The Midwife and the Poet

Bioaccumulation and Retroactive Shock

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Abstract Triangulating narratives from a prospective mining site in northern Norway, this article works to identify (and render graspable) a particular effect of retroactive shock—tracing its resonance through experiences of chemical exposure, colonial racism, cultural erasure, and destruction of the built environment. Linking these experiences, the argument sets up and explores an analytical space within which the toxic modernity of planetary capitalism can resonate, structurally, with the racist violence of state colonialism: a space that also, the author suggests, describes an important dimension of Anthropocene experience itself.

Keywords toxicity, colonialism, retroactive shock, anthropocenic affect

Introduction

The global diffusion of synthetic materials is one marker of the much-debated new epoch known as the Anthropocene. Within a scant few decades, human activities have generated a planetary sheath of novel, anthropogenic substances—plastics, radioactive isotopes, toxins, other synthetic materials—that is sufficiently massive, on its own, to form a distinctive layer or rupture in the future geological record. The distributed pervasiveness of these materials affects the Arctic and Antarctic disproportionately, as wind and oceanic currents grind and transport them toward the poles, sedimenting them in land, ice, water, and flesh.[1] This is one way in which the Arctic serves as a vanguard of the planetary "new normal": an early window on the realities of life on a "damaged planet,"[2] on modes of terrestrial life that have been altered,[3] or recomposed, through the cellular bioaccumulation of microplastics,[4] heavy metals, and artificial

1. See, e.g., the Northern Contaminants and Global POPs Program, Inuit Circumpolar Council Canada, http://www.inuitcircumpolar.com/contaminants.html; also, the work of the Civic Laboratory for Environmental Action Research (CLEAR), https://civiclaboratory.nl/ (accessed June 10, 2018).

2. Tsing et al., *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*.

3. Murphy, "Alterlife and Decolonial Chemical Relations"; Alaimo, *Exposed*.

4. Alexander, "Bioaccumulation, bioconcentration, bioaccumulation."

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toxins. The strange, overwhelming realities of this new epoch—not just pervasive toxicity but droughts and storms and famines, ocean acidification, shifting species ranges, extinctions and extirpations, rising seas, melting glaciers, seasons out of joint—can trigger a range of complex and often contradictory responses. Despite some early efforts,[5] the mass of these emergent, "anthropocenic" affects is still poorly understood, and largely uncharted. In the following discussion I attempt to delineate one such affect—one which I conceptualize as a particular structure of the wound, an injury that enters experience through a kind of *retroactive shock*. I develop this idea further in the closing section, following my discussion of three examples—two empirical vignettes and one more general account—that help triangulate and flesh it out, marking out some of its key coordinates and continuities. In the same breath, I am also trying to capture and bring into view some of the disorienting scalar instabilities that inhere in the Anthropocene concept itself—as a planetarizing device whose global heft can subsume the particularity of specific settings, rendering them subsidiary, or prosthetic, to a totalizing frame. Before I get to that, however, let me set the scene.

In June 2014 I was conducting fieldwork in an Arctic village on the bank of a fjord in Finnmark, the northernmost administrative district of Norway.[6] The village is small, counting just over a thousand inhabitants, and remote. Recently it had been in the news, on account of a private company that is proposing to reactivate and expand a nearby copper mining facility, last operational in the 1970s.[7] Controversially, the plans for this project specify that tailings from the mine will be "deposited" directly into the fjord. Norway is one of only a small handful of countries that permit this form of mining waste disposal, known as submarine tailings disposal (STD)—and of this handful, Norway is the only one that allows the practice in relatively shallow coastal waters.[8] The principal river that feeds the fjord is a protected national salmon river, and a key site in the spawning cycle for several important local fish populations. Fisheries have been a vital livelihood here for centuries, supplemented more recently by revenue streams from sports fishing and tourism.[9]

Having passed most of the regulatory checkpoints, the project currently looks set to go ahead. At town hall meetings, in media interviews, at trade shows, and in investor pitches, advocates of the project extol its projected social and economic gains—emphasizing benefits that nullify, supposedly, the negative risks (and certainties).[10]

5. See, e.g., Norgaard, *Living in Denial*; and Reinert, "Haunting Cliffs."

6. Fieldwork for the project occurred primarily in the context of two research grants: Estonian Research Council grant PUT30, "Life in the Sacrifice Zone," and Research Council of Norway grant RCN 215961, "Economics and Land Use Conflicts in Reindeer Herding in Finnmark." The name of the village is Kvalsund: http://www.kvalsund.kommune.no; see also https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kvalsund (accessed June 10, 2018).

7. Lund, *Gull, Gråstein og Grums*.

8. See also Reinert, "On the Shore," "About a Stone," and "Notes from a Projected Sacrifice Zone."

9. When the mine was last operational, in the 1970s, waste was also disposed in the fjord. While this went on, some locals say, the fish in the fjord began to rot on the bone. Their flesh became so discolored that "even cats wouldn't eat the scraps."

10. Reinert, "Notes from a Projected Sacrifice Zone"; see also, "Sacrifice."

Futures of universal wealth, growth, and well-being are conjured as if by practiced magicians, framed within the messianic horizon of a capitalist salvation history that promises redemptive abundance for all. In the time I have been following it, however, local and national opposition has also escalated rapidly: from almost nothing—images of the first demonstrations show three people holding up a banner outside the village hall, in the snow—to national and international media coverage, protest marches and rallies in the capital, coordinated campaigns of civil disobedience, and threats of direct action. Opposition has focused particularly on the consequences of the projected marine disposal, and the questionable reliability of environmental impact reports for the project—reports that were produced, as is normal in Norway, by consultants paid for by the mining company. Against the profitability narratives of proponents, critics mobilize alternative stories, conjuring futures that speak of loss, destruction, and damage: the collapse of local species, irreversible alterations to waterways and the shape of the land, livelihoods made impossible, new forms of poverty, economic exploitation by abstract global entities, actors accountable only to the bottom line. Local critics educate themselves, sifting through the overwhelming mass of technical briefs, reports, and briefing papers that form in the wake of the project. What substances are in play? Who says they are safe and who says they are harmful? How, when, in what concentrations, to whom, or to what? Have the turbulent fluid environments of the fjord been properly mapped? Are the biological interactions of nanoscale materials sufficiently understood, particularly when released into a fluid environment? What will happen when substances "leak" from the deposit, as seems almost inevitable—dispersing themselves through local environments, embedding themselves in the food chain, in human organs, in the public imagination?

Poisoned Milk

The immediate context for my visit to the village was a local fund-raising event being held by a major national NGO that has involved itself with the case.[11] Over two days, on an indoor stage in the village hall, a succession of speakers presented a program of talks, lectures, poetry readings, political appeals, and musical performances. One presentation in particular caught my attention. The speaker was a midwife from the area,[12] also the head of a regional chapter of the NGO that organized the event. Her appeal took the form of a story. A few years ago, she told us, a young woman from the area had come to her office asking for help and advice. The woman had given birth recently and as she talked to the midwife, she was breastfeeding her newborn child—but while doing this, she was also crying uncontrollably. Her problem, it turned out, was that she

11. Naturvernforbundet, "Folkefest for Fjorden i Kvalsund."

12. Her name is Annie Henriksen. She is currently the leader of the Finnmark chapter of the Norwegian Midwives' Association, as well as the editor of a book on indigenous birthing traditions in northern Norway; see Henriksen et al., *Eye-Mother*.

knew enough about bioaccumulation to know that over the course of a life lived "in the north," quantities of heavy metals and dioxins had settled in the soft tissues of her body—and that as she nursed her child these would be released, passing through her breastmilk to settle in its body, concentrating in the brain and nervous system, causing irreversible damage. The young woman was asking the speaker for her scientific and professional opinion, as a midwife—although deep down, the speaker said, she already knew what she had to do. If there was any way to limit or reduce the damage to her child, the young woman had no choice: she would have to leave her family, her friends, her homeland behind and move south. Her child would grow up there, far from the home, the land, and the community of its parents: first wave, perhaps, of some new geochemical diaspora—as people escape the shifted realities of a land that no longer accommodates them the way it used to.

"That young woman," the speaker said, "was my daughter." As she said this, she too was crying. Whether the punchline was intended literally or figuratively, it was a jarring and powerful statement. The presentation itself was raw but effective, vividly capturing the desperation and grief of the young woman in her office. I was moved, and curious—not only about her story but also because this was not the first time, in the context of these protests, that I had come across the image of a nursing mother. Over the last year or two, at various rallies and events I had seen another version of the same figure: the effigy of a mother and child, painted on a hand-drawn banner, carried from event to event and unfurled by protesters. On the banner, both the woman and the nursing child were encircled by a large, threatening snake,[13] depicted as a monster that seemed about to devour them. Inside the circle were also other beings: a salmon, birds, a deer. The woman on the banner was easily legible—as an emblem of motherhood and threatened innocence, endangered by the looming, catastrophic threat of the snake. Figured thus, importantly, this threat still appeared external, preventable. Whatever *it* was, it had not yet happened, the woman had not been caught. Up on the stage, however, the speaker offered us the figure of the nursing mother in another form. This one the snake *had* caught; the poison was in her milk now, and the image conveyed a different set of imperatives. On the banner, the mother warned of a looming threat; up on the stage, she bore witness instead to a damage that had already occurred: to injuries already suffered, costs unwittingly paid, life in the aftermath. Both figures captured a set of changed realities, distilling them into an appeal for protection—but while the mother on the banner called for preemptive action against a threat that was still in the future, external, the poisoned mother expressed something else: a sort of world-horror, an almost gothic dread of life in invisibly transformed environments, in a world whose elements had been turned against you, in secret, by unseen forces.

13. The events I am describing took place sometime before the Dakota Access Pipeline protests began in early 2016. Although the snake iconography parallels in striking ways the imagery of the Black Snake, associated with Standing Rock (e.g., Rivas, "Solidarity in Standing Rock"), the two images are as far as I know unrelated.

For all the immediacy of the young mother's situation, and of the real but impossible choice she faced, her experience was also being brought into play rhetorically: given form to shock the audience, to nudge them into recognizing that what had happened to her had also already happened to them, that their world had been altered in ways that affected each and every one of them down to the cellular level. The implications of her transformed body radiated outward: taking in the air, the water, the plants, the birds and their eggs, the fish, the reindeer, the people—all of them altered by the same forces, in the same ways, as her. Practices that had sustained communities in the area for centuries, vital both for subsistence and as part of local food cultures and traditions, practices such as gathering wild eggs, harvesting berries, hunting birds, fishing: these had suddenly become toxic, hostile to life, unsustainable. Skills and knowledges that had anchored people to their environments and helped them live—knowledge of what to eat, what to drink, how to sustain themselves—no longer corresponded to the world in which they had been developed.

For the speaker, recognition of this was associated with a profound grief, and with an encompassing sense of loss. In her speech, and in subsequent statements,[14] she delineated an experience of shock that was almost cosmic, a destructive collision between two worlds: one world that was encoded in the values, habits, practices, and beliefs of people; the other physical, a material environment that in the span of a generation or two had been remade, subtly and invisibly, into something unfamiliar, something whose workings and affordances were now obscure, inhospitable, toxic. Rapid and fundamental physical change had outpaced the cultural forms that tracked it. Embedding themselves in the flesh, novel substances had effected a complex disruption: of bodies and relations, practice, traditions, even of generational time itself. The image of the poisoned mother brought the cyclic biological substrate of time into question, animating it as vulnerable and haunted by the possibility of disruption or irreversible collapse. With this, transmission and reproduction were rendered as fundamental problems in a way they had not been before. For the unaware, to grasp the poisoned mother in her full implication meant being shifted, shockingly, into a world that you already shared with her but which, until that point, only she could experience: a damaged world, suffused by invisible poisons, shaped by forces that were remote, powerful, and unaccountable. Her image was agentive, in a sense almost sorcerous: her unrooted condition could unroot others, transmitting a shock that rendered them homeless like herself.

Lost Names

Up on the stage, the midwife pleaded with her audience to understand, to take what she said seriously and to recognize, in her story, their own condition: their own exposure, and vulnerability, in a world that had been transformed by the very same forces that

14. E.g., in an interview published in the Norwegian-language *Journal for Midwives*; see Uhre, "Ambassadør for det Ufødte Liv."

were now moving in on the village—that now proposed to shift 2 million tons of mining waste per year into the living waters that ran past, right outside. Her appeal concluded, and the next speaker took the stage. At the back of the hall, pondering, I let my gaze drift up, toward the high windows. Outside, the land lay bathed in the unrelenting brightness. It was summer and this far north the daylight was continuous. Something in what she said tugged at me, a kind of obscure resonance.

Upon arriving in the area initially, a year or so before, one of the first things I had done was try and find someone to walk me up into the hills and inland, into the proposed mining area. My guide in this turned out to be a local poet,[15] also a fierce critic of the proposed mine, who later became one of my key informants.[16] As we walked up into the hills from the village, she pointed out to me the various traces and marks left by past attempts, over the centuries, to mine this particular deposit. Many of the traces were small, difficult to spot in the vast landscape: an oddly shaped hole; a quarry full of angular, iridescent stones; a small artificial cave, roughly carved, dripping with water. Specific marks encoded the shifting scales and ambitions of the forces that produced them. The most recent were vast, artificial ravines that cut through the mountains themselves, reshaping them. Pausing on an uphill slope to pick some berries, the poet told me how the names she knew for the features of the inland—its mountains and ridges, hills, valleys, and plains—were recent fabrications: settler names, created because no one in the village knew their deeper history, their stories or their names in the local northern Sámi language.[17] This problem of "namelessness" was intimately tied, for her, to the pressing question of how (some) locals could, right now, be supporting a project that would irreversibly harm the very land they lived on. Her argument for this was complex, and requires some exposition.

Historically, the village and its surrounding areas are a particularly successful example of the forced assimilation policy known as *fornorsking*, or "Norwegianization": a program of cultural eradication directed by the Norwegian state against the indigenous Sámi minority from the late 1800s until the 1980s. This policy, which was central to the ongoing "internal colonization" of the northern territories,[18] was rooted in a complex mixture of racial chauvinism, national romanticism, and social Darwinist ideology—particularly, the widespread racist conviction that complete assimilation, or "absorption," was the only hope for Sámi people within the modern Norwegian nation-state. Formal implementation of the policy focused particularly on eradication of Sámi language and culture through the school system, but also via mechanisms such as the restriction of land sales to Sámi speakers; its effects were further amplified by

15. Her name is Marion Palmer. She has published several volumes of her own poetry, as well as an oral history of Kvalsund; see Palmer, *Bare Kirka Sto Igjen* (2010).

16. See Reinert, "On the Shore."

17. Northern Sámi was (and is) the primary indigenous language of the Kvalsund area. Across the territories of Sápmi there are up to eleven distinct Sámi languages, inflected further into a number of regional dialects.

18. See, e.g., Pedersen, "Statens eiendomsrett til grunnen i Finnmark."

widespread anti-Sámi prejudice among self-identified Norwegians. The policy was ultimately unsuccessful, in the sense that the Sámi survived as a people, but its consequences have been far-ranging and complex, and continue to this day. Health workers and mental health professionals refer to the "Sámi pain,"[19] denoting a suite of interlocking syndromes associated with the systematic and ongoing repression, stigmatization, and destruction of Sámi culture. In June 2017 the Norwegian Parliament voted to establish a commission,[20] on the model of similar initiatives in Canada and Australia, to determine the true scope, effects, and historical responsibility for Norwegianization. The proposal has occasioned considerable public debate, with resistance particularly from parties and politicians of the right.

Reporting from his 1950s fieldwork in the area, the anthropologist Robert Paine noted that the village and its surrounds had already been "heavily" Norwegianized.[21] The poet had her own story to tell here. Growing up in the area, as a teenager in the political ferment of the late 1960s and early 1970s, she had felt a strong sympathy for the Sámi cause—but being Norwegian herself, and thus "of" the colonial power, she had felt no right to "impose herself" in a struggle that was not hers. Instead, she had channeled her energies into other causes: getting involved in labor union politics in the south, traveling to the Middle East to work with volunteering organizations. Only many years later, returning to the north as an adult, did she begin to question aspects of her narrative. Odd memories began to surface. Had she not sat under the table in the kitchen, as a child, listening to her grandmother and her friends speak a language that she half understood? Gradually, sifting through evidence from many difficult conversations, she pieced together the story. Her family *had*, in fact, been Sámi—but as in many other Sámi families, faced with the complex and apparently inescapable stigma of indigeneity,[22] in a context defined by deep and pervasive racism, one generation had made the decision not to transmit their identity to the next. Instead of Sámi, the children would grow up speaking Norwegian, living as Norwegians; neither their history nor their language would be passed on to them.[23] By this strategy, many Sámi parents had

19. Eikjok Andreassen, "Den Samiske Smerten"; see also Dankertsen, "Samisk Artikulasjon" and "Fragments of the Future"; and Nergård, *Det Skjulte Nord-Norge.*

20. Stortinget, "Representantforslag om en sannhetskommisjon for fornorskningspolitikk og urett begått mot det samiske og kvenske folk i Norge," https://www.stortinget.no/no/Saker-og-publikasjoner/Saker/Sak/?p=67518 (accessed June 10, 2018).

21. Paine, *Coast Lapp Society I*; see also "Night Village and the Coming of the Men of the Word."

22. The classic texts on Sámi ethnic stigma in Norway are Harald Eidheim's monograph *Aspects of the Lappish Minority Situation* and his chapter "When Ethnic Identity Is a Social Stigma," in Fredrik Barth's edited anthology *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*. The concept has subsequently been picked up and used across a range of sectors, from linguistics to social work and sociology; see, e.g., Dankertsen, "Samisk Artikulasjon."

23. For readers unfamiliar with the context, it is worth noting that this strategy of intergenerational "passing" was possible because Scandinavian Sámi identity is, generally speaking, not strongly associated with physical markers such as distinctive skin color; Norwegian Sámi tend to "look Norwegian," a fact that has shaped indigenous politics at the national level in very particular ways.

hoped to give their children opportunities they never had themselves: a chance to integrate, to escape, to become fully "Norwegian" within a system (and a nation-state) that seemed unlikely ever to accept their Sámi identity as anything but a problem.

To the poet, the shock of this realization was profound.[24] After a lifetime thinking herself one of the colonists, she had discovered that she was, in fact, the colonized—so fully colonized, in fact, that her identity had disappeared, that her people had ended their own identity so as to give her the hope of another. The stigma, the internalized *shame* of indigeneity was so deeply embedded that to this day, she said, many of her family members refused to talk about the subject. In her hands, the story refracted much wider realities. With her own erasure and uncountable others like it, across the ancestral territories of Sápmi, entire generations had lost not just their language and identity but also their past, their anchoring to the land in biographical, historical, and generational time. Knots had been undone, rich continuities erased and falsified. The dynamics of colonization had not just conquered or rewritten the past but *erased* it, made as if it had never happened—as if history itself had yet to happen, or yet to begin. Using shame to destroy even the memory of memory, colonization had disconnected *people* from *land*: uprooting the former, leaving the latter as if devoid of value. Now, without name or memory, the land lay as if empty: if there was nothing to be lost here, there was also nothing worth defending.

As the poet continued to tell it, however, this was only one half of her story. During the Second World War, northern Norway had been occupied by the German army. In October 1944, as the occupying German forces fled west from the advancing Soviet army, the Reich had ordered the implementation of a "scorched earth" strategy. Houses were to be burned, livestock slaughtered, people evacuated—by force, where required: "compassion for the local population is inappropriate," the directive from Berlin

24. It is useful to clarify, at this point, that the first two sections of this essay were written, intentionally, in a way that circumscribed the complex Sámi presence in the area—thus circumscribing, also, the equally complex histories of colonization, suppression, and indigenous erasure that continue to shape the region (and the village) in fundamental ways. The aim of this uncomfortable narrative device was (among other things) to produce *in the reader*, at this point, some echo of the retroactive, revelatory shock that the poet is describing—a shock that is also the affect that the essay itself circles around and attempts to work with analytically. The reader will hopefully forgive the sleight of hand.

Bluntly, this narrative "trick" illustrates how easily the indigenous Sámi presence in the area can be erased (and *is* erased), simply through omission. In the light of this "turn," some parts of the first two sections also warrant revisitation. In her talk, for example, the midwife did not foreground ethnicity or indigeneity—but her intervention *could* also be read through the lens of her own complex identification as Sámi (see Uhre, "Ambassadør"). This prism, in turn, opens up her argument to conversations across a much broader international body of indigenous scholarship, on issues such as environmental toxicity, climate justice, decolonization, global capitalism, and the Anthropocene; see, e.g., Todd, "Indigenizing the Anthropocene"; Davis and Todd, "On the Importance of a Date." Of particular note here is Kyle Powys Whyte's argument about the Anthropocene as a kind of post-apocalyptic déjà vu, an intensification and amplification of processes that indigenous people have already suffered for centuries; see, e.g., Whyte, "Indigenous Climate Change Studies." See also Simpson, "The Anthropocene as Colonial Discourse."

instructed.[25] Finnmark was to be destroyed, turned into a hostile no-man's-land that could offer no food, no supplies, no possibility of shelter to the advancing enemy. The strategy was effective, but it left in its wake a crescent of destroyed towns that trailed the entire northern coast-edge of Norway, from Kirkenes in the east to Lyngen near Tromsø in the west. Like other population centers in the path of the advancing Soviet army, the village too had been destroyed and the villagers evacuated, transported south by the fleeing Germans. This event figured very strongly in the analysis of the poet—in part, because she had recently completed an oral history of the evacuation, a project based on years of interviews with villagers who had lived through it.[26] For many of the survivors the event had been, as she put it, a kind of apocalypse, almost indescribable. Survivors narrated scenes of biblical horror: flames and black smoke over the roofs, the terrified bellows of livestock being slaughtered, everywhere the smell of blood as German soldiers rowed villagers out to the waiting ships.

Until the evacuation, many of the villagers had never even left the village: on arriving in the cities of the south, their shock and disorientation was profound. After the war, when the government in the south undertook the grand project of reconstruction, aiming to modernize and reform the north,[27] many of the returning villagers saw this as an opportunity: a chance to join the opulent southern modernity they had glimpsed in the evacuation, a world of wealth and abundance—of wide roads and grand structures, electricity, markets, libraries.[28] And that world, of course, was Norwegian. Unsurprising, then, that in town after town along the coast, in the first census after the war, townships that registered a Sámi majority before the war suddenly "switched," en masse, to becoming predominantly Norwegian.[29]

In telling this story, the poet was sketching out the lineaments of a landscape defined by two massive and overlapping erasures: one, a complex intergenerational effacement, effected over centuries of domination, persecution, forced assimilation, and marginalization; and two, a complete obliteration (and subsequent reconstruction) of the built environment. In the juncture between these two, she argued, the village today had come into being as a space, *a world* in which people lived as if uprooted already—alienated from a land that had first seen its past erased, then that erasure too erased. The village today existed in a sense both *before* history, as if history had yet to begin, *and* in a sort of posthistorical, apocalyptic space in which history had ended, but no one even remembered that it had happened in the first place. This emptied space,

25. Johansen, *Brent Land*, 13.

26. Palmer, *Bare Kirka Sto Igjen*.

27. To this day, most of coastal architecture in Finnmark reflects a handful of standardized designs—designed by the southern architects of the reconstruction for simplified mass production, but also in the spirit of standardization and centralization that dominated Norwegian public thinking during the postwar period.

28. Pulk, Thrane, and Sara, "Gjenreisning og Fornorsking."

29. Bjørklund, *Fjordfolket i Kvænangen.*

simultaneously prior and subsequent to history, was a blank slate, a perfect manifestation of *terra nullius*—not as a device or fantasy of the colonist, but as the lived, subjective reality of the colonized.

The Fourth Wound

Perhaps the resonance between the two stories is already becoming apparent. Like climate, or radiation, pervasive environmental toxicity is, for the most part, not directly available to the senses—at least not in a straightforward way. The injuries it leaves are often invisible;[30] even when they do become obvious, they can manifest as if worked by invisible agents, in inscrutable ways. The point at which the existing damage is revealed, at which it becomes apparent and known, can thus come as a moment of retroactive, redefining shock—a moment that echoes, structurally, the shock of the poet when she discovered her suppressed identity as a Sámi. Both experiences circle a point where you discover yourself "already wounded," awakening to an invisible yet constitutive injury that had *already been inflicted*, a long time ago, which you carried without knowing but now that you know, it changes everything.

In the eighteenth lecture of his *General Introduction to Psychoanalysis* (1920), Freud posited that science had inflicted three great successive wounds or "outrages" to the "naive self-love" of humanity.[31] The first occurred when astronomy displaced Earth from the center of the universe; the second, when evolution and biological descent displaced humans from the throne of creation, rendering them instead as an animal among others. The third, finally, was inflicted—supposedly—by psychoanalysis itself, when it showed how the conscious, rational, thinking self was neither sovereign nor ever fully available to itself. Working in the lineage of that proposition, many other candidates for a "fourth wound" have been proposed. Dominique Lestel, for example, identifies this wound with the emergence of complex animal subjects in disciplines such as ethology, as nonhuman animal studies continue to dismantle, one by one, the supposedly exceptional traits that differentiate "the human." The fourth wound, Lestel argues, is that "the human being is no longer the sole subject in the universe."[32] Along similar lines, Donna Haraway has also made the case for a "cyborgian" fourth wound, inflicted in the dissolution of barriers between the organic and the inorganic.[33] More recently, others have proposed that the Anthropocene diagnosis also be read along these lines—as a narcissistic injury that decenters a certain subject, or subject formation, by destroying some premise that its self-image depends on.[34]

Initially, the proposition might seem counterintuitive. Despite the catastrophic tenor of its various shifts, ruptures, and accumulations, many still hail the Anthropocene

30. Goldstein, "Invisible Harm."
31. Freud, *General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, 246.
32. Lestel, "Question of the Animal Subject," 114.
33. Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 12.
34. Ross, "Question Concerning the Anthropocene."

as the threshold of a brave new age: a Promethean moment of world history when a human subject is finally released, transfigured by technology into a planetary force—a "homo deus," free to rebuild the world in its own image. Rhetorics of control and transcendence take on fantasmal, hallucinatory intensity: the transposition of *anthropos* into planetary history appears less as a humbling wound than a grandiose, world-historical elevation. In positing "the human" as an agent of planetary transformation, however, concepts like the Anthropocene also force a dramatic and far-ranging reassessment of what that "human" is—or ever was—in the first place.[35] The implications of this reassessment are not necessarily straightforward. Latour, for example, gestured to Freud a few years ago when he described the "narcissistic wounds" entailed in certain strands of anthropocenic discourse.[36] On the one hand, he argued, frameworks such as the Gaia hypothesis force the human imagination "back from an infinite universe," imprisoning it within the "tiny local atmosphere" of Earth. At the same time, the causal mechanisms revealed in the Anthropocene also render this trapped human subject *accountable*, ultimately and without escape, for the consequences of its actions. Against the vertiginous expansion of human agency posited in the Anthropocene, concurrent refigurations of the planet also impose the finite, fragile planetary environment as a hard limit to fantasies of limitless expansion and transcendence. Planetary systems are neither invulnerable nor oblivious; actions have consequences—an observation that imposes itself with limiting force precisely on that invulnerable, omnipotent, ever-advancing subject that celebrates its own apotheosis in the Anthropocene.[37] The double narcissistic wound here is finitude, and responsibilization: a forced reckoning of consequences, within a suddenly limited space.

In a more straightforward register, the Anthropocene is also legible as a kind of ecological injury in its own right—a wounding of the planet or of the planetary biosphere, as anthropogenic effects ripple across and into it: shredding biotopes, eradicating species after species, destroying communities, and threatening, ultimately, even the geochemical calibrations that sustain aerobic life.[38] Crucially, in this reading, planetary humanity tends to figure as the *wounder*, not the wounded: agent of a harm that is ultimately self-harm. Of course, that supposedly self-harming, planetary human agent only exists in certain limited ways; the Anthropocenic power to inflict harm is ultimately as asymmetrical, and as unevenly distributed, as the harms themselves. More often than not, this concept of a collective human subject—the *anthropos* of the

35. Chakrabarty, "Climate of History."

36. Latour, "Puzzling Face of Secular Gaia."

37. In a 2014 piece for the *New York Review of Books*, author Zadie Smith captures the shock of this unexpected vulnerability using a particularly striking simile: "We always knew we could do a great deal of damage to this planet, but even the most hubristic among us had not imagined we would ever be able to fundamentally change its rhythms and character, *just as a child who has screamed all day at her father still does not expect to see him lie down on the kitchen floor and weep*" (emphasis added). Smith, "Elegy for a Country's Seasons."

38. Helmreich, *Alien Ocean*, 64–65.

Anthropocene—functions only to blur the responsibility of concrete actors, allowing the specific ravages of capitalism or colonial violence to dissolve into the absorbent and exculpatory body of a universal "humanity."[39]

Still, among the many shocks of the Anthropocene,[40] the complex experience of discerning oneself as a destructive planetary agent is still also a real and central aspect of this new epoch. Transfigured in that shock, the banal quotidian practices of consumptive modernity—practices such as driving a car, wrapping food in plastic, traveling by plane for a holiday, discarding a computer—acquire vast and lethal consequence. In the aggregate, their unexamined normality ceases to be innocuous and becomes catastrophic; the mundane reveals itself as monstrous.[41] A central aspect of this shock is *moral*: a certain subject recognizes its own, previously unrecognized agency and apprehends, in the same moment, that this agency has been at work for a long time already—blindly, obliviously, to destructive effect. In this particular sense, the epochal diagnosis of the Anthropocene wounds the moral self-understanding of a subject whose existence was predicated on a sense of innocence, perhaps unarticulated—an innocence that collapses in the revelation of consequences it cannot be reconciled with. Not only is that innocence false now, but it always was.[42] Today, a central question we confront may well be how to *induce* that shock, how to further wound that subject—in the depths of its grandiosity and innocence—and, by doing so, make space for others.

Analytics of the Wounded

Strathern observes that "it matters what ideas we use to think other ideas (with)."[43] Framing phenomena such as environmental toxicity, colonialism, or the Anthropocene through the figure of the wound is a way to open them, among other things, to the knowledge of the injured. As Judith Butler observes, wounds sensitize their victims to the mechanism by which they were inflicted: "To be injured means that one has the chance to reflect upon injury, to find out the mechanisms of its distribution, to find out who else suffers from permeable borders, unexpected violence, dispossession, and fear, and in what ways." [44]

This is why decolonial theorists can point to the potentiality of the colonial wound as "a new location of knowledge"[45]—because the wound describes a displacement that

39. Todd, "Indigenizing the Anthropocene."

40. Bonneuil and Fressoz, *Shock of the Anthropocene*.

41. I discuss this experience of Anthropocenic complicity in other contexts, e.g. Reinert, "About a Stone," and "Haunting Cliffs"; see also Swanson, "Banality of the Anthropocene."

42. Structurally and in other ways, this "moral wound" of the Anthropocene echoes the injured innocence of whiteness, of the white subject when confronted with their own implication in structures of systemic racism. Wekker, *White Innocence*.

43. Strathern, *Reproducing the Future*, 10.

44. Butler, *Precarious Life*, xii.

45. Mignolo, *Idea of Latin America*, 74.

is also a transformation. From the wound, new analytics radiate. Both the midwife and the poet struggled with complex and obscure injuries, caused by abstract, overpowering agents through mechanisms that transcended personal action, or accountability, and that offered no simple path to remediation or recovery. For both, the concealed nature of their injuries also forced them into a struggle to communicate their basic reality, to alert others to the ways in which those others, too, had been injured—because in both cases the agent, cause, and mechanism of injury all exceeded the scope of individual action, and of individual justice. Speaking from the complex, overlapping realities of a colonized periphery, their stories grew like a new eye, attuned to the mechanisms that brought it into being: a *forensic* eye, trained on the traces that subtle forms of violence sometimes let slip,[46] betraying themselves and becoming visible.

Extrapolating from this, I also sketched out here an account of the Anthropocene as a kind of moral shock, or a wound to innocence: a narcissistic injury to the self-understanding of a subject that suddenly grasps its own innocence not just as false, but as a cornerstone in a system of ongoing harm. The retroactive shock of that epiphany functions, I think, as a kind of mirror to the other two I have described: in the sense that for its subject, the world-altering character comes not from finding oneself the unwitting *victim* of an unrecognized violence, but rather its agent. Despite this reversal, a recognizable structure of experience is still in play, I think, across all three examples: a wounding shock that establishes a "new location of knowledge," rendering a particular subject position impossible and forcing the development of novel analytics, novel understandings of self and world alike. Together, the three stories triangulate the structure of the affect I was after: the retroactive shock of an injury that transforms the world, a figure of the aftermath but also of beginnings, a trope that opens thought to the thinking of the wounded.

I have used this figure to set up an analytical space within which the toxic modernity of planetary capitalism can resonate, through the structure of its experiential footprint, with the racist violence of state colonialism. My sense here is that this resonance can be extended to encompass also those, say, for whom the moment of shock reveals not some hidden damage they have suffered but rather damage they have *caused*, and the structural complicity of their (supposed) innocence—thus rendering available, too, the complex mechanisms that produced their unawareness, concealing from the aggressor the nature of their aggressions. Oblivious entitlement, the reproduction of invisible violence, the grand delusional "normality" of the world-devouring subject that finally finds its mirror stage in the Anthropocene: might not socialization into these perhaps itself be understood, at some point, *as a form of violence*—and its effects then recognized, with retroactive shock, as a kind of injury? In the shared anthropocenic dislocation of the wound new affinities might then become possible, crossing lines that may seem absolute at the present time: new potentials for alignment and joint work;

46. Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*.

triangulated diagnostics rooted in a common experiential recognition of the same injurious force(s), operating (and inflicted) in completely different ways across domains, in different lives. Working from the space described by their respective injuries, the midwife and the poet have already begun, together, to define a "new location of knowledge": one that opens itself to the novel planetary condition, and to its emergent politics, precisely through those wounds that forced it into being. In time, I think, more and more will join them there, setting themselves also to this work—of fashioning the tools required "not only for acts of rebellion, but for thinking-otherwise."[47]

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47. Mignolo, *Idea of Latin America*, 62.

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