed space is a living and fecund place, yet pregnant with the subjunctive, "formless" possibility of "anything and everything" that might yet come to be, so the land contains multitudinous yet untold narratives. Enclosure reduces the land to a determined, gridded, mathematical space thereby eliding these possibilities. Additionally, the open, unenframed land maintains the heterogeneity of place. It is a teeming and inhabited locality. It is perhaps the living biome of place which haunts Dixon in this passage. Thus, by surveying the enclosures Dixon cuts himself off from the biosphere. He makes himself, and humanity by extension, something separate, bordered, from the rest of nature. He creates the *Anthropos* by way of enclosure.

It should be noted that enclosure, colonialism, and thus the Line, owe their origins to the linearity of Enlightenment teleology. As Ireton points out, "linearity and progress become synonymous in the wake of Newton: the eighteenth century strives to advance its social and moral agenda according to unwavering, rectilineal courses of action."[101] Thus the Enlightenment's history, like the West Line, progresses unerringly in a single direction, drawing yet another border between improvement and barbarity. Both enclosure and colonialism were justified with this belief that people had to be rescued from antiquity. Colonel Washington justifies the settling of the

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[100] Pynchon, *Mason & Dixon,* 504.

[101] Ireton, "Lines and Crimes," 150.

colonies—like enclosure, a process of taking a common land for private ownership—using the same logic as the British landholders justifying enclosure. Compare Colonel Washington's claim that "Out in the wild Anarchy of the Forest, we alone had the coherence and the discipline to see this land developed as it should be"[102] with Sir John Sinclair's, the President of the Board of Agriculture, words from 1803: "Let us not be satisfied with the liberation of Egypt, or the subjugation of Malta, but let us subdue Finchley Common; let us conquer Hounslow Heath; let us compel Epping Forest to submit to the yoke of improvement."[103,104] This parallel was recognized at the time as revealed by the argument, as identified by historian J.M. Neeson, who remarks that for people at that time:

> It made as much sense to preserve [the commons] as it did to leave North America to the Indians: "Let the poor native Indians (though something more savage than many in the fens) enjoy all their ancient privileges, and cultivate their own country their own way. For 'tis equal pity, notwithstanding some trifling dissimilarity of circumstances, that they should be disturbed."[105]

The Line is therefore both a tool of mathesis, and as an act of enclosure/colonialism as demanded by Enlightenment teleology.

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[102] Pynchon, *Mason & Dixon,* 281.

[103] Sinclair (sr.) quoted in Sinclair (jr.), *Memoirs of the Life*, 111.

[104] Sir John Sinclair's biographer and son, Rev. John Sinclair, further notes:

> One day, after passing over Hounslow Heath, Sir John urged his friend, the Duke of Northumberland, to take measures for the enclosure and improvement of that extensive tract, which, to the disgrace of the country, had been suffered to remain in a state of nature. It is now covered with villas, or converted into gardens.

which is further illustrative of the attitudes towards so-called unimproved land.

[105] Neeson, *Commoners*, 30.

This historical linearity, in creating a division between civilization and wilderness, humanity and nature, is necessarily anthropocentric. Absent the Enlightenment telos, there is no division between humanity and nature. According to environmental literary critic Thomas Lyon, "for the Indian, as has often been noted, there was no wilderness here, in the sense of a dichotomous term opposed to 'civilization',"[106] or as Luther Standing Bear put it, "We did not think of the great open plains, the beautiful rolling hills, and the winding streams with tangled growth, as 'wild.' Only to the white man was nature a 'wilderness' and only to him was the land 'infested' with 'wild' animals and 'savage' people."[107] In extending their Line west, Mason and Dixon are bringing with them this teleological linearity which is necessarily both anthropocentric and divisive. As Pearson Bolt reflects in his analysis of biocentrism and border horror in VanderMeer's *Annihilation*: "For this is precisely what all borders do: in their demarcations, they pull us into accepting the concept of two distinct categories: us and them, human and animal, the subject and the Other."[108] Thus, as Mason and Dixon carve their Line into the cartographic imaginary, they are simultaneously drawing a line between the *Anthropos* and the *Bios*, enshrining anthropocentrism in the cultural imaginary.

The transformation of the land and the novel's critique of mathematical borders is most visible in negative, viz. in an unenclosed place: The Wedge. The charters for the borders of Maryland, Pennsylvania, and Delaware are drawn by distant monarchs with what the narrator of *M&D* called "their tangle of geometric hopes,—that somehow the Arc, Tangent, the Meridian, and the West Line should all come together at the same perfect Point,— where, in fact, all is Fail-

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[106] Lyon, *This Incomparable Lande,* xv.

[107] Standing Bear, *Land of the Spotted Eagle,* 30.

[108] Bolt, "Monolithic, Invisible Walls," 28.

ure."[109] The efforts to inscribe a mathematic form to the land, based in no experience of the place itself, is doomed to failure. The land resists mathesis, and the product is "the Wedge"[110]: a land which exists undescribed, and thus unencumbered, by cartographic mathesis—a place surrounded yet unenclosed. In Pynchon's rendering, it is "occupied by all whose Wish…is not to reside anywhere,"[111] that is to say, it's neither Maryland, Delaware, nor Pennsylvania, and it has not yet been brought into the grid of rational mathematic space. It is a political, economic, or spatial non-place. The Wedge is also a prime example of a place still "haunted" by biodiversity and possibility. The Wedge is an unspoiled area full of "Summer Maize fields," "vast unforgiving Thickets of Stalks," and "gravid short Forests"[112] and defies capital extraction of its "semi-magical" Iron Hill because it is unowned. "Tis no one's for the moment. A small geographic Anomaly, a-bustle with Appetites high and low, their offerings and acceptances."[113] In addition to a refuge of the non-human, the Wedge is a realm where possibilities of subjunctive realities abound, "where just at the Tangent Point, strange lights appear at Night, figures not quite human emerge from and disappear into it, and in the Daytime, Farm animals who stray too close, vanish and do not reemerge."[114] The Wedge exists where spatialization has failed, and so it remains alive to the subjunctive realities that rationality eliminates elsewhere in America. It embodies, or rather emplaces, the struggle against colonial rationality.

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[109] Pynchon, *Mason & Dixon,* 337.

[110] Pynchon, 323.

[111] Pynchon, 469.

[112] Pynchon, 470.

[113] Pynchon, 470.

[114] Pynchon, 323.

The fantastic occupies an important role in *Mason & Dixon.* It provides a contrast to the stringently determined reality of the Enlightenment, and "serve[s] the deeper purpose of offering an alternative to the dominant rationalism of the eighteenth century."[115] In one encounter with the fantastic, Mason objects "Isn't this suppos'd to be the Age of Reason?"[116] However, the Wedge implies that the "Age of Reason" is not the discovery of the true state of nature but rather an imposition of Enlightenment reason on a nature which contains the potential for numerous other possibilities. As literary scholar Adam Lifshey observed in his own work on *M&D*, "Pynchon's key concept in this regard is a tension between declarative and subjunctive Americas, that is, between Mason and Dixon's inscription of a rationalizing, Western European narrative of the continent on one hand and the concomitant erasure of multiple hypothetical and unmapped Americas on the other."[117] The Wedge and the West remain, so long as they're uncharted, as subjunctive spaces of possibility, so rich with imminent narratives that the narrator at one point asks:

> Does Britannia, when she sleeps, dream? Is America her dream?— in which all that cannot pass in the metropolitan Wakefulness is allow'd Expression away in the restless Slumber of these Provinces, and on West-ward, wherever 'tis not yet mapp'd, nor yet written down, nor ever, by the majority of Mankind, seen,— serving as a very Rubbish-Tip for subjunctive Hopes, for all that *may yet be true*,— Earthly Paradise, Fountain of Youth, Realms of Prester John, Christ's Kingdom, ever behind the sunset, safe til the next Territory to the West be seen and recorded, measur'd and tied in, back into the Net-Work of Points already known, that slowly triangulates its Way into the Continent, changing all from subjunctive to declarative, reducing Possibilities to Simplicities that serve the ends of

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[115] Ireton, "Lines and Crimes," 149.

[116] Pynchon, *Mason & Dixon,* 164.

[117] Lifshey, *Bordering the Subjunctive,* 345.

> Governments,— winning away from the realm of the Sacred, its Borderlands one by one, and assuming them unto the bare mortal World that is our home, and our Despair.[118]

The declarative, the rational, the colonial, and the anthropocentric are all written onto the land along with the Line. The Wedge becomes a part of Delaware and of gridded mathematical space. Land held in common with a community, better yet land understood as an unownable part of the biosphere, is written out along with the other subjunctive possibilities of unmapped America.

In the final analysis, Mason's and Dixon's Line is an inscription of colonial, capitalist, and ultimately Enlightenment power/knowledge on the continent, and between the *Anthropos* and *Bios.* However, as with all borders, the Line is a narrative act, and narrative acts always leave the possibility for renarrativizing, telling a different, better story—one which reunites the person with the land, and welcomes the human back into the biosphere. To explore just such a renarrativization, I turn now to a novel acutely aware of the power of narrative, and the healing that a different story can bring, namely Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony.*

"United By a Circle of Death"
Prefiguring the Biocene in *Ceremony*

Ceremony tells the story of Tayo, a Laguna Pueblo man and a veteran of the second World War. During the war, Tayo sees the face of his uncle, Josiah (who dies while Tayo is away), on a Japanese soldier that he's ordered to execute, and his adoptive brother, Rocky, dies during the Bataan Death March. When Tayo returns from the war he's suffering from PTSD—what his doctors call battle fatigue. At the beginning of the novel Tayo is self-medicating with alcohol and the reservation is suffering from drought. Over the course of the novel, Tayo undergoes a healing

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[118] Pynchon, *Mason & Dixon,* 345.

ceremony which involves finding and reclaiming Josiah's cattle, which had been stolen following Josiah's death. When the ceremony is completed, Tayo is able to heal from his PTSD and the land begins to recover from the drought. *Ceremony* alternates between Tayo's story and various legends which deal with environmental crisis. These are formatted as poems to mirror the cadence of oral story telling. One of these is about another ceremony undergone to heal the land from a drought, paralleling Tayo's own. By providing alternative narratives via the indigenous legends with which Silko intersperses the narrative Silko gives the reader an alternative knowledge rooted in biocentrism, reopening the subjunctive space closed off by imperialist power/knowledge, in which the reader is empowered to imagine "how that-which-is might no longer be that-which-is."[119] *Ceremony* further shows the limitations of the colonial épistèmé by characterizing European medicine as unable to treat Tayo's, and by extension the land's, illness. Where Pynchon's Mason and Dixon are exemplary men of the Enlightenment, Silko's Tayo synthesizes traditional indigenous knowledge with modernity to prefigure the *Bios.* By comparing the historically contingent *Anthropos* with the stories and practices that form *Ceremony*'s épistèmé, it will be possible, as Foucault claims, to "open up a realm of historical inquiry...both to grasp the points where change is possible and desirable, and to determine the precise form this change should take."[120] In other words, *Ceremony*'s critiques anthropocentrism in order to present the alternative relationality of biocentrism.

The tool with which *Ceremony* ruptures Enlightenment hegemony is nothing more-or less-than story telling. It is a novel acutely aware of the power of stories, which the opening makes abundantly clear:

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[119] Foucault, "Critical Theory," 36.

[120] Foucault, "Enlightenment," 46.

I will tell you something about stories,

[he said]

They aren't just entertainment.

Don't be fooled.

They are all we have, you see,

all we have to fight off

illness and death.

…

Their evil is mighty

but it can't stand up to our stories.

So they try to destroy the stories

let the stories be confused or forgotten.

They would like that

They would be happy

Because we would be defenseless then.[121]

Stories are powerful because they reopen the subjunctive spaces lost to Enlightenment power/knowledge. As Foucault scholar Sara Mills points out, "the production of information by the marginalised themselves can alter the status quo."[122] Thus stories become the weapons with which we "fight off" the power/knowledge forced on us by the Enlightenment épistèmé, or capitalist realism, and rupture its hegemony in order to imagine and create another world—acts which are inherently a reclamation of power.

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[121] Silko, *Ceremony*, 2. Brackets in original.

[122] Mils, *Michel Foucault,* 70.

The novel as a whole is a struggle between two competing stories, the story of witchery and the ceremony that Tayo is trying to complete to heal himself and the land. Witchery is unambiguously associated with the colonial and anthropocentric exploitation of the land which is made clear in one of *Ceremony*'s stories within the story. In this particular legend, a group of witches are competing to see who can work the greatest evil, until one steps forward and offers simply "a story"[123] (yet another example of the performative power of narratives in this novel) about a "white skin people" to come:

Then they grow away from the earth
then they grow away from the sun
then they grow away from the plants and animals.
They see no life
When they look
they see only objects.
The world is a dead thing for them
the trees and rivers are not alive
the mountains and stones are not alive.
The deer and bear are objects
They see no life.[124]

This witch wins. No one else could summon an evil to match the people who will come to "poison the water" and "slaughter whole tribes."[125] This story characterizes European colonizers, above all else, by their anthropocentrism. Like the surveyors in *M&D,* they turn the world into a

[123] Silko, *Ceremony,* 124.

[124] Silko, 125.

[125] Silko, 126.

dead *bestand,* and in doing so make it something which can be stolen. In *Ceremony,* the *Anthropos* is therefore inseparable from colonialism and the Enlightenment épistèmé. Every struggle for power/knowledge is thus fought between the *Anthropos* and the *Bios,* or between colonization and indigeneity.

Ceremony also exposes and opposes European science, the tool by which the Enlightenment épistèmé exercises its claim over the present moment. When Tayo's uncle, Josiah, decides to raise cattle, how he should do so becomes an intra-household, epistemic battle ground. When Josiah begins reading books on cattle raising, he rejects "Scientific cattle breeding."[126] The problem is that the White scientists who wrote the books on cattle breeding conceived of a homogenous cattle breed ("Hereford, white-face cattle"[127]) in a homogenized, mathematical space. The a priori knowledge of colonial science is a poor fit with the material reality of the heterogenous place. Instead of the homogenized Hereford cattle, Josiah plans to raise "…some special breed of cattle"[128] and when Tayo sees the cattle Josiah plans to buy, "he thought of the diagram of the ideal beef cow which had been in the back of the books, and these cattle where everything that the ideal cattle was not."[129] These cattle are there fore an embodied alternative to the Enlightenment épistèmé. The lived experience of place also does not match the mathematical space of the Enlightenment *Mathesis Universalis,* whose scientists "did not think about drought or winter blizzards or dry thistles, which the cattle had to live with."[130] The question of how to raise cattle thus be-

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[126] Silko, 69.

[127] Silko, 69.

[128] Silko, 69.

[129] Silko, 69.

[130] Silko, 69.

comes a contest between an indigeneity defined by its relation to place and a colonial science which considers only homogenous space.

The struggle between the colonial and indigenous forms of power/knowledges is heightened by Rocky's response. He feels more at home in White society and is planning to go to college on a football scholarship. In other words, he is more assimilated, which accounts for his response that "Those books are written by scientists. They know everything there is to know about beef cattle."[131] Rocky gives the fact that books are written by scientists as a justification in and of itself, showing that Enlightenment science is a self-authorizing system of truth production. As Foucault writes in "Questions of Method," "by the production of truth I mean not the production of true utterances, but the establishment of domains in which the practice of true and false can be made at once ordered and pertinent."[132] Rocky takes the scientists' books to be true because they arise from a system of truth making that he's come to accept, unlike his more skeptical family. As the narrator says, "He did not hesitate to speak like that, to his father and his uncle, because the subject was books and scientific knowledge—those things that Rocky had learned to believe in."[133] Because the Enlightenment épistèmé, here represented by science, presents itself as a complete system of knowledge, anything not contained within it is elided, so the scientists "know everything there is to know" not by actually mastering all possible knowledge, but by deeming all else as not worth knowing. Rocky's paradoxical assertion that "That's the trouble with the way the people around here have always done things—they never knew what they were doing,"[134] thus becomes intelligible as a rejection of tradition. These ways have sustained the

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[131] Silko, 69.

[132] Foucault, "Questions of Method," 79.

[133] Silko, *Ceremony,* 70.

[134] Silko, 69-70.

people and yet Rocky claims that they didn't know what they were doing because he believes that only the knowledge recognized by the hegemonic épistèmé has value, not knowledge whose utility has been proven by survival. The determination of Josiah's family to "get along without these books"[135] thus becomes an act of resistance and a denial of the Enlightenment épistèmé's hegemony, an act that sets the stage for the epistemic struggle at the heart of this novel.

In addition to the dispute over cattle breeding, language is highlighted as another site of power/knowledge in this novel. Knowledge outside the colonial system of truth making is not only labeled false, but is linguistically removed from the tools of truth making. When the narrator, speaking about Tayo's aunt, reflects, "the feelings were twisted, tangled roots, and all the names for the source of this growth were buried under English words, out of reach,"[136] the feelings can't be known because the words with which they might be described have been destroyed by colonial power/knowledge. They have been linguistically excluded, by the systematic erasure of indigenous languages (in industrial boarding schools, for example), from the body of knowledge deemed worth knowing. While *Ceremony* doesn't directly address language beyond this scene, Robin Wall Kimmerer, founding Director of the Center for Native Peoples and the Environment at SUNY, provides an excellent analysis of the potential for indigenous languages[137] to reclaim a marginalized power/knowledge:

> A bay is a noun only if water is dead. When bay is a noun, it is defined by humans, trapped between its shores and contained by the word. But the verb wiikwegamaa—to be a bay—releases the water from bondage and lets it live. "To be a bay" holds the wonder that, for this moment, the living water has decided to shelter itself between these shores,

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[135] Silko, 69.

[136] Silko, 64.

[137] Specifically, she draws on Potawatomi and Ojibwe.

> conversing with cedar roots and a flock of baby mergansers. Because it could do otherwise—become a stream or an ocean or a waterfall, and there are verbs for that, too. To be a hill, to be a sandy beach, to be a Saturday, all are possible verbs in a world where everything is alive. Water, land, and even a day, the language a mirror for seeing the animacy of the world, the life that pulses through all things, through pines and nuthatches and mushrooms. This is the language I hear in the woods; this is the language that lets us speak of what wells up all around us. And the vestiges of boarding schools, the soap-wielding missionary wraiths, hang their heads in defeat.[138]

At the same time that colonial languages deaden the landscape by turning it into a collection of inanimate nouns, indigenous languages reanimate the landscape by describing a community of active subjects. Put another way, "saying *it* makes a living land into 'natural resources.' If a maple is an it, we can take up the chain saw. If a maple is a her, we think twice."[139] The words we speak thus become another epistemic battleground between the *Anthropos* and the *Bios.*[140]

In *Ceremony* borders, both local and national, are also a site of epistemic struggle. On a local scale, *Ceremony* challenges enclosures, the form of bordering that holds such an important role in Pynchon's novel. Part of Tayo's journey towards healing is the recovery of Josiah's missing cattle. When he finds them they've been stolen by a White rancher, and to get to them Tayo has to cut through the fence enclosing the rancher's land. The connection between enclosure and colonialism is made explicit by the narrator when she says, "the people knew what the fence was

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[138] Kimmerer, Braiding Sweetgrass, 55.

[139] Kimmerer, 57.

[140] Though a full discussion of the chapter "Learning the Grammar of Animacy" (pp. 48-59) is impossible in the context of this section, it is an invaluable insight into the role of languages in teaching and upholding either anthropocentrism or biocentrism. I strongly recommended it, along with the whole of *Braiding Sweetgrass,* to the reader.

for: a thousand dollars a mile to keep Indians and Mexicans out; a thousand dollars a mile to lock the mountain in steel wire, to make the land his."[141] This seems very much to echo the Diggers' assertion that enclosure defends by violence land that was taken by violence.[142] Enclosure is tied indelibly to theft, theft of the English commons, the theft of Josiah's cattle, and the theft of the mountains. Enclosures are no more than the institutionalization of that theft. To restore his relationship to the land, Tayo has to reclaim what was stolen by breaking through the fence. Similarly, restoring a relationship to the biosphere requires reclaiming the land from Enlightenment power/knowledge by unbordering, unmathematizing, and uncommodifying the the land.

Ceremony further rejects borders on the national and global scale by representing humanity as being part of one people. A recurring image in Tayo's dreams is a Japanese soldier with Josiah's face that Tayo killed during the war. When he tells Betonie, a medicine man, about this, the medicine man tells him, "It isn't surprising you saw [Josiah] with them. You saw who they were. Thirty thousand years ago they were not strangers. You saw what the evil had done: you saw the witchery ranging as wide as this world."[143] This suggests that the same witchery which cleaved humanity from the biosphere divided humanity from itself. Just as Mason's and Dixon's Line was simultaneously a border between North & South and between *Anthropos* & *Bios,* so too are colonialism, borders, and anthropocentrism all parts of the same power/knowledge, the same witchery. This then begs the question, if the Japanese are kin that Tayo has been alienated from, what other kinships have been hidden from us by the borders of anthropocentrism?

The critiques of White science and borders come together in this novel's representation of White medical practices. When Tayo returns from World War II he's suffering from PTSD

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[141] Silko, *Ceremony,* 174.

[142] Winstanley, "A Declaration."

[143] Silko, *Ceremony,* 114-115.

and interned in a mental institution. While he's eventually released, he's far from cured. The White medicine is unable to heal him, exposing the incompleteness of European knowledge, a "line of fragility"[144] from which an indigenous épistèmé can begin to assert itself. Where the western doctors fail to heal Tayo, Betonie is able to help. As with Josiah's cattle raising, Indigenous knowledge is able to reassert itself where Western knowledge proves insufficient. As Mils points out in her work on Foucault, "in producing knowledge, one is also making a claim for power,"[145] so in reasserting indigenous knowledge, this novel simultaneously makes a claim for indigenous power.

Furthermore, the White medicine's failure reveals the relationship between European knowledge and anthropocentrism on the one hand and between indigenous knowledge and biocentrism on the other. Western medicine is characterized as alienating and isolating. The doctors tell Tayo to focus on himself and do away with "words like 'we' and 'us'."[146] *Ceremony* rejects a western épistèmé so border-obsessed that even medicine consists of constructing artificial boundaries. Instead, as Silko scholars have noted, "Silko continually reminds us that the health and balance through out the many ecosystems of our planet are dependent on the extent to which humans live with a consciousness of the interrelatedness of all aspects of our respective worlds."[147] The novel does this through Tayo's understanding that "medicine didn't work that way, because the world didn't work that way. His sickness was only part of something larger, and his cure would be found only in something great and inclusive of everything."[148] As other scholars have

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[144] Foucault, "Critical Theory," 36.

[145] Mils, *Michel Foucault,* 69.

[146] Silko, *Ceremony,* 116.

[147] de Ramirez and Baker, "Balances and Harmonies," 214.

[148] Silko, *Ceremony*, 116.

noted, Tayo can only get better by understanding himself neither as an alienated individual nor as a part of a solely human community. He can heal only by recognizing himself as a part of the "symbiotic real"[149] of the all encompassing biosphere.

The healing is not Tayo's alone, but the land's as well. Tayo's healing is paralleled with the land's in a non-causal, nonhierarchical simultaneity. The land doesn't heal as a result of Tayo's healing, nor the other way around. The two heal together in a mutualistic, even symbiotic, relationship so that their healing becomes indistinguishable and inseparable, obliterating the barrier between human life and the biosphere. The two become bound together in a transcendent solidarity reenforced by mutual exploitation. The exploitation of the biosphere is highlighted, in one passage, by the comparison between "Bear People"—whose healing ceremony originates the ceremony that Betonie uses to aid Tayo's healing—and the witches: "[Bear people] are naked and not conscious of being different from their bear relatives. Witches crawl into skins of dead animals, but they can do nothing but play around with objects and bodies."[150] In other words, the bear people are unaware of any separation between themselves and the rest of the biosphere, but the witches interact with the biosphere only to reduce it to a set of useful objects. How is the exploitation of nature all that different from the exploitation of Tayo and the other Laguna veterans? Later in the novel, a woman observes of the veterans, "They had been treated first class once, with their uniforms. As long as there had been a war and the white people were afraid of the Japs and Hitler. But these Indians got fooled when they thought it would last."[151] The Laguna veterans are reduced to their use value by colonialism/

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[149] Morton, *Humankind,* Intro.

[150] Silko, *Ceremony,* 121.

[151] Silko, *Ceremony,* 153.

witchery, just as the living biosphere is, in a way that recalls the inextricable exploitation of the land and enslaved people in *Mason & Dixon.*

In *Ceremony*, shared exploitation becomes the grounds for solidarity. Tayo and the land share their suffering so they also share their healing, a relationship that only deepens as the novel progresses. This parallel exists in *Mason&Dixon* as well. It is especially visible in a passage of Pynchon's novel where the narrator remarks on sugar as a "sweet memento, for those it matters to, of the cane thickets, the chains, the cruel Sugar-Islands."[152] In another, LeSpark, Cherrycoke's brother in law describes the beauty of an ironworks, prompting the Rev. Cherrycoke to reflect that:

> What is not visible in this rendering … is the Negro Slavery …— the inhuman ill-usage, the careless abundance of pain inflicted, the unpric'd Coercion necessary to yearly Profits beyond the projectings even of proud Satan. In the shadow's where the Forge's glow does not reach, or out uncomforted beneath the vaporous daylight of Chesapeake, bent to the day's loads of Fuel from the vanishing Hardwood Groves nearby, or breathing in the mephitic Vapors of the bloomeries,— wordlessly and, as some may believe, patiently, they bide everywhere, these undeclared secular terms in the Equations of Proprietary Happiness.[153]

In this passage, the Lord Lepton's fortune is dependent upon the exploitation of the land—via mining the ore, the burning groves for fuel, and releasing gaseous pollutants—and humans who will be chained with iron, perhaps the same one's forced to grow sugar cane. Additionally, Lord Lepton's name is a probable double play on the Greek monetary unit and the class of fundamen-

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[152] Pynchon, *Mason & Dixon,* 329.

[153] Pynchon, 412.

tal particles responsible for binding atoms[154], further paralleling capitalism, bondage, and environmental degradation.

Ceremony reaches its climax, as perhaps a story of ecological degradation should, with the prospect of apocalypse. Near the end of the story Tayo discovers the uranium mine, where stones were taken from the earth and sent to Japan as atom bombs, just as Tayo had been sent as a soldier. As with the iron mines and sugar plantations in Pynchon, the exploitation of the earth is inseparable from the destruction of human life. In *Ceremony* this is highlighted further by the shared form of the exploitation: human and land, both are objectified and weaponized. Furthermore, witchery (and thus anthropocentrism) reaches its apotheosis with the creation of atomic warfare. As critic Lee Schweninger points out, "The invader's (the Euro-American's) progress, in one sense, culminates in nuclear war, or in creating the potential for nuclear war. Nature cannot be fully exploited until the exploiter has complete control; complete control in this context comes only when nature can be totally annihilated. Not before."[155] However, just as the shared exploitation of the land and people paradoxically creates the conditions for their healing, the capacity to end all life necessarily unites all life in a shared biocentric destiny. When Tayo arrives at the uranium mine, the narrator says:

> he had arrived at the point of convergence where the fate of all living things, and even the earth, had been laid. From the jungles of his dreaming he recognized why the Japanese voices had merged with Laguna voices, with Josiah's voice, and Rocky's voice; the lines of cultures and worlds were drawn in flat dark lines on fine light sand, converging in the middle of witchery's final ceremonial sand painting. From that time on, human beings

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[154] Specifically, the electron, one of the six types of leptons, binds atoms into molecules.

[155] Schweninger, "Writing Nature," 55.

> were one clan again, united by the fate the destroyers planned for all of them, for all living things; united by a circle of death that devoured people in cities twelve thousand miles away, victims who had never known these mesas, who had never seen the delicate colors of the rocks which boiled up their slaughter.[156]

Borders, cartographic and imaginary, lose their coherence in the face of shared destruction. What do the lines in the sand that divide us matter when our fates are the same? In this passage, the shared destruction of the land, the Laguna, and the Japanese comes from the construction and use of nuclear weapons, but is there any reason we cannot extend the same logic to the global environmental crisis? In the face of catastrophic climate change, our fate becomes linked with that of every other living being on the planet, all of us "united by a circle of death." The threat of the end of the world creates the conditions for the land's unbordering, recalling the line, spoken offhandedly in *M&D* that, "in the world that is to come, all boundaries shall be eras'd,"[157] or Tayo's realization that "He had only seen and heard the world as it always was: no boundaries, only transitions through all distances and time."[158] Regardless of whether the "world that is to come" is brought about by nuclear annihilation, global climate catastrophe, or the unification of the global biosphere. In a supreme twist of fate, the very forces which rely on our separation from other humans and non-humans give us the tools to recognize our unity within the symbiotic real of the biosphere. I contend that it is precisely the possibility of apocalypse which makes the possibility of the *Bios* the most real.

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[156] Silko, *Ceremony,* 228.

[157] Pynchon, *Mason & Dixon,* 406.

[158] Silko, *Ceremony,* 229.

Of course, the "symbiotic real,"[159] Timothy Morton's term for solidarity and interdependence between the human and non-human, is not only recognized in this book via the potential of shared destruction, nor is biocentrism visible merely negatively via the critique of anthropocentrism. This is absolutely necessary for a lasting biocentrism. As the posthuman theorist Rosi Braidotti points out, "the conditions for renewed political and ethical agency cannot be drawn from the immediate context or the current state of the terrain. They have to be generated affirmatively and creatively by efforts geared to creating possible futures."[160] If biocentrism was formed purely as a reaction to a momentary context, such as climate change, then it would be contingent upon that context, and thus momentary itself. Hence, it's important that *Ceremony* constructs biocentrism positively, as when Josiah tells Tayo, "This is where we come from, see. This sand this stone, these trees, the vines, all the wildflowers. This earth keeps us going."[161] The land and the people don't just share vulnerability, this book suggests, we share life, we maintain each other.

One of the stories told in pieces throughout *Ceremony* is of Nau'ts'ity'i, "our mother,"[162] retreating beneath the world, taking the plants and the rain with her, angry that the people are:

so busy

playing around with that

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[159] Morton, *Humankind,* Intro.

[160] Braidotti, "Post Human Critical Theory," 27.

[161] Silko, *Ceremony,* 42.

[162] Silko, 44.

Ck'o'yo magic[163]

they neglected the mother corn altar.[164]

and the quest of Hummingbird and Fly to earn the mother's forgiveness, which parallels Tayo's own quest which also ends a drought. Fly and Hummingbird's quest is hardly straightforward, requiring them to constantly fly between worlds and forge alliances with several different animals. This has several functions, one is to show that healing is a long process which takes real commitment because, as the Mother says, "It isn't very easy / to fix up things again."[165] The second function is to expand the narrative framework to draw in many species—Buzzard, Caterpillar, tobacco, pollen, and even humans—making healing a pan-species community effort and creating relationships of reciprocity between the members of the narrative. This is what Kiowa novelist N. Scott Momaday would call "reciprocal appropriation … in which man invests himself in the landscape, and same time incorporate the landscape into his own most fundamental experience."[166] The story, though set in the past, is framed as having a claim on the people of the present, as de Ramirez and Baker write, "When the story encompasses the larger themes of life and death and regeneration, that responsibility extends to each person's role as caretaker for our planet."[167] Josiah reminds a young Tayo of this reciprocity when he catches Tayo killing flies and tells him, "It was the greenbottle fly who went to [the mother of the people], asking forgiveness

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[163] Another name for the "witchery" mentioned above, which is synonymous with colonialism and anthropocentrism.

[164] Silko, 44.

[165] Silko, 237.

[166] Momaday, "Native American Attitudes," 80.

[167] de Ramirez and Baker, "Balances and Harmonies," 215.

for the people. Since that time the people have been grateful for what the fly did for us."[168,169] Stories can thus create a network of relationships and obligations between ourselves and the whole of the biosphere[170], drawing us into the "implosive holistic"[171] of the *Bios.*

The importance of the story of Hummingbird and Fly is highlighted further when contrasted with other cultural myths. In particular, it is worth considering it alongside Kimmerer's comparison between the Book of Genesis and Skywoman Falling, a story "shared by the original peoples throughout the Great Lakes"[172]:

> On one side of the world were people whose relationship with the living world was shaped by Skywoman, who created a garden for the well-being of all. On the other side was another woman with a garden and a tree. But for tasting its fruit, she was banished from the garden and the gates clanged shut behind her. That mother of men was made to wander in the wilderness and earn her bread by the sweat of her brow, not by filling her mouth with the sweet juicy fruits that bend the branches low. In order to eat, she was instructed to subdue the wilderness into which she was cast.
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> Same species, same earth, different stories. Like Creation stories everywhere, cosmologies are a source of identity and orientation to the world. They tell us who we are. We are inevitably shaped by them no matter how distant they may be from our con-

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[168] Silko, Ceremony, 93.

[169] Notably, when Josiah first catches him, Tayo justifies killing the flies by saying, "But our teacher said so. She said they are bad and carry sickness," yet again positioning the colonial épistèmé in direct opposition to a biocentric, indigenous knowledge.

[171] Morton, *Mankind,* Intro.

[172] Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass,* 7.

> sciousness. One story leads to the generous embrace of the living world, the other to banishment.[173]

Like the story of Skywoman, the story of Hummingbird and Fly orients the listener towards an "embrace of the living world." The people are never specified as being one specific tribe or species, not the Laguna people, just "the people", and Nau'ts'ity'i is identified as the mother of all the people—the humans as well as Hummingbird and Fly. All the living creatures of the earth are united as one people, one family, in this story. Reading it alongside the anthropocentric narrative of Genesis heightens the contrast between the anthropocentric European épistèmé and the biocentric ethos of *Ceremony.*

It's important that we don't understand biocentrism as being wholly based, and thus contingent, on an emergency moment, otherwise when the emergency passes anthropocentrism may reassert itself. However, by connecting Tayo's health and the land's health, *Ceremony* represents mutual vulnerability and mutual thriving as inseparable conditions. When nature thrives, *all* of nature thrives, including the human, and where nature fails, we all fail. The well being of the land and the well being of humans are directly dependent on one another, as Schweninger puts it, "An inextricable connection exists between the land and the people, between one aspect of nature and another."[174] One example of this is when a ck'o'yo named the Gambler steals the storm clouds for his own hoard of possessions, attempting to turn nature into something ownable. As a result of the Gambler's greed, "The land was drying up / the people and animals were starving."[175] This incident parallels the drought at Tayo's ranch, and the land when Nau'ts'ity'i took the rainclouds below the world. The ck'o'yo stealing the rainclouds is further paralleled with

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[173] Kimmerer, 6-7.

[174] Schweninger, "Writing Nature," 54.

[175] Silko, *Ceremony,* 160.

the colonists stealing the land when the narrator later recalls that, "the Laguna people understood that the land had been taken, because they couldn't stop these white people from coming to destroy the animals and the land. It was then too that the holy men at Laguna and Acoma warned the people that the balance of the world had been disturbed and the people could expect droughts and harder days to come."[176] However, where nature persists, there is still hope for humans too, as Tayo realizes when:

> he saw a bright green hummingbird shimmering above the dry sandy ground, flying higher and higher until is was only a bright speck. Then it was gone. But it left something with him; as long as the hummingbird had not abandoned the land, somewhere there were still flowers, and they could all go on.
>
> The next day he watched the clouds gather on the west horizon; by the next morning the sky was full of low dark rain clouds.[177]

Where lack of clouds and rain was associated with ecological death in the passages quoted above, the hummingbird in this passage is the harbinger of healing and renewal. This recalls the wisdom of Chief Dan George, who, in his history of the people of the Macon Plateau, said "All things are connected. Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons of the earth. Even the white man cannot be exempt from the common destiny. We may be brothers after all; we shall see. This we know: the earth does not belong to man, man belongs to the earth."[178] In the recognition of biocentrism's shared destiny we might find not only the prospect of shared destruction, but shared renewal.

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[176] Silko, 172-73.

[177] Silko, 88.

[178] Quoted in Schweninger, "Writing Nature," 58.

In this novel, the renewal of the land is not as simple as the return of rainclouds. It requires a fundamental reorientation of the relationship, not merely between humans and animals, but between humans and the land itself. Indeed, this reorientation is little more than an undoing of the relationship formed in *Mason & Dixon,* an unbordering of humanity and nature. As discussed previously, the imposition of mathesis onto the land organizes heterogenous place into a homogenous geometric space. To rediscover a biocentric relationship to the environment requires resurrecting that environment as heterogenous place, knowing it not as collection of points but as a living home. As literary scholar Patricia Clark Smith argues:

> Nontribal people often perceive the land as an object, as something faintly or greatly inimical, to be controlled, reshaped, painted, or feared. Tribal people see it as something mysterious, certainly beyond human domination, and yet as something to be met and spoken with rather than confronted. For them, the land is not just collection of objects you do things *to,* nor is it merely a place you do things *in,* a set-stage for human action. It is multitude of entities who possess intelligence and personality.[179]

The relationship to land qua place is reflected in the relationships Josiah and Betonie in particular have to the places they live. For example, Josiah's insistence in raising cattle that are suited to the particularities of his local biome, rather than homogenizing, even coercing, the land into a space suitable for the cattle in the white scientists' books, shows a commitment to living with the land rather than working against it. Furthermore, Betonie's relationship to the land is particularly rooted in an understanding of the land as place as revealed when, discussing the town of Gallup, he tells Tayo:

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[179] Smith, "Earthy Relations," 176.

> "They keep us on the north side of the railroad tracks, next to the the river and their dump. Where none of them want to live." He laughed. "They don't understand. We know these hills, and we are comfortable here." There was something about the way the old man said the word "comfortable." It had a different meaning—not the comfort of big houses or rich food or even clean streets, but the comfort of belonging with the land, and the peace of being with these hills.[180]

Betonie has built, or more properly built upon, a deep, multigenerational relationship with the specific place he and his family have lived. It's not a relationship that can be translated in space, moved to another collection of coordinates. He belongs to *these* hills. As he tells Tayo, "this hogan was here first. Built long before the white people ever came. It is that town down there which is out of place. Not this old medicine man."[181] The relationships formed over time with a place are enduring, and aren't erased by the imposition of colonial settlements or dumps, and, crucially, they expose the contingency of the colonial épistèmé.

The contingency of colonial power/knowledge over/of the land is addressed most explicitly in the context of Mount Taylor, where Tayo eventually finds Josiah's cattle. Betonie says of the mountain, "They only fool themselves when they think it is theirs. The deeds and papers don't mean anything,"[182] and later Tayo has a similar revelation, realizing:

> …nothing was lost; all was retained between the sky and the earth, and within himself. He had lost nothing. The snow-covered mountain remained, without regard to titles of ownership or the white ranchers who thought they possessed it. They logged the trees,

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[180] Silko, *Ceremony,* 108.

[181] Silko, 109.

[182] Silko, 118.

> they killed the deer, bear, and mountain lions, they built their fences high; but the mountain was far greater than any of these things.[183]

Within the anthropocentric épistèmé, property is a given; the place of man is to control and dominate nature. The biocentric épistèmé calls into question even the fundamental assumption of ownership. The mountain predates humans and outlasts exploitation, and ownership becomes inconsequential and illusory. Pynchon's novel critiques borders along similar lines, implying that they become insignificant when confronted with the sheer scale and complexity of the natural world: "there exists no 'Maryland' beyond an Abstraction, a Frame of right lines drawn to enclose and square off the Bay in its unimagined Fecundity, its shoreline tending to Infinite Length, ultimately unmappable."[184] The mountain reminds us that we did not always believe in owning the land. As Kimmerer says, "Our lands were where our responsibility to the world was enacted, sacred ground. It belonged to itself; it was a gift, not a commodity, so it could never be bought or sold."[185] By recognizing our obligations to the places we live, we accept that, in an inversion of anthropocentrism, "It is the people who belong to the mountain."[186] By exposing the contingency of anthropocentrism, we open the possibility of recognizing that we belong to the biosphere, and not the other way around.

Up to this point I have discussed how *Ceremony* critiques the Enlightenment/colonial épistèmé and how it offers an alternative biocentric narrative which unites humans, non-human people, and the land within the implosive holism of the biosphere. I would like now to conclude by looking at how the novel's end imagines a rupture from the Anthropocene, answering the call

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[183] Silko, 204.

[184] Pynchon, *Mason & Dixon*, 354.

[185] Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 17.

[186] Silko, *Ceremony*, 118.

of nature writer and literary scholar Prof. Killingsworth for "a new literature that promises no less than a new way of life."[187]

At the end of the novel, at the end of the ceremony, Tayo is confronted with a choice. Emo and Leroy, other men from the reservation, are acting as agents of the destroyers, and Tayo can either kill them or let them live. He decides to spare them because killing them would only perpetuate the violence and the killings that the destroyers set in motion when they brought witchery into the world. As the Narrator says, "Tayo had almost jammed the screwdriver into Emo's skull the way the witchery had wanted, savoring the yielding bone and membrane as the steel ruptured the brain. Their deadly ritual for the autumn solstice would have been completed by him."[188] Tayo can't kill Emo because completing his ceremony, and not the ck'o'yo's requires a complete break from the ways of witchery and the destroyers. Schweninger argues that "Tayo's cure depends on his ability to learn not to hate the destroyer, for in hating the destroyer he too becomes a destroyer."[189] In the end, healing the land and the people requires a complete rupture from the colonial witchery.

Tayo recognizes the need for transformative action, as when he think "there were transitions that had to be made in order to become whole again, in order to be the people our Mother would remember."[190] Critically, the transformations aren't about returning to an idyllic past, despite the parallels between Tayo's quest Hummingbird and Fly's. The transformations require constant change and growth which honors the past but doesn't idealize it or attempt to return to it. According to Betonie, the drive to keep the world the same is "what the witchery is counting

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[187] Killingsworth, " Literature of Living Water," 19.

[188] Silko, *Ceremony,* 235.

[189] Schweninger, "Writing Nature," 55.

[190] Silko, *Ceremony,* 157.

on."[191] Instead, it's necessary to honor the past while always imagining and creating a future that is different from the present. As Betonie explains, "At one time, the ceremonies as they had been performed were enough for the way the world was then. But after the white people came, elements in this world began to shift; and it became necessary to create new ceremonies. I have made changes in the rituals. The people mistrust this greatly, but only this growth keeps the ceremonies strong."[192] The form of *Ceremony* is itself an expression of this synthesis. This novel combines oral traditions with the novel form, and tells old stories in a new tongue. By completing a new ceremony, Tayo becomes something new himself. His commitment to the story—the same story which has always been being told, which Hummingbird and Fly were a part of and which Tayo himself is now a part of—remains. When he turns away from the violence of the destroyers it is to return to the land to "gather seeds…and plant them with great care in the places near sandy hills…The plants would grow there like the story."[193] Commitment to the story thus requires an active practice of renewing the land. *Ceremony* doesn't end with Tayo trying to recreate the past, it ends with him, like Betonie, looking to the future, welcoming a new day with the novel's final lines, "Sunrise, / accept this offering, / Sunrise."[194] Tayo becomes a synthesis of old and new ways, a man of the future, broken from the old épistèmé which has engendered such destruction while rooted in the wisdom of his ancestors, the place they lived, and cognizant of his place within the biosphere. In short, Tayo ends the story having become the prefigurative man of the Biocene.

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[191] Silko, *Ceremony,* 116.

[192] Silko, 116.

[193] Silko, 236.

[194] Silko, 244.

For all Pynchon's critique of colonial power-knowledge, Mason's and Dixon's journey ends on a rather pessimistic note. When the surveyors turn back east, the narrator imagines them continuing all the way to the coast and beyond, saying "Suppose that Mason and Dixon and their Line cross Ohio after all, and continue West,"[195] as though the actual fact of their absence was incidental to the "fix'd motion,—westering"[196] of American settlement and the unceasing mathematizing of the globe. Silko's novel, by comparison, leaves the reader with the possibility of redemption. Possibly this is because, where *Mason & Dixon* primarily critiques the hegemony of the colonial Enlightenment épistèmé, *Ceremony* also offers an alternative drawn from an anti-colonial indigenous épistèmé. This creates the possibility for the embrace of a biocentric épistèmé, and for hope that the land can heal, and us with it. In the shadow of apocalypse, we may yet greet the sunrise of a new epoch.

Welcome to the World of Our Posthumanity
Trans-Corporealism and Eco-Cosmopolitanism in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*

Thus far I have discussed the broad reconception of apocalypse as motivated by this historical moment, and the philosophical orientation of biocentrism which I understand to be commensurate with the historical, material, and ethical demands of the time. Priscilla Wald and Phaswane Mpe have both made strong connections between contagion and cosmopolitanism but their work is limited by its humanism. I aim to show that the very arguments which have been used to define a humanistic cosmopolitanism contain within themselves the potential for a biocentric eco-cosmopolitanism. I will also look at contagion through a lens of trans-corporealism to show that communicable diseases make visible a centerless network of material exchange be-

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[195] Pynchon, *Mason & Dixon,* 706.

[196] Pynchon, 707.

tween bodies both human and non-human. While using Mpe's novella to examine the contagion narrative and eco-cosmopolitanism, I will also be using it as a lens through which to understand the present moment of global pandemic. The SARS-COV-2 (COIVD-19) virus, in this framework, becomes intelligible as a kind of bio-cognitive map that locates the individual within both global humanity and the biosphere, as necessitated by the climate crisis.

In *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative*, Wald uses fictional, journalistic, and academic depictions of communicable disease to examine the outbreak narrative. One of her main focuses is how the narratives we form around contagion informs the narratives we form around one another. For example, she highlights how outbreak narratives can stigmatize immigrant groups and depict them as being more primitive and thus more likely to contract and spread disease.[197] However, Wald argues, contagion narratives demonstrate a shared global vulnerability that defies the abilities of political borders to block. Therefore, while they may temporarily inspire xenophobia, contagion narratives are ultimately community forming: "the social experience of a disease, the image of communicability, and the materialization of interdependence that characterizes depictions of epidemics suggests an epidemiology of belonging through which people might experience their emergence as 'a population.'"[198] My primary criticism of Wald's work is that it is essentially anthropocentric. She uses contagion to generate a cosmopolitan vision which surpasses national borders but includes only the human. She challenges the characterization of certain practices as primitive, but not the categories of *primitive* and *civilized* themselves as reifications of a teleology which conflates progress with distance from the non-human. Furthermore, the focus on the "outbreak" narrative identifies the emergence of disease into

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[197] Wald, *Contagious,* 8.

[198] Wald, 18.

a human population as the moment when it becomes an object of interest. However, biocentrism demands a decentering of the human. My aim is to extend Wald's analysis to the non-human and show contagion as materializing connections between the human and the biosphere in the same way it materializes connections within a human population. Stacy Alaimo's work on trans-corporealism provides a powerful framework for considering the exchanges, in this case viral, that occur between the body and the environment, and I will be using it as a compliment to Wald's writing.

Welcome to Our Hillbrow tells the story of Refentše who has moved from the South African village of Tiragalong to the Johannesburg suburb of Hillbrow, where he lives with Cousin while studying at the University of Witwatersrand. The novella follows Refentše as he graduates and becomes a lecturer at the University. He also falls in love, and becomes romantically involved, with Lerato, whom his mother disapproves of because Lerato is from the city rather than the countryside. When he walks in on Lerato sleeping with his best friend Sammy—whose girlfriend, Bohlale, Refentše had slept with, unbeknownst to either Sammy or Lerato—it leads to his suicide, which precipitates Lerato's own suicide. The novella then transitions to heaven, where Refentše, his mother, and Lerato are reunited. Finally, the story changes focus to Refilwe, a childhood friend of Refentše's as well as a former lover. She goes to Oxford where she pursues a MA. While there, she falls in love in a Nigerian man, which helps her to overcome her prejudices towards non-South Africans, or *Makwerekwere.* The story is narrated in the second person, positioning the reader as Refentše, for most of the novel. The final chapter, which chronicles Refilwe's move to Oxford and return to Tiragalong, begins in the third person until Refilwe arrives back in South Africa, in the final pages, at which point the narration returns to second person with her now as the addressee.

Identity, in *Hillbrow*, is constructed relationally and spatially. Clarkson, a scholar of South African literature, in a discussion of personal identity in African traditions, points out that, "[we] does not simply mean 'myself and others whom I identify as the subject of my sentence'; instead it announces the self as an intersection of social relations. That is to say, individual identity is conceived as being intrinsically relational"[199]—critically, Clarkson's argument is not overly generalized to a homogenous Africa, but is grounded in an analysis of specific languages and cultures, including Sepedi, a language spoke by the main characters of Mpe's novel, and the language in which Refilwe writes her book. These social relationships become synonymous with locations in *Hillbrow*. This is marked by the references to Refentše as, "child of Tiragalong"[200] and, later as a "child of Tiragalong and Hillbrow."[201] Just as Clarkson argues that individuals are the products of their interpersonal relationships, the novel's characterization of Refentše as having been made (metaphorically birthed) by where he's lived implies that his identity is constituted locationally as well as relationally. Furthermore, the relationship between personal identity and place is reciprocal, and places come to be known by the people who live there. This is best illustrated by the use of Tiragalong as a synecdoche for its residents, especially in the section discussing the rumors which sprang up around Refentše's suicide. At times "Tiragalong's story loving population"[202] is referenced directly, and at other times direct agency is attributed to Tiragalong itself, e.g. "Sheer jealousy was her motive, Tiragalong had suggested."[203] This illustrates a direct relationship be-

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[199] Clarkson, "Locating Identity," 453.

[200] Mpe, *Welcome to Our Hillbrow,* 1.

[201] Mpe, 29.

[202] Mpe, 46.

[203] Mpe, 45.

tween the identity of a place and the people who live there, one in which their identities are formed by a process of mutual appropriation.

I wish to draw attention to what is taken for granted by both the novella and the critical discourse around it, namely that identity is constructed in terms of species as well as space. The characters of this novel, in addition to being South African, and Johannesburgers or children of Tiragalong, are also *Anthropos.* This, as explored in previous sections, is contingent on the colonial past which this novella wrestles with; it's not a necessary category. However, this novel's exploration of relational identity does afford us a point from which to expand on. In addition to envisioning the corporeal self as a node in a social and communal network, we might also engage with a trans-corporeal reading, which envisions the body as a node in a network of biological and material exchange. Trans-corporealism proposes that the body is in a constant process of exchanging material with the environment and thus always being constituted and reshaped by it. Consequently, trans-corporeal scholar Stacy Alaimo claims, "'the environment' is not located somewhere out there, but is always the very substance of ourselves."[204] Therefore, identity is produced not only socially, but also materially and environmentally. We might then imagine an expansion of "we" which announces the self not only as the product of social relations, but biological and environmental relations as well—in which the we which is myself extends as much to the bird whose song uplifts our spirit as it does to the neighbor we greet with our new smile.

The spatial formation of identity carries with it an implicit danger. A group identity constructed around a place leads to the creation of borders in order to distinguish between who is from 'here' and who is an outsider. In this novella this is made clear through the hierarchical process of othering which takes place. This hierarchy establishes levels of otherness along conti-

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[204] Alaimo, Bodily Natures, 4.

nental, national, regional, and municipal differences. Cousin feels a shallow pan-African solidarity with black non-South African football teams when they play against Europeans, but a powerful animosity towards black non-South Africans living in Johannesburg, who he refers to by the racial pejorative *Makwerekwere*.[205] Space is further divided into rural and urban.[206] In particular the people of Tiragalong stigmatize the city. Refentše's mother insisted that he stop dating Lerato because she was, "a Hillbrow woman—as Tiragalong insisted on labelling her"[207] (note the continued attribution of agency to the location of Tiragalong). Even within the immediate vicinity of Hillbrow there are divisions, as when Sammy's girlfriend is troubled by his spending time in the nearby suburb of Chelsea, which is identified with vice and temptation, as when the narrator says, "The Chelsea drugs had been too seductive for him to resists."[208] The novella thus creates a spatial stratification of 'other' which echos the race classifications of the apartheid government.

At the same time that *Hillbrow* establishes these borders, it shows that each space is defined and redefined by the material transmissions (of both bodies and viruses) which occur across them. This is epitomized by contagion. Contagions trace a transnational, even global, path of interconnection (or perhaps super-national; effacing, rather than simply crossing, national borders). In the context of *Hillbrow*, the AIDS contagion defies the bio-power of borders by traveling to and from South Africa through the bodies of immigrants coming to Hillbrow, or to Oxford in the bodies of Refilwe and her boyfriend. As spaces are defined by the people and relations they contain, they are also redefined by their ever-shifting populations; the individuals within them are

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[205] Mpe, *Welcome to Our Hillbrow,* 17.

[206] This is itself a remnant and reproduction of "apartheid's efforts to dispatch black existence to 'tribal homelands' in order to produce city-space as white" (Samuelson 249).

[207] Mpe, 39.

[208] Mpe, 50.

also deeply effected by these spatial transgressions, as dramatized by the spread of AIDS, whether they're aware of them or not. According to global literature scholar Emily Davis, "In the era of global migration, spurred on by the circulations of global capital, contagion offers a more realistic model for understanding global interconnection. In this narrative, you are already part of a cosmopolitan community; your body is vulnerable to its shared weaknesses whether you like it or not."[209] Thus the global transmission forms a global community which equally includes Tiragalong, Oxford, and the *Makwerekwere.*

When Refilwe returns to Tiragalong, the narrator says that, "Now she herself was, by association, one of the hated *Makwerekwere.*"[210] Her diagnoses with AIDS has made her an outsider, in the same way that Wald describes infection turning community members suddenly into outsides: "Carriers were the dangerous strangers one encountered with alarming frequency in an increasingly interdependent world, and they were the most precious intimates dangerously estranged by the discovery of their carrier state."[211] Refilwe's transformation into *Makwerekwere* can be also be read as foregrounding her membership in a global community—one which she was a part of already, by dint of her humanity as well as her preexisting infection with HIV, but is now visibly so. The distinction between her being read as an outsider and being read as a new cosmopolitan is destabilized by the fact that she is reintegrated into her community. She's not exiled from Tiragalong but returns to die with her family, and if she can reenter the local community then perhaps there is hope for her fellow *makwerekwere* to be similarly integrated.

A cosmopolitan reading applies this act of integration, or reintegration, to an ideal of a global human community, but it need not end there. Both Wald and Mpe are engaged in the

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[209] Davis, "Contagion, Cosmopolitanism, and Human Rights," 102-103.

[210] Mpe, *Welcome to Our Hillbrow,* 118.

[211] Wald, *Contagious,* 16.

cosmopolitan project, which is well served by tracking merely human interactions. Contagion, however, is not a merely human interaction. Mpe makes a brief mention early in the book that "certain newspaper articles attributed the source of the virus that caused AIDS to a species called the Green Monkey,"[212] but he takes this no further. Similarly, Wald examines narratives which emerged around the possible transmission of SARS to humans from farm animals.[213] And of course we must also consider the SARS-COV-2 virus which is believed to have originated in bats. If indeed "The interactions that make us sick also constitute us as a community,"[214] then it shouldn't be understood as a strictly human community. We are as vulnerable to the interchanges of viral matter between human and non-human species as we are to the same interchange between one another. To illustrate this point, let us imagine a person living in one of America's large urban centers, say LA, or NYC. Let us say even that they are in one of the many places so isolated from visible non-human life that it has been termed a "food desert." If anyplace could be said to be bioisolated it would be there, but is this person not also at risk from the current pandemic? Is their body not also vulnerable, to paraphrase Davis (who is herself drawing on Wald), to the multi-species community which includes, at a minimum, both bat and human? There is therefore no place where a human individual is not always already within the community of the more-than-human.

This necessitates a reevaluation of Wald's claims. For example, she claims "The *human* contact materialized by the spread of a communicable disease reveals an interactive and interconnected world"[215] (emphasis added), or that one "cannot account for the spread of the disease

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[212] Mpe, *Welcome to Our Hillbrow,* 4.

[213] Wald, *Contagious,* 5.

[214] Wald, 2.

[215] Wald, *Contagious,* 38.

without registering the interactions that bear witness to the connections of *human* communities… The outbreak narrative manages the consequences, as it makes sense of, what the communicable disease makes visible"[216] (emphasis added). The explicit limitation of her argument to the human, I would argue, is unnecessary. The claim holds just as well when we apply it to a more-than-human community; we could as well say that the *biotic* contact materialized by the spread of disease reveals an interactive and interconnected *biosphere.* Furthermore, what it shows us is that, for better or worse, we are already a part of the more-than-human. Importantly, it is the terms of Wald's own argument that we come to recognize its broader applicability. It contains already the potential for an inclusive eco-cosmopolitanism which needs only to be recognized, and this affords us the opportunity to see how already productive theories can still grow once we free ourselves of the burdensome assumptions of anthropocentrism.

This reevaluation of Wald can be bolstered by turning again to trans-corporealism. According to Alaimo, "Imagining human corporeality as trans-corporeality, in which the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world, underlines the extent to which the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from 'the environment'…By emphasizing the movement across bodies, trans-corporeality reveals the interchanges and interconnections between various bodily natures."[217] It is impossible to read "transmission between bodies" while sitting in quarantine and not think of contagion. Our susceptibility to viral infection shows exactly how our bodies are always being formed and altered by its interactions with the more-than-human world. The current pandemic is therefore a mass illustration of what eco-feminist Nancy Tuana calls "viscous porosity", an idea she explains thus:

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[216] Wald, 39.

[217] Alaimo, *Bodily Natures,* 2.

> There is a viscous porosity of flesh—my flesh and the flesh of the world. This porosity is a hinge through which we are of and in the world. I refer to it as viscous, for there are membranes that effect the interactions. These membranes are of various types—skin and flesh, prejudgments and symbolic imaginaries, habits and embodiments. They serve as the mediators of interaction.[218]

Our bodies, therefore, are not closed systems, but open to, contingent upon, and a part of the environment. We thus arrive back at the conclusion derived from Wald: The transmission of viral matter between species demonstrates, viscerally, bodily, that we, the human and non-human, are of one community.

Let us return now to Mpe with a fourfold focus on how the spread of AIDS informs his cosmopolitan vision, how he presents the ethical consequences of this vision, how these are both applicable to an eco-cosmopolitan vision, and how these are all materialized within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite its cosmopolitan potential, contagion is also a source of fear and xenophobia. Like Refilwe, the victims of contagion are held in a tension between the comprehension of a global community and the intensification of xenophobic fears. As Davis explains, "In theory, the discourse of contagion serves the opposite function of cosmopolitanism. If the latter has tended to fixate on the benefits of contact across the boundaries of discrete communities and advocate for ever-greater circulations of people and ideas, the former serves as a warning about the potentially disastrous consequences of such contact."[219] Indeed, one might ask, if the cost of being within an interconnected biosphere is hundreds of thousands of deaths, why should we embrace

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[218] Tuana, "Viscous Porosity," 199-200.

[219] Davis, "Contagion, Cosmopolitanism, and Human Rights," 103

contact with anything other than the rigidly defined, and narrowly constrained, *Anthropos*? This is exactly the dynamic that this novella has to navigate, as it works to extract cosmopolitanism from contagion, rather than xenophobia. Wald's analysis makes it clear that routes of human interaction become routes of contagion. This novel, in contrast, treats these *a priori* as routes of contagion and works to reclaim them as networks of shared humanity. Sex, for example, is first mentioned in the novella as a vector of AIDS,[220] but even adulterous sex and sex with many partners (which would be easiest to stigmatize) are treated non-judgmentally by the narrator. Refentše and Lerato's mutual infidelities are shown as products of love and sympathy, not recklessness: "You would have understood that she and Sammy were as well-intentioned as you were on the day that you and Bohale betrayed Sammy…You had let your heart and semen spillover into Bohale's heart and womanhood—so full that heart was with love and care!"[221] The sexual network between these people could easily be characterized as a pathway for infection, but instead this novella highlights how it constitutes a shared humanity of compassion and love. By extension, we might see that networks of contagion also constitute our membership in a much greater network of being.

Critically, the epidemic is represented as an already existing omnipresence. Consequently, the xenophobic impulse to reinforce borders has no real capability to halt contagion. When Refilwe and her boyfriend are diagnosed, "they were also given to know that they had both been HIV-positive for a long time. Refilwe, in particular must have been infected for a decade or so,"[222] and when she returns to Tiragalong we learn that "several of the people they had buried

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[220] Mpe, *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, 4.

[221] Mpe, 48.

[222] Mpe, 117.

in the past two years were victims of AIDS."[223] AIDS is already a fact of life in Tiragalong and Hillbrow, if an unacknowledged one, and Refilwe comes to realize that "no one in particular can be blamed for the spread of AIDS. That Tiragalong should know well enough that its children are no better than others."[224] So, rather than reinforcing a trope of immigrants as carriers of disease, *Hillbrow* characterizes AIDS as a global (or at least super-national) concern, asserting its cosmopolitanism rather than reifying xenophobic fears. Borders cannot contain contagion; instead they divide space and become sources of alienation and violence, just as they are for the *Makwerekwere* in Hillbrow. Contagion and its risk are always already present in *Hillbrow,* so we need to remember that our bodies, from the moment of conception, are already being affected by the environment; in other words "there is never a time in which the human can be anything but trans-corporeal."[225] We don't, it seems, have a choice of whether or not to be a part of either the cosmopolitan or eco-cosmopolitan reals. We cannot escape the risks, rather we can only recognize the values of being a part of the more-than-human community.

The recognition of this shared existence necessarily entails ethical consequences. *Hillbrow* opens with a description of the celebrations which followed the victory of the local football team over one from the Ivory Coast, and the death of a little girl who was hit by a car in the midst of the revelry. The othering of a distant group becomes immediately associated with local violence, collapsing the spatial hierarchy into a thing of universal and indiscriminate violence. The in-group is not made safer by its isolation from the out-group, rather division becomes a source of random and arbitrary violence. This is not, necessarily, an entirely symbolic relationship either. In discussing immigration with Refentše:

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[223] Mpe, 121.

[224] Mpe, 123.

[225] Alaimo, *Bodily Natures,* 12.

> Cousin insisted that people should remain in their own countries and try to sort out the problems of these respective countries, rather than fleeing them; South Africa had too many problems of its own.
>
> Surely we cannot be expected to solve all the problems of Africa? he would insist.[226]

The distinction between "our" problems and problems of other Africans operates on the same logic which makes the death of the little girl the problem of her crying mother and not the problem of the passersby who quickly return to their celebration. The national collective implied by cousin reveals itself in the death of the child to be not a matter of what constitutes *our* problem but what constitutes *my* problem. The alienation from the foreign other is translated into the alienation from a common humanity at every spatial strata.

This exact argument can and should be expanded to the realm of biocentrism. There is a conceptual viscosity which separates the human and the non-human, and which creates the illusion that the problems of the biosphere are not the problems of the *Anthropos*. As Alaimo puts it:

> The most pervasive assumption within the United States would seem to be that people are separate from nature, the environment, and other material substances and forces… Attention to the material transit across bodies and environments may render it more difficult to seek refuge within fantasies of transcendence or imperviousness.[227]

By understanding the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of trans-corporealism and eco-cosmopolitanism, we expose the illusion of a humanity constituted separately from the environment. As the discussion of Silko illustrated, the future of the human is necessarily entangled with the futures of the other-than-human. Just as was the case in *Hillbrow,* if we alienate ourselves from the sup-

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[226] Mpe, *Welcome to Our Hillbrow,* 20.

[227] Alaimo, *Bodily Natures,* 16.

posed "other" then the harm we do is bound to turn back on us. In reality, "their" problems and "ours" are not so easily separable. Whether it's the threat of nuclear war, of ecological collapse, or of global pandemic, our wellbeing is inextricably interdependent.

It is instructive to look at how exactly this alienation is enacted in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow,* especially in the context of the novel's most marginalized group, the *makwerekwere*. The term *makwerekwere* derives from the supposed unintelligibility of black foreigners' languages, "The term's emphasis on the immigrants' linguistic difference highlights their social illegibility. Within this xenophobic discourse, immigrants function as mute bodies, available for sex and other forms of labor, transmitting nothing except HIV; their language, culture, and history are non-communicable."[228] If community is constructed through story telling, then the cosmopolitanism of "the courtyard of Heaven" presents an alternative narrative praxis for transforming bordered, discretized space into an continuous, global whole. Immigrants' bodies, however, are not the only ones rendered mute. Within the framework of anthropocentrism, all non-human life is in fact excluded from the common narrative. In *Ceremony* human and non-human alike are included in the narrative, and we might imagine how this can motivate an active practice of listening to excluded voices. In the case of the *Makwerekwere,* their incorporation into Hillbrow is dependent upon the recognition of their language and their voice. If we are to extend this beyond the *Anthropos* we might take seriously the notion of interlocutors who, for example, "speak for the trees, for the trees have no tongues"[229]. Though the trees don't speak with tongues, and animals don't speak in our tongue, that doesn't mean they have nothing to say, and I don't mean this in a purely spiritual or idealistic sense. Professor Kimmerer exemplifies a kind of conversation we might have with

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[228] Davis, "Contagion, Cosmopolitanism, and Human Rights," 104.

[229] Suess, Dr., *The Lorax*, 23.

plants when she says, "To me, an experiment is a kind of conversation with plants: I have a question for them, but since we don't speak the same language, I can't ask them directly and they won't answer verbally. But plants can be eloquent in their physical responses and behaviors…Experiments are not about discovery but about listening and translating the knowledge of other beings."[230] Kimmerer goes on to describe a study she and her graduate student, Laurie, undertook to compare the effects of different traditional harvesting methods on *Wiingaashk,* or sweetgrass, to see if either one was responsible for the decline in its population. Laurie's committee didn't take this work seriously, the dean even saying, "*Anyone* knows that harvesting a plant will damage the population. You're wasting your time. And I'm afraid I don't find this whole traditional knowledge thing very convincing."[231]As it turned out, the study showed that the unharvested control group was the only one dying out. Both of the traditional methods promoted the health of the plants, in direct contradiction to what the dean claimed "*Anyone* knows." The committee had it's understanding of plants, but the plants had their own story; they just needed someone who knew how to listen, and by translating the knowledge of *Wiingaashk* into the language of science Kimmerer and Laurie filled the role of interlocutor and brought the sweetgrass into the collective narrative. This extension of narrative understanding is as critical to Mpe's vision of cosmopolitanism as it must be to any vision of eco-cosmopolitanism.

Much of my discussion of Mpe's book has thus far focused on the challenges it poses to borders; however, the places which those borders enclose remain important—and, to extend the argument, the lived experiences of species are distinct, and humanist concerns still have consequence for our lives. Refilwe writes her book in Sepedi, the language spoken in Tiragalong, and

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[230] Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass,* 158.

[231] Kimmerer, 159. Emphasis in original.

she returns there when she's dying. Similarly, while we exist in a global system, we are never the less impacted differently by the specific ecosystems we inhabit. Places remain important to the people who live there and should therefore not be erased along with the borders that surround them. Instead, a new conception of place, one which is not scarred by arbitrary divisions, is needed. The prototype which Mpe provides for this is the Heaven that Refentše occupies towards the end of the novel. In life, Refentše's mother "hated the Hillbrow women with unmatchable venom,"[232] but when she meets Lerato in the "courtyard of Heaven"[233] her attitude is very different: "[Her eyes] scrutinized Lerato from the feet, slowly moving up until they reached the level of her eyes. Your mother fixed a long stare there. And a gentle smile announced itself."[234] The specific setting, the "courtyard", is important. "Courtyard" can translate into three Sepedi words, *'lekgotleng', 'kgorong',* and *'mafuri'*:

> Primarily, 'courtyard' could be a translation of *'lekgotleng'*—the court of law at the kraal of the chief or the village induna. 'Courtyard' also summons up the words *'kgorong'* and *'mafuri.' 'Kgorong'* can be synonymous with *'lekgotleng'* but it also refers to the place in the homestead where the men spend their evenings. 'It is a place of storytelling', Mpe said to me, especially 'men's stories'—of war, bravery and manly instruction.[235]

Mpe's own description of *'mafuri'* is "a place of storage and work for women and girls, largely. But where there are people, storytelling happens."[236] The courtyard of Heaven is thus a superposition of all these spaces. The masculine and feminine spaces, the urban and rural—as shown by

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[232] Mpe, *Welcome to Our Hillbrow,* 39.

[233] Mpe, 69.

[234] Mpe, 70.

[235] Clarkson, "Locating Identity," 456.

[236] Quoted in Clarkson, 456.

the interaction between Lerato and Refentše's mother—are all contained within the courtyard. The spaces still exist, but they're unbordered, flowing into, and existing on top of, one another. The novel's cosmopolitan vision is realized in Heaven, so the refrain that begins as "Welcome to our Hillbrow,"[237] evolves to be more expansive and cosmopolitan—e.g. "Welcome to our all,"[238] "Welcome to the World of our Humanity"[239]—until it reaches its apotheosis in the book's final line, "Welcome to our Heaven."[240] Perhaps this transcendental non-place is at last capacious enough for all the more-than-human excluded from the "World of our Humanity." We might even ask how to further impose upon Mpe's cosmopolitan vision. How, for instance, do we evoke in the Courtyard of Heaven, the courtyard in which the dog suns itself, and in which flies zip around until they are caught by the spider, in which plants push themselves up from the flag-stones, beneath which worms aerate a soil enriched by uncountable microbes? Because Mpe defers full cosmopolitanism to the spectrality of Heaven, we can read it as an ideal to strive towards without the aim of actually achieving it, akin to Derrida's "democracy to come."[241] Indeed, positioning biocentrism as Derrida's spectral *arrivant,* we see that it is evidently caught within the same bind as the "democracy to come," in as much as it necessitates the "infinite respect of the singularity *and* infinite alterity of the other as much as for the respect of the countable, calculable,

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[237] Mpe, *Welcome to Our Hillbrow,* 2.

[238] Mpe, 104.

[239] Mpe, 113.

[240] Mpe, 124.

[241] Derrida, *Specters of Marx,* 81.

subjectal equality between anonymous singularities."[242,243] Just as the courtyard brings together the local and the global, it provides a model for resolving the central tension of this whole section: the tension between humanism and posthumanism. The discourse of cosmopolitanism has real stakes for our world, especially as national borders continue to be held up as justifications for unspeakable violence; It is also true that the present moment demands a move beyond the limits of humanism. The particular vision of superposition in this novella allows us to approach this tension by recognizing that its resolution is not that we accept either humanist cosmopolitanism or posthumanist eco-cosmopolitanism (and reject the other as either parochial or frivolous), but that we make room in our reckoning for the dialectic tension of both/and. Just as the Courtyard of Heaven allows the particular to exist within the cosmopolitan, so too might it allow the human to exist within the biocentric.

Contagions are materializations of the social connections that make up our global human society, but beyond that they materialize the constant interchange of matter between the human and the environment. Mpe's novella is highly attuned to the social dynamics of communicable disease, and this makes it an excellent work from which to develop an understanding of contagion narratives more generally. We ought to apply this understanding to the COVID-19 virus which is so often on our minds these days. We are daily reminded of the risk of infection, but this shared vulnerability also serves as a reminder of material interdependence. The pandemic illustrates, unignorably, viscerally, that however much we construct ourselves as *Anthropos,* and understand ourselves to be segregated from the *Bios,* we are viscously porous bodies, always being trans-

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242 Derrida, 81. Emphasis in original.

243 Derrida apparently anticipates just such an application of his work when he speaks of the *arrivant* "which will not be asked to commit to the domestic contracts of any welcoming power (family, State, nation, territory, native soil or blood, language, culture in general, *even humanity*)" (81-82, emphasis added).

formed by, and transforming, our environment. Because of their ability to locate the individual within the network of the biosphere, diseases like COVID-19 might even be considered a representational system within a broader practice of bio-cognitive mapping, as discussed earlier. The climate crisis demands that we reconstitute ourselves as a part of the biosphere, and the pandemic shows us that we need only recognize that we always have been.

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