



# A Political Ecology of Desire

## Between Extinction, Anxiety, and Flourishing

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**Abstract** How does attention to exertion and absence of care illuminate possibilities for avoiding extinction amid global biodiversity declines? This article brings together feminist technoscience and more-than-human theory on care with Lacanian psychoanalytic theories of anxiety and desire. It does so to diagnose the threat of extinction anxieties and consider their material and political consequences for impedances to caring for nonhuman life and their flourishing. The article is developed through the empirical case of *Arrojadoa marylandae*, an endangered species of cactus in Bahia, Brazil, as a political ecology of desire. In bringing psychoanalytic thought into conversation with care, it considers how desire sits at the heart of more-than-human care and yet may be thwarted by anxiety. Contending with his own extinction anxieties as they became focused through an endangered cactus on a mountain destined for mining, the author excavates routes toward flourishing geographies: geographies of care-full interspecies alliances composed against Anthropocenic thinking. In concluding, the author urges for greater attention to the work of desire in studies of environmental change and the wider environmental humanities.

**Keywords** care, cacti, psychoanalysis, more-than-human geography, Jacques Lacan

### Who Cares Whether a Cactus Goes Extinct?

Acts of care for endangered species are uneven, regardless of how near to extinction a species might be or become.<sup>1</sup> Formal recognition of species endangerment, or practices marking species as matters of concern, do not necessarily lead to efforts of species care. There is therefore an important distance between the politics and ethics of demonstrating concern and “hands-on” practices of care for nonhuman life.<sup>2</sup> Whereas concern holds more passive connotations of “worry and thoughtfulness,” care, as María Puig de la Bellacasa writes, invokes active practices with a “strong sense of attachment and commitment to something.”<sup>3</sup> What structures this distance between handwringing

1. Van Dooren, “Care”; van Dooren, *Flight Ways*, 7.

2. Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*.

3. Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, 42.

and the active work necessary for fostering life? How might approaching desire to care for another life be better understood by first asking what it means to desire or what stands in desire's way?

With these questions in mind I engage with the cactus *Arrojadoa marylandae* to write a political ecology of desire. I consider a political ecology of desire as a kind of analysis of environmental change, recognizing that desire holds profound capacities for making (and remaking) the world in ways that can produce or accelerate forms of unevenness and imbalances of power across societies, spaces, and species alike. If political ecology excels in revealing the production of these kinds of human inequalities wrought through and coproducing environmental change, explicit attention to desire turns to an appreciation that the political and economic are also profoundly shaped by the work of the unconscious and "the desire to desire," the force that propels the subject forward as a desiring subject. The story of *A. marylandae* is one of desiring to care best understood through a psychoanalytic reading of the unconscious as "thoroughly social and material," in line with two decades of psychoanalytic geographic thought.<sup>4</sup> But in aiming for desire, this article explores what occurs when desire becomes impossible, thwarted by anxiety.

*Arrojadoa marylandae* is a cactus endemic to one mountain in Bahia, Brazil, and was only recently described in the scientific literature. Its survival as a species, however, does not elicit sufficient concern to move powerful actors to care for it more than the profit potential of the mountain's mineral resources, though this does not stop others from attempting to care within a deeply "troubled ecology."<sup>5</sup> The cactus exemplifies crucial gaps between concern and care in species conservation work, and how matters of care are always inherently also political matters intersecting the governing of non-human life and transformations wrought by global capitalism.<sup>6</sup> *A. marylandae* provides a useful case study in contending with how extinction elicits powerful expressions of anxieties in response to it as a profound disruption of time—when the obliteration of time gets "too close."<sup>7</sup>

Taking up concerns for care and extinction in a Lacanian psychoanalytic register, I explore how anxiety thwarts desire by displacing the ultimate absence that makes desire possible with the absence-presence of the cactus verging on extinction.<sup>8</sup> In a related vein, Paul Robbins and Sarah A. Moore understand Anthropocene anxieties through what they call "ecological anxiety disorder."<sup>9</sup> Through an analysis of how scientists respond to species invasions, they interrogate how Anthropocene anxieties swirl around the question of human importance in great planetary transformations underway. Here

4. Robbins and Moore, "Return of the Repressed," 1750. Kingsbury and Pile, "Introduction."

5. Besky and Blanchette, "Fragility of Work," 6.

6. Marder, *Plant-Thinking*.

7. Bastian, "Fatally Confused"; Shepherdson in Harari, *Lacan's Seminar on "Anxiety,"* xxxii.

8. Lacan, *Anxiety*, 174–75.

9. Robbins and Moore, "Ecological Anxiety Disorder."

I am concerned with extinction as a particularly disturbing form of portending *temporal absence*. Because anxiety represents a form of denial or repression of what one actually knows, but the unconscious works to conceal to protect the subject from unwanted feelings or revisitations of past traumas, anxiety also holds potential: “It [anxiety] can reach beyond the phantasy . . . prompting a potentially radical shift in the constitution of subjects, practices, and institutions.”<sup>10</sup> Anxiety, therefore, is a “signal,” but “of all signals, [it] is the one that does not deceive.”<sup>11</sup> In examining this case of impending extinction anxiety, I show how the seemingly futile and even contradictory efforts taken by concerned actors to “save” this species represent intelligible expressions of extinction anxiety and what this anxiety seeks to conceal: the political and economic conditions behind the diminishing presence of the cactus, powers thwarting efforts of collective exertions to enact species care.

In what follows I turn to psychoanalytic self-analysis in making sense of bearing witness to cactus extinction. This approach to ethnographic research, as Jesse Proudfoot writes, includes “the discovery that key elements of my research were inextricably connected to my own anxieties as a researcher.”<sup>12</sup> There is a steady and growing body of scholarship interested in how studies of human-environment relations can benefit from the insights of psychoanalytic thought.<sup>13</sup> Recognizing that psychoanalytic theories of the unconscious are inextricable from the European imagination through which they emerged, I approach my arguments against a backdrop of understanding the colonial psyche as one that represses the “violent acts and desires of colonization.”<sup>14</sup> My presentation of psychoanalytic self-analysis in contending with extinction anxieties is thus inevitably also a reading and critique of Euro-Western conservation desires expressed in-landscape in Bahia, Brazil.

### Between Flourishing Geographies and Extinction

There is little cross-fertilization between more-than-human geographies and psychoanalysis.<sup>15</sup> If “human nature is an interspecies relationship,” as Anna Tsing writes, why has more-than-human scholarship tended to neglect our unconscious selves?<sup>16</sup> How humans and nonhumans co-constitute one another, and how this co-constitution is mediated by affects, encounters, and efforts to care, has been a key feature of more-than-human geographies and a range of affiliated fields since their inception and remains so

10. Moore, Arefin, and Rosenfeld, “Generating Anxiety, Short-Circuiting Desire,” 1084.

11. Lacan, *Anxiety*, 160.

12. Proudfoot, “Anxiety and Phantasy in the Field,” 1135.

13. Nast, “Mapping the ‘Unconscious’”; Robbins and Moore, “Return of the Repressed”; Moore, Arefin, and Rosenfeld, “Generating Anxiety, Short-Circuiting Desire.”

14. Nast, “Mapping the ‘Unconscious,’” 215.

15. But see two notable exceptions: Pile, “Beastly Minds”; Pohl, “Object-Disoriented Geographies”; and see a new edited volume by Burnham and Kingsbury, *Lacan and the Environment*.

16. Tsing, “Unruly Edges,” 141.

today.<sup>17</sup> Donna Haraway writes, “We are in a knot of species coshaping one another in layers of reciprocating complexity all the way down.”<sup>18</sup> The psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, whose work I draw on here, also liked thinking with knots and shows how the unconscious can be understood topologically through knots’ conjoining the real, the symbolic, and the imaginary in chains of signifiers.<sup>19</sup> We may be knots of species coshaping one another, but our knotted unconscious selves aren’t just along for the ride, they mediate the very meaning of the journey “all the way down.” As Steve Pile aptly writes, “The affective and emotional intensities of human and nonhuman relationships must be seen as fundamental to how and why psychical structures take the form they do.”<sup>20</sup>

In *Imagining Extinction*, Ursula K. Heise asks a vital question: “Is it possible to acknowledge the realities of large-scale species extinction and yet to move beyond mourning, melancholia, and nostalgia to a more affirmative vision of our biological future?”<sup>21</sup> What I see left unnamed in this “affirmative vision” are flourishing geographies as a horizon of pursuit—an impossible destination that nevertheless orients movement away from extinction as a great unmaking.<sup>22</sup> My thinking on flourishing is inspired by Chris Cuomo’s theorizing of flourishing as an ecological feminist ethic for interspecies well-being that also advances human well-being. As Robin Wall Kimmerer writes, “All flourishing is mutual.”<sup>23</sup> Flourishing is an ecological engagement of interdependence. Flourishing acknowledges that human and nonhuman life are entwined and reciprocal, without suggesting evenness or necessary mutuality.<sup>24</sup> But flourishing, as Franklin Ginn, Uli Beisel, and Maan Barua write, “is not some ‘soft’ alternative to biopolitics. Flourishing also involves a constitutive violence; flourishing . . . requires that some collectives prosper at the expense of others.”<sup>25</sup> Composed against dismal “misanthropocenic”<sup>26</sup> narratives, I consider flourishing geographies as places where life is afforded the possibility for becoming in an ever-changing world.<sup>27</sup> Extending this thinking to matters of care, care demands contending with impediments to the capacity to enact flourishing, just as it requires contending with any number of material, political, economic, or biophysical (in)capacities. To insist on flourishing as a horizon is to resist both psychic and physical efforts constraining life’s potential for adaptation and change as a processual enactment of becoming.

17. Whatmore, *Hybrid Geographies*; Krzywoszynska, “Caring for Soil Life in the Anthropocene.”

18. Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 42.

19. Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality*, 122–36.

20. Pile, “Beastly Minds,” 233.

21. Heise, *Imagining Extinction*, 13.

22. Dean, *Communist Horizon*, 1–2; Rose, “Multispecies Knots of Ethical Time.”

23. Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 20.

24. Cuomo, *Feminism and Ecological Communities*, 74.

25. Ginn, Beisel, and Barua, “Flourishing with Awkward Creatures,” 115.

26. Patel, “Misanthropocene?”

27. Larsen and Johnson, *Being Together in Place*, 20–22.

*On Extinction and Care: A Psychoanalytic Thought*

Extinction studies is concerned with “understanding and responding to processes of collective death,” death that Deborah Bird Rose describes elsewhere as a “double death,” the permanent extinguishing of intergenerational time.<sup>28</sup> Across much work in extinction studies is an awareness of a mounting “ethical paralysis,” an emotional state disabling response to extinctions as they unfold and hasten.<sup>29</sup> But we can also understand inaction to extinction’s presence through the work of Jacques Lacan on anxiety and unconscious attempts to shore up the psyche through protecting ourselves from the pain or trauma contained in what we know but refuse or are unable to confront.<sup>30</sup> Asking what instead could contribute to a flourishing of thought fostering a praxis of multi-species care is aided by developing a conversation between psychoanalysis and extinction studies.

Against ideas of anxiety as being without an object, for Lacan, anxiety very much does have an “object,” but it is a different sort of object, what he names *objet a*. Lacan repeatedly states that “anxiety is not without an object.”<sup>31</sup> As Roberto Harari explains, this wording of “not without” is exacting: “These two particles . . . structure the aphorism in a way that accounts for *the obscure, imprecise condition of the object at hand*.”<sup>32</sup> This Lacanian theorizing of anxiety is important because it helps make sense of how it is the absence-presence of the thing being made extinct—the unnerving proximity of true absence close at hand—that causes extinction anxieties to arise, not absence itself. In the context of global species declines, this excavating work of the unconscious produces important opportunities for grappling with extinction anxieties to see what lies beyond.

In raising the specter of extinction as a looming threat encircling Anthropocenic thinking, Lacan’s key insights of jouissance and *objet a* illuminate what inhibits possibilities for movements to care. Jouissance poorly translates into English as “enjoyment”; rather, it is surplus-enjoyment “beyond the pleasure principal,”<sup>33</sup> a yearning for “total satisfaction” that can only produce the “ache of desire.”<sup>34</sup> Jouissance sits at the core of Lacanian theory on desire: it “involves an ineluctable yet fleeting, alluring yet threatening painful pleasure.”<sup>35</sup> Jouissance also helps clarify the emergence of a cactus at the edge of extinction as a signifier for *objet a*. This is because *objet a* is a “lure,” a horizon or target to be pursued through the desire for jouissance.<sup>36</sup> “In the desire of every

28. Rose, van Dooren, and Chrulaw, “Introduction,” 5; Rose, “What If the Angel of History Were a Dog?,” 75. Many key texts within extinction studies are published in this journal. See Bastian, “Whale Falls, Suspended Ground”; Garlick and Symons, “Geographies of Extinction.”

29. Rose, “Slowly,” 2; van Dooren, *Flight Ways*.

30. Robbins and Moore, “Return of the Repressed.” A helpful short review of Lacanian anxiety is offered by Moore, Arefin, and Rosenfeld, “Generating Anxiety, Short-Circuiting Desire.”

31. Lacan, *Anxiety*, 159.

32. Harari, *Lacan’s Seminar on “Anxiety,”* 34.

33. Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 184.

34. Kirshner, “Rethinking Desire,” 84.

35. Kingsbury, “Did Somebody Say Jouissance?,” 50.

36. Loveless, *How to Make Art*, 80.

demand,” Lacan says, “there is but the request for object *a*, for the object that could satisfy *jouissance*.”<sup>37</sup> *Objet a* is the leftover excess emergent in the formation of the subject in relation to the big Other. The capital O Other here is not a referent to another specific individual but the more abstracted “big Other” through which we symbolically emerge as desiring subjects upon entering the world of language as young children.<sup>38</sup> In the desire for the fantasy of the impossible (re)unification of the self with this pre-separated state, it is the subject’s recognition of an ontic split from the Other that makes the desiring subject possible. Lacan instructs we should understand this desire as a mediation of what we suppose our own unconscious desires to be in relation to the Other’s desire. This does not mean we cannot grasp at these desires, instead it is to recognize “our” desires are not “ours” alone. The unconscious, as Maurice Merleau-Ponty says, “is to be sought not at the bottom of ourselves, behind the back of our ‘consciousness,’ but in front us, as articulations of our field. It is ‘unconscious’ by the fact that it is not an object, but it is that through which objects are possible, it is the constellation wherein our future is read.”<sup>39</sup> This is what Lacan means when he says, “The discourse of the Other that is to be realized, that of the unconscious, is not beyond the closure, it is *outside*.”<sup>40</sup>

*Objet a*, in other words, is what sets desire in motion.<sup>41</sup> But desire is not only mediated as an experience between our unconscious selves and the external world; as Paul Kingsbury explains, the mental and the social are topologically enjoined: “The interior is present in the exterior and vice versa.”<sup>42</sup> This raises our eyes to a more-than-human psychoanalytic possibility focused on the *interactivity* of unconscious desires operating in the world with profound reverberations for the living world and how we understand the world to be. Such an appreciation is vital to establishing how we might approach a cactus on the road to extinction as both a “lure” in the desire for *jouissance* yet also an “object” [*objet a*] of anxiety. Attention to desire in examining the work of care is important then because it is the search for *jouissance* in *objet a* that is the motor behind a desire to *desire*. And yet when the position of *objet a* shifts away from its proper place—the side of the Other—in relation to the desiring subject, anxiety may arise, thwarting the capacity to desire. Anxiety is not—as Lacan importantly instructs—an emotion; anxiety is an affect. Anxiety emerges when *objet a* becomes too close, when the fantasy of the split subject begins to disintegrate. Anxiety’s affective closeness signals desire falling away.

Before turning to how desire mediates movements toward care and concern, it is important to clarify meanings of care. The difference between concern and care is

37. Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality*, 126.

38. Lacan, *Écrits*, 366.

39. Merleau-Ponty, *Visible and the Invisible*, 180. I first encountered this description of the unconscious in Loveless, *How to Make Art*.

40. Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 131; Kingsbury, “Extimacy of Space,” 246.

41. Kingsbury, “Locating the Melody of the Drives.”

42. Kingsbury, “Extimacy of Space,” 246.

important because their separation is the difference between expressing concern and doing something in response. Concern and care also engage with different politics: as Puig de la Bellacasa writes, “A politics of care engages much more than a moral stance; it involves affective, ethical, and hands-on agencies of practical and material consequence.”<sup>43</sup> The politics of care is an active expression of desire to make better, but care does not only carry meanings of positive outcome; there is work to be done to unsettle care within wider political ecologies shot through with unevenness, inequality, and violence.<sup>44</sup> Although power and agency ought be understood in more-than-human terms, questions of power beget other questions about responsibility, and who or what bears responsibility when species extinction registers as a matter of concern.<sup>45</sup>

I am drawn to understanding care as a mode of analysis that “starts out from the fleshiness and fragility of life” to stay close to how the thing or subject being cared for is an active participant in exertions of care and also how subjects are *compelled* to care.<sup>46</sup> But as Eva Haifa Giraud argues, “Simply acknowledging that human and more-than-human worlds are entangled is not enough in itself to respond to problems born of anthropogenic activity.”<sup>47</sup> This leads me to consider questions about movements toward care in conservation geographies, and which lives sufficiently move people or organizations into practices of care against the threat of extinction, and which lives do not. My use of the active verb *move* in relation to care here is specific; considering what moves people to care must account for what unconsciously takes place that elicits the desire to *care* as an active and relational process between the unconscious self and our external worlds, or what occurs in structuring the movements of desire.<sup>48</sup>

### Contending with Cactus Extinction on the Dark Mountain

On a hot day in November 2018 I observed a botanist plucking seeds off a tall, thin cactus swaying in the wind on the edge of a mountain. The small mountain of about 300 meters in height is in the process of being excavated as a quartz mine. Our group, a mix of botanists, conservationists, and European cactus collectors, arrived to visit and informally assess the status of the now-imminently threatened cactus species *Arrojadoa marylandae*. Like many species, this plant’s entrance into scientific knowledge was almost immediately marked with the threat of extinction. The botanist assured me this species would be extinct in a matter of years, if not sooner, save dramatic intervention.<sup>49</sup>

43. Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, 4; see also Krzywoszynska, “Caring for Soil Life in the Anthropocene.”

44. Murphy, “Unsettling Care”; Martin, Myers, and Viseu, “Politics of Care in Technoscience.”

45. Puig de la Bellacasa, ““Nothing Comes without Its World””; Puig de la Bellacasa, “Making Time for Soil”; Latimer and Puig de la Bellacasa, “Re-thinking the Ethical.”

46. Mol, *Logic of Care*, 11; Ureta, “Caring for Waste.”

47. Giraud, *What Comes after Entanglement?*, 7.

48. Kingsbury and Pile, “Introduction.” On the movement of desire see McGowan, *Capitalism and Desire*, 33.

49. Goettsch et al., “High Proportion of Cactus Species.”

*A. marylanae* is known to exist only in one location in the entire world, the Serra Escura (Dark Mountain) in the municipality of Tanhaçú in southwestern Bahia. The cactus was first identified as a new species in 2003 by botanist Marlon Machado and named *A. marylanae* after a student who alerted Machado to the possibly novel species. I wondered by what unlikely event of dispersal *A. marylanae* arrived on Serra Escura from some distant locale or, alternatively, if this population instead represented the last stronghold of a species that once dotted hilltops across the region. Phylogenetic and ecological research could help answer these questions and explain its small habitat range, but that research has yet to be conducted, and likely never will. Yet this kind of basic knowledge can be an essential starting point for the enactment of species flourishing.<sup>50</sup> Truly little is known about the kinds of ecological company *A. marylanae* keeps.

When Machado first published his formal description of *A. marylanae* in 2005, the plant faced few if any threats to its survival. Passionate cactus collectors did not want it because they did not know it existed. Even if they had, it is not the sort of cactus to cause a collecting frenzy<sup>51</sup>—it can grow over 2 meters tall (making it difficult to keep in a greenhouse), and while it is certainly a beautiful cactus, especially when mature and studded with rings of flowers, it does not have any uniquely striking morphological features, especially when young, when its charms are less apparent (fig. 1).<sup>52</sup> Its location on top of a mountain also meant it was secure from the common problems of urbanization and agricultural development that can threaten other cacti species in the region.

This changed when a mining company purchased the land of Serra Escura, with the plan to transform the mountain into a quartz mine for sixty years. Referring to their plan as The Dark Mountain Project (Projeto Serra Escura), the company Minas Stones is extracting quartz from the mountain, which is used in the processing of materials for a variety of industrial manufacturing purposes including the production of steel. That the mountain is home to a species that exists nowhere else in the world is an inconvenience on the road toward the mountain's excavation. This is not an exceptional case; rather it is representative of the constant and mundane conflict embedded in choices about how life is prioritized or not in the face of capitalist exploitation.

At the top of the mountain, our group visited one side studded with mature adults scattered along the craggy top and hugging the escarpment's edge (fig. 2). On the other side, just a few dozen meters away, we encountered much younger transplants, individually staked cacti in a grid pattern. These cacti were recently relocated away from the side of the mountain that will be destroyed. This other side of the mountain, we were told, would be spared from mining. I asked a botanist in our company for his opinion on the prospects for *A. marylanae*. The botanist gestured to the side of the mountain with the transplanted cacti (fig. 3). "It's too small, it's just that small hill over there, it

50. Cuomo, *Feminism and Ecological Communities*, 73.

51. Margulies, "Korean 'Housewives' and 'Hipsters.'"

52. Machado, "Discovery of *Arrojadoa Marylanae*," 62.





Figure 1. Young relocated *Arrojadoa marylanae* in Minas Stones's nursery. The spelling of the species' Latin name is incorrect on the placard.





Figure 2. Mature *Arrojadoa marylandae* dotting the peak of Serra Escura.



Figure 3. Staked and relocated *Arrojadoa marylandae* on the mountain's "salvage" area.

isn't enough to sustain the population. There are already plants lying around, dead. The plant will go extinct." I asked him about the greenhouse at the bottom of the mountain, where the company was propagating the plants that will be affected by their operations as part of their formal sustainability plan. "Ex-situ conservation?" he replied, shrugging his shoulders in ambivalence. So little is known about *A. marylandae*'s ecology, it was preposterous to him to consider the moving of plants off the mountain as conservation work while the company destroyed the cacti's only habitat.

I pressed the botanist for more information—if the plant was formally described and recognized as endangered, shouldn't it be protected under Brazilian law? "The plant was described," he explained:

We put it in the Red List as critically endangered. We proposed to list it in the Brazilian list of endangered species; it should be included in the national [Red] List as critically endangered, but because the process is so slow, the mining company already got their license. Now the plant is listed as critically endangered on the state of Bahia's list of endangered species, so it will likely be included in the national list, but it's too late, the company already has their license, and they are mining.<sup>53</sup>

53. "Critically endangered" is the most threatened category in the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN)'s threat classification system, except for "extinct in the wild" or simply "extinct."



That the species registers as a matter of concern—it appears on the list of threatened Bahia flora—matters only because it gestures toward a concern for its well-being yet does not otherwise permit scientists to intervene in curbing profitable mining. Despite the comparatively “charming” nature of cacti within the botanical world, the plant does not compel people in power to greater action.<sup>54</sup> This is the banality of biopolitical power at work par excellence; a power that fosters and cherishes some lives while also excluding others.<sup>55</sup>

I next walked with the botanist to the eight-hectare “reserve area” on one side of the mountain, where around sixty *A. marylanae* were moved and replanted a year prior (fig. 3). This area was covered in shrubby vegetation, now cleared for the cacti, and the ground had a distinct topsoil layer, unlike the rocky quartz where the cacti grew. The botanist noted that, unless the company keeps clearing the scrub, it will be taken over again by denser, faster-growing vegetation outcompeting the cacti. And what about sixty years from now, when they expect mining operations to cease—will *A. marylanae* recolonize the ruins of a mined mountain? It is certainly something that Minas Stones, at least in theory, is hoping to achieve as part of their project’s sustainability plan. Later we saw this project’s greenhouse, where the removed plants from the mountain (*A. marylanae* among them) are maintained and propagated for future planting. But I wondered, as the botanist did, where these relocated plants will grow, many of which did not appear to be thriving in their new home. According to the botanist, there is no similar mountaintop nearby, to say nothing of the unknown ecological relations *A. marylanae* keeps on Serra Escura. The “sustainability plan” for *A. marylanae* felt tenuous, its capacity to conceal the lurking threat of extinction incomplete.

Before our group left the mountain, I stood with the botanist as he scanned the horizon. “It’s a nice spot, it’s so sad. . . . It can be preserved in cultivation, but I don’t see it being safe anywhere else. There must be a reason this plant only grows here. Maybe it just never dispersed to other hills that are like this, but none are near here.” I suddenly heard myself saying out loud “*If only we could ask what it needs*” before trailing off. He smirked at this glib response, not missing a beat: “The plant needs to be here. Now you see the real problem—it’s not people taking a few seeds or cuttings of plants, it’s development.”

Shortly after this conversation, I became aware of energetic activity around me. As I wrote in my field notes on the mountain:

[People] start digging out small plants and putting them in a bag with a pen knife. I feel like I’ve been thrown into a strange version of the monkey wrench gang. I *want* them to have these plants . . . it feels sad but also victorious? Someone passes a pen knife off in front of the company biologist. It’s hard to imagine she isn’t aware or didn’t see what it

54. Lorimer, “Nonhuman Charisma.”

55. Srinivasan, “Biopolitics of Animal Being and Welfare.”

was used for, it still has dirt on it. Maybe she is glad, or just doesn't care . . . or maybe she does care, maybe she understands what is going to ultimately happen to this species on this mountain.

These acts illustrate the at-times complicated meanings of more-than-human care work. What are we to make of the quick and covert ripping of plants from the only place they are known to flourish as a purported act of care? Alongside questions of care, these acts point to anxiety as a vital inflection point, an impediment to desire.<sup>56</sup> If, following Lacan, anxiety is the falling away of desire, when lack as the motor of desire is interrupted by the presence of objet a, how are we to understand objet a as the “object” of extinction anxieties in relation to the absence-presence of *A. marylandae*?<sup>57</sup> To attempt to address these questions, I turn to a self-analysis of my own contention with extinction. I use this analysis to clarify my argument for flourishing geographies as a political horizon composed against Anthropo-Capitalocenic thinking.

### Extinction Anxiety

I give attention now to when I heard myself say, “if only we could ask it what it needs.” Psychoanalysis tells us such a blurting out of speech is often very meaningful, even if (or especially if) the conscious self recognizes it, as I immediately did, as an embarrassing remark, a signal perhaps of anxiety's presence. Embarrassment, Lacan writes, is “when you don't know what to do with yourself any more, [and] you look for something behind which to shield yourself.” It is, he writes, a “slight form of anxiety.”<sup>58</sup> Anxiety emerges when “something that should not have been exposed, as something meant to remain hidden, becomes present.”<sup>59</sup> Through the lens of psychoanalysis, I interpret this remark to mean that “I” (the egoic conscious self) heard “myself” (the unconscious self) speak. Imagine inserting the word *but* into this expression—“*but* if only we could ask what it needs.” This *but* is an insertion of a kind of uncertainty into speech in “if only . . .”; we could say another discourse is present. As Bruce Fink explains, this *but* is “announcing the unconscious subject of enunciation, and thereby showing that the subject is split—of two minds, so to speak, conscious and unconscious.”<sup>60</sup> For Lacan, it is only in this brief temporal moment, a flicker of what would seem to be someone else's speech within our own, that we see the unconscious make itself known to “us.” The unconscious slipping into the conscious is important because it reveals how anxiety manifested through *A. marylandae* as “a signal,” an interruption alerting me to what was being exposed beyond the plant itself, yet signified through it that led me to pronounce, “[But] if only we could ask what it needs.” These chains of signification are composed of bending and twisting lines becoming knots in the search for an impossible

56. Lacan, *Anxiety*, 175.

57. Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ix.

58. Lacan, *Anxiety*, 11.

59. Harari, *Lacan's Seminar on "Anxiety,"* 56.

60. Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, 40.

unity; in this way, thoughts and desires wind their way toward “a desire that is based on no being—a desire without any other substance than that assured by knots themselves.”<sup>61</sup> I see a desire for flourishing becoming knotted through contending with the anxiety that extinction elicits when confronted by its nearness at hand, the absence-presence of the cactus as objet a. The “signal” of the fading away of the cactus marks the fading away of desire. Anxiety, which as a “cut,” in Lacan’s words, works to safeguard the conscious self, also alerts us to what might emerge through the work of analysis rather than negation. “It’s upon the cutting edge of anxiety that we have to hold fast.”<sup>62</sup> The cactus alerted me to the painful recognition of accelerating intergenerational unmaking of life, yet producing a sense of psychic immobility to enact a world otherwise.<sup>63</sup> The knotting of desire, to turn back to Haraway, speaks to how “actual encounters are what make beings” and how the unconscious becomes articulated through encounters in the world.<sup>64</sup> In this way, we can see desires as entangled in the creation of beings as knotted encounters, inside and out.

“If only we could ask it what it needs” brought to the level of speech an unconscious desire to desire, but one thwarted by anxiety. This alters the tenor of my introductory question, “Who cares whether a cactus goes extinct?” to focus instead on what caring for a cactus signals as a lure in the search for *jouissance*. On the mountain there was a buzz and excitement to rescue *A. marylandae* from the grips of impending doom. My fieldnotes, photographs, and videos from this day resonate with a high-intensity energy to care, in which people removed plants from the only habitat they are known to survive in, justified as work to maintain and continue the species “as well as possible.”<sup>65</sup> Two years later this sentiment is more ambiguous. Perhaps a seedling of *A. marylandae* now grows on in a greenhouse in Belgium or on a windowsill in Bahia. So what? Although care on the mountain might appear as an enactment of response-ability, what Haraway describes as “a praxis of care and response . . . in ongoing multispecies worlding on a wounded terra,”<sup>66</sup> such a reading is also a missed opportunity to understand this effort to care as anxiety in *motion*.<sup>67</sup> Approaching this desire to care instead as an affective engagement with anxiety, as an effort to stabilize the psychic fantasy maintaining objet a in its proper place, some clarity emerges: how we might understand the anxiety in extinction’s nearness being “cut away,” materialized through the literal cutting away of the plants themselves, to conceal over what their diminishing presence asserts.<sup>68</sup>

61. Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality*, 126.

62. Lacan, *Anxiety*, 15.

63. Rose, “Multispecies Knots of Ethical Time.”

64. Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 67.

65. Fisher and Tronto, “Toward a Feminist Theory of Caring,” 40.

66. Haraway, “Awash in Urine,” 302.

67. Harari, *Lacan’s Seminar on “Anxiety,”* 1–27.

68. There is a linguistic relation between care, concern, and the work of psychoanalysis as cure. See Harari, *Lacan’s Seminar on “Anxiety,”* 5–8.

In a more affirmative sense, I consider what occurred on the mountain with *A. marylanæ* as a movement toward care, but care set in motion by anxiety's presence. Each fallen seed encased in bright pink fruit felt so important, at-risk, precious. Why did the cactus not only move us, but *lure* us, to care? Anxiety, *jouissance*, and *objet* a help disentangle how *A. marylanæ* became something else, something distorted until viewed "from the side," the perspective from which the unconscious meaning signified through the encounter with the cactus might be grasped.<sup>69</sup>

#### *Toward a Care-Full Psychoanalysis?*

To understand the cactus in relation to desire, we should consider the cactus within a chain of signifiers.<sup>70</sup> The twists linking the subject with the external world are described by Lacan as taking place through topological forms. The Möbius strip is an excellent example of this. It is a non-Euclidean topology in which a twist is produced before connecting two ends of a piece of paper through which interiorities and exteriorities become enjoined—a spatial orientation Lacan describes through the use of the term *extimacy* to instantiate how, as Virginia Blum and Anna Secor describe, "material spaces and psychic processes shape one another."<sup>71</sup> The Möbius strip represents how the psyche and our social and material worlds are developed in relation to one another, linking seemingly discrete registers of being through topological continuity.<sup>72</sup> Thinking the unconscious with the cactus in this topological formation helps give meaning to seeing the unconscious as in front of us. *A. marylanæ* was by no means the only cactus I encountered during several weeks of participatory "cacto-exploration" with my primary research subjects. I saw other tall columnar cacti on other mountains in Brazil, some so exceptional in color and form they felt ethereal and otherworldly—the stunning blues and great wisps of golden hair of cacti in the *Pilosocereus* genus, the enticingly smooth blue-gray skin of *Cipocereus bradei*—but they did not affect me in the same way *A. marylanæ* did. It was not the cactus itself as a corporeal being that lured me to care, but neither does this negate the charms or living wonder of these plants. We can see then that *A. marylanæ* became something else; it became inscribed with other significations through these topological twists affixing the unconscious in the world.<sup>73</sup>

Other psychoanalytic readings of this cactus are also possible. As lack is the motor of desire, we might alternatively read extinction as lack, the temporal obliteration of presence itself. In this vein we might instead approach the cactus—*contra* anxiety—through the Lacanian notion of sublimation as a "sublime object," or an object that stands in for what Lacan refers to as *Das Ding* (to be replaced in later seminars by *objet*

69. Lacan, *Écrits*, 724.

70. Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 79–90.

71. Blum and Secor, "Psychotopologies," 1031; Kingsbury, "Extimacy of Space"; Healy, "Traversing Fantasies, Activating Desires."

72. Pile, "Emotions and Affect"; Philo and Parr, "Introducing Psychoanalytic Geographies."

73. Blum and Secor, "Psychotopologies."

a). Sublimation is the process in which an ordinary object is elevated “to the dignity of the Thing [objet a],” the ultimate lack.<sup>74</sup> There is certainly merit to such a reading, especially as extinction marks absence. But against this reading I would argue that this extends extinction too far into metaphorical registers. Extinction is real even if it is through absence that it is composed.<sup>75</sup> In arguing for understanding extinction anxiety in the presence of a diminishing cactus, this is where a specifically Lacanian reading of anxiety is crucial, because anxiety is when lack *recedes*. The presence of anxiety, when objet a is close at hand, interrupts the desiring subject through this twist that anxiety puts in the way.<sup>76</sup> As Derek Hook writes, “Anxiety thus is not tantamount to desperation, but rather . . . a type of *expectant dread*.”<sup>77</sup> Extinction anxiety, as a cut, shores up unconscious stability by insisting on a turn away from the great unmaking that could be otherwise, interrupting the capacity to desire by instead telling us to rejoice in the stealing of a cactus off a mountain, or accepting the fantasy of a “sustainability plan” that removes the cacti from the only place in the world they are known to grow. It is the cacti’s presence that alerts us to the cracks in this fantasy and what we already know to be true and must contend with rather than negate in an act of psychic retreat.

Reading the story of *A. marylandae* yet another way, we might consider how I or others wished to witness extinction itself as a fetishized experience of *jouissance*, as Stasja Koot recently argued through their case of tourism amid South Africa’s rhino poaching crisis.<sup>78</sup> *Jouissance* and desire are found at opposite yet connected poles in Lacanian thought. If desire is about lack, *jouissance* “is a plus, a sensation beyond pleasure.”<sup>79</sup> “Enjoying” extinction is a noteworthy application of Lacanian thought for political ecology, and it is very likely that some of the members of my group experienced an excess of aching pleasure as some of the few visitors permitted to watch a cactus in the process of being unmade by extractive capitalism. But here my interest is in what I and others were in the grip of on the mountain in the nearness of extinction unfolding—the proximity of a void. The collectors’ and conservationists’ diverse concerns for *A. marylandae*’s persistence on the mountain should be understood as greater than an endeavor of more-than-human care or the short-lived thrill in obtaining, illicitly or not, another species for collection. Something greater-than lurked beyond my question of wishing I could ask what it needs: the anxiety signaled in the anticipation of intergenerational obliteration, a painful awareness of its cause, and an inability to enact a different story. As a lure *A. marylandae* manifested the threat of contending with the Anthro-Capitalocene as a movement of species unmaking—that movement toward paralysis so commonly described in

74. See Pohl, “Sublime Object of Detroit”; Kingsbury, “Sociospatial Sublimation”; Lacan, *Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 112.

75. Schmidt, “Glacial Deaths, Geologic Extinction.”

76. Lacan, *Anxiety*, 54.

77. Hook, “Mapping Anxiety,” 117.

78. Koot, “Enjoying Extinction.”

79. Braunstein, “Desire and *Jouissance*,” 104.



extinction studies, in which desire is replaced by an encircling of the object that stands in its way. “Coming to grips” with *A. marylandae*’s extinction speaks to the profound difficulties of engaging with extinction as a disorientating obliteration of time, in which the anxieties of the Anthro-Capitalocene become manifested through the absence-presence of species in the process of being unmade.<sup>80</sup> Anxiety in a Lacanian register shows how the process of a cactus being made extinct can resonate with meanings far beyond the confines of species’ existence by paying closer attention to the interactivity of the unconscious self with the world through speaking the aims of desire.

### For Flourishing Geographies

What I see emergent in the story of *A. marylandae* is contending with the anxiety of the Anthro-Capitalocene as a time in which the causes of this great unmaking are named yet there is a compulsion to turn away in shame rather than contend with the weight of desire, the enactment of flourishing geographies. As Svitlana Matviyenko and Judith Roof describe in their introduction to *Lacan and the Posthuman*:

Too often, the obstacle to confronting knowledge comes from within. . . . Apparently, it is less painful for the subject to turn away from a deadly disaster, even at the cost of death, than to survive the disgrace of admitting that we knew what we were doing, that we knew about the potential consequences of our actions, and that we were both passively and actively complicit in the wrongdoings of others.<sup>81</sup>

In suggesting that work remains to be done to excavate unconscious thought about extinction in the Anthro-Capitalocene through analyzing what was brought to the surface in my blurting out of speech, my invocation of a collective “we” is deeply qualified. There are, of course, other scholars and bodies of scholarship that describe decidedly different kinds of human-plant relations immersed in reciprocal forms of care and mutuality that speak to understanding extinction as a matter of concern that needs little psychoanalytic accounting.<sup>82</sup> Recent collective and collaborative interventions of Indigenous and decolonial thought, such as the Creatures Collective and the Bawaka Collective, offer important critiques of hegemonic and silencing Euro-Western conceptualizations of species, extinction, and the Anthropocene.<sup>83</sup> Against this Anthropocenic thinking, Noah Theriault and colleagues call for “living protocols” that “foster accountability, healing, reciprocity and capacities for

80. Bersaglio and Margulies, “Extinctionscapes”; Maddrell, “Living with the Deceased”; Pohl, “Object-Disoriented Geographies.”

81. Matviyenko and Roof, “Introduction,” 6.

82. See, for example, de la Cadena, *Earth Beings*; Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*; Chao, “In the Shadow of the Palm.”

83. Hernández et al., “Creatures Collective”; Country et al., “Working with and Learning from Country”; Suchet-Pearson et al., “Caring as Country.”

resistance.”<sup>84</sup> The pursuit of flourishing geographies is therefore to enact collaborative efforts of opposition to Anthro-Capitalocene thinking as an insistence for a vital (and here, vegetal) politics of interdependent futures, one in which the ongoing harms of colonial violence, both past and present, are named and recognized rather than repressed.<sup>85</sup> This “we,” therefore, is one that seeks to recognize the longstanding harms of human-nature dichotomies and repressive thought that patriarchal Euro-Western societies are only beginning to truly grapple with, even if history and sociality are only part of the story of the unconscious self.<sup>86</sup> Exclusions also mark absences; I do not know more, for instance, about people who currently or may have once held different relations with *A. marylanæ* or Serra Escura prior to its enclosure. This work took place amid the broader context of my larger research project of writing a multispecies ethnography of illegal cactus trade and collection. The time I was therefore afforded to learn with *A. marylanæ* in Bahia was altogether too restricted to interrogate how its history intersects with the profoundly violent past of Bahia’s colonization, or Serra Escura’s more immediate history within a regional context of mining over the past several centuries.

The story of *A. marylanæ* demonstrates that work remains in grasping for routes out of Anthro-Capitalocene thought while acknowledging that decolonial pathways toward “abundant futures” already exist.<sup>87</sup> But extinction thinking not only shapes how we contend with extinction’s profound absences but also increasingly holds powerful sway over the remaking of place and landscape through narratives of extinction. In excavating extinction anxieties, and to think extinction otherwise, we must move beyond fantasizing about unmaking—we are compelled, Natasha Myers writes, to “resist the lure of apocalypse like your life depends on it . . . the only way to thwart the momentum of the Anthropocene is to break the spell of capitalism and activate processes of decolonization.”<sup>88</sup> Confronting the anxiety of extinction demands confronting what impedes desire, which is to say, recognizing the unconscious as a terrain of struggle for another politics.<sup>89</sup> But *A. marylanæ* was not acting alone as a lure. It acted in concert within an assemblage of enthusiastic supporters in the form of conservationists, scientists, and collector/hobbyists also invested in its survival, all moved to care in various ways through how *A. marylanæ* was inscribed with significations of loss. In this way I cannot think *A. marylanæ* outside thinking it with these others and their own desires as a collective desire to care, but where the means of caring and the foundational reasons for desiring to care remain uneven. This is to say, in considering the

84. Theriault et al., “Living Protocols,” 898–99.

85. Buck, “On the Possibilities of a Charming Anthropocene”; Head, *Hope and Grief in the Anthropocene*; Head, Atchison, and Phillips, “Distinctive Capacities of Plants”; Myers, “How to Grow Livable Worlds.”

86. Callard, “Taming of Psychoanalysis in Geography.”

87. Collard, Dempsey, and Sundberg, “Manifesto for Abundant Futures”; Sundberg, “Decolonizing Post-humanist Geographies.”

88. Myers, “How to Grow Livable Worlds,” 54 (emphasis mine).

89. Pohl and Swyngedouw, “What Does Not Work in the World.”

care of the species as an enactment of response-ability, I am also speaking of a desire to care collectively for and with others as multispecies enactments of flourishing geographies—a fantasy, but one that is nevertheless actualized in the world as a very real horizon.

### Conclusion

The frantic, ecstatic feeling of tearing plants from the only place they live is an intelligible response to extinction anxiety weighed against confronting the relentless forces of the Anthro-Capitalocene making quick work of a mountain and a species of life. Attention to the unconscious through *A. marylandae* highlights matters of desire in articulating what prompts movements (or not) toward care in unconscious registers. There is so much that remains unknown about *A. marylandae*, and what binds the species to Serra Escura within entangled ecologies. When the botanist said to me that the plant “needs to be here,” he was gesturing toward an unknown set of relations that permit *A. marylandae* to flourish as a being that lives and dies in different times than humans do. Plants inhabit worlds of life and death simultaneously, and they exceed the synchronous and sequential temporalities of individuals amid generations as animals do; in other words, they inhabit *phyto*-temporalities all their own.<sup>90</sup> As beings that connect above and below-ground worlds, plants suture time and space together in useful ways for thinking with species as intergenerational formations of time bound up with place.<sup>91</sup> Learning to care for plants must therefore also attend to caring for the distinct temporal worlds of plants, connecting life and death within ecologies that are themselves care-full alliances. Jodi Dean writes that the horizon marks “a fundamental division that we experience as impossible to reach, and that we can neither escape nor cross.”<sup>92</sup> Perhaps plants are especially helpful guides then for navigating toward a flourishing horizon as transgressive beings that entwine earth and sky (the spatial horizon) while further blurring the temporal horizon demarcating the past and its attendant failures from what lies ahead.

I take learning from nonhuman life seriously, and so to me it follows that theory should flow out from the world and from questions of pressing concern about sustaining it. This article is therefore the result of learning with a plant and how this led me to unexpectedly engage with the world of psychoanalytic thought, as paradoxical as this may seem. Despite the intellectual distance between the two, I suggest that an openness for conversation between this diverse body of theory and more-than-human thinking provides a valuable set of analytical concepts to contend with extinction, care, and flourishing. Analyzing *A. marylandae*'s possible extinction as a political ecology of desire engages the limits of law to grant protection to nonhuman others; at the same time it reveals how possibilities for multispecies alliances are shot through with matters of

90. Marder, *Plant-Thinking*; Chao, “In the Shadow of the Palm.”

91. Houle, “Animal, Vegetable, Mineral.”

92. Dean, *Communist Horizon*, 1.

the unconscious. When I said, “if only we could ask it what it needs,” I truly do not think I was expressing an actual desire to ask this species what it required to flourish. “I” understood, before the botanist needed to remind me, that this species as a formation in time is part of a greater “living mountain,” and its demise as a flourishing being was always knotted within the ecologies of others that will also be unmade through this work of mineral resource extraction.<sup>93</sup> This is not to deny the possibilities for renewal, or that many plant species quite easily move across great distances, ecosystems, and geographies whether we want them to or not. Nor is this some circuitous route toward reasserting preservationist desires for “Edenic” natures absent human presence or modification. Perhaps, as the mining company suggests, in sixty years’ time these relocated plants will again find the means to persist or even flourish on a hollowed-out mountain. Or perhaps not. But when my unconscious slipped into conscious speech, I do not think I had only this cactus in mind. Approaching desire in this light is more than the work of excavating the unconscious, but a collective effort of confronting anxiety that stands in desire’s way. What worlds do we miss in failing to speak of desire?

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93. Shepherd, *Living Mountain*. As Alf Hornborg wrote over twenty-five years ago, “Turning a mountain into gravel [or quartz] is facilitated by first breaking it down conceptually.” Hornborg, “Environmentalism, Ethnicity, and Sacred Places,” 251.

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