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Haunting the Way in New Materialist Ecocriticism. Book review of *Spectrality and Survivance. Living the Anthropocene* (Grech, M., 2022)

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Acechando el camino en la ecocrítica nuevomaterialista. Reseña de *Spectrality and Survivance. Living the Anthropocene* (Grech, M., 2022)

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Challenging the Specular Logic of the Anthropocene

As a scholar of ecocriticism, I often read about the ways in which the “Anthropocene”, as a term and a concept, works to an abdicatory logic: both in the violently unjust universalisation implied in *anthropos*, and the subsumption of the present to the future (Haraway, 2015, 2016). New materialism, recognising the “Anthropocene” as a narrative with profoundly material implications, has argued that to both decentre *anthropos* and recentre the present, material agency (in mutual constitution with discursive practices) must be recognised (Barad, 2007; Bennett, 2010). However, when these theories are applied in ecocriticism, they can often get bogged down in rerouting material processes through textual paradigms, without explicitly linking the “solution” (material agency) back to the “problem” (the futurist and anthropocentric violences enacted by the narrative of the Anthropocene) (see Iovino and Oppermann, 2014). This is what Marija Grech’s new book *Spectrality and Survivance: Living the Anthropocene* (2022) does with a clarity of logic – and prose – that makes it not only incredibly useful, but also profoundly refreshing.

Grech challenges the “double violence” of the Anthropocene (p. 126) through a materialist reading of the lithic trace, recognising it as both the “conceptual cornerstone” (p. 18) of the Anthropocenic paradigm and a compelling example of how human meaning is imbricated with the natural world (Hägglund, 2011, pp. 118–119). Grech employs a hauntological methodology to destabilise that most slippery of binaries, that between animate and inanimate matter (Chen, 2012), redeveloping the Derridean concepts of *différance*, spectrality, and survivance to unveil how textuality, metaphor, and biological and inanimate forms of matter “*live on*” in ways that are both “*conceptually comparable* as well as *materially entangled*” (p. 26) with each other. The place we end up in Grech’s conclusion may by now be familiar to many new materialist ecocritics: in spaces of entanglement

“composed of complex material realities that ‘live on’”, (p. 115) independent from the jurisdiction of anthropogenic agency; however, the journey to get there is both distinctive and illuminating.

The book begins with Grech exposing the futurist logic of the Anthropocene as “specular”, one that creates “a vision of the present that is haunted by the future memory of itself as past” (p. 5). This “future-retro-vision” is structured around an absence of the human that must remain present, as the Anthropocene is reliant upon on a humanoid figure of the future reading “geochemical traces in the earth’s strata” (p. 18) and interpreting them within as “elegiac immortalisation[s] of human civilisation” (Weisman, 2007). In this way, apocalyptic narratives that imagine a world of human extinction end up preserving ways of knowing that structure our current cultural paradigms, transported into the future to enable this speculative “alien scientist” (Weisman, 2007, p. 154) to interpret traces such as radioactive isotopes as marks of human activity. Grech spends the introduction critiquing the idea that such narratives can inspire environmentalist action, writing that the human perspective narrating such stories implicitly promises the survival of Anthropocentric knowledge systems, enacting a cyclical logic in which Anthropocentrism and its attendant problems are not challenged. Those of us in Anthropocene literary studies are all too familiar with this trope: it structures large swathes of eco-fiction, from classics such as J.G. Ballard’s *The Drowned World* (1962) to more recent stories such as Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006) and Megan Hunter’s *The End We Start From* (2017). Though these fictions present shocking future imaginaries of a climate-ravaged earth, each is narrated by an individualised (often White) character who acts as a “transported avatar” of the reader into that future, allowing them to play out fantasies of survival. When Grech states her aim to engage with narratives that do not rely on the survival of the human as a way to circumvent the “future retrospectivity” (p. 5) of the Anthropocene, then, she is also speaking

to the term's exclusory logic, of who gets to survive in these futures.

To take the *anthropos* out of the Anthropocene, Grech zeroes in on the "lithic trace" as one of its essential concepts, deconstructing its Anthropocentric semiotic role and instead establishing its constitution by entanglements of materialist agencies. She does this by route of eco-deconstructive readings of Derridean textuality; it is this methodology that underpins the usefulness of Grech's work to literary scholars. Where most new materialists focus on the materialism of textuality, Grech unpacks the textuality of materialism. This in no way steers us back to social constructivism or the dreaded representationalism (Barad, 2007, p. 46), but instead gets down into the mechanistic minutiae of metaphor, text, and sign, via the Derridean hauntological concepts of *différance* and survivance, to restructure the lithic trace into something truly material. In this way, Grech achieves her aim of revealing the "inherent non-simultaneity of presence in the entanglement of different forms of life and matter" (p. 8), a considered challenge to specular futurism.

Grech builds her theories carefully. Following her narratorial critiques in the introduction, she uses chapter one to explicate the specular logic of the Anthropocene through material practices including the Svardbard Seed Vault and the Frozen Ark, writing how these initiatives preserve Anthropocentric scientific and cultural systems of thought about how life is organised alongside their cryobiotic material. Grech then highlights how those frozen embryos draw attention to the "spectrality of living" (p. 24) in that they "deanimate living tissue" (p. 53), revealing a porosity between animate and inanimate states of matter. This materialist analysis enables her to go on to build her hauntological view of the present, by recognising that within life is always contained the "spectre of the other" (p. 56), revealing its material embeddedness of that which lies "outside" of it.

A Différent Kind of Trace

Chapter two is where Grech does most of her heavy theoretical lifting, weaving together Derrida and Karen Barad by way of eco-deconstructive work done by Vicky Kirby (2001). Using Barad's theory of intra-active entanglement of discursive practices and material phenomena, which performatively constitute each other through diffractive mechanisms (2007), Grech unpacks Derrida's textuality and its non-anthropocentric promises. Working with the newly translated *Life Death* seminars (Brault & Naas, 2020), Grech reveals how, just as metaphors always materially implicate that which they represent (Barad, 2007, p. 69), textuality and life are governed by the same processes of *différance*, i.e., the movement of sameness and difference, consisting of the constant "inter- and intra-active mediation and negotiation of these structures and processes with that which supposedly exists outside of them" (p. 77). This reveals the spectrality both in textuality and different living and non-living forms of matter, in ways that always "implicate them in that which they supposedly are not" (p. 79). Having established her hauntological logic, Grech then applies this to the lithic trace of the radioactive isotope.

In chapter three, Grech applies her hauntological paradigm of textuality to construct her idea of the "material survivance" of radioactive materials and how they "live on" in the earth's strata. Her concept of survivance is formulated through Derrida's ideas of the biodegradability of text (2013): that the spectral "life" of the text (spectral in that it lives on beyond the parameters of the organic and inorganic), is constituted by maintaining an equilibrium between its break down and assimilation into culture, and its resistance to this through the singularity of its existence. The text's survival—and that of the singular linguistic sign (Peterson, 2018)—is therefore predicated on this intra-active balance (Derrida, 1985). Grech's posits Derrida's term "survivance" as a generative shorthand for this relationship, applying it to the processes by which all biological and inanimate matter "lives on", its ongoing existence constituted through intra-active exchange with its environment and cohesion of its own borders.

This becomes explicitly material when applied to the radioactive isotope, which literally “lives on” through its decay, by way of its half-life. In chapter four, Grech performs a materialist close-reading on isotopic intra-activity, describing how isotopes live on in the mutations they enact on their material and bodily surroundings and the chemical changes they themselves go through. Grech holds them up as a particularly potent example of how all things exist through this intra-active survivance—and how this can fundamentally challenge the Anthropocentrism of the lithic trace as human signature. At the beginning of the book, Grech critiques the evocation of Chernobyl as “an immersive simulation of the future, an image of what will come in our wake” (O’Connell, 2020, p. 196) as a “future-retro-vision” governed by a cyclical, specular, and Anthropocentric logic; in chapter four she reconceptualises Chernobyl as an entanglement of complex material realities that “live on” (p. 115), affecting countless human and non-human lives due to the intra-active survivance of radioactive materials and their environments. Crucially, Grech widens out Masco’s idea of “mutation” (2006) as the ongoing biological and intergenerational effects of radioactive survivance to a more explicitly new materialist formulation including the mutations of inorganic matter and all social, economic, political, military, and technoscientific discourses which led to Chernobyl and have continued to ripple out since.

In her conclusion, Grech returns to this idea of the “double violence” of the Anthropocene: the colonial and imperialistic violence by which the industrial-capitalist world was brought into being (Yusoff, 2018, pp. 57-58) and then how the use of the term continually erases this history by constructing *anthropos* as a universalised referent. In light of Grech’s work, we can add another multiplication of violence, preserved via the static logic of future-retro-visions. At this point, Grech resituates her understanding of the Anthropocene in scholarship done by Bonneuil and Fressoz, Jason Moore, and Donna Haraway that work to undo some of these violences. Differentiating terms like Capitalocene and Plantationocene

better account for “the vast economic, political, cultural, biological and geographical stratifications of power that many humans have been subjected to” (p. 126) and Haraway’s tentacular “Chthulucene” recognises the “myriad temporalities and spatialities and myriad intra-active entities-in-assemblages—including the more-than-human, other-than-human, inhuman, and human-as-humus” (Haraway, 2015, p. 160), in which we are forced to be “truly present” (Haraway, 2016, p. 1). The Chernobyl that Grech describes speaks to these theories of diffracted agency across complex actor-assemblages, but she has shown us *how we get there*, by recognising the différance inherent in the survivance, or living-on, of both matter and text. Through this, Grech illuminates the “non-contemporaneity of the present” (p. 7) felt in the Anthropocene *without* rerouting it through a specular logic that preserves Anthropocentrism; by showing that the materiality of it is always constituted by “what it is not” (Derrida, 1982, p. 13). Not only does this challenge the futurism of the Anthropocene concept, but it also exposes the spectrality of matter, destabilising the boundaries that keep animate and inanimate matter apart.

A Methodology for New Materialist Storytelling

For my work in new materialist ecocriticism, Grech’s book provides a crucial methodological link to help explicate *how* narratives of complex material entanglements challenge the violences inherent in Anthropocene logics of exclusion, futurity, and stasis; i.e., through their engagement with potent examples of survivance and spectrality. My current research centres around finding such literatures, ones that narrate ongoing ecological crises of pollution and toxicity in ways that are new materialist, intra-active, and hauntological. Stacy Alaimo’s theory of “transcorporeality” and the literary examples she analyses (2010) are essential examples of this and Grech does well to acknowledge them. To offer some examples from my own work, I read Jeff VanderMeer’s *Annihilation* (2014) as a narration of the toxicological crisis of oil spills through the strange enmeshment of human

and more-than-human forms. Another example is Max Porter's *Lanny* (2019), which uses a mythological figure to narrate the hauntological intra-activities of rubbish with the different bodies, matter, histories, and systems of the English countryside. Both of these narratives tell stories of material entanglements without specular recourse to the human, however, as novels, they are both still reliant upon semiotic marks interpreted Anthropocentrically to

generate meaning. They may not be as de-anthropocentred as Grech's lithic trace then, but if they provoke reconceptualisations of how we think and write about Anthropocene, this will have material-discursive repercussions of what "the Anthropocene actually turns out to be" (p. 130).

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