

“AND THIS IS WHAT I SAW”:
(UN)NATURAL WASTE IN CATHY PARK HONG’S
“FABLE OF THE LAST UNTOUCHED TOWN”*

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ABSTRACT

At its most philosophical, poetry can help us imagine alternative realities. In “Fable of the Last Untouched Town,” Cathy Park Hong manages to complicate current notions of nature by way of an unusual form of futuristic waste. Through the analysis of the poem, this article aims, on the one hand, to show how works of poetry can reflect and denounce some of the many ugly aspects of reality. Particularly, Hong can be said to draw in her poem an allegory of the pressing issue of e-waste. On the other, I intend to highlight how poetic imaginations can shake certain assumptions regarding those contemporary conceptions of nature and problematize the humanistic tendency in new materialisms and object-oriented theories. Indeed, an understanding of waste as the threshold which separates us from Nature might better equip us when facing the imminent change of paradigm that looms over our understanding of our place in the world.

KEYWORDS: e-waste, ecopoetics, strange strangers, Cathy Park Hong, Timothy Morton.

“Y ESTO ES LO QUE VI”: DESECHOS (IN)NATURALES EN “FABLE
OF THE LAST UNTOUCHED TOWN” DE CATHY PARK HONG

RESUMEN

En su aspecto más filosófico, la poesía puede ayudarnos a imaginar realidades alternativas. Con “Fábula del último pueblo intacto,” Cathy Park Hong consigue problematizar las nociones contemporáneas de naturaleza a través de una forma inusual de desechos futuristas. Por medio de su análisis, en este ensayo me propongo, primero, mostrar cómo la poesía puede reflejar y denunciar algunos de los desagradables aspectos de la realidad. En este caso, el poema de Hong puede ser visto como una alegoría del acuciante problema de los residuos electrónicos. Por otra, mostrar cómo los imaginarios poéticos pueden sacudir ciertos supuestos respecto de esas concepciones actuales de la naturaleza; así como cuestionar una tendencia humanista en los nuevos materialismos y las teorías orientadas a objetos. Una reconsideración de los desechos, entendidos como el umbral que nos separa de la Naturaleza, puede equiparnos mejor para enfrentar el cambio de paradigma que amenaza el entendimiento de nuestro lugar en el mundo.

PALABRAS CLAVE: residuos electrónicos, ecopoesía, extraños forasteros, Cathy Park Hong, Timothy Morton.



As Begoña Simal has noted, the “aporetic situation” where “human artifacts and anthropogenic ecosystems should be considered as much ‘natural’ as ‘unnatural’” (2010, 4) has a long history. In its latest episode, the turn to new materialisms has brought about several Bruno Latour-inspired conceptions that claim to disrupt the anthropocentric relationship between human and nonhuman actants by blurring the contours of nature and yielding in turn posthumanist ethical alternatives. While Greg Kennedy has warned of the danger of a conception of “Nature’s universality” where “we would seem to lose the distinguishing marks of judgment in the vastness of cosmic indiscrimination” (2007, 2), on the opposite end, theorists like Timothy Morton maintain that “thinking big doesn’t prevent us from caring for the environment” (2010, 23). Following Susan S. Morrison’s call to “utilize not just presentist theory, but also a *futurist* theory, for our own and our society’s well-being” (2015, 3; emphasis in original), I will explore here the limits of nature through the image of the “data glacier,” an unusual form of waste that merges the human with the digital in Cathy Park Hong’s futuristic epilogue to her 2012 *Engine Empire*, “Fable of the Last Untouched Town.”

As if analyzing a poem in an issue devoted to fiction was not enough, I shall further tweak the matter and instead of offering a narrative of waste, I will propose waste itself as a disruptive element in another narrative, to wit, contemporary positions regarding the nature/culture divide. To this end, throughout this paper I will succinctly review the relation between ecocriticism and poetry to place Hong’s work in the unlikely genre of ecological poetry and, eventually, in a variant of what Sarah Nolan has dubbed “unnatural eco-poetics” (2017) that favors imagery over formal experimentation. After locating the poem within the wider frame of the triptych, I will show how the image of the glacier elicits conversations regarding two challenges that have a bearing on contemporary ecocriticism: transnationality and transnaturality (Simal 2010). As an allegory, responding to more traditional ecocritical approaches, the glacier stands in for e-waste and its multiple and pernicious consequences for both marginalized communities and the environment. Speculatively, through a conversation with new materialisms and object-oriented theories, represented here by Timothy Morton, I will finally show how the image of the glacier allows for futurist speculations that complicate contemporary notions of nature.

Although her work has only recently become more overtly committed to a particular social cause, namely her advocacy of Asian American identity in her bestselling experimental autobiography of 2020 *Minor Feelings*, Hong’s oeuvre has been typically regarded as socially engaged.¹ In her first two books, *Translating*

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¹ Claudia Rankine and Michael Dowdy’s anthology of contemporary political poetry, *21st Century Poetics of Engagement* (2017), which popularized the term “social engagement” to refer to contemporary works that deal with social, racial, and gender inequality, actually borrows the term from Hong’s article “There’s a New Movement in American Poetry and It’s Not Kenneth Goldsmith” (2015).



Mo'Um (2002) and *Dance Dance Revolution* (2006), Hong bends and blends languages to foreground the complexity of hybrid cultures and identities. Her third and greatly lauded book, *Engine Empire*, expands the experimentation with the boundaries of space and time already present in Hong's early work. Indeed, *Engine Empire* is shot through with spatiotemporal uncanniness: the different images that populate the book evoke familiar historical periods and locations, but almost no place or time find their exact counterpart in our reality. This temporal displacement has caused *Engine Empire* to be labeled under the tag of speculative poetry, an umbrella term coined by poet Suzette Haden Elgin which serves to encompass the poetic sisters of narrative forms from fantasy to dystopia, from space opera to steam punk, from sword and sorcery to urban fantasy, among many more.² Consequently, some authors like Robert Grotjohn (2015), Tana Jean Welch (2017), or Danielle Pafunda (2019) have read Hong's work as a speculative exploration of the consequences of grinding late capitalism. The ecological concerns found in the book, however, seem to have been unattended until now.

This lapse may be due to the subtle presence of the matter in the book. However, together with rebellious characters, every section in *Engine Empire* features some relevant ecocritical image. While a band of desperados in the first part who cannot abide by the emerging postbellum modern states' laws represent the death throes of an illusion of pure freedom, the prospectors' greed in it foreshadows today's overexploitation of the lands. The nameless factotums of an imaginary megalopolis in current day industrial China stand in for the victims of the unstoppable expansion of the tech industry in a second part that addresses displacement and economic violence. There, the poem "A Little Tête-a-Tête" revisits Coleridge's "Kubla Khan," offering an image of the ecological consequences of relentless industrial growth in the form of polluted rivers. The third part, which unfolds in a future where life as we know it has transmigrated into a plane of indolent virtuality, features a dissident woman who is left behind after being made redundant amidst the maelstrom of digitalization. It is in this third section where the stakes are risen. The poem titled "Year of the Amateur" offers a picture of a decaying world which is being turned into "pulp" as we, distracted by idle online videos, "laugh softly" (Hong 2012, 67). The joint appearance of melting icecaps and digital media announces the disruptive element that threatens the gap between nature and culture, the image that drives the epilogue and places *Engine Empire* in the realm of (unnatural) ecopoetics: the data glacier.

² The label inevitably harks back to that of speculative fiction popularized by Margaret Atwood as a genre about "things that really could happen but just hadn't completely happened when the authors wrote the books"—as opposed to "things that could not possibly happen" (2011, 14), which would pertain to the realm of science fiction proper.



THE ONLY GOD WE KNOW | NATURE IN “FABLE OF THE LAST UNTOUCHED TOWN”

“Fable of the Last Untouched Town”³ (from here on, “Fable”) begins with the narrator describing her town as “the only hole in a world of light” (Hong 2012, 89),⁴ thus placing it outside the advanced civilization introduced in *Engine Empire*’s third part. To complete the renegade circle, the protagonist of the epilogue is also a rebel. Initially, she proudly describes the ways of her kin: living under ferocious climatic conditions, the townspeople are “impervious to discomfort [...] strong” and “not afraid to betray” (Hong 2012, 90). As an example of their cruelty, the woman admits they “rush [their] old” (90), i.e., they abandon the elderly to freeze in the wild. In *Civilization and its Discontents* ([1930] 1962), Sigmund Freud claims that although technological advances cannot provide eternal bliss, they help people to cope with the miseries of everyday life. Hong’s luddite civilization seems to prove Freud’s point: in the town, “no lamps grid [the] streets, no cars flash their headlights” (2012, 89); the low temperatures “crackle [the] blankets” and congeal “the monthly bloody rags women dry for the night” (90). When “the shrieking wind and dark / cut the wilted day at noon” they have “no choice / but resign [themselves]” (90). These daily routines dictated by the hours of sunlight, attuned to the times prior to the industrial revolution, if not directly to feudal times, create a picture of the sort of life led by the inhabitants of the town.

Cut off from the hyperconnected world where hearts are grown “from cells” and people “live to 150” (Hong 2012, 89), the Last Untouched Town’s death harks back to Aldous Huxley’s Malpais, the savage lands in *Brave New World* ([1932] 2004). The inhabitants’ despair upon the arrival of dusk, however, stems not from a fear of prowling predators or the freezing temperatures but due to sheer “boredom” (Hong 2012, 89). The tedious hours “during the long winter months” (89) kindle the narrator’s imagination and she dreams of murder, of “a blade cold / as ice-nettled milk steaming into a neck” (91). Fearing her own fantasies, she decides to volunteer “to collect night soil” (91). Hong’s choice of words here is relevant: “night soil” was the euphemism used by nineteenth century farmers for human feces, which were collected from cities and eventually used to fertilize the fields (Rogers 2006, 35). Later in the poem, this soil will be explicitly referred to as “mountains of frozen shit,” a description that could well fit the data glacier itself, as we shall see. Indeed, this is the first instance where the image of waste hints to a blurring of the boundaries of nature: for the townspeople, out of excrement, “out of waste, / comes food for the only God / we know” (Hong 2012, 91). If manure is understood as that which is being fed to that “god,” then the inhabitants of the Last Untouched Town must

³ Hong’s choice of genre for the title of the poem shares a family resemblance with the first chapter of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962), “A Fable for Tomorrow,” which further support an ecocritical reading of the piece.

⁴ Grotjohn (2015) has confirmed that although the North Korean regime inspired the imagery of “Fable,” Hong did not intend it to be any place in particular.



concur with Baruch Spinoza's notion of *deus sive natura*, i.e., their "only God" is nature itself.

There are no signs of animism in the poem and an afterlife is explicitly denied. When denizens die, the townspeople tell "No fairy stories to ease the children's ears [...] no / he's gone away to somewhere magical" (Hong 2012, 91). After the woman's partner goes missing—that is, he is executed on account of being one of the "Enemies of the state" (2012, 91)—their only ritual involves dancing "a ring around the tower" (91). Pantheism is here suggested again when the woman adds "and he is the tower. He is the tree" (91). The first sentence in the line is a Biblical reference: "He is the tower of salvation to His king, and shows mercy to His anointed, to David and his descendants forevermore" (2 Samuel 22:51). The tower, however, acquires in the next sentence the form of a tree, a crucial symbol of the split between (or the fusion of) the godly and the telluric. This ambiguity presents the townspeople's relation to this god or nature as that of a deist who conceives of a transcendental being that is blind and dumb to its creation's prayers. Void of a relatable God, nature becomes pure materiality.

Reviewing the concept of nature, Raymond Williams highlights the importance of laying bare the "history and complexity of meanings" (1980, 67). According to Williams, the figure of Mother Nature was demoted to a deputy of a monotheistic god only to resurface after the Enlightenment as the "inherent and essential quality of any particular thing" (68). This was the sense inherited by first wave ecocritics and, consequently, ecopoets. A heightened environmental awareness fostered a poetics that reached back to the conceptions of nineteenth century American Transcendentalists, reproducing the split the circle had opened between an industrialized humanity and the sublime natural world. In "Fable," however, this separation is cancelled by precisely the unyielding forces of nature. After a terrible storm, the "town was erased / by hills of snow" (Hong 2012, 91). While this could initially be chalked up to the effects of climate change, it acquires a more intriguing character since "after the storm, a gigantic glacier appeared" (91). The most fascinating—yet the eeriest—aspect of Hong's imagined future is the "snow like pale cephalopods" that connects everyone "into a shared dream" (65), making everybody's musings and memories easily accessible in real time. Arguably, the glacier is an enormous block of "neuronic snow" that permits this hyperconnectivity. The unusual material it is made of invites us to revisit the frontiers of the natural. Indeed, in the storm episode the narrator suggests another blurring of its limits claiming that "It's easy for snow to swallow us" (91). In her ultimate rebellious act, the one that tears through the fabric of the symbolic, it is her who will swallow the snow. If Hong's allegory of the internet can be seen as the very plausible commodification of the unconscious in a near future, in "Fable," it is precisely the surplus of this wondrous technology which ignites theorization twofold: on the one hand, responding to more traditional ecocritical concerns and modes of representation, the Last Untouched Town can be seen as standing in for the peripheric territories of transnational capitalist cartographies that fall victim of environmental injustice, trapped under the double logic of exploitation and pollution. On the other, speculatively, the glacier appears as the disruptive element that complicates contemporary notions of nature.



IMPERIALIST-PLOTTED ICE | THE GLACIER AS AN ALLEGORY OF TRANSNATIONAL E-WASTE

In his study of the environmental consequences of digital technology, Sean Cubitt calls attention to the slippery etymology of the word “wilderness,” which can refer to the private hunting grounds that were saved for nobility. While peasants were excluded from these territories, such was not the case with scientists and artists who helped to create an image of nature “associated with the most dangerous places, and the ones most inimical to human habitation” (Cubitt 2017, 117). Thus, the old commons became either someone else’s property or a source of peril, which prevented the peasants from gathering their own sources of energy. Other than leading to a vision of the latter as unruly—a feature Morrison claims it shares with waste since both, given their “uncanny powers, need to be put in their place” (2015, 25)—Cubitt links this early distribution of the land to current day energy monopolies, which are responsible for “the reduction of superfluous populations to externalities condemned [...] to bear the brunt of the waste inherent in resolving crises of overproduction” (2017, 118). In this respect, the townspeople can be seen as a particular case of what Zygmunt Bauman has called “human waste,” i.e., “the population of those who either could not or were not wished to be recognized or allowed to stay” (2004, 5) once they have become “redundant,” that is, unprofitable, for the capitalist machine. Specifically, Bauman highlights the “former peasants who have fallen (or been thrown) overboard from the vehicle of economic progress” (60) and now populate technological dumpsites in the Global South like Agbogbloshie in Ghana, Guiyu in China, or the Payatas landfill in Quezon City in the Philippines.

According to some estimates, between 50% and 80% of American e-waste, “a virulent new category of refuse that includes trashed televisions, computers, cell phones and other electronics,” is offshored (Rogers 2006, 15). Indeed, when a team of scientists and artists working for SENSEable City Lab at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology investigated the meanderings of national refuse with electronic trackers, they discovered that “[m]any electronic items went to ports where they were loaded aboard ships, then left cell coverage and were never heard from again” (Humes 2012, 116). This “prime example of market anarchy leading to deep social and environmental harm” (Cubitt 2017, 127) is represented in “Fable” by the glacier. Once the mountain of “imperialist-plotted ice” (Hong 2012, 92) appears, i.e., it is illegally dumped in the Last Untouched Town, the king forces people to join the workforce to destroy it. The fact that the accidental ingestion of the tiniest chip causes one worker to “hallucinate, blither in another language” (Hong 2012, 92) points to the fact that “components of electronic products contain toxic substances, which can generate a threat [...] to human health” (Bhutta et al. 2011, 1). The improper dismantling of electronic equipment, an “illegal, typically unrestricted, environmentally nefarious endeavor” (Rogers 2006, 169), releases POPs (Persistent Organic Polluters), and exposes people to heavy metal poisoning due to the presence of substances like lead, zinc, and mercury. Lead alone, for example, “can damage the central and peripheral nervous systems, the blood system, and kidneys



in humans [...] and has highly acute and chronic toxic effects on plants, animals, and microorganism” (Pellow 2006, 187).

As Matthew Zanting suggests in his analysis of Rita Wong’s “sort by day, burn by night,” where the Canadian author denounces the dumping of e-waste in Guiyu, literature elicits “hard questions” (2013, 623) that may lead to a reconsideration of individual and collective habits. Hence, as an allegory, the glacier effectively responds to the needs of an ecocriticism that acknowledges transnational urges. However, beyond this allegorizing the pervasive electronic detritus, with the image of the “offensive glacier” (Hong 2012, 92) made of data exhaust, Hong does nothing short of creating the ultimate hybrid behemoth, the relentless spawn of unbridled technology and climate change. The implications of this theoretical entity transcend the ecological to reach the realm of ontology. Morton (2010) has coined the notion of hyperobject to refer to human creations that will outlive humanity. Plutonium, or Styrofoam are two of the examples he offers. Hong’s congealing of residual digital data could be added to the list. The glacier made of futuristic waste, representing a looming yet amorphous threat, works as theoretical reference against which to question the notion and limits of nature.

THE OFFENSIVE GLACIER | WASTE AS A DISRUPTIVE (UN)NATURAL ELEMENT

In *The Ecological Thought*, Morton introduces the notion of “mesh” to describe the cluster of objects that populate the universe and their inexhaustible relations. The mesh, however, is not the holistic version of Nature that understands that the whole is more than the sum of its parts. Morton’s ecological thought proposes an interconnectedness without a center, driven by pleasure, that holds no difference between inside and outside, here and there, or any kind of boundary whatsoever. Among the things that relate in the mesh, the ones “whose existence we cannot anticipate” (2010, 42) receive the title of “strange strangers.” Ungraspable and mutable, the unexpected appearance of strange strangers should break the “cycle of sameness” (59), allowing for new forms of relations and theorizations.

EXCURSUS ON THE POETIC IMAGE

Acknowledging Lynn Keller’s denunciation of “an insufficient poetic response to the radical instabilities of the environmental mess in which we find ourselves” (2007, 33), Sarah Nolan ventures in *Unnatural Eco-poetics* (2017) an application of new materialist theories in poetry. There, she shares Morton’s concern with respect to certain “environmental responsibilities that are overlooked when nature is viewed as something ‘over there’” (140). Interested in forms of bridging the gap between nature and culture, Nolan borrows Donna Haraway’s notion of “natureculture” and claims that her unnatural eco-poetics operates beyond traditional understandings which “do not sufficiently account for technological or social shifts toward fewer physical and natural spaces and to more digital and built sites” (14). Focusing heavily



on formal aspects, Nolan advocates for textual spaces where, following Buell's notion of environment, material elements coalesce with nonmaterial ones. Her claim that a change in eco-poetry can take place "only by employing nontraditional forms and self-reflexive language" (26), however, unnecessarily limits the scope of what may count as unnatural eco-poetic work.

While Nolan is initially explicit regarding her intention to leave the kind of images found in traditional nature poetry behind, which would include a glacier, the first poem analyzed in the book is A.R. Ammons's classic *Garbage*, where she claims that "The garbage heap appears to be the perfect site for naturecultures because it is perceived as a place where the by-products of culture are disposed and decomposed by and into the natural" (2020, 37). While this resembles my claim about the glacier, on the one hand, suggesting that cultural products go "into" the natural actually reproduces the divide instead of bridging it; on the other, Nolan stresses the contextual elements that drove Ammons to relinquish his original devotion to nature poetry in favor of a formal experimentation that permits the creation of textual spaces where natureculture's productions emerge. In other words, Nolan understands that the tearing down of the nature/culture divide must happen formally in the textual space opened by the poems.

I hold certain qualms regarding what Joan Retallack has contended about experimental poetry, that is, that every formal experiment "is a move away from the state of things" (2007, paragraph 25), and prefer to side, minus the sarcasm, with Ben Lerner's remark regarding Language poetry when he wonders "who among us still believes, if any of us ever really did, that writing disjunctive prose poems counts as a legitimately subversive political practice?" (2018, 136). Granted, *Engine Empire* has been regarded not only as a politically engaged work, but also as experimental and, indeed, Hong's tryptic features a wide array of formal resources mixed in verses and prose poems, fragmentation, pastiche, plurilingualism, hidden and explicit references, among others.⁵ Leaving aside the prickly matter of whether any of the mentioned resources can consistently be conceived of as "untraditional" nowadays,⁶ the poem's strength lies elsewhere.⁷

In his *Poetics*, Aristotle famously poses poetry as akin to philosophy on account of the discipline's dealing with what might happen.⁸ Depicting facts, on the other hand, is the duty of historians. Coincidentally, a common feature of twenty-first century political poetry is "an orientation toward the past in particular as it relates to literary traditions, cultural archives, and official histories" (Rankine and Dowdy 2018, 7). Rarer and more troublesome are the instances where the poem deals with

⁵ Ultimately, I coincide with Joel Bettridge (2020), who has claimed that the experimental in today's poetic avant-garde lies not so much in its formal aspects as in their demand for an ethical-political commitment.

⁶ Some examples Nolan gives in the epilogue of the book—Christian Bök's injection of poetry in DNA comes to mind—definitely present some form of innovation.

⁷ By no means does this imply that formal analyses of experimental works cannot yield thought-provoking results. Lynn Keller's study (2015) of Evelyn Reilly's *Styrofoam* (2009) is a perfect example of this.

⁸ A more contemporary version of this is found in Danielle Pafunda's contention, precisely discussing Hong's poetry, that "The lyric's main function is to express that for which we haven't yet a working language" (2018, 195).

the future, which is the case with Hong's "Fable." Here, Ezra Pound's understanding of the poetic image as *phanopoeia*, that is, the "use of a word to throw a visual image on to the reader's imagination" (1991, 37) may better equip poetry in its philosophical endeavors since, as picture theorist W.J.T. Mitchell suggests, images "introduce new forms of value into the world, contesting our criteria, forcing us to change our minds" (2002, 9). Thus, while I borrow from Nolan the notion of unnatural as it applies to "poems where naturecultures are made tangible through overtly textual spaces" (2017, 20), I do not restrict the generative power of these spaces to their formal aspects.

With the image of the glacier, a full-blown strange stranger, Hong's poem elicits theorizations like those of Morton's, which stir comfortable assumptions and signal a need to revisit the new realities of humans and nature. That the latter is represented by garbage as an "endless process of generation and decay," argues John Scanlan, "is only exaggerated by the fact that knowledge and reason involve a separation of the human from the natural" (2005, 36). If this split began with the development of *techne* to exert control over the disorderly outside reality,⁹ made of a blend of technological and mental refuse, Hong's data glacier cuts right through the binary. The hybrid glacier, in other words, should be regarded *not* as hybrid at all, but as pure nature proper.

Through this prism, human trash is not different from abandoned dams, nests, burrows, and hives; the corpses predators discard, the trail of devastation plagues or hurricanes leave behind. When the protagonist of the epilogue and her brother are carrying their mother to her snowy grave "up the mountain of junipers," she admits "I dread we will see other kin abandoned there" (Hong 2012, 90). At play here is Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject, the human reaction before the threat of loss of meaning triggered by particular images such as feces, open wounds or, exemplarily, dead bodies: "The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life" (1982, 4). By keeping the remembrance of our animality at bay, abjection operates on the threshold of the symbolic, separating nature and culture. In fact, Kristeva relates the abject to the irruption of the Real. Interestingly, Slavoj Žižek has equated the current ecological crisis to "the ultimate form of the answer of the real" (1992, 31). Hong's glacier, initially appearing as the upshot of a climatological phenomenon, carries within something more destructive.

When, after being drafted to pick away the block of ice, the protagonist sees the glacier, she admits that:

When I arrived, I was awed, so awed, I began to cry [...]

⁹ Significantly, the king's first measure against the glacier is to "launch a campaign" where "defunct factories suddenly produced lamps" which were hung over the block of ice, "but the glacier only glistened" (Hong 2012, 92).



The sheer sapphire cliffstone towered so high,
the whole ocean seemed frozen in it.
Under its shellacked panes of ice were marblings of color
I'd long forgotten: tangerine, topaz,
canary and rose.

Like fluorescing cuttlefish,
the colors pulsed, swirled and bloomed
into contracting rings. The ice breathed. (Hong 2012, 92)

By ascribing to the woman this feeling of awe—a sentiment originally reserved only to the vision of God—before the pile of (e-)waste, an object that would typically not be considered natural, let alone beautiful, Hong once again toys with the godly character of the (un)natural. With her detailed description of the colors that make the woman experience the sublimity that Romantics saved for nature at its wildest, Hong harnesses the other end of the binary and foreshadows an aesthetic breaking of the divide: this sublime piece of waste is a product of the human mind.

By introducing the Id, Freud claimed to decenter the individual self, just as Copernicus and Charles Darwin had flattened humanity's ego by decentering it from the universe and the planet, respectively. In *The Fourth Discontinuity* (1995), Bruce Mazlish adds a fourth decentering: eventually, he claims, it will be impossible to tell apart human from machine. As long as motherboards and circuits come from the dismantling of laptops and speed traps, solar panels and Tamagotchis, e-waste will remain, in Morton's famous wording, something "over yonder" (2010, 12). Old dentures, eyeglasses and glass eyes may still belong to the realm of the uncanny owing to their eerie familiarity with authentic human appendices. But what about used-up pacemakers, or worn-out bionic prosthetics? Even beyond that, beyond the circuits and silicon transistors, the glacier is made of memories and fantasies. It does not get any more human than that. This naturalization of human beings heralded by new materialisms and posthumanisms, this falling from the pedestal of more-than-nature implies granting equal dignity to all human organs. Earlier I suggested that the "mountain of frozen shit" that was the night soil collected by the protagonist could well be used to describe the neuronc glacier. In this 'pannaturalistic' framework, memories and musings should not be considered different from excrement: they are both the end product of bodily organs. Hence, the block of frozen dreams and fears is one more kind of (un)natural bodily refuse.¹⁰

The implications of this begin to take form in the event involving one of the workers drafted to destroy the glacier. One day, while they are chipping it away, "the wind burst and scattered the powdery snow far / into the air like spores" (Hong

¹⁰ For sure, thinking of bombastic verses, inspiring speeches, or pure love confessions as one form of waste may be challenging. But what about words that come out wrong? Slips, unheard callings, regrettable accusations thrown in the heat of the moment? Idiomatic expressions such as "to talk trash," "to talk shit," "to talk out of your ass" further buttress this point.

2012, 92). A man accidentally swallows some spores and goes into a hallucinogenic shock, speaking in tongues. He is “immediately exterminated” and the rest of the crew are forced to wear masks. This is nothing more than the symbolic protecting itself. After witnessing this episode, the woman does something remarkable:

One day, I decided to steal some.
I pocketed one grain.

The snow glowed blue in my hovel.
My little lamp.
Then one night I don't know why I swallowed it. (Hong 2012, 93)

If the neuronomic snow is understood as a form of bodily refuse, and hence an agent of abjection, by voluntarily swallowing some snow the woman becomes the ultimate rebel, tearing through the fabric of the symbolic, enacting the smashing of the illusion of meaning that is necessary to, in Morton's own words, hold “our mind open for the absolutely unknown that is to come” (2009, 204).

This feat, however, is anything but easy. In *Ecology without Nature* (2009), Morton claims that the embrace of our ecological position “must be more excessive, exuberant, and risky than a bland extension of humanitarianism to the environment. Humanitarianism would leave the environment just as it is, as an Other ‘over there’, a victim” (188). Indeed, earlier he states that “we can't mourn for the environment because we are so deeply attached to it – we *are* it” (186). Yet in *The Ecological Thought*, Morton eventually folds back into neohumanist mores: the ecological thought, he claims, “has to do with warmth and tenderness; hospitality, wonder, and love; vulnerability and responsibility” (2010, 77). “The ecological thought,” he concludes “is about people—it is people” (77). The paradox within these theories¹¹ lies in the fact that when they equalize all existing beings, these are always granted human(istic) dignity. Sarah Wasserman has already advised against “the fantasy that we might selectively attribute human values to objects and find in them better, more enduring visions of ourselves” (2020, 230). One could ask Morton who said viruses are solidary. Why assume boulders are not purposefully crushing hikers when freak accidents occur?

These uncomfortable questions can only be pondered in the arts. What interests me about Hong's poem is that it does not claim to know the answers and it saves the reader the preaching: the Last Untouched Town, its inhabitants, the glacier itself offer no moral compass. Hong's visions reach past our near future and bring back just a glimpse and then silence. The protagonist's last words after swallowing the ice, which coincide with the last lines of the poem and give this article its title, “And

¹¹ I am here focusing my attention on Morton, but also thinking of Jane Bennett's vibrant matter, Rosi Braidotti's posthumanism, Stacy Alaimo's trans-corporeality, Karen Barad's ethico-onto-epistem-ology, the Latour of the modes of existence, and any other theorist who has taken a materialist detour to end up back on the doorstep of humanist ethics.



this is what I saw” (Hong 2012, 93), are followed by a full stop that leaves looking into the unknown as the only plausible reference for the deictic “this.” The vantage point of a fictional future—what Morton would call the “‘impossible’ viewpoint [...] of the ecological thought” (2010, 23)—provides the poem with a theoretical thrust that carries along the unnegotiable vertigo concomitant to standing on the verge of that unknown.

“Reading poetry won’t save the planet,” (2010, 72) teases Morton. To some extent, however, art “can allow us to glimpse beings that exist beyond or between our normal categories” (60). While through metaphors and allegories art can denounce present ailments, the changing notions of nature, ecology, or the environment provided by theoretical foraging can also be put to a special type of trial by literature, films, or the plastic arts. Indeed, the aesthetic renditions of looming threats that lack a reference in space and time become theoretical entities that generate disruptions, demanding attention and enticing us to imagine possibilities beyond current limits. Thus, the (un)natural form of waste in Hong’s “Fable,” while not providing answers—or perhaps precisely because of this—unveils uncharted territories that shall stage the near and inevitable encounter with strange strangers yet to come.

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