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# Sublime Extinctions in Anthropocene Fiction: Literary representations of geologic force in works by Ballard, McCarthy and Watkins

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In the landscape of extinction, precision is next to godliness.

— Samuel Beckett

## **Abstract**

This essay examines representations of extinction in a selection of Anthropocene fiction. The Anthropocene is a potential new geological epoch, in which the human species capacity for massive ecological transformation is rivalling that of geologic processes. As the Anthropocene has grown into a subject of cultural significance, critical literary scholarship has identified implications for a possible Anthropocene fiction. A representational challenge in this regard is how to render extinction comprehensible in literature. This essay examines how extinction is manifested as a representational problem for literature in three fictional works. It explores scale, threshold and continuity in J.G Ballard's *The Drowned World* (1962); archive, absence and futurity in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006); and speculation, desire and the rhetorical device of catalog in Claire Vaye Watkins' *Gold Fame Citrus* (2015). I argue that these representational limits are explicable through the concept of the sublime, which in the Anthropocene occurs in response to significantly different relational terms to the nonhuman other.

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## Introduction

In conjunction with anthropogenic climate change, an affiliated concept has become a topic of cultural discourse, namely the Anthropocene. The term was coined by scientists Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer in an article published in the year 2000 and refers to a discussion among geologists whether a new geologic epoch can be verified, in which humankind is acting as a significant driver of ecological change that rivals nonanthropogenic earth-system processes, that our presence as a species has entered into the geological record in the earth's strata (Steffen, Crutzen, and McNeil 614).

A development has also emerged where works of fiction are described as belonging to a genre called climate fiction or Anthropocene fiction. While climate change and the Anthropocene are not identical concepts they are nonetheless frequently used interchangeably. Characteristic for the Anthropocene in cultural discourse is how porous and productive it has become as an imaginary, sparking the interest of a wide academic readership, including literary studies scholarship especially within ecocritical theory. It has been subject of considerable debate on the possible challenges it may pose for both literature and theories about literature. Examples include Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement* (2016) and Timothy Clark's *Eco Criticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as Threshold Concept* (2015), to name a few.

In this essay I do not discuss whether or not the Anthropocene is a valid term or to what it refers in present day geological or social reality. My interest is rather to investigate a genre of fictional narratives that presume to describe a world which in turn confronts multiple literary categories with their limitations. While the question of which works are considered part of the genre has already been explored (Trexler, 2015; Marshall, 2015), I examine a different characteristic for Anthropocene fiction. This essay investigates Anthropocene fiction through works that represent the possibility of *extinction*. In that sense it argues against an identification of Anthropocene fiction as necessarily characterized by an explicit engagement with milieus of climate change politics or other environmentalist themes. Instead, the problem of extinction offers a way of understanding the contradictions that are present in how literary representations try to manage the Anthropocene.

Extinction is relevant because it is central to how humanity is endowed with "geologic force". This argument is articulated by Dipesh Chakrabarty (2009) in his description of how the Anthropocene affects the distinction between human and natural history and designates a new agency to the human as such. The ways in which extinction in the Anthropocene presents

representational limits can be described through scale (Clark 2015) and continuity (Ghosh 2017) as well as futurity and the projection of narrative reception (Colebrook, *Death of the Post Human*, 2014; Vermeulen, “Future Readers” 2017).

I use these conceptualizations when analyzing J.G Ballard’s *The Drowned World* (1962) and Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006). I pursue an argument which concedes the validity of existing critical scholarship that identifies issues in how these works utilize literary tropes; however, this argument explores these issues in light of the representational limits of which they are emblematic. In addition, I analyze a more recent work of Anthropocene fiction - Claire Vaye Watkins’ *Gold Fame Citrus* (2015), in which the problem of extinction is manifested in the necessarily speculative quality of the stylistic use of cataloging and its function in managing human desire. The formal textual properties of this literary device are in turn connected to the insolubility of the representational limit posed by the totality that is the Anthropocene. This totality I speculate may be designated as an Anthropocene sublime.

My argument is this: these works do not show the limits of representation by revealing a challenge to narrative that can be easily surmounted. Rather, they relate to the Anthropocene by way of the problems of which it is emblematic. The works are representative of the Anthropocene to the extent that they show an intractable relation between language and the world which is explainable by reference to the concept of the sublime.

This concept has played an important role throughout history in philosophical inquiries into the aesthetic and has been analyzed notably by Longinus, Burke, Kant, Schopenhauer and Lyotard, as well as countless others. The sublime denotes a profoundly ambivalent experience of terror and pleasure which causes a condition of crisis in the mind which experiences it, one that challenges consciousness at its very core. The concept has a variation of meanings depending on what philosophical interpretation is applied. In this essay I will only be referring to the differences between a Kantian and a Lyotardian account of the sublime, which is related to the capacity of human reason to transcend the challenges posed by the sublime.

I will now briefly account for the Anthropocene and how the phenomenon of extinction figures within it, before I show how this is related to the question of literary representation

## The Anthropocene and the Problem of Extinction

In September 2017, a statement was released by scientists from the Anthropocene Working Group, under the International Commission on Stratigraphy, declaring that the most suitable time designation for an Anthropocene epoch would be the “upward inflections” of population growth, economic activity and resource use associated with “The Great Acceleration” of the mid twentieth century (J. Zalasiewicz et al. 57). The statement concludes that the consequences of human activity have

changed the course of Earth history by at least many millennia, in terms of the anticipated long-term climate effects (e.g. postponement of the next glacial maximum: and in terms of the extensive and ongoing transformation of the biota, including a geologically unprecedented phase of human-mediated species invasions, and by species extinctions which are accelerating (57).

Despite this apparent consensus, the prospective cultural meaning of this concept is still unsettled. Debate in the humanities and social science revolves around how to characterize the “Anthropos” in Anthropocene, i.e. which form of human subjectivity or other factor is co-emergent and responsible for it. The question becoming therefore which is the more apt designating term.<sup>1</sup> This debate is important, but not relevant for the scope of this inquiry.

Rather, I base my analysis of the Anthropocene on an account by postcolonial historian Dipesh Chakrabarty. Identifying a series of shifts in how humanist forms of knowledge maintain the distinction to the biological fact of man as a species, he argues in “The Climate of History” (2009) that humans have become *geologic agents* in the advent of the Anthropocene. The human is a species whose ideational constructs of virtues, freedoms, rights, concepts of property, emotions, affect, etc. are intimately connected to its aggregate being as a collective lifeform. Mankind is an animal whose modern social organization is predicated on extraction and consumption of fossil fuels, energy otherwise not subject to release apart from in catastrophic events, and whose presence in history is discernable by way of recorded signals in fossilized traces of mass death. For the concerns of this essay, Chakrabarty points to the capacity to cause extinction as one indicator of how the human has attained geological force: “To call ourselves geological agents is to attribute to us a force on the same scale as that released at other times when there has been a mass extinction of species” (207). Further complicating

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<sup>1</sup> See e.g. *Capitolocene* (Moore, 2017), *Eurocene* (Grove, 2016), *Cthulucene* (Haraway, 2014) etc.

matters, as noted by Clark, this form of agency contains “a power that barely recognizes itself as such” (14), meaning that the full extent of the Anthropocene is obscure to humanity and its cultures. This lack of epistemological clarity is intimately connected to the significance of the concept of extinction as the next section will show.

## **Why Extinction Matters**

The Anthropocene is predicated on signals, detectable in the future within stratigraphic layers of the earth. Extinction is a “biostratigraphic” signal in the fossil record, whereas remaining industrial infrastructure is part of a lithostratigraphic signal (Merola 126). More than other features of the Anthropocene, extinction of other lifeforms carries with it a realization that the human species also risks extinction in the unfathomable time scales that are evoked by placing humanity on the same scale as geologic change. Extinction is an indicator of the emergence of the Anthropocene, of human power over nature, but it also radically unsettles the notion of the human in various ways. Through extinction, humanity is subsumed into a contiguity with non-human others and its dependence on the biospheric basis of life is revealed. It exposes the incompatibility between anthropocentrism and the continuation of life as such.

What extinction epitomizes is the dual nature of the Anthropocene, that the human is both “*acting upon* the natural world” as well as “*being acted upon* by that same world on an ontological rather than merely existential level” (Boes and Marshall 61). When humanity is intimately linked to causing extinction, what inevitably follows are “anxieties, uncertainties, and desires besetting the anticipation of human extinction and the human’s reduction to a geologic trace” (Vermeulen, “Future Readers” 874). While the timescales invoked by geology necessarily involve projections implying the finitude of human civilization and possibly the human species, the Anthropocene also assumes a projected future geologist who interprets the stratigraphic signals, as noted by several scholars, but most clearly by Vermeulen. This agent he refers to as a “posthumous reader” who performs the role of an “imagined retrospect” that enables “proleptic mourning” (872). This means that the Anthropocene paradoxically both implies the inevitability of human extinction as well as “its posthumous readability” (880). Tension between extinction and legibility reveals that the Anthropocene is not merely a topic of writing, but is also based on inscription, something that changes the way information and memory is transferred through time, as pointed out by Boes and Marshall (“Writing the



Anthropocene”) and Marshall (“What are the Novels”). Claire Colebrook points to the essentially speculative dimension of the Anthropocene that involves this reading:

the Anthropocene era relies on looking at our own world and imagining it as it will be when it has become the past. In imagining this world after humans, we are reading what is not yet written or inscribed (*Death of the Posthuman* 24).

Neither the Anthropocene per se, nor extinction is possible to relate outside of a discourse. This, Wolfe argues, is no different than any other aspect of nature in that extinction and the Anthropocene never arrive merely through themselves but always through the symbolic and imaginary (22). As shown by Heise’s seminal 2016 study *Imagining Extinction*, any loss of life form is equally a loss of story about that lifeform (45). She argues that this logic is also evident when the mind, attempting to grasp extinction, employs the figurative construction of *synecdoche* as describing the relationship between individual organisms and the species (22).

While symbolic or narrative structure determines its description, there is equally a kind of resistance to representation in extinction. As described by James Berger, extinction narratives especially tend to resist representation because: “we cannot imagine an ending without also imagining what happens after it, that is, the recuperation of the loss” (qtd. in Turner 57). Clark makes a similar point that extinction is like death in that respect as both are necessarily *fictional*: “one cannot imagine being dead without, impossibly, also projecting oneself as the imagined witness to that condition” (39). So, bearing in mind both the significance that extinction has for understanding the Anthropocene and the importance that symbolic and narrative representation have in this context, I will now review some key scholarly accounts of the field of Anthropocene fiction.

## **Anthropocene Fiction**

What is clear from the most comprehensive review, conducted by Trexler, is that the Anthropocene constitutes a unique challenge for literature as an art form. This concerns both the specific format of the realist novel as well its narratological underpinnings. Since the Anthropocene decenters the human and equates human experience with the nonhuman, the anthropocentricity of the novel is a potential hindrance. Moreover, the formal functions of a novel are being changed by the emergence of an Anthropocene world. As noted by Trexler, this includes functions “such as character, setting, milieu, class, time, and representation” (16). A

central tension is how to both account for a massive transformation of “setting” while still retaining its “plausibility” (78). The dilemma is how to both render with accuracy the novelty of a new world while retaining the possibility for the reader to identify it as theirs. A question that Clark poses, and which remains to be conclusively answered, is whether the Anthropocene is obscure due to the nature of human imagination or the limits of literary techniques (181).

Nonetheless, there is equally an emphasis on the novel providing unique possibilities due to its “imaginational capacities” (Trexler 23). Radical shifts have occurred previously in history and the novel form has adeptly adapted to these shifts. Trexler points to how it can “transcend time and difference” (115), while Vermeulen argues that the novel has survived because it “managed to codify the relations between individuals, subjects and collective...through a massive effort to capture, contain and map affective events” (*Contemporary Literature* 134). This begs the question of what about the Anthropocene and its attendant extinction is resistant to the novel form. A convincing answer is provided by Amitav Ghosh.

Ghosh describes how the novel form, to convey a narrative, always assumes a modicum of discontinuity. This refers to a boundary between the sphere of the human and that of the nonhuman. Any narrative is predicated on distinguishing between the human actor and its environment. He explains how a narrative form takes its shape as a series of events where meaning is derived from improbability within a greater setting in which probability is regular and constant. In the Anthropocene, the distinction between improbable and probable is dissolved and the “background” being no longer stable, disturbs the functioning of the narrative format. The novel form marks a certain “world” in which time and space form boundaries which: “like the margins of a page...render places into texts” (Ghosh 59).

He shows how a narrative in the novel form requires an obscuring of the massive forces effecting existential conditions for lived human experience, which can then only occupy “the background” of the story in the novel. Ghosh exemplifies this in regard to temporal scale when he points to how it is only “by telescoping the changes into the duration of a limited-time horizon, that the novel becomes narratable” (61). So, when telling a story in a novel about the contemporary world, it would be difficult to account for the entire process leading up to the first massive fossil fuel extractions of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, although it may be entirely relevant for a prospective Anthropocene fiction novel.

Concerning the way in which the novel is argued to be able to “map affective events”, Ghosh argues that the events which constitute the Anthropocene are incommensurable; they are “too powerful, too grotesque, too dangerous, and too accusatory to be written about in a lyrical, or elegiac, or romantic vein” (32). He connects his account to the Freudian notion of the *unheimlich* or the “uncanny”, arguing that the contiguity with the nonhuman other, as revealed in the encounter with massive climatological and geological forces in the Anthropocene, is the same kind of “return of the repressed” as in Freud’s famous version. This last point is highly relevant in how the interior and exterior are conflated in narratives of the Anthropocene. But where does this leave literature?

In his account, Clark makes the point that any literature engaging the Anthropocene will have to be counterintuitive and he is skeptical of narratives’ ability to address the dilemmas it poses. Vermeulen emphasizes the importance of thinking “disjunctively” by which he means not only to suggest the presence of the nonhuman, but to “figure the fissures that cultural geology and the Anthropocene locate at the heart of human life” (*Contemporary Literature* 139). He argues that it is not possible to abandon the novel forms and adopt an easily digestible Anthropocene format. Rather he calls for an acknowledgement of the Anthropocene’s full consequences for literature and for the human itself. I consider this constructive and it is from a recognition of this approach that I pursue an argument concerning the limitations evident in the works under analysis. Vermeulen clarifies this point very well when he states:

Even if the impact of nonhuman otherness on human life requires that the narrative repertoire of the traditional novel be revised, this shift can be made palpable by confronting the limits of that repertoire in the very form in which the reader expects it to be operative. (*Contemporary Literature* 138)

I explain how the Anthropocene is more evident in the limitations of a given narrative rather than identified through a genre thematic when I present the choice of works under analysis in this essay in the following section.

## **The Selection of Works**

J.G Ballard’s novel *The Drowned World* (1962) is an important precursor for literature about climate change and the Anthropocene, not because it features processes of anthropogenic climate change but because of how it shows that “climate change is experienced not within a

place but as an estrangement of place” (Trexler 24). This estrangement occurs in the other works too. That change in experience of place is described in the works is one of the criteria for selecting them. They are revealing of how my argument builds on, but also departs from established scholars within the field.

A difference between the established scholarly reading and my own is evident in the recurring critique of literary tropes in the novels. Trexler argues for instance that Ballard’s work exemplifies how the biblical deluge narrative of the flood forms a reductive template for Anthropocene fiction (90). He argues that *The Drowned World* compresses complex world events into simple local events, eliminating diversity of experience and interaction with the changing world of the novel through a reductive perspective of an antihero (90). Regarding *The Road*, Trexler claims that it too “simplifies social relationships” through its emphasis on “paternal succession” (78). I consider these simplifications evidence of the failure on the part of narrative to accommodate new complications of the Anthropocene. These failures are my primary area of interest and I consider them indicative of the difficulty in adapting the categories of “world” and “event” to a new reality. How the human psyche is portrayed interacting with its environment is further revealing of this dynamic in these novels.

Trexler notes how, in Anthropocene fiction, in an encounter with climate change “even the human mind is absorbed into it” (88). I understand this as describing how human experience of a distinct subjective point of view is subsumed under a new totality. What Trexler considers a flaw in *The Drowned World* - how it avoids concrete description and instead engages in “mirroring of landscape and character” (90) - is rather what I understand as its most indicative feature. His critique recurs about the texts in question and it is shared by other scholars. These claim that use of apocalyptic tropes through hyperbolic gestures and devices necessarily obfuscate the complexities of the Anthropocene.

While I concede that a reductive reading of the Anthropocene would simply use it as an allegory for the apocalypse, I nonetheless consider relevant how *The Drowned World* introduces a certain merging of subject and world. This is part of what I argue is the most prescient feature of the Anthropocene, how it challenges the ability of language to name it and how this in turn is revealing of the sublime.

In *The Drowned World*, *The Road* and *Gold Fame Citrus*, the relationship between narrator, character and the world of the novel is affected by the representational challenge of geologic force, of which extinction is an expression. Language as it manifests in these novels

is changed by the attempts at representing the Anthropocene which has consequences both in terms of scale and continuity as can be shown in *The Drowned World*. It also effects literature's capability to retain cultural memory and futurity through the concept of "Archive" as is evident in *The Road*. It also features in how desire and speculation are articulated within literary representation to overcome the limits presented by the totality of extinction. These features all form the conceptual terminology with which I analyze Ballard's, McCarthy's and Watkins' work and they will be explained further in the following section.

## **The Problem of Naming in The Anthropocene**

As suggested, the problem of extinction in Anthropocene fiction is primarily one of language and representation, of how to name what is beyond experience, due to the nature of its implications. Circumstance begs the question of how to even approach the task of describing such a problem?

Durbeck provides a constructive starting point in her 2014 analysis of German fiction, in which precursors of Anthropocene fiction are identified by features that provide a helpful model applicable to the cases in selection. These include renditions of large scale geologic change and meditation on a disappearing Holocene, remote locations displayed as close and the convergence of internal and external catastrophe and protagonists functioning as simultaneous observers and causers of destruction. Moreover, they also feature a final disappearance of the protagonist which portends a finitude for human civilization and a highly ambivalent and equally vanishing narrator. Lastly, they also include the following formal aspects:

Texts perform a fragmented poetics that depicts the disintegrating lifeworld of the inhabitant of the modern world and the dissolution of the anthropocentric order of knowledge (and even the dissolution of human beings). The montage-like storytelling and fragmented poetry explore the cracks in the discourse of modernity through which the narrative of the Anthropocene grows like weeds on rubble (118).

Durbeck's emphasis of fragmentation and disintegration is pertinent to all three works in this essay since they display varying features of narrative or point of view undergoing disintegration. They also include fragmentations of narrative construction as well as characters' inability to maintain their integrity as subjects in interaction with the world. While the three

novels' articulations of this are not identical, they nonetheless all occur in response to the catastrophic fact of extinction.

In *The Drowned World*, the main character Dr. Robert Kerans undergoes a radical transformation in his perception of the world and eventually succumbs to a process of de-evolution while the narrator still commands a relative omniscient overview; however, the categories of setting and character are blurred. In *The Road*, more linguistically explicit changes toward fragmentation occur as language is revealed to be susceptible to attrition brought on by the catastrophe of extinction. In *Gold Fame Citrus*, hybrid literary techniques are employed which create and sustain ambivalent tension for how language can project desire and speculate in the face of extinction, which is ever present but also ever subject to deferral through the rhetorical gesture of catalog. Here the fragmentation of language is evident in the persistent attempts at reestablishing its order while retaining the need for speculation.

The responses to extinction by the narrator and characters differ between the works but all involve negotiation with the limits of language and attempts at re-inscribing a boundary between the self and the outside world, of re-establishing a certain discontinuity. In the final part of this section, I discuss the representational challenges of extinction and further explain them through the concept of the sublime.

I will now approach the specific ways in which each novel reflects the problem of naming the Anthropocene and its attendant extinction. I do this through applying concepts which describe certain limits of literary representation as described in the critical literature. As previously mentioned these concepts are not mutually exclusive nor are they exclusive for each individual work of fiction. I have chosen to apply them through a choice of emphasis in my reading. I will begin by analyzing how scale, threshold and continuity are manifested in *The Drowned World*.

### **Scale, Threshold and Continuity in *The Drowned World***

The entire precondition for plot and narrative setting in Ballard's novel is that a "...sudden instability in the Sun..." has spawned a series of long-lasting solar storms that bring drastic consequences for the Earth's magnetic field, increasing the degree of radiation and solar energy circulating within the Earth's atmospheric layers (Ballard 33). The resultant warming causes gargantuan floods covering most landmass. This global transformation leaves a mere 5 million

people alive and reconfigures the terrestrial surface entirely. Comparatively little space is devoted to describing the consequences of these events on the planetary scale, yet they determine everything which transpires in the plot. Focus is much more on a different kind of change due to the influx of solar energy, described as a kind of creative force that creates a new “internal landscape and logic” (25).

A key feature of these new “landscapes and logics” relates to the “uncanny” recognition experienced by the main character Dr. Robert Kerans when encountering the iconography of the sun in a Max Ernst painting. He relates how he experiences a “curious feeling of memory and recognition” when “the image of the archaic sun burned against his mind illuminating the fleeting shadows that darted fitfully through its profoundest depths” (41). This recognition is clarified later in the novel by the character Dr. Bodkin through reference to the theory of “deep neuronc time”, when he attempts to explain recurring dream states experienced by several characters including Kerans (62). This “deep neuronc time” is revealed to be the result of a process of de-evolution. The dream states are described in vivid language and feature “a gigantic sun” (85) and, “volcanic pounding of the solar flares”, the features of which remain in a waking state as “the vast inflamed disc of the spectral sun” (86). What this “Triassic sun” (described by Bodkin) prefigures is what the narrator describes as a collapsing distinction between latent and manifest content and the indistinguishability of psychic and terrestrial landscapes analogous to what has occurred at the historical sites of “Hiroshima and Auschwitz, Golgotha and Gomorrah” (89). What these sites have in common is radical change through extinction, transformation and the conversion or transfiguration of energies, whether physical or symbolic or both.

In the novel, the process of de-evolution generates a plethora of “new” and yet ironically prehistoric lifeforms to re-emerge. These have undergone **de**-extinction while countless others have perished. The human species is not yet extinct, but this is intimated insofar as the geologic time of mammalian species domination of the planet is over. Clarke argues that the novel contains a premonition of “xenocide”: the coming non-existence of humankind (18).

The novel relates to extinction and the Anthropocene through how it describes a process of erosion between the inside and outside of characters’ psyches. The environment is not a physical locale as much as it is “an ontological structure” where changes can transform or destroy our inner worlds” (Clarke 19). The dissolution of boundaries between spatial-temporal scales, between self and world are indicative of blurring the distinction between literary elements of character and setting. When in *The Drowned World* the effects of the death of most

of humanity and untold other biota are presented, the novels primary concern is what this challenges in human consciousness.

What occurs in the story is typical of what Fevyer reads as a challenge to the distinction between “human subject as historical agent and biosphere as exterior to this subject” (9). Character and setting distinction is predicated on a difference in agential capacity, which the philosopher Timothy Morton points to is also necessary for the concept of “a world” to exist. Since “a world” requires hierarchical differences between objects and since these are dissolving in the plot of the novel, “the world” is disappearing too. The ultimate outcome of the narrative is the total erosion of difference between agents and objects. This is evident when Kerans ultimately embarks upon a journey in which he aims to “join” the sun, quite literally. He is projecting meaning onto something that is entirely devoid of it. The desire that compels him forward is merely one that eventually destroys itself. This may be understood as a resort to what Morton claims is the only way to establish hierarchies among objects, through ignorant projection of meaning (104).

The novel illustrates what Beckman considers a recurring trope in Ballard’s work, namely, how it is “dismantling modes of representation that keep life from expressing itself beyond predetermined shapes” (61). It depicts a process in which “ecological events exceed their human conceptualizations” (65). In this aspect it illustrates what Timothy Clark has referred to as a threshold problem in scales introduced by the Anthropocene. Although the massive changes to the planet portrayed in *The Drowned World* are not caused by human action they nonetheless demarcate a “scalar threshold” (59), above which “a new imponderable physical event” has occurred (72). The scalar transformations in the novel are representative of how in the Anthropocene, a phenomenon such as climatological change not only involves an “interpenetration of domestic and planetary scales” (Trexler 26), but critically includes “effects that dissolve both place and space” (237).

In addition to the features of threshold and scale, Ballard’s book describes a world that manifests what Ghosh refers to as the “uncanny” aspects of the Anthropocene. In it, the human experience of itself as a species is changing. Humans remember a prehistoric contiguity with the nonhuman and thus are placed in a state of continuity with it. This is evidenced in how the book emphasizes connections between the shared genetic heritage between species, such as when the character Bodkins elaborates on how



The uterine odyssey of the growing foetus recapitulates the entire evolutionary past, and its central nervous system is a coded time scale, each nexus of neurons and each spinal level marking a symbolic station, a unit of neuron time (Ballard 44).

This emphasis on return to an obscure and yet familiar origin is equally evident in the recurring figurative comparisons between the ocean and the womb. Apart from illustrating the notion of the “uncanny”, connected as it is to the Anthropocene as shown by Ghosh, the theme of regress connects to the Freudian death-drive or “Thanatos” as describing “the urge to repeat”, which in its most central core is about a yearning to return to a state of non-living matter. This is evident in for example Kerans’ striving to merge with the sun. In addition, it is connected to a reaction to the absence inherent in extinction insofar as it reveals what Ray Brassier describes as “the catastrophe of extinction reiterates the trauma at the origin of life” (234).

As noted by Clarke, there is a kind of “terrible sublimity” present in *The Drowned World*, one that is directly related to its revealing of a seemingly inevitable extinction (18). This experience of sublimity occurs in response to an absolute totality that is beyond experience, but possibly beyond even imagination. The problem of representation is an expression of this quality. As will be explained further in the end of this section, it may be theorized through reference to existing philosophical accounts on the problem of the sublime. As will be shown in the following section, Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*, also contains these features.

## **Archive, Absence and Futurity in *The Road***

*The Road* is a contentious example of Anthropocene fiction. It has both been deemed “the most important environmental book ever written” by George Monbiot in *The Guardian* while described by Trexler and Colebrook (*Death of The Post Human*), as simply re-inscribing a nostalgic gaze onto the Anthropocene, and articulating a parochialism that misses to fully grasp the complexities of the environmental crisis. This reading is what motivates others to not regard it as climate fiction (Johns-Putra & Trexler 189).

Other scholars make more of the figurative and symbolic properties of the narrative. Hannah Stark considers it an example of “allegorical projection” in which climate change provides a “metatextual reference” (73). My own reading is more concerned with how McCarthy’s novel is representative of a successive breakdown in language’s ability to name the

fact of extinction as it manifests in the Anthropocene. The tendencies identified by Trexler and Colebrook can be understood as indications of this same breakdown.

Extinction features more explicitly in *The Road* than in *The Drowned World*. The magnitude of destruction is much more apparent. Importantly, the narrative point of view itself is affected. The story contains fragmentation and disintegration characteristic of stylistic and thematic properties connected to the challenge to human futurity in the Anthropocene, as noted by Durbeck. To make sense of what this entails I apply the concepts of archive, absence and futurity on the novel.

In McCarthy's novel, all life seems to be ending. A father and son are hopelessly traversing a ruined landscape without prospect of survival and enduring and witnessing a world where all vestiges of organized human collectivity and social life are destroyed. The setting describes an environment entirely barren, apart from dispersed human artefacts such as canned goods. Notable in the novel is the connection between the destruction of life and the disappearance of language as a source of human solace. The story tells of a slow but steady violence visited on not only the characters' bodies, but their very capacity to symbolically describe this violence. The work to sustain a source of meaning is described as a burden akin to that of ensuring physical survival and absence from harm. The question of how to impart the symbolic and reflexive capacity for meaning between generations in the face of the overbearing obstacle of extinction is the central conditioning conflict of the story. This conflict, however, is not evidently subsumed by the narrative language which articulates it.

Thus, concurrent aspects of extinction occur in *The Road*; there is *personal* extinction in the form of individual characters' experience of mortality, *biological* in the form of catastrophic failure of bio systems, and finally *symbolic* extinction in the form of the disappearance of language as a source of meaning. The story shows that a loss of life in the world causes an attrition of the symbolic order of language itself. In extinction the mutual constitution of sign and referent is shown when the narrator reflects how "The last instance of a thing takes the class with it." (McCarthy 28).

Absence of life is constantly invoked. For example, when the boy asks if there are fish in a lake created by a dam, juxtaposing explicitly the human use of energy with extinction (20). Other absences refer to cows (120), crows (157), fish and marine mammals (221), or through modifying adjectives such as "birdless" (215). The coincidence between absent life and loss of words grows prevalent as the novel progresses. Such as when the boy cannot recognize the

word “neighborhood” because fixed locale sociality is erased (95). De Bruyn points to how, in *The Road*, words decay through a process of “dislexification”, a concept developed by Robert Pogue Harrison (“Borrowed Time, Borrowed World”). It involves the disappearance of “lexification” which in turn is “the process by which certain institutions bind us to the legacy of the dead and thus lend us ancestral assistance in our attempt to respond to the future.” (De Bruyn “Memory of Ecology” no page number available). The narrator in *The Road* explicitly references this disappearance:

The world shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities. The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be true. More fragile than he would have thought. How much was gone already? The sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality (McCarthy 88).

An additional way in which extinction affects the narrative and shows the limits of representation is how *The Road* lacks an account of the how, what and why of the original cause of extinction. McCarthy’s book depicts the Anthropocene not because it features extinction events. It is rather the unknowability of the catastrophe that makes the novel an example of Anthropocene literature.

The obscurity of extinction in *The Road* effects the prospect of both futurity and of retrospection. This is analogous to how extinction figures in the Anthropocene: it contains a paradox since it is non-epistemic, beyond knowledge. This makes it relatable to the nature of a nuclear holocaust as can be explained through the concept of “Archive”. The concept of “Archive”, developed by Jacques Derrida in 1984, denotes the capacity of language to mitigate personal extinction by way of symbolic reinvention and reinterpretation. His argument is that mourning and recreation of meaning after death is possible in the case of an individual death by reference to the totality of human knowledge that remains in the form of post-mortem texts. Nuclear holocaust and total extinction prevent this possibility. A possible total eradication of language as a source for symbolic cohesion also means that any record or representation of extinction is impossible.

Both Fevyer, 2015 and Squire, 2012 argue that *The Road* alludes to destruction of all form of knowledge and speculate that nuclear holocaust is a good analogy. As Squire writes: “total death, or the end of the world, leaves no remainder and thus no apparatus (no literature) by which the negotiation of the space of humanity occurs” (216). This ironically means that

nuclear extinction is an inherently *fictional* concept that is always *virtual*. Klein explains Derrida's concept as follows:

Like a purely literary event, Total Nuclear War can be spoken of but has no real referent, only a signified referent; it exists only through what is said of it, only where it is talked about, and in that sense, Derrida calls it a fable (173).

So, extinction as a totality is both capable of erasing all possibility of representation and therefore is only possible to conceive of as virtual futurity, through a kind of narrative projection that is always aimed at the future but can never be documented. There are no books in *The Road* because of the totality of the event and so it is obscure also in retrospect. The concept of archive is even invoked in absence when the narrator reflects: "Do you think that your fathers are watching? That they weigh you in the ledger book? Against what? There is no book and your fathers are dead in the ground" (McCarthy 206). Mark Steven reads this as the fact that "the event" of the *The Road* "ruptures the symbolic order of the sign itself" (71).

Neither survival nor extinction are certain. As argued by Kearney, any reading that asserts itself as a clear and unambiguous description or claims to know the nature of the catastrophe "is to ignore the very nature of the lacuna within the text (165). Squire further explains that the revelation of the human as *geologic agent* exposes this same paradoxical relationship between the nuclear holocaust and the Anthropocene era:

the Anthropocene era may be a time wherein what we fear is contamination of the archive by the physical events it has led towards, hence it deconstructs (while we seek to reconstruct) who we [think we] are (217).

Fevyer and Squire both read *The Road* as revealing a co-constitution of the archive of language and the world as geological, of thought and material as linked in construction and destruction. Fevyer also tentatively argues for the possibility in literature to reimagine the complex interdependence revealed by the Anthropocene. That the novel attempts both to anticipate and to destabilize accounts of extinction which simplify causes and effects, might be indication of a possible resilience of narrative modes to the prospect of extinction. To the extent that contemporary readers are affected by the artefact of human civilization that is McCarthy's novel, the story resists its own premise.

Claire Colebrook in her critical reading considers the slight promise that is offered regarding the possibility of literature to name a catastrophe in *The Road* as an expression of a

“fantasy of redemption in a mode of true post-apocalyptic therapy” (“Not Kant, Not Now” 155). Her argument is that McCarthy resists the “genuinely material sublime” which would prohibit any representational account whatsoever. Paul Patton, in his analysis of *The Road* describes rather a “hermeneutic sublime” in which damage has occurred to the “hermeneutic apparatus” that would enable representation of extinction (136). These two arguments are not as opposed as first they might seem as will be described later in this essay.

## **Speculation, Desire and Catalog in *Gold Fame Citrus***

Claire Vaye Watkins’ *Gold Fame Citrus* is a recent novel that in its thematic and formal properties is illustrative of the representational problem of Anthropocene and its attendant extinction. These aspects coalesce around the rhetorical device of catalog, which in turn manifests both the theme of desire and speculation as responses to the problem of extinction. I will now show how these features are operative in the novel before establishing their connection to the Anthropocene sublime.

The setting of *Gold Fame Citrus* is a drastically altered post-drought California where massive desertification has enveloped the eastern border under the ominous and yet seductive name “The Amargosa Dune Sea”. These radical ecological transformations and destruction of habitats are never explained just as in *The Road*. There is an ever-present sense of loss of place, a key precondition for how the novel represents existential conflict and ambivalent desires, something it shares with the earlier works.

The protagonist Luz, a former child actor, model and icon for water conservation efforts, traverses this landscape with her military veteran partner Ray and contemplates the future while languishing in a state of ennui. While some critics identify a sensitivity to “worldwide disregard for global warming” (Valente 3), there is no actual reference to this in the novel. The two social forms that are still enduring are anarchic or fascist, but no explication of an original cause of decline is provided. On the contrary, the novel’s placement as Anthropocene fiction is evident in a total and yet unnamed transformation of ecology and how this affects the characters’ perception the world. This undefined extinction and loss of ecology forming the preconditions for the plot also informs how desire operates in the narrative.

The protagonist Luz’s ambivalent mental state is the locus of the novels rendition of desire as motivating force and unconscious drive. It channels the question of what things are

possible to desire in a post-drought world. This determines not only her behavior but other characters' as well and plot development. It is also linked to the story's subthemes of parenthood, responsibility and community. Desire is a constant factor in the negotiation with existential limits such as scarcity, death and loss of meaning. The title of the novel is its first articulation consisting of three objects of desire, listed in succession. These are all highly disparate objects but emblematic of the symbolic overdetermination of the mythologized landscape of the American west, especially California.

The problem of which objects can be desired by a post-drought subject is integrated in the novel's narrative through the rhetorical device of catalog. Lists being its most recognizable type. Other hybridized forms include documents, reproduced pictorial images and various ambiguous and undefined points of view. The list form is significant because it enables a narrative juxtaposition of characters' interiority against both setting and other characters. Listing occurs in dialog but mostly through close focalization on Luz accomplishing transference, projection and deferral of desire. Catalog also channels modes of desire related to the avoidance of trauma and death.

The first list form occurs when the narrator presents a series of newspaper headlines about the former child icon "Baby Dunn", whom the reader knows as the character Luz. She also occurs as an item on the list compiled by the other main character, Ray, temporarily focalizing the narrative onto him. The various objects included imply a shift in the selection processes regarding objects of need or of desire. It is unclear in what category she fits. Luz' own list-making occurs as a response. Later, the narrator reproduces, as a compiled list form, the exact words previously spoken by Ray and his actions as they are understood by Luz (Watkins 157). This enables simultaneous focalization on both Ray and Luz and destabilizes narrative authority. In addition to modifying point of view through hybrid constructions, lists occur subtly in other character exchanges such as in relation to the child character Ig who is adopted by the pair.

The adults respond to Ig's consistent inquiries about the world with a listing procedure such as when the little girl points and asks:

"What is?" Ray said, "Chair." He said, "Pool." He said, "Fountain." "Frogs." "Trellis." "Hot tub." "Fur coat." "Half pipe." "Rocks." "Rocks" "Rocks." "Rocks." (51).

The objects enumerated are not of desire but rather of remove: there is no continuity between them, it is rather the lack of meaning that is continuous. This list reveals how Ig

becomes important in that she manifests a proclivity for sensual curiosity and desire which induces Luz to compile a list of Ig's "likes" and "dislikes" (43). It shows how the way the child relates to the world becomes a source of meaning for the two adults in the face of the scarcity that surrounds them. This projection of yearning for sense experience onto objects is equally evident in other examples of list-making.

Luz is routinely enumerating objects and their sensual properties, whether it be foodstuffs (17), or the remains of a shattered cityscape (47). An implied transference is also active when the narrator lists 31 items that the characters bring along when trying to cross the massive desert that has spread across the state. When Luz makes a first list it is headed with "What we must do:" and what follows are commands beginning with the imperative to travel to fantasized places where a living ecology exists:

- Leave
- Go to Seattle
- find a little cottage on a sound where the air is indigo and ever-jeweled with mist
- take Ig walking in the rainforest, barefoot (55).

Listing is the mode through which the protagonist convinces herself that she and Ig and Ray must leave California, despite no real assurance that it is even possible. Thus, listing occurs at an inflection point in the plot; a decision to relocate despite the encounter with an insurmountable boundary initiates an urge to compile a list as a way of projecting desire and deferring anxiety. This is comparable to what Fevyer claims about the repetition of memory in *The Road*, that "The act of repetition is also one of delay (97).

Listing also articulates the desire to remember experiences of taste or smell, or the search for these in the present: "Luz studied the mountains ahead, watched the sunset coloring them as the things gone from them: lilac, plum, lavender, orchid, mulberry, violet." (Watkins 84). As the plot transitions to a remote and precarious desert cult community and Luz immerses into drug use, the desire for sense experience leads to the full dissolving of barriers between desire and self: "She'd cracked a hole there, in the wall between the intellectual and the sensual, and so her thoughts were sensations" (299). This breakdown is not sustainable, and an eventual realization of the artificiality and false premise of desire anticipates a final resolution through suicide.

The list manifests as an attempt at remediate existential problems presented by the ecological catastrophe. For example, it occurs when the characters are playfully repeating possible interpretations to the meaning of the “R” icon on their car dial as they slowly run out of gas while attempting to traverse the massive desert (98). This listing takes the shape of dialog, but the effect is to present possible alternatives to the acute lack of fuel through a shared projection of fantasized possibilities of renewal:

“Replenish. Rejuvenate. Regenerate. Regurgitate Reinstatement. Reject. Restore.” (98).

Catalog is an attempt to defer an absence and thus is indicative of how the novel represents extinction indirectly. It also occurs when the narrator uses the ambiguous conjunctive/disjunctive “or” when listing a mythologized discourse about possible alternative communities that exist in the *Amargosa* desert. This aspect further establishes the connection between the list form and that which is projected or imagined by the characters (123).

Projection is ostensibly speculation, a way to allow language to not only designate the safely discernable but also to express belief in the possible. One hybridized section of *Gold Fame Citrus* is an encyclopedic pictorial primer collection of “new” lifeforms, claimed to have adapted to desertification. Particularly speculative in its premise it is titled: “Neo-Fauna of the Amargosa Dune Sea: a primer”. Despite this being an index of fabricated biota, it becomes a convincing vehicle for speculative imagination in the face of absolute extinction due to the way it enables character focalization onto the unreliable character Levi (193). To illustrate the absurd aspects of this speculation one of the fictitious animals includes “Colossus Vinegaroon”, a kind of scorpion with a sting that causes “its victim to taste only vinegar” (194).

Speculation is not only a source of comedy. It is how the novel represents responses to extinction in the Anthropocene. Colebrook in her work argues convincingly that the Anthropocene requires speculation to be represented. As stated by Boes and Marshall, modernity is “constituted in the observation cycles of witnessing”, and they consider literary speculation necessary to find a medium “in which to house such witnesses” (67). The list form enables both a kind of speculative operation as it does a projection of desire, and therefore can contribute to creating such a medium. Critically, speculation is a kind of correlate to extinction insofar as what is extinct is comparable to something that has never existed, or what is only imaginary such as the creatures in the *Amargosa Primer*. Eugene Thacker makes this point when he provides an index over things that can be called extinct:



the living being without a species (e.g. the unnamable thing); the species without any existent living beings (e.g. cryptids, imaginary creatures); or the subtraction of the species from living beings (e.g. elemental, nonorganic life) (125).

This last example of nonorganic life is important when understanding how the concept of the sublime can help explain how extinction figures in the Anthropocene. I will now continue the essay by describing how an analysis of the device of catalog can provide a link between the representational challenges of extinction in the Anthropocene, and how the concept of the sublime can illuminate them.

## **The List and The Anthropocene Sublime**

A list can be narrative at its most basic form as it creates a world:

in the literary sphere, to list nouns is to do more than record; it is to display, to lay out, to arrange – to create reality whether that be to represent a moment of complete awareness of the world or just to experiment, to conjure by naming (Belknap 19).

But listing also contain an ambiguity of meaning and desire: does listing one after the other establish a logic through which things can be desired or the not? Nicholson-Weber points out that when facing a privation of ecological disaster, there is a similar tension between a wish to defer “emotional pain on the one hand and to reintegrate and make meaning on the other” (129). She argues that objects are important in this regard because they bear the burden of symbolic immortality (130). The act of listing, whether explicit or implicit, is an attempt to recreate this relationship to objects, to create conditions that can mitigate the “end of the world”. The list can thus both establish distance and closeness and be an expression of what Nicholson-Weber, referencing Harold Searles, describes as the relation to the non-human:

We deny our relatedness to the nonhuman because we fear sinking back into differentiation if we remember our continuity with it. Nothing is as dreaded by a human being than feeling like an inanimate object...But at the same time we long to ease the pain of separateness by becoming nonhuman again (135).

Lists can be understood as reinstating a sequence, a way of re-establishing a relationship to the world that controls for continuity. I understand listing as an attempt to rebuild “the Archive”, to make possible a “relexification”. Of reestablishing linguistic difference

between subject and object and resisting an uncanny awareness that the human is material. In *The Road*, the absence of lists signals the belatedness of everything: “No lists of things to be done. The day providential to itself. The hour. There is no later. This is later.” (McCarthy 53-54). The list is a gesture of inscription, of re-ascribing meaning. But this meaning is not unambiguous.

Lists both create an order but can ironically also display absence of meaning. They can be as Spufford states: “a brief intimation of everything” or a “fierce flirtations with nothingness” (7) What they always do is reconfigure what they refer to, to insert a level of discontinuity between the lister and the listed. But this relationship is always asymmetric. As Spufford notes: “things can never quite be perfectly passive signs of human preference. Lists of them that are supposed to reflect selves can never quite be perfect reflections” (15). Lists are devious and contain much more than at first meets the eye.

This dimension of catalog as a narrative device is connected to the overarching aim of this essay, namely to provide an examination of the limits of literary representation caused by extinction as a necessary feature of the Anthropocene and explain them through the concept of the sublime. The link between a list and the sublime is evident in how infinity figures in two forms of catalog and their differing use of conjunction: *polysyndeton* (which includes a conjunction) and *asyndeton* (which uses a comma). Both forms have no necessary end, but rather can allude to a possible infinite series (Belknap 31). This potential infinity is one connection to a sublime dimension. Another is in the way lists reference by negation. As noted by Eco, all lists indirectly refer to what is not included: “They foreground their own incompleteness as a way of pointing towards those things that exceed them, that cannot be listed or enumerated (15).

As is shown in *Gold Fame Citrus*, a contemporary example of Anthropocene fiction, catalog can serve to illustrate a change in the relationship that language takes to denoting objects. This expression of an object relationship to language reminds of what Eco, in reference to Krzysztof Pomian, describes as “semiphoric”:

According to Krzysztof Pomian...collection very soon turned to objects that he calls “semiphoric”, in other words things – often over and above their selling value – that were signs, witnesses to something else, to the past they come from, to an exotic world of which they are the only documents, to the invisible world (Eco 170).

This principle of accumulation, through which things gain meaning by being gathered, in catalog or collection, exists in relation to something outside of perception and this is where the concept of the sublime can enter into the discussion on extinction and the Anthropocene.

The sublime designates a deeply ambivalent experience of terror and pleasure. Notable theorists of the sublime include Kant and Lyotard. The Kantian view of the sublime has two variants. One is analytic and relies on the argument that the human capability of reason can incorporate a human limit of perception into itself and thus not become overwhelmed by the thought of mathematical infinity. The other type is dynamic and refers to the ability of the human will to supersede the experience of powerlessness in the face of the forces of nature.

Lyotard considers rather that what the sublime experience denotes is a “breaking in the fit between mind and nature” which leaves the mind “without recourse to the means of presentation” (137). This in turn divides the interiority of human consciousness and causes a split “within the subject between what can be conceived and what can be imagined or presented” (101). Critically, Lyotard’s sublime is in relation to an absolutely unknowable, uncaring thing that is “not waiting to be destined, it is not waiting for anything, it does not call on the mind” (142).

A central difference between the two is that Kant’s account describes how the experience of terror and pleasure occur “in succession, not simultaneously” (Kainulainen 112). This speaks to how the act of re-inscription through lists is an attempt to reestablish a relation or sequence. Where Kant’s notion of the sublime invokes reason’s ability to name itself and the object and therefore a kind of possibility of transcendence, Lyotard’s prohibits this because it lacks a form in which representation can describe it. This postmodern sublime “thing” is more reminiscent of the phenomenon of extinction in the Anthropocene as shown in the fictional works under analysis. Strategies of speculation notwithstanding, what this illustrates is how the problem of extinction, in Lyotard’s words takes the shape of “stellar death”, the ultimate contingency of all systems of meaning. His argument is that while language and thought might be able to exist outside of earth and therefore could potentially survive the inevitable coming extinction of the sun, this potential language and thought would no longer be human. The Anthropocene, through its invocation of extinction also articulates this.

As discussed earlier in the context of *The Road*, two alternative versions of a possible sublime have been suggested: Patton’s “The hermeneutical sublime” and Colebrook’s “The geologic sublime”. These might at first appear to oppose one another in similar ways as Lyotard

and Kant in so far as Patton argues that what is being described in *The Road* is a damage to the operation of human symbolic meaning making, while Colebrook argues rather that what is *revealed* is the absolute obduracy of the material world. I would argue however that what is revealed in the works under analysis in this essay, especially in the rhetorical device of catalog in Watkins' is the co-occurrence of the absolute obscurity of the sublime experience and the breakdown of the representational apparatus which seeks to describe it. Critical in this regard is the ability of language to impose an order and sequencing of description. This ability cannot *represent* the sublime void of extinction partly because due to the limits of scale, continuity, futurity and human desire, but also because it does not *present* in a form which is apprehensible in language in the first place.

## **Conclusion**

The stories analyzed in this essay are narratives that are unable to fully accommodate the loss in language's capacity to represent extinction. As evident by the representational boundaries of scale, continuity, futurity and desire that I have analyzed in Ballard's, McCarthy's and Watkins' works, I conclude that a fiction which seeks to describe Anthropocene processes must do so reflexively and with an awareness of its own formal and thematic constitution. Extinction in the Anthropocene forces literature to reexamine its own premise, which is evident in the most basic of narrative operations- to enumerate, to designate and to name. I have shown how the representational crisis manifested through the limitations revealed in these novels is explainable by way of a broader discussion regarding how literary language and its ability to relate aesthetic objects is subjugated by the sublimity of the reality it seeks to portray. What might be further examined are the ways in which speculative and reflexive representation may be employed to circumnavigate this horizon.

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