

Deconstructive Ecocriticism

REVISITING THE SUBLIME: FROM NATURE TO ECOLOGY

“Nature” is an ambiguous word that surfaces regularly in our conversations. We speak of the birds that come to our bedroom windows in the early morning, of the earthly resources usurped for industrial use, or of human “nature” and the “nature” of things when it comes to making an ethical judgment. For many urbanites living in overpopulated cities like Istanbul, nature begins in the city’s northern forests, and ends with a glimpse of the first skyscraper in the business district of Maslak. There is wildlife, the sum of its various elements—trees, shrubs, foxes—contributing to the authenticity of a weekend excursion on the one hand, and the crowded urban textures covered in concrete and high-rise apartments on the other.

But what are we actually referring to when we speak of nature? As Timothy Morton observes in *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*, nature has become a slippery term that “stands at the end of a potentially infinite series of other terms that collapse into it, otherwise known as a metonymic list: fish, grass, mountain air, chimpanzees, love, soda water, freedom of choice, heterosexuality, free markets” (2007, 14). Encapsulating “a potentially infinite series of disparate fantasy objects” (14), nature is often considered “either as a *substance*, as a squishy thing in itself, or as *essence*, as an abstract principle that transcends the material realm and even the realm of representation” (16). When imagined as essence, nature designates what is inherent and

normative. When imagined as substance, it often denotes the immediate material reality and the physical environment that surrounds us: nature as the landscape, the background motif that remains exterior to and independent from culture. Nature as substance escapes the space of the discursive and the social sphere.

In *The Veil of Isis*, Pierre Hadot examines how nature has come to embody diverse meanings throughout intellectual history by contemplating the various meanings attributed to the Greek word *phusis* (the root of the Latin word *natura*). He remarks that the word *phusis* had primarily two meanings at the time the Greek philosopher Heraclitus uttered his well-known aphorism “*phusis kruptesthai philei*”¹ (traditionally translated as “nature loves to hide”): a thing’s process of realization, appearance, and growth; and, the constitution or proper nature of each thing. Originally deriving from the verb *phuesthai* (to be born, to grow) to designate a process of the springing-forth of things, Hadot argues, *phusis* gradually began to signify a personified ideal as Nature came to be seen as the guardian of its secrets: “Nature thus has a two-fold aspect: it shows itself to our senses in the rich variety of the spectacle presented to us by the living world and the universe, and, at the same time, it conceals itself behind appearances in its most essential, profound, and effective part” (34). This simultaneously processual and essentialist understanding of nature has, over the centuries, left its place to a more normative and transcendent notion of nature that has had significant implications to this day. Today the term nature “has the force of law, a norm against which deviation is measured” (Morton 2007, 14). As Stacy Alaimo remarks in *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*, “[n]ature has long been waged as a philosophical concept, a potent ideological node, and a cultural repository of norms and moralism against women, people of color, indigenous peoples, queers, and the lower classes” (2010, 4). It has become a transcendental principle, a “repository of essentialism and stasis” (Alaimo 2010, 5) vis-à-vis culture, which—mediated and socially manufactured—is deviation personified.

This sharp nature/culture dichotomy has been predominant in literary and cultural works for centuries. Its manifestations are evident in the oldest genre of nature writing, the pastoral form, which dates back to

¹As the words *kruptein* and *kruptesthai* suggest “hiding from knowledge” (Hadot 2006, 7), the aphorism also expresses the difficulty of unveiling a thing’s proper nature.

the Greek poets Hesiod (750–650 BC) and Theocritus (300–260 BC), as well as the Latin poet Virgil (70–19 BC). To give an example, Virgil's *Eclogues* (*Bucolics*), modeled after the Greek genre *Bucolica* ("on care of cattle"), presents a dramatic interpretation of the revolutionary change in Rome between roughly 44 and 38 BC. It contains ten pieces, each called an eclogue ("selection") populated with herdsmen conversing and performing amoebaeon singing in largely rural settings about revolutionary change and un/happy love. One common pattern in this and other similar narratives is that natural settings offer alternatives to socio-political clamor. Ironically, the conventions of the pastoral genre were established by urban poets who perpetuated fantasies about rural lifestyles. Although Virgil's *Eclogues* introduces political clamor as a background motif, which is largely absent in the pastoral poetry of Theocritus, such as his *Idylls* ("little scenes" or "vignettes"), these works consist predominantly of descriptions of undemanding rustic chores such as watching over sheep from the top of a sunny hill and the perfect leisure of outdoor solitude coupled with erotic fantasies. Pastoral poetry has thus contributed to the making of the countryside as both an idealized place of escapism and a place devoid of civilization separated from the polis.

After the pastoral poets, perhaps the British Romantics have been the most influential in shaping our perception of the rural through their praises of the wild. They wrote in a period of accelerated industrial growth, when a new taste for landscape and wild places had just begun to flourish. As Rebecca Solnit notes in *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*, many tourists went on the Grand Tour to the Alps and Italy while poets and artists developed a taste for walking perceived "as a cultural act, as a part of aesthetic" experience (2001, 82). One particular British Romantic poet took a special interest in embarking upon epic walks in the countryside. Having traversed a distance of approximately 180,000 English miles, William Wordsworth thought of his excursions into the wild and of walking not simply as modes of traveling, but as ways of being. When he was not in the company of a friend or his sister Dorothy, Wordsworth enjoyed solitary walks enriched by occasional encounters with the unforeseeable.

It was Wordsworth's "amazing 1790 walk with his fellow student Robert Jones across France into the Alps, when they should have been studying for their Cambridge University exams," (Solnit 2001, 107) that led to the composition of the epic poem *The Prelude*, which reads like "a single long walk" (106). The tension between the rugged natural

world and the social-industrial world Wordsworth leaves behind is a central node around which a continuous reflection on subjectivity is woven. To give but one example, in Book VI of *The Prelude*, the poet crosses a mountain pass called the Simplon Pass. He is fully immersed in the scene as the magnificence of nature makes its incursion upon his consciousness. The landscape Wordsworth depicts is, to him, eternal:

[...] The immeasurable height
 Of woods decaying, never to be decay'd,
 The stationary blasts of water-falls,
 And every where along the hollow rent
 Winds thwarting winds, bewilder'd and forlorn,
 The torrents shooting from the clear blue sky,

 Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light
 Were all the workings of one mind, the features
 Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree,
 Characters of the great Apocalypse,
 The types and symbols of Eternity,
 Of first and last, and midst, and without end. (1970, 100)

These lines are not merely a depiction of the external world, but also of the poet's mind. Immersed in the powerful workings of the landscape, whose intensity leaves an inerasable imprint on him, the poet perceives even opposing qualities like dark and light to be in ungraspable harmony, and concludes that they must be the "workings of one mind." The poem is both "about the failure of the poet's imagination to represent the greatness of the Alpine scene, and [...] of] the imagination's transcending every standard of the senses in its attempt to achieve the infinite. Paradoxically, although the imagination falls short of representing the infinite, it is precisely in this inadequacy that one gains an epiphany of it" (Yu 2005, 204). Geoffrey Hartman considers Wordsworthian nature as an "outdoor room essential to thought" (1997, 158), for Wordsworth gazes at a scene that is as much a product of his fantasy as a product of natural phenomena. Nature becomes a mirror of the human mind as we, readers, are invited to look at the person looking at the trees rather than to look at the tree directly (Morton 2007, 125). Rather than simply experiencing the landscape, we enter the imagination of the poet, who perceives himself to be a part of the landscape and mediates the experience of wilderness through his vivid descriptions. Nature and

imagination enter a dialectical relationship as Wordsworth attempts to escape the confines of (post)-industrial subjectivity, by identifying more readily with the “torrents shooting from the clear blue sky” than with the benefits of inland transport and iron-making techniques.

Similar examples abound in Romantic poetry as well as in the visual arts. Consider the 1818 painting *Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer* (*Wanderer Above the Mist*) by the German Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich. *Der Wanderer* depicts a man dressed in an overcoat standing in contemplation upon a rocky precipice with his hair blowing in the wind and a walking stick in his right hand. He gazes out on a prototypically sublime landscape covered in a thick sea of mist. In the far distance, faded mountains rise toward the sky. The pervading fog stretches out indefinitely, becoming almost indistinguishable from the cloud-filled sky. The man, whose back is turned to the viewer who sees the world through his eyes, faces a hazy horizon and an unforeseeable future. The painting presents contradictory positions, suggesting at once mastery over a landscape and the insignificance of the individual within its magnificence.

The concept of the sublime emerged in the Romantic era as part of a new vocabulary to articulate the increasing taste for specific types of landscape. Natural phenomena that were previously considered to be merely threatening soon came to be appreciated with a “finely honed connoisseurship” (Solnit 1999, 44). In his treatise, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Edmund Burke identifies the sublime with the feeling of awe and wonder, astonishment and terror one feels when confronted with the immensity of the natural world. The sublime is a sensory experience of exaltedness beyond the limits of reason; the mind is so entirely filled with its object that it cannot entertain any other. “Hence arises the great power of the sublime, that, far from being produced by them, it anticipates our reasonings, and hurries us on by an irresistible force” (Burke 1761, 96). Having a number of seemingly contradictory qualities such as obscurity, infinity, vastness, magnificence, terror, power, suddenness, and pain, the sublime can excite pain and terror, but if the pain is not carried to the point of violence, it is capable of producing delight and elevation. This sense of simultaneous pain and delight was welcomed by the Romantics, who gazed on the dizzying abyss resting assured that they were not truly in danger. The fact that eighteenth-century aristocrats could enjoy the wonders of thunderstorms, which once

meant that chances of surviving such encounters were becoming slimmer, is, as Solnit remarks, a measure of just how much security they enjoyed (1999, 45). Despite being situated on the top of a mountain, the poet is wrapped in a blanket of safe distance. This experience of pain and awe in comfort is, for Morton, “a tenet of Romantic consumerism” (2007, 127).

The Romantic legacy left its imprint on both European and American literary traditions. A different take on the sublime emerged with the American transcendentalists in the mid-1800s. A uniquely American manifestation of the Romantic movement, and evident in the works of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, transcendentalism emerged as a reaction against overpowering religious dogma, presenting nature as leading to higher spiritual truth and self-renewal. Thoreau’s notes about his 1846 climb of Mount Katahdin in Maine share significant parallels with Wordsworth’s writing about the Alps:

Vast, Titanic, inhuman Nature has got him at disadvantage, caught him alone, and pilfers him of some of his divine faculty. She does not smile on him as in the plains. She seems to say sternly, Why came ye here before your time? This ground is not prepared for you. Is it not enough that I smile in the valleys? I have never made this soil for thy feet, this air for thy breathing, these rocks for thy neighbors. (Thoreau 1985, 64)

As William Cronon writes in “The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” “Thoreau’s description owes as much to Wordsworth and other romantic contemporaries as to the rocks and clouds of Katahdin itself. His words took the physical mountain on which he stood and transmuted it into an icon of the sublime: a symbol of God’s presence on earth” (1995). Cronon classifies Wordsworth’s and Thoreau’s responses to wilderness under two broad headings, the sublime and the frontier. While the sublime is largely an expression of Romanticism, “the frontier is more peculiarly American. [...] The two converged to remake wilderness in their own image, freighting it with moral values and cultural symbols that it carries to this day” (1995). Such prioritization of aesthetic sensibilities and idealized landscapes over ecological concerns is one reason why some contemporary writers critique the Romantic legacy for its failure to capture the complexity of nature-culture interactions.

Solnit, for example, draws on an important distinction between the Romantic and the contemporary sublime in *Savage Dreams*:

Those eighteenth-century connoisseurs were happily poised between being at the mercy of nature and having nature at their mercy (and it may have been the increasing control over nature that provoked the increasingly destructive and morbid imagination of the romantic sublime, until that control itself went haywire in our time). The sublime they enjoyed came from natural phenomena or artistic representations of natural phenomena; the unnatural disasters of the present offer no such containment within the bounds of the natural—the oil fields afire in Kuwait, the mushroom clouds above Yucca Flat, the blood-red sunsets of Los Angeles—though they still compel attention. (1999, 46)

Solnit reconfigures the Romantic sublime after having experienced a sense of awe and terror about the nuclear bombing at the Nevada Test Site. In *Savage Dreams*, a book dedicated to the history of the American West and the wars against the land and the indigenous peoples, she writes that during the brief instance of its explosion, an exploding nuclear bomb resembles a star: “As the temperature of the fission reaches millions of degrees, the physics of the bomb becomes akin to the physics of stars, though stars burn calmly for billions of years, and a bomb is only a star for a moment” (43). Solnit states both her fascination with the fact that human beings are endowed with the skills and technology necessary to create star-like explosions, and her horror at the fact that they went through all this trouble to obliterate other humans and the nonhuman landscape. Her simultaneous horror and fascination with nuclear bombing drives her to a radical revision of the concept of the sublime in contemporary society.

Since the unnatural disasters Solnit exemplifies are related to technological advances (war technologies, oil industry, etc.), her reframing of the sublime recalls the postmodern or technological sublime Fredric Jameson defines in *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*:

The technology of contemporary society is therefore mesmerizing and fascinating not so much in its own right but because it seems to offer some privileged representational shorthand for grasping a network of power and control even more difficult for our minds and imaginations to grasp: the whole new decentered global network of the third stage of capital itself

[...]. It is in terms of that enormous and threatening, yet only dimly perceivable, other reality of economic and social institutions that, in my opinion, the postmodern sublime can alone be adequately theorized. (1991, 37–38)

Jameson identifies as postmodern the “moment of a radical eclipse of Nature” (34), and declares that the other of our society is no longer nature, but “that enormous properly human and anti-natural power of dead human labor stored up in our machinery” (35). It is the unimaginable totality of the contemporary world system that now appears as awe-inspiring as nature once did for the Romantics. Just as Romantics perceived nature as independent and powerful enough to cancel out the implications of human intervention, postmodern cultures, for Jameson, experience technology as a mesmerizing force whose inconceivable powers have led to a radical eclipse of nature. In “Notes Toward an Ecopoetics: Revising the Postmodern Sublime and Juliana Spahr’s *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs*,” Christopher Arigo notes that postmodern renderings of the sublime from Jameson’s to Lyotard’s have placed great emphasis on technology and simulacra, and questions what happens when the contemporary poet, who may be aware of the “endless flow of simulacra,” enters the natural world. Arigo locates two problems at work here. First, by reducing the world to simulacra, some postmodern thinkers pose an argument that is “problematic outside of the context of developed nations. In order to be exposed to this simulacra, one must be exposed to its harbinger: technology, the god of the developed world” (2008, under “Revised Sublime”). Second, Arigo argues, they establish a technological/natural dichotomy, implying that the two function independently. Arigo repositions the postmodern sublime in the context of “inter-related, ecological thinking” (2008, under “Revised Sublime”), and uses the phrase “Revised Sublime” (in reference to Solnit) to accentuate the constant tension between culture/technique and nature. As he puts it, what we experience today is a spectacle of “the tension between the tranquility and beauty [of a natural scene] as juxtaposed with human intervention in the landscape, often in its most destructive forms—and there is a correlation: the more devastating the destruction and the more beautiful a landscape is, the deeper the feeling of the Revised Sublime” (Arigo 2008, under “Revised Sublime”). The concept of the Revised Sublime foregrounds the contemporary poet’s fascination with both natural phenomena and the effects of the human

capacity for destruction. Grounding nature and culture as interlaced elements of a complex ecological tangle, it suggests that “there is virtually no landscape, no ecosystem on this planet that has been untouched by human intervention” (Arigo 2008, under “Revised Sublime”).

That several contemporary critics from Solnit to Jameson to Arigo revisit the notion of the sublime reveals the necessity of reconfiguring its meaning in light of the new scale of the capitalist-industrialist system and technology. Although the interaction between nature and culture is as old as human history, given the scale of human intervention in its environment today, the implications of post-industrial technology are now much more threatening than ever before. Revisiting the Romantic sublime is therefore essential if we don’t want to lose sight of the complex entanglement of human and nonhuman environments. Furthermore, it remains necessary to address the question as to why compartmentalizations of the wild and the industrial still today persist in the rhetoric of some, and at times opposing, political factions. As Morton reminds us in *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*, Tony Hayward, the CEO of BP at the time of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, said that the Gulf of Mexico was a huge body of water, and hence would itself take care of the “minor” spill. Hayward’s statement betrayed an element of metaphysics and “capitalist essentialism. The essence of reality is capital and Nature. Both exist in an ethereal beyond. Over here, where we live, is an oil spill. But don’t worry. The beyond will take care of it” (Morton 2013, 115). At the other end of the spectrum are well-intending environmentalists who keep inviting us to “return” to nature, worrying that we are too disconnected from it. “But what if one of the problems were *this idea itself*?” (Morton 2007, 108). What if that pure category of nature, which we are asked to return to, has never existed in the first place?

As Morton puts it, “there is no such ‘thing’ as nature, if by nature we mean some thing that is single, independent, and lasting. But deluded ideas and ideological fixations do exist. [...] Ideology resides in the attitude we assume toward this fascinating object [nature]. By dissolving the object, we render the ideological fixation inoperative” (2007, 20). Dissolving such ideological fixations also implies that we stop holding fast to the transcendence of nature—as either an abstract principle or a purely material realm—to save ourselves the trouble of thinking about our complicity. Once we start talking about environment in relation to history, economics, and politics, “[i]t stops being That Thing Over

There that surrounds and sustains us” (1). To find an accurate vocabulary through which to comprehend the new significations that arise in the age of nuclear contamination, we may benefit from an understanding of ecology as a complex tangle of natural and social systems that continually shape human and nonhuman environments.

What is at stake for us today is an urgent need to rethink what we see when we look at the ecopolitical landscape in which we are embedded. The tension between the visible and the invisible, appearance and reality, has become a key issue for ecologists who are equally interested in the secret elements of subterranean worlds as in the state, military, and industrial institutions that cultivate these worlds—from radioactive fields to tectonic plates to landfills—lying beyond our vision. Ulrich Beck has written extensively about the ironic relationship between the invisible and the visible in *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* and *Ecological Enlightenment: Essays on the Politics of the Risk Society*. Beck argues that we confront a new material reality as we transition from a classical industrial society to an industrial risk society. We are constantly exposed to large-scale, socially induced material risks—wholesale products of modernity—that are invisible, irreversible, and often catastrophic. To give an example, when radioactive contamination occurs, a phenomenon that cannot be seen, heard, or smelt, “the normality of our sensual perceptions deceives. [...] We experience a world, unchanged for our senses, behind which a hidden contamination and danger occurred” (Beck 1995, 65). At such times, the uncertainty with regard to our perception and our access to truthful information gives rise to a “doubling of the world” (65):

Threats from civilization are bringing about a kind of new “shadow kingdom,” comparable to the realm of the gods and demons in the antiquity, which is hidden behind the visible world and threatens human life on this Earth. [...] Dangerous, hostile substances lie concealed behind the harmless façades. Everything must be viewed with a double gaze [...]. (Beck 1992, 72)

It is ultimately ecocritics’ task to expose this continuum between visible and invisible worlds by unconcealing the flux between the two realities. In “a world without refuge from toxic penetration” (Buell 2003, 38), there is an urgent need for ecological narratives that go beyond the kind of poetry, painting, and photography which portray the pristine land

of Colorado, but fail to articulate the radioactive contamination from the Rocky Flats Plant² Contemporary photographers such as Richard Misrach and Edward Burtynsky produce such narratives that shed light on the revised sublime. Misrach, for example, takes beautiful and haunting photographs of places like Cancer Alley, an area along the Mississippi River between Baton Rouge and New Orleans, where swamplands abut the refineries of the petrochemical industry. As Solnit observes, Misrach “uses the vocabulary of landscape photography to address issues more akin to social documentary—that is, he refuses to respect the tradition in which the landscape is our refuge, is timeless, is serene, and he equally refuses to respect the tradition in which politics is represented in the hasty, grainy black and white of photojournalism” (1999, 46). Using stunning colors to capture images of “unnatural violence” (Solnit 1999, 46), Misrach shows that “what is beautiful is often deadly, damaged, evil” (47), and that the relationship between the aesthetic and the ethical, appearance and reality, is a strained one.

Misrach’s lush documents of political catastrophe point out that politics has invaded the landscape, that the landscape is now a victim of history, that history is not only the history of human actions, of causes, but the history of effects, of ecological damage. Thus, we see not the soldiers bombing the landscape—action pictures—but the landscape shattered by bombs. In representing violated landscapes—landscapes populated by dead animals or bomb craters—as sublime, he refuses too the neat before-and-after virgin-whore categories that both nature calendars and photojournalism prop up. (Solnit 1999, 47)

Misrach’s photography is a compelling example of the kind of work that maintains a double gaze. It has the ability to both evoke credibility and induce shock in viewers through a reframing of the relationship between landscape and politics, aesthetics and ethics.

Nature is inscribed with history and politics, for better or worse, and “relying on strict boundaries separating the urban and the rural depends on imagining the woods or any untrammelled landscape as an unsocial place and on erasing those who dwelt and still dwell there” (Solnit 2008,

²A former U.S. nuclear weapons production facility that caused radioactive contamination as a result of plutonium fires in 1957 and 1969.

6). This project follows the footsteps of various writers who have contested conventional environmental writing's silence toward the socio-political and its clear-cut distinction between nature and society. As Beck reminds us, along with the industrially forced degradation of ecological foundations of life, a historically unprecedented "social and political dynamic is set in motion, which also forces a thinking of the relationship between nature and society [...] nature can no longer be understood *outside of* society, or society *outside of* nature [...] nature is *neither* given *nor* ascribed, but has instead become a historical product" (1992, 80). Hence, retaining metaphysical conceptions of nature at the turn of the twenty-first century is neither plausible nor reassuring, only the extension of an anachronistic viewpoint.

A compelling literary example of the revised sublime that also supports Beck's view is *An Army of Lovers* (2013), a work of fiction written by Juliana Spahr and David Buuck. The protagonists of *An Army of Lovers* are two poets—Demented Panda and Koki—united by their mutual desire to write politically engaged poetry. Living in two different cities with only 1.4 miles of distance between them, the poets meet regularly on a plot of land equidistant from their homes to write *A Picturesque Story About the Border Between Two Cities*. The story focuses on a small plot about 0.27 miles in perimeter, where usually "nothing much dramatic" (Spahr and Buuck 2013, 18) happens. The poets are confused about how to refer to the plot, which "had all the histories of the surrounding areas [...]. It had for many, many years been populated by various humans and animals" until it was "considered unclaimed and unpopulated by an expedition of people sent by another nation far away" (19). Since the plot is surrounded by heavy traffic and public transit trains, it is not exactly a park; nor is it a meridian strip, because it is slightly wider than most strips; and, it is not uninhabited, though only a few people bother to sleep there.

The turning point in the story comes when Demented Panda and Koki meet at the plot one day, hopeless about the possibility of writing an interesting story. Demented Panda then decides to cast a spell, which combines performance art and poetry, in order to express the complete failure of their collaboration. To their surprise, the spell works, and the plot of land is suddenly occupied by a giant dressed as the devil, flames, clowns, and camouflage-costumed figures rappelling from copters:

There was a Ferris wheel, roller coasters, contortionists in boxes, caged lions, and bubble machines. Impertinent beings in white face and breasty girls in top hats began to practice debaucheries of every kind [...].

[...] it was no longer only a small plot of land, but also an enormous food court. Except it wasn't just a food court, but also [...] an intersection in the Financial District on the night of March 23, 2003. Not an intersection but an interrogation room. Not an interrogation room but a holding cell funded by the Department of Homeland Security for counterterrorist efforts, holding 2,438 protesters [...]. (Spahr and Buuck 2013, 30; 33)

As the poets witness the continual transformation of the plot into a food court, a business district occupied by anti-war protests, and a holding cell, the outrageous absurdity of the spell leaves its place to a heightened perception of consumerist excess and militant capitalism. While Demented Panda begins “mumbling over and over to himself that all he had wanted to do was write nothing about an unremarkable place, write a picturesque story of a post-pastoral plot of land” (36), both he and Koki realize that a plot of land is no longer merely a picturesque landscape, but is permeated by the “history of debauchery and excess in civilization” (34). *An Army of Lovers* demonstrates, to borrow Morton's words, that “[p]lot is a potential space, a limbo waiting to generate value. Capitalism moves onto this empty stage, with its phantasmagoric carnival, leaving junkspace in its wake” (2007, 86).

The spell captures the current ecological and political state of affairs across the globe without presenting the rural as a romantic flight from history and politics. As the spell ends, everything burns down, leaving Panda and Koki sitting on the plot of land covered with smoldering ashes, raw sewage, and “knowing lostness deep inside” (Spahr and Buuck 2013, 38). While the story progresses, their bodies, like the land, are invaded by the ills of capitalism and they become sick due to partaking in an economic, military, and political system they have no control over. The story captures the poets' realization of their complicity as well as their feeling of despair. Where “everyone was knee-deep in it, not just watching but as embedded participants” (34), what the spell reveals is not just a series of surreal phenomena, but the very strangeness of what actually happens in contemporary society. The story points to the impossibility of writing a picturesque story about a post-pastoral plot of land in an age of fossil fuel and militarized capitalism. Any ideal of nature as pristine sanctuary untouched by economy, history, and politics risks turning

into a fable, in which, as soon as the clock strikes midnight, the birds hovering above turn into nuclear bombs and the flowers into vending machines, signaling the end of the age of enchantment and the Romantic sublime.

An Army of Lovers can be read as a manifesto against nature narratives presented in a tradition of isolation, removed from their relevant socio-cultural and political contexts. Unlike American nature writing, which has typically claimed rural environments and wilderness as its domain, Spahr and Buuck's work attests that when we speak of ecosystems, we cannot dismiss densely populated areas and big cities, where privatization greatly transforms both human and nonhuman environments. As every aspect of life risks becoming a commodity, it is misguided to discern an ecological struggle from a socio-political one. *An Army of Lovers* deliberately shifts our focus from traditional American pastoral narratives to a story occurring in a plot close to the borderline between two cities in California. It underlines the necessity of offering connective readings of the natural and the social by focusing on how politics impacts our perception of different ecosystems from plots of land to human bodies equally polluted by history. If, as Beck notes, "nature has become *political*" (1992, 82), then the characters' attempt to compose a story about a pastoral plot of land is doomed to turn into an experiment revealing their embeddedness in a "*powerful political, economic and cultural magnetic field*" (Beck 1992, 82). *An Army of Lovers* focuses on the revised sublime to present a complex view of natural-social entanglements and to remind us, in Serpil Oppermann's words, that we are at once "ecologically embodied and socially embedded beings" (Oppermann et al. 2011, 476).

TEXTUAL AND ECOLOGICAL ENTANGLEMENTS: FROM THE BOOK OF NATURE TO THE ECOLOGICAL TEXT

Any attempt to shed light on the revised sublime and ecological entanglements in contemporary society requires moving beyond a transcendent notion of nature. Imagining nature as a self-enclosed system unaffected by society or as essence/law is to engage in a reiteration of the metaphysical determination of being as presence. In order to contest the idealization of nature as a transcendental, absolute category, we need, first and foremost, to embark upon a systematic critique of metaphysics.

Given this philosophical task, it is vital to turn to Derrida, the philosopher who dedicated his *oeuvre* to a critique of the metaphysics of presence in the Western history of thought.

The remaining part of this chapter examines Derrida's critique of presence by focusing on his analysis of the divide between natural (universal, divine) writing and literal (finite, human) inscription. Derrida contests the traditional understanding of nature, as well as natural writing (the book of nature), as vessels of pure meaning by replacing the "book" with the "text." I first explicate his views on textuality and textual entanglement, then foreground the significance of textual entanglement for thinking about ecological entanglement. Arguing for the concept of an "ecological text" to replace the "book of nature," I propose rethinking the implications of deconstructive methodology for ecological thought.

As Gayatri C. Spivak notes in her preface to *Of Grammatology*, "Derrida uses the word 'metaphysics' very simply as shorthand for any science of presence" (1974, xxi):

The history of metaphysics, like the history of the West, is the history of these metaphors and metonymies. Its matrix [...] is the determination of Being as *presence* in all senses of this word. It could be shown that all the names related to fundamentals, to principles, or to the center have always designated an invariable presence—*eidos*, *archē*, *telos*, *energeia*, *ousia* (essence, existence, substance, subject) *alētheia*, transcendental-ity, consciousness, or conscience, God, man, and so forth. (Derrida 1978, 279–280)

One more noun that can be added to the abovementioned list is "nature" since it belongs to the same class of concepts as essence and substance. Whether it connotes essence to highlight an immutable principle, or substance to underline materiality, nature has always designated the constant of a presence and it has been attributed a primary role in the hierarchical ordering of nature/culture.

In "The End of the Book and the Beginning of Writing," a chapter from *Of Grammatology*, Derrida investigates the connection between nature and writing by elaborating on two different forms of writing that have been juxtaposed to each other throughout Western history: (eternal) writing in the metaphoric sense, and (finite) writing in the literal sense. He illuminates the age-old opposition between "natural and

universal writing, intelligible and nontemporal writing,” and “writing that is sensible, finite [...], writing in the literal sense [...], thought on the side of culture, technique, and artifice” (1974, 15). He then notes that literal “reading and writing, the production or interpretation of signs [...] allow themselves to be confined with secondariness. They are preceded by a truth, or a meaning already constituted by and within the element of the logos” (14). Referring to “the Platonic writing of the truth in the soul” (15) as an example of universal and metaphoric writing in the Middle Ages, Derrida throws light on the history of this “metaphor that systematically contrasts divine or natural writing and the human and laborious, finite and artificial inscription” (15). Studying different texts in which he encounters various modifications of “the great book of Nature” (Descartes), “God’s book” (Bonnet), and the world as “the manuscript of an other” (Jaspers), Derrida remarks that the most decisive separation between eternal and finite writing appears at a moment when “at the same time as the science of nature, the determination of absolute presence is constituted as self-presence, as subjectivity” (16). The moment he has in mind is roughly the seventeenth century, when an unprecedented emphasis on rationalism marks the importance of “self-presence in the senses, in the sensible cogito, which simultaneously carries in itself the inscription of divine law” (17). Whether it goes by the name of God, nature, divine law, or subjectivity, all these names relate to logos, and designate the constant of a presence by creating a sharp division between what is primary and natural, and what is secondary and cultural.

Derrida remarks that the hierarchy between eternal and finite writing echoes the hierarchy between writing and speech. Writing has, throughout the Western history of thought, been seen as a supplement, an exterior addition to speech perceived as “the natural expression of thought” (Derrida 1974, 144). Natural inscription is tied to the voice and the breath that arises hieratically whereas perverse inscription is linked to the literal and the mnemonic: “the good and natural is the divine inscription in the heart and the soul; the perverse and artful is technique, exiled in the exteriority of the body” (17). In all these categorizations, a sublime character is attributed to natural, nontechnical writing. A manifestation of this coupling of nature and sublimity, as Derrida points out, is evident in Rousseau’s *Emile*, where nature is considered a sublime book: “It was as if nature had spread out all her magnificence in front of our eyes to offer its text for our consideration.... I have therefore closed all

the books. Only one is open to all eyes. It is the book of Nature. In this great and sublime book I learn to serve and adore its author” (Derrida 1974, 18). Rousseau not only attributes an eternal presence to nature and natural law, but also regards it a book, and “[t]he idea of the book is the idea of a totality [...]. It is the encyclopedic protection of theology and of logocentrism against the disruption of writing [...], against difference in general” (18).³ Two important points need highlighting here. First, Rousseau’s coupling of nature and the sublime entirely excludes culture and technique from the picture. Second, in texts like *Emile*, nature and natural writing are both defined through their proximity to, or contiguousness with, logos; they embody a transparent meaning that we can all read and comprehend. It is this desire for transparency and immediacy that Derrida critiques when he draws attention to the traditional understanding of nature and divine writing as vessels of pure meaning.

Although Derrida does not include twentieth-century writers in his discussion, we can trace a similar desire for unmediated nature and a pure form of inscription in the nature diaries and almanacs of the 1900s. Morton argues that Aldo Leopold’s influential work, *A Sand County Almanac* (1949), reflects such a desire for immediacy located in nature and nature writing. Writing a journal to capture nature in a (non)aesthetic form and to escape the ruse of the literary, Leopold uses the “‘situatedness’ rhetoric” and “the here and now of writing” (Morton 2007, 32). In fact, according to Morton, several contemporary authors such as James C. McKusick employ the same strategy to escape the conventional aesthetic framework: “As I write these words, I peer out the window of my study across open fields and gnarled trees crusted with ice” (McKusick 2000, 1). It is assumed that such writing, by virtue of resembling a diary entry inscribed in the same moment as the trees outside are covered with ice, can escape the weight of mediation and aesthetic construction. In an attempt to simulate reality through transparent

³Hadot observes that from earliest antiquity we come across a vision of nature as a poem, and from the Renaissance down to modern times we pass from the metaphor of the poem to the metaphor of the book. Hadot gives various examples that point to an understanding of nature as a coded, divine book, from Jacob Boehme’s *De signatura rerum*, where nature is presented as the language of God, to the work of Franz von Baader, who invites mankind to decipher the divine hieroglyph of nature to uncover a premonition of the great ideal of God (2006, 202).

language, according to Morton, these writers fall into the “ecomimetic illusion of immediacy” (2007, 36). They claim to have penetrated the material realm directly through their senses, yet this rhetoric itself is another formal and aesthetic choice. With such examples in mind, Morton writes that ecocriticism risks becoming “another version of Romanticism’s rage against the machine,” if it produces a certain vision of nature as well as “a vision of the text as a pristine wilderness of pure meaning” (2007, 122).

Derrida’s philosophy can be utilized in marking an important shift in ecocritical thinking precisely because his critique is directed at such a purist vision of nature and writing. When concluding his discussion in “The End of the Book,” Derrida draws attention to the urgency of “a necessary violence”: “If I distinguish the text from the book, I shall say that the destruction of the book, as it is now under way in all domains, denudes the surface of the text” (1974, 18). He replaces “the book” with “the text” in order to reveal the breach in the totality of meaning. In contrast to the natural theology dominated by Western metaphysics, which dictates that nature is a divinely authored book, Derrida demonstrates that nature can indeed be seen as an impure text. Replacing the book with the text, Derrida makes a number of moves the reader is likely familiar with. He turns to the concept of *le texte en général* (“text in general;” 1974, 14) to demonstrate that if the book implies an empirical closure of the unity of a corpus and the totality of its formal and thematic meanings, the general text, “characterized by structures of referral without a referent” (Gasché 1986, 281), is where this unity collapses. With a pre-ontological status, it functions as “a fabric of traces, a system of linking of traces, in other words a network of textual referrals (*renvois textuels*). Because of this [...] tissue of traces endlessly referring to something other than itself, yet never to an extratext that would bring its referring function to a clear stop, the general text is by nature heterogeneous” (Gasché 1986, 289). Carrying within itself the law of its displacement and heterogeneity, the general text allows for a rupture of its context and lends itself to future recontextualizations. Where further signification and transformation of a structure’s contents are always possible, textuality locates its source in self-differentiating operations.

Asserting the provisionality of textual meaning, Derrida foregrounds trace as the mark of the absence of presence. If the trace is a symptom of “the indefinite process of supplementarity [that] has always already *infiltrated* presence” (Derrida 1974, 163), then the entanglement

of presence and absence conditions an infinite movement of signification. Replacing totality of meaning with the movement set in motion by textual play, he remarks that the “self-identity of the signified conceals itself unceasingly and is always on the move” (49). The transition from book to text thus foregrounds the constancy of the movement of signification, which ruptures every possible context and proves the ideal of a pure ontological category to be a failed desire. For Derrida, “[o]ne could call *play* the absence of the transcendental signified as limitlessness of play, that is to say as the destruction of ontotheology and the metaphysics of presence” (50). The absence of a transcendental signified, center, or origin opens the text to a movement of differentiation and deferral, and to “infinite substitutions” (Derrida 1978, 289). Derrida also uses the term *archi-écriture* (“arche-writing;” 1974, 56) to name this inscription of the trace. The play of differentiation introduces a spatiotemporal delay into textual meaning, infinitely exceeding the semantic limits of the book. This textual delay or spacing, as he notes in *Positions*, is the impossibility of (self) presence, “the impossibility for an identity to be closed on itself” (Derrida 1981, 94). Derrida also refers to this delay as the “generative movement in the play of differences” (1981, 27), and notes that this movement disputes logocentrism and orders of subordination.

To better comprehend what is at stake in Derrida’s conception of textuality, we can also recall the etymological origin of *text* in the Latin *textus* (tissue, texture), which derives from *texere* (to weave). Thinking of text as a tissue of many threads, or as a woven structure, brings about the question of *what* it interweaves and *how* it entangles different elements into its dynamic structure. If “the text is never fixed or single: it is ever rewoven, constantly renewed or reconstructed” (Olney 1998, 344), then it points to an originary entanglement that enables its operation. Textuality, in this regard, comes to the fore as a form of entanglement that proves useful in thinking about ecological entanglement. A number of points Derrida raises in relation to the text (entanglement of presence and absence; constancy of the movement of signification; limitlessness of play as the destruction of the metaphysics of presence) are significant for thinking about ecology as well. Ecological processes embody an ever-evolving and nondeterministic co-existence of life and death, growth and decay, positive fulfillment and negative desire as entangled forces. It is thus fertile to turn to deconstruction for understanding ecological entanglements, because deconstruction reveals something significant not only about writing and language, but also about the world in

which we are embedded. As Keith Jenkins writes in *Why History? Ethics and Postmodernity*, “we are ourselves textual. We too are the stuff of history, of textuality, unable to access any Archimedean point outside of ourselves from whence we might issue forth, omniscient narrator style” (1999, 39). Textuality thus extends from semiotics to ontology, or from writing to history to the biosphere. I intend to bring Derrida’s ideas on writing and textuality back to the material realm, giving textuality a more ontologically complex meaning. As Timothy Clark remarks in “The *CounterText* Interview,”

Text here is not meant merely in a loose sense of “that which is always open to interpretation,” but refers to certain elemental logical “structures” of reference and recursion inherent in any informational entity, as a condition of any “meaning” or intentionality. What Derrida terms “writing” and “language” are not to be read solely as human properties. The characteristics of Derrida’s “writing” are also precisely those of biological, physical, informational, or genetic systems, of cell-division, protein creation, DNA/RNA, etc. (2015, 275)

Seen in this light, just as textuality locates its source in self-differentiating operations and entanglements, ecological systems also locate their source in a self-generating complexity and nondeterministic entanglements, pointing to a processual understanding of a play of forces.

What concerns me here is to read textual and ecological entanglements alongside one another and to argue that Derrida’s replacement of “the book” with “the text” can be interpreted as replacing the “book of nature” with the “ecological text.” What then is the book of nature or the ecological text? If the book of nature suggests a transcendent notion of nature by setting distance as the guiding principle of idealization, the ecological text highlights the tangle of nature and society by replacing the illusion of distance with an intimidating sense of intimacy or inextricable interwovenness. If the book of nature is a revelation of God’s language and of an absolute or inherent truth, the ecological text is neither divine nor anthropocentric. If the former is a vessel for the communication of pure meaning and arrests the movement of signification, the ecological text practices its infinite deferral, embodying a nonteleological view of ecology, whose meaning is never entirely revealed. Whereas the book of nature presents nature as a precritical category independent of culture, the ecological text contests these orders of subordination and stresses

both the positive and negative implications of nature-culture entanglements. If the former treats matter as inert, and relies heavily on binaries like form/substance, matter/discourse, the ecological text reveals the porous boundaries in-between. If the former is an entirely legible book, promoting the constant of a presence, the ecological text is neither pure nor absolutely legible, but radically changes our conception of being and ontology. It spills over frontiers and circumscriptions since there is always a remainder according to which it affirms an identity for itself.

The ecological text asserts the impossibility of self-presence, an issue crucial to both deconstruction and ecocriticism, placing emphasis on the originary breach. It should be noted that despite the diverse body of scholarship he produced, when asked to classify his writings under the domain of a single genre, Derrida always referred us to the loosely defined notion of autobiography.⁴ His critique of the metaphysics of presence in traditional autobiography and Western philosophy has always targeted a revised understanding of identity and self/hood (*autos*). Stressing the breach in originary identity, Derrida emphasizes that identity does not precede, but emerges from its relation to alterity. Just as alterity cannot be restricted to the human, identity should not simply be taken for human subjectivity, but rather as a process of signification relevant to any entity. Derrida shows disjunction and difference to be constitutive of the structure of any identity. As he notes in *Monolingualism of the Other; or, The Prosthesis of Origin*, “an identity is never given, received, or attained; only the interminable and indefinitely phantasmatic process of identification endures” (1998, 28). The constancy of the identification process eliminates the possibility of an exhaustively determinable context. Marked by a necessary detour called into play by the inextricable link to alterity, identity can be seen as that which is comprised of a network of filiations variably loosening and tightening, but never closing in on itself. Hence, for Derrida, identity is to be located in the response-ability to alterity and in the division constitutive of ipseity. Derrida’s emphasis on relational ontology is a crucial point for ecocriticism, because it stresses an ethics of relation and entanglement rather than isolated moments of existence. As Morton notes, “[t]hings are a kind of liminal space made of other things” (2014b, 279). This

⁴ See Jacques Derrida’s discussion of genre in “This Strange Institution Called Literature: An Interview with Jacques Derrida” (1992).

liminality is of utmost importance for Derrida whose critique of presence extends from selfhood to writing to nature. Derrida disputes ontotheological thinking by challenging the hierarchical division of self/other, presence/absence, nature/culture, and capturing, instead, their complex entanglement. Deconstruction upends the various binaries that uphold our overly sedimented modes of thought. I contend that the relevance of deconstruction for ecocriticism lies precisely in this strategy of subversion: replacing the book of nature with the ecological text, and the notion of nature as presence with an understanding of ecology as the “play of absence and presence” (Derrida 1978, 292).

The ecological text should not be construed as a book we read and decode from a distance, for it would then, once again, become a reductive metaphor that privileges the mind and the realm of ideas over the body and the material realm. Rather, it should be taken as a useful metaphor for exploring the dynamic co-existence in which we are embedded. In *Daybreak*, Nietzsche writes that “our so-called consciousness is a more or less fantastic commentary on an unknown, perhaps unknowable, but felt text” (1997, 76). At stake is a semi-illegible ecological text we not only read, but also take part in and sense (smell, taste, touch, etc.), with the full panoply of our sensorium. Nietzsche’s emphasis on the senses is of major importance as it pointedly challenges the perception of matter and all things material as evil from Plato to Christianity. His deliberate disturbance of the mind/body, idea/matter split is also present in the ecological text, which underlines the constant flow between mutually implicating material and discursive realms.

There is currently a limited, but significant corpus of scholarship by critics like Timothy Morton, Vicky Kirby, Timothy Clark, Nigel Clark, Claire Colebrook, Bronislaw Szerszynski, and Tom Cohen that discusses the relevance of Derrida’s work for ecocritical theory. In addition to Morton’s and Kirby’s deconstructive approaches to ecology and textuality, *Inhuman Nature: Sociable Life on a Dynamic Planet* by Nigel Clark and *Telemorphosis: Theory in the Era of Climate Change*, a collection of essays edited by Cohen, made significant contributions to existing scholarship. Furthermore, the special issues of *Oxford Literary Review* on “Deconstruction in the Anthropocene” (2012) and of *Symploke* on “Critical Climate” (2013) have brought together prominent proponents for the integration of deconstruction into ecocriticism. To give an example, Timothy Clark’s “The Deconstructive Turn in Environmental Criticism” argues that “romantic idealizations of nature through notions

of harmony and homeostasis” are replaced by deconstructive readings that are “‘textualist’ in the broad sense of seeing natural processes in terms of the algorithmic or the semiotic, as open, complex systems of information exchange” (2013, 12). Similarly, in the “Introduction” to *Telemorphosis*, Cohen speaks of the contributors’ interest in exploring how “mnemotechics, conceptual regimes, and *reading*—a certain unbounded textualization that exceeds any determination of writing—participate in or accelerate the mutations that extend, today, from financial systems to the biosphere” (2012, 20). Several essays in *Telemorphosis* refer to the work of Derrida as well as that of other continental thinkers like Blanchot, de Man, and Nancy⁵ to both emphasize philosophy’s relevance to ecocritical theory, and to complicate the “task and object [of philosophy] after the end of a carbon economy” (McQuillan 2012, 270). My work builds on and contributes to this corpus of work by arguing for the concept of an ecological text both to emphasize textuality as a form of entanglement that proves beneficial in interpreting ecological entanglement, and to abandon a transcendent notion of nature by emphasizing the nondeterministic movement of deferral and differentiation in ecological processes.

Whether we examine Derrida’s writings on nature, textuality, or identity, entanglement comes to the fore as a key concept in deconstructive thought. It contests the hierarchical and dichotomous thinking inherited from the history of Western philosophy. The term entanglement surfaces in Derrida’s works alongside a number of other nouns and verbs with somewhat similar connotations such as intrication, contamination, interwoven, and intertwined. One of the earliest texts where the term appears is *Voice and Phenomenon: Introduction to the Problem of the Sign in Husserl’s Phenomenology* (*La Voix et le Phénomène*, 1967), where Derrida analyzes Husserlian phenomenology and deconstructs his distinction of indication and expression. It is in this book that the term “entanglement” (*enchevêtrement*) first appears as a translation of Husserl’s *Verflechtung*, and “entangled” as a translation of *verflochten* (Derrida 2011, 19). Here Derrida remarks that indication is always added to expression in a logic of supplementarity right at the origin (97),

⁵One example, among others, would be J. Hillis Miller’s discussion of ecotechnics in “Ecotechnics: Ecotechnological Odradek,” which integrates Nancy’s notion of the “ecotechnical” and Derrida’s notion of “auto-co-immunity.”

and that their entanglement is originary. Derrida thus borrows the term entanglement from phenomenology, and reinforces it in his own work by multiplying its synonyms, all of which refer to an originary breach in any given identity. Yet critics have not foregrounded it as a uniquely Derridean term such as trace, *différance*, or supplement. Just as Derrida borrows it from Husserl and reappropriates it as a critical tool for deconstructive methodology, I borrow it from Derrida and remobilize it with the intention of foregrounding its relevance for ecocritical thought.

As a crucial metaphor for elucidating tangled genealogies, entanglement makes the relation to the other a necessary condition for the reservation of the complexity of the self. Defined variably as interaction, dis/connection, and forced intimacy, entanglement reveals, in Spahr's compelling formulation, just "How lovely and how doomed this connection of everyone" (2005, 10) is, and foregrounds our "intimacy with things [... we] would rather not be intimate with" (13). Seen in this light, entanglement is embedded with relational difficulties, and has both constructive and destructive implications. It entails both a risk and a promise, because it roots identity in reciprocal relationships and perceives the mutual dependence between self and other as a productive and irresolvable tension rather than a moment of deviation exterior to their relation. A closer look at entangled relations of becoming thus radically deconstructs classical ontology.

Entanglement has both philosophical and biological value as it surfaces in deconstruction as well as in evolutionary biology, in the works of Derrida as well as in those of Charles Darwin. Take the famous passage from Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, wherein he describes a "tangled bank" to draw attention to the inter-connected life-forms and their reciprocal becoming:

It is interesting to contemplate an entangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent on each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us. [...] from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved. (1859, 490)

Although Darwin's observations in this passage are primarily restricted to flora and fauna, it is worth posing the following question: What if we recontextualize Darwin's tangle by expanding it to include humans and nonhumans, systems that are biological as well as political, chemical as well as linguistic? What is ecology if not the study of the tangle of material and discursive elements whose boundaries are intimate, permeable, and ever-shifting?

The recurrence of the metaphor of entanglement in different fields from philosophy to biology reminds us what is at stake in thinking about ecology in light of this metaphor. Entanglement deconstructs any idea of totality and essence—names that denote a center and the constant of a presence—to foreground impurity and difference. For both Derrida and Darwin, it proves to be a useful metaphor in highlighting a certain “a-nomie and de-regulation” (Derrida 1981, 65) at the heart of all processes of becoming. Whereas Derrida draws attention to trace to dispute origins, Darwin foregrounds difference and fluctuation to shatter origins and to reveal the constructedness of species. As Darwin writes, “we shall have to treat species as those naturalists treat genera, who admit that genera are merely artificial combinations made for convenience. This may not be a cheering prospect; but we shall at last be freed from the vain search for the undiscovered and undiscoverable essence of the term species” (1859, 392). Both Darwin and Derrida change the way we conceptualize genealogy by stressing that the origin is but a trace. Using similar strategies and focusing on differentiation, deferral, and play, Darwin and Derrida challenge different taxonomies: Darwin, the biological taxonomy of genus; Derrida, the generic taxonomy of writing.⁶ A closer look at the etymological link between genealogy, genesis, genre, and genus suggests something about birth, origin, and filiation. It also reveals the intimacy of Darwin's and Derrida's respective transgressions of generic boundaries.

⁶Derrida's texts often operate as monstrous hybrids, at once autobiographical, philosophical, and poetic. As he notes in “Roundtable on Translation,” many of his texts such as *Glas* circulate between different genres, “trying meanwhile to produce another text which would be of another genre or without genre. On the other hand, if one insists on defining genres at all costs, one could refer historically to Menippean satire, to ‘anatomy’ (as in *The Anatomy of Melancholy*), or to something like philosophic parody where all genres—poetry, philosophy, theatre, et cetera—are summoned up at once” (1985, 140–141).

Like Derrida, Darwin replaces “the legible book of nature with a corrupt text—still written, but not by God—whose signifiers change and only reveal absence” (Milburn 2003, 612). Although Derrida has never suggested Darwin as one of his intellectual forebears, his close reading of works by thinkers like Nietzsche and Marx, haunted by the specter of Darwin, suggests a certain affiliation with Darwin’s work. Like Darwin, Derrida keeps the question of origins moving in order to resist a return to identity’s fixed and foundational truth. Through a critique of the “nostalgia that posits an originary ‘before’ whose presence has been lost to language” (Kirby 2011, 46), Derrida shifts our focus from origins to future possibilities of becoming. As Morton remarks, “[l]ike deconstruction, evolutionary biology rejects teleology: the claim that beings tend toward an end or emerge from an origin” (2014a, 295). The emphasis placed on futurity and becoming radically transforms the way we conceptualize identity for it foregrounds entangled taxonomies and genealogies.

Whereas Darwin’s work investigates the symbiotic becoming of organisms, Derrida’s work accommodates the productive interplay of subjectivities, regenerating them toward a future without an “eschatological *content*” (Derrida 1998, 68). Derrida’s semiotics of radical alterity resembles Darwin’s discovery of species transmutation in that both processes are marked by play and difference. Seen in this light, Derrida’s relational ontology, which is based on tangled binaries and *différance*, is just as necessary to ecocriticism as Darwin’s tangled banks and differential survival. Through a critique of origin, essentialism, and immutability, they pursue the hidden, undecidable, illegible side of things. Even as the promise of the future enfolds a threat, it reminds us of the shifting space of passage across indeterminate and permeable borders.

The parallels between Derrida and Darwin are also examined in Colin Nazhane Milburn’s “Monsters in Eden: Darwin and Derrida,” which focuses on the figure of the monster as “the perfect deconstructive icon, collapsing distinctions with impunity” (2003, 605). Milburn compares the definitions of monstrosity in both deconstruction and evolutionary biology, and refers us to the final lines from “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” where Derrida underlines the “unnamable which is proclaiming itself and which can do so, as is necessary whenever a birth is in the offing, only under the species of the nonspecies, in the formless, mute, infant, and terrifying form of monstrosity” (1978, 293). The birth of the monstrous figure—perverse and unnamable—destroys “taxonomic logics at once defining and challenging the limits of

the natural” (Milburn 2003, 604). Similarly, the monsters in Darwin’s work also appear as deviated biological organisms that highlight the instability of species boundaries. Whether they embody gradual difference or radical alteration, monsters put essentialist thinking into question. They symbolize “a phenomenon of extreme transmissible difference” (Milburn 2003, 607) and contest the “natural essence” of a species. Like Milburn, I draw on the similarities between Derrida and Darwin, deconstruction and evolutionary biology, to shift the focus from origins to future possibilities of becoming. Precisely because of the emphasis on futurity, the ecological text demands a revised readership. Derrida and Darwin teach us how to read, and, by that account, how to read ecologically so that we can engage with the ecological text’s material and semiotic structure, and its irreducible context.

The ecological text also reminds us that “Reading is *formally* ecological” since it “discovers a constantly flowing, shifting play of temporality, and a constant process of differentiation—like evolution” (Morton 2014a, 292; emphasis in original). In this regard, both ecological and textual entanglements emphasize what remains partially illegible, which is what Derrida calls *l’arrivant* and what Morton refers to as “the *strange stranger*, the stranger whose strangeness is forever strange—it cannot be tamed or rationalized away” (2013, 124). *L’arrivant* and the familiar stranger are useful tropes for contemplating our simultaneous intimacy with and estrangement from what we consider an indisputable property: identity. In the absence of an organizing origin, Derrida anchors identity in the alienating and phantasmatic process of identification, which produces, at best, “a vague resemblance” (Derrida 1998, 19) to oneself. This alienation is constitutive of any identity in question, including that of nonhuman nature:

This abiding “alienation” [*aliénation à demeure*] appears, like “lack,” to be constitutive. But it is neither a lack nor an alienation; it lacks nothing that precedes or follows it [...]. This structure of alienation without alienation, this inalienable alienation, is [...] the origin of our responsibility. (Derrida 1998, 25)

Derrida couples alienation and responsibility, for the very responsibility to inscribe the future, given originary alienation, is an ethico-political task. Since nature can never be fully rationalized, originary alienation is what demands a constant revision of our preconceptions about both

nature and society as well as of our responsibility in these mutually implicated spheres.

Derrida's deconstructive methodology—with particular emphasis on tangled genealogies and radical nonidentity—has the potential to make a valuable contribution to ecocritical theory. The fact that the significance of deconstructive methodology to ecocriticism has only recently been acknowledged may be due to the fact that Derrida has not written extensively about ecology or the environment, with the exception of a few texts that lend themselves to an ecological reading. One example is "Biodegradables: Seven Diary Fragments" (1989a), an essay that investigates whether a "publication" can be biodegradable, and whether one can employ the language of natural waste treatment, ecosystem, and remains to speak of cultural products. Another example is *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, which takes up Jeremy Bentham's question concerning whether animals can suffer. In *The Animal*, Derrida confides in the reader that his philosophical method cannot simply be restricted to the sphere of the human or language. He writes that

whereas the deconstruction of "logocentrism" had, for necessary reasons, to be developed over the years as deconstruction of "phallogocentrism," then of "carnophallogocentrism," its very first substitution of the concept of trace or mark for those of speech, sign, or signifier was destined in advance, and quite deliberately, to cross the frontiers of anthropocentrism, the limits of a language confined to human words and discourse. Mark, grammar, trace, and *différance* refer differentially to all living things, all the relations between living and nonliving. (2008, 104)

Given Derrida's desire to cross the frontiers of anthropocentrism, deconstruction's implications cannot be confined to the study of literal texts alone. Derrida does not only teach us how to read the written word, or argue that there is no reality outside language. His statement "*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*" ("there is no outside-text") (1974, 158), a rephrasing of the Lacanian maxim "there is no metalanguage," does not actually mean there are no trees, bears, or toxic waste but only signs and sounds. Rather, Derrida reminds us that there is no biological, ontological, or philosophical context that can escape the movement of *différance*. Since no context can close in on itself, ultimately, "there is no outside the entangled bank, any more than there is outside the [con]text" (Milburn 2003, 617). Any given context involves a tension between entangled

entities—self/alterity, nature/culture, material/discursive—thus making it impossible to escape the dynamic network of relations in which we are deeply embedded, a point clearly articulated by Spahr and Buuck in *An Army of Lovers*.

Seen in this light, deconstruction can no longer simply be discarded as nominalism. As Morton states,

It would be a big mistake to see deconstruction as saying that things only exist insofar as we have names for them. Nominalism preserves a boundary between things and signs for things. Deconstruction disturbingly suggests that this boundary cannot be accounted for within nominalism as such: nominalism too has a hidden shadow. Another way to fend off deconstruction is to say that it is “just” about texts; but since many phenomena in our universe can be described as texts, deconstruction must apply to them. (2014a, 295–296)

Derrida’s understanding of textuality is not only relevant for writing in the literal sense. As he remarks, “writing” is used “for all that gives rise to inscription in general, whether it is literal or not”: “It is also in this sense that the contemporary biologist speaks of writing and *pro-gram* in relation to the most elementary processes of information within the living cell. And, finally, whether it has essential limits or not, the entire field covered by the cybernetic program will be the field of writing” (Derrida 1974, 9). If “[t]he textuality of life forms is the genome” (Morton 2010b, 5), then it is possible and productive to extend the discussion of textuality to the nonhuman sphere and to reformulate the nature/culture divide in this light.

This is a point that Kirby also raises in *Quantum Anthropologies: Life at Large*, where she notes that Derrida “acknowledged that the puzzle of language is just as evident in cybernetics and the biological sciences as it is in literature and philosophy” (2011, 73). Raising the question as to whether textuality can extend to the workings of biological codes, Kirby calls attention to the fact that “biological information in general, from genetic structures to the translation capacities of our immune system, shares some workable comparison with natural languages. But what are these languages, these biological grammars that seem to be the communicative stuff of life?” (73). Thinking of the code-cracking and encryption capacities of bacteria as they decipher the chemistry of antibiotic data, Kirby asks whether or not life itself can be seen as a “creative

encryption” and “language and discourse extend to the workings of biological codes and their apparent intelligence” (73). Moreover, if life is a creative encryption, who/what are its narrators?

Kirby poses this same question to Judith Butler in an interview (Butler 2001, 13), noting that, for Butler, “because Nature will always appear as a sign (to be read), and inasmuch as Nature isn’t literate and a sign is therefore a cultural artifact, then what we take to be Nature is really Culture (in disguise)” (Kirby 2011, 97). Butler relies predominantly on a cultural constructivist approach that has no other option than reducing nature to culture, at least on a practical and empirical level. In other words, if life is encryption, “Butler’s response is a form of admonition, a reminder that language is circumscribed, that its author and reader is human, and that the human endeavor to capture a world ‘out there’ through cultural signs will always be a failed project” (Kirby 2011, 73). Kirby finds Butler’s view problematic with regard to its treatment of nature and culture as two coherent categories that exist independently and successively (nature precedes culture). As she remarks, “to posit the social or cultural as a second-order frame of reference, a regulating force that befalls the infant (who initially lacks it) and leaves it at a loss, understands identity as ‘something’ that is either present or absent, true or fictional” (110). Butler perpetuates the notion of an originary identity lost through culture’s failed attempt to represent it, thus running the risk of formulating a chiasmic relation between nature and culture. For Kirby, such a model that foregrounds an “interactive interface” (94) between two wholesome entities stands in stark contrast to Derrida’s understanding of originary entanglement. As she notes, “The very notions of sameness and difference, homo and hetero, natural and cultural, are not just implicated—a notion that presumes their segregation before they are compromised, or chiasmically involved. If identity is never given, and the entanglement of these terms of reference can never be segregated, then the constitutive paradox of identity becomes strange indeed” (109). This constitutive paradox of identity is of utmost importance for Derrida, who stresses the lack of an absolute identity to contest dichotomous thinking. He does not perceive nature as a precritical category independent from culture; it emerges through its entanglement with culture. In other words, Derrida does not reproduce any one of the two opposing discourses we encounter in the debate between biological determinism and social constructivism. While the former presumes an inherent separation of matter (the responsibility of natural sciences) and discourse (the responsibility of

social sciences and humanities), the postmodernist stance concludes all too hastily that everything is an ideological construct. Rather than envisioning nature and culture, matter and discourse as mutually exclusive, Derrida calls attention to a confluence of material and discursive forces that intervene with and mutually shape one another.

The concept of an ecological text is crucial for conveying the entangled genealogy of nature and culture and for destabilizing the matter/discourse dichotomy. To return to Kirby's initial question, if life is indeed a "creative encryption" or a vibrant ecological text, then its inscription is both material and semiotic, and its narrators, both human and non-human. Deconstruction can thus prove useful in analyzing semiotic as well as material processes. Although Derrida does not elaborate on matter extensively in his work, his hesitation to do so can be explained by the fact that matter is "too often reinvested with 'logocentric' values" (Derrida 1981, 64) associated with presence, referent, and the real. Seeing realism as a modification of logocentrism, Derrida has no interest in treating matter as inert substance or sensual exteriority. In *Specters of Marx*, he thus suggests "an obstinate interest in materialism without substance: a materialism of the *khôra* for a despairing 'messianism'" (Derrida 1994, 212): "the signifier 'matter' appears to me problematic only at the moment when its reinscription cannot avoid making of it a new fundamental principle [...]. It can always come to reassure a metaphysical materialism. It then becomes an ultimate referent [...], or it becomes an 'objective reality' absolutely 'anterior' to any work of the mark" (Derrida 1981, 65). For Derrida, so long as matter is not defined as radical heterogeneity, it becomes complicit with idealism.⁷ To avoid the trap of idealism, as Pheng Cheah points out in "Non-Dialectical Materialism," Derrida's deconstructive materialism "depicts the opening up or overflowing of any form of presence such that it becomes part of a limitless weave of forces [...]. In contradistinction, a metaphysical concept of matter regards materiality either as the endpoint of this movement of referral, or as an external presence that sets off and secures this

⁷Perhaps one of the first philosophers to divorce matter from idealism is Friedrich Nietzsche. One of his last works, *Ecce Homo* (1908), teases the mind/body dualism of the Western philosophical tradition through an autobiographical-philosophical parody. Focusing on the materiality of the autobiographical subject, Nietzsche allows less room for the problems of the Cartesian ego and more space for an account of his illness, indigestion problems, and the influence of climate on metabolism.

movement. Matter as presence is the arrestation of the text in general” (2010, 73). Against a logocentric understanding of matter as presence, Derrida reads matter as text to show that it is not immune to the radically recontextualizing force of *différance*. In light of Derrida’s understanding of materiality, when referring to the ecological text, I also point to a material-textual operation that does not escape the movement of differential becoming.

The difference between metaphysical and deconstructive materialism resembles the difference between the book of nature and the ecological text. Just as the book of nature arrests the movement of signification by presenting itself as an entirely legible book, metaphysical materialism promotes the constant of a presence by ending the movement of referral. Deconstructive materialism, however, pays attention to the excessive overflowing of any form of presence just as the ecological text remains open to radical alteration by never entirely exhausting its meaning. Through the use of different tropes—from book to matter to referent—Derrida’s criticism targets the same problem he identifies in logocentric thought: the metaphysics of presence.

When referring to matter, Derrida does not have the notions of full presence or actualization in mind. While an analysis of materiality, as Cheah observes, typically focuses on the distinction between *dynamis* and *energeia*, or the potential and the actual (with implications of self-actualization), by subordinating the former to the latter, the deconstructive understanding of “materiality as absolute alterity” (Cheah 2010, 78) “indicates a force that is impossible, something not yet and no longer of the order of presence” (79). For Derrida, (self)actualization remains an impossible task due to the arrival of radical alterity that disrupts autonomy as presence and “demands a reconsideration of the entire *topos of autos*” (Derrida 1987, 322). Derrida thus envisions materiality as an opening toward “the event (unique, unforeseeable, without horizon, unmasterable by any ipseity or any conventional and thus consensual performativity), which is marked in a ‘to-come’” (Derrida 2005, 87). Just as semantic identity, material identity also remains nondeterministic and aporetic, without origin or telos.

Whether it is textual, material, or ecological entanglements that is at stake, Derrida’s work leaves the reader wondering if the lack of an origin or telos is supposed to lead one to despair or to hope. As he puts it, there are two ways of understanding this lack:

Turned towards the lost or impossible presence of the absent origin, this structuralist thematic of broken immediacy is therefore the saddened, *negative*, nostalgic, guilty, Rousseauistic side of the thinking of play whose other side would be the Nietzschean *affirmation*, that is the joyous affirmation of the play of the world and of the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin which is offered to an active interpretation. (1978, 292; emphasis in original)

In contrast to the nostalgic, Rousseauistic thinking of play, Nietzschean affirmation requires playing without reassurance, by surrendering “to the *seminal* adventure of the trace” and “pass[ing] beyond man and humanism” (Derrida 1978, 292; emphasis in original). The relevance of deconstruction to ecocriticism derives, in part, from this Nietzschean affirmation of a world that offers itself to active interpretation. The adventure of the trace invites us to face our demons and to investigate what the ecological tangle truly entails.

A significant ecocritical implication of critiquing the metaphysics of presence as well as the idea of nature as presence is to abandon the inside/outside, background/foreground distinctions we often use to articulate our positions in the world. If we come to terms with the absence of a metalanguage or metareality, and with the fact that “there is nowhere outside a signifying system from which to pronounce upon it” (Morton 2007, 26), we can no longer indulge in the fantasy of stepping outside the ecological tangle to either admire or exhaust it. We are then forced to recognize that everything we do affects our biosphere and that “We can no longer enjoy things in secret, because we know that (figuratively speaking) Google Earth already has a picture of us doing it, even if no one else sees it. There are no hidden corners, and thus no world as such—‘world’ is reduced to a merely superficial aftereffect” (Morton 2014a, 299–300). Such a realization may lead to ecological anxiety, for nature stops being a passive substratum under our feet and becomes instead “as close as one’s own skin—perhaps even closer” (Alaimo 2010, 2). Just as existentialists had to sacrifice metaphysical comfort when killing god, ecological society has to sacrifice ontological certainty when letting go of an extra-social nature. As Morton argues in *The Ecological Thought*, this may be a fear-inducing project at first for

The more we become aware of the dangers of ecological stability—extinctions, melting ice caps, rising sea levels, starvation—the more we find ourselves lacking a reference point. [...] There is no way of measuring anything anymore, since there is nowhere “outside” this universe from which to take an impartial measurement. [...] We’re losing the “ontic,” the actual physical level we trusted for so long. (2010a, 31)

In this respect, ecocritical thinking is more a “hauntological” (Derrida 1994, 10) practice rather than an ontological one, because the loss of ontological certainty forces us to focus on the absent or the emergent as much as the present. Ecology as such is no longer equal to nature as we know it—mountains and rivers—but the sum of “entangled presences and absences” (Morton 2010a, 104) that comprise our being. Rather than forcing an ideal form on nature, we may benefit from focusing on the contingencies and emergent properties of the ecological text. If “all beings are related to each other negatively and differentially, in an open system without center or edge,” then “[t]he more we analyze, the more ambiguous things become. [...] Far from gradually erasing strangeness, intimacy heightens it” (Morton 2010a, 39–41). The strangeness of the intimate marks the radical openness of the ecological text.

If, as Derrida notes, “preculturally *pure Nature* is always buried” (1989b, 81), then we must grasp existence in its fragility, incalculability, and withdrawnness. Nigel Clark expands on this point in *Inhuman Nature: Sociable Life on a Dynamic Planet*, where he notes that, for Derrida, “the true nature of the ground beneath us or the sky above us is never finally revealed. They withdraw from us, retain the secrets of their own emergence, continuity and destination” (2011, 5). What is implied here is not that there is an essential disposition of nature hidden from us and waiting to be decoded. Rather, as Heidegger once remarked, *krupt-esthai* is an integral part of *phusis* (Hadot 2006, 306), that is ecological processes retain a tension between disclosing and concealment since they do not follow a deterministic route. This tension between veiling and unveiling is the play of absence and presence that conditions the spectrality of life-forms. Morton derives from Derrida’s arche-writing the term “arche-lithic” to stress this ontological ambiguity of life-forms as “spectral entities that are not directly, constantly present” (2016, 80; 18). In a similar vein, I elaborate on entanglements and emergent properties of the ecological text to point to its partially illegible texture, where substance and significance, nature and culture, are engaged in a

mutually implicating context of inexhaustible play. Deconstruction may be, as Morton states, ecocritics' secret best friend (2014a, 296) in that it exposes the contradictions inherent in the transcendental construct of nature as well as the impossibility of circumventing ecological ambiguity. By replacing the conservative distinctions between inside/outside, background/foreground with a complex and dynamic tangle composed of malleable boundaries, deconstruction underlines the fact that no system can close in on itself. Approaching the ecological text and its entangled taxonomies from a deconstructive lens thus invites an understanding of ecology as a nondeterministic knot of material and discursive encryption.

The metaphor of entanglement I remobilize here should not be confused with the notion of holism predominant in certain strands of environmental thought. As Ursula Heise points out in *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet*, textual and visual representations of Planet Earth in the 1960s and 1970s, from Fuller's "Spaceship Earth" to Lovelock's "Gaia," "relied on summarizing the abstract complexity of global systems in relatively simple and concrete images that foregrounded synthesis, holism, and connectedness. The efficacy of these tropes depended not only on their neglect of political and cultural heterogeneity [...] but also on a conception of global ecology as harmonious, balanced, and self-regenerating" (2008, 63). Heise notes that biologists have countered this rhetoric by stressing "the dynamic and often nonequibrated development of ecological systems even in the absence of human interference" (63). Such simple Gaian-style holisms she takes issue with foreground a facile notion of connectivity and an inherently balanced, organic whole often regarded as greater than the sum of its parts. They can thus be oppressive in their repression of difference and negativity. Entanglement, by contrast, is neither facile nor suppressive of difference as holism can often be. There is no idealized moment of harmonious reconciliation between entangled entities, which are engaged in a mutually implicating movement of differentiation with no teleological outcome. Hence, there is room for disjuncture and aporia as well as a longing for the absent. Yet entanglement is also not apocalyptic, cynical, or entirely negative. It is embedded with relational difficulties, and has both positive and negative implications. Entanglement will thus sometimes demand that we engage fully with its negative consequences such as nuclear accidents and oil spills, and, other times, that we tease out its positive outcomes such as environmental preservation initiatives and international cooperation on climate change.

My understanding of entanglement shares in common with Morton's mesh—a "radically open form without center or edge" (2011, 22)—a criticism of the potentially oppressive features of certain forms of holistic interconnectivity. His view that "[e]cological awareness is dark, insofar as its essence is unspeakable" (2016, 110), intersects with my argument about the undecidability of the ecological text. Yet when stressing the radical nonidentity of nature, Morton engages more heavily with the elegiac, offering a view of ecology based on "the dark, depressive quality of life in the shadow of ecological catastrophe" (2007, 187). Although the emphasis on tragic melancholy leaves its place to "an anarchic, comedic sense of coexistence" (2016, 160) in *Dark Ecology*, his earlier work stresses that interconnectedness "has a dark side embodied not in a hippie aesthetic of life over death [...], but in a 'goth' assertion of the contingent and necessarily queer idea that we want to stay with a dying world" (2007, 184–185). Morton has solid motives to emphasize "negative desire rather than positive fulfillment" (2007, 186) as he departs from a Derridean notion of mourning to critique modern culture's inability to grieve. Yet, despite the fact that my work remains in a strong dialogue with his, his views are more haunted, more filled with loss and longing than mine. I contend that a recognition of entanglements demands an openness to both life and death, positive fulfillment and negative desire. I thus remobilize the term to allow more room for the tension between the saddened, mournful Rousseauistic thinking and the joyous, Nietzschean affirmation of a world offered to an active interpretation. Each emerging tangle, in this respect, is a threshold of possibility inviting unpredictable trajectories and creative responses.

Ecology, from a deconstructive lens, is an emergent and partially illegible landscape of interlaced natural and social forces. This partial illegibility is what enables a constant revision of familiar categories of thought and defines our responsibility toward the radical otherness of the ecological text. Derrida tirelessly reminds us that radical ecopolitical change often comes through unpredictable paths. As Solnit also states, "to be hopeful means to be uncertain about the future, to be tender toward possibilities, to be dedicated to change all the way down" (2012). Deconstructive ecocriticism places significant emphasis on futurity, highlighting the impossibility of disentangling oneself from the network of material and discursive forces that comprise the figures we continuously become. It demands that ecopolitics move toward an improved understanding of ethics of complicity and responsibility.

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