

The Price of Extinction and the Epic Journey to Mourn Beyond the Human in Ned Beaman's *Venomous Lumpsucker*

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Abstract This article aims to explore how contemporary speculative fiction contributes to the current debate about the extinction crisis in the context of the Anthropocene by the critical analysis of Ned Beaman's latest novel *Venomous Lumpsucker* (2022). First, it explores how in a future speculative world, where the exploitative drive of the neoliberal economic system interlocks with the latest technologies, the monetisation of life ends up detaching the notions of extinction and death. Additionally, it follows and interprets the epic travel of a cognitive scientist from apathy to environmental awareness and her complex journey towards mourning beyond the human.

Keywords Extinction. Anthropocene. Necrocene. Ecological mourning. Speculative fiction. Ned Beaman.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Speculative Storytelling and the Deathly Nature of the Anthropocene. – 3 Of Extinction Credits, Sanctuaries, and Biobanks. – 4 'Offloading the curse' of Extinction. – 5 Conclusion.



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Mourn then, what cannot be saved, but defend
 what remains and can be
 (Kretz, "Emotional Solidarity", 275)

1 Introduction

We are living in disorienting and unsettling times. The effective alteration of the planet through direct human intervention by means of extensive deforestation, continuous mining for resources, large-scale food production, and urbanization has resulted in the disappearance and destruction of countless species, landscapes, and biodiversity, as well as the displacement of thousands of individuals around the world. These are considered to be manifestations and direct consequences of the Anthropocene, a term increasingly used to refer to the current planetary epoch that is characterized by humans' influence on Earth's processes and bio-geophysical composition (Chua, Fair 2019). Timothy Clark signals that, even if the term has been rightfully adopted by the global community, at the heart of the Anthropocene still prevails an overwhelming incomprehensibility, since there is no "simple or unitary object" to confront, delimit, or 'tackle' but "only a kind of dissolution into innumerable issues" (2015, 10). Scholars in the Environmental Humanities, such as Tereza Dědinová et al. (2021), Gina Comos and Caroline Rosenthal (2019), or Joanna Zylinska (2014) have brought attention in their research to the potential of narratives and literature to act as critical tools that can actively shape a more concrete understanding of the present crisis, as well as offer mechanisms that allow us to determine ways of assuming individual and collective responsibility for the state of the planet. Among these narratives, speculative fiction appears as one of the most potent and fruitful forms of storytelling in the current literary panorama to "furnish solid contours to the yet only foreseen consequences" of the Anthropocene (Dědinová et al. 2021, 4). The genre opens the possibilities for the exploration of the causes and consequences of our planetary condition into horizons that are inaccessible to other literary forms. It does so by freely dismantling current societal structures and established laws and, most importantly, by asking a simple question: 'What if?'. As Michel Lincoln stated, "speculative fiction is realism" in today's world (2022)

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and, as seen in the wide readership that the genre enjoys, there is no doubt that this narrative mode responds and attends in singular and appealing ways to some of our most urgent planetary concerns, including climate change and mass extinction, by producing texts that “timestamp current and lingering worries” (Callus 2022, 681) but that reach beyond catastrophism.

Following this line of thought, this article attempts to add to the discussions of the potentialities of literature to access the Anthropocene and “grasp the unimaginable” (Dědinová et al. 2021, 4) by assessing, more specifically, how the speculative genre is contributing to the up-to-date debate about nonhuman species mass death in the Sixth Mass Extinction. For that, an analysis of the novel *Venomous Lumpsucker* (2022) by the British author Ned Beaman will be carried out framing it in the context of the Anthropocene, and by extension the Necrocene, and as an example of a contemporary text that features, while at the same time ironically subverts, aspects of the literary epic genre. Written in Beaman’s darkly comic narrative style, this novel follows two main characters who represent the opposite sides of the coin of environmental conscience: Resaint, a morally conflicted cognitive scientist, and Halyard, a selfish corporate consultant who advocates for profit rather than ethics. As they try to save from extinction the endangered venomous lumpsucker, a highly intelligent fictional fish, they traverse the European continent having to navigate and face the reality of environmental collapse and corporate greed. Beaman’s novel, which has been described as a “cerebral eco-thriller” (Power 2022), has received the acclaim of the general public, obtaining the Arthur C. Clarke Award for science fiction a year after its publication. However, even if it features topics that might interest scholars in the Environmental Humanities, Posthumanism and Transhumanism, as well as Future Studies, the critical analysis of the text to the date, maybe due to its recent publication, is very limited. Among these, Erin James’s research is particularly notable for using the entanglement of fiction and belief as a conceptual point of departure to examine the novel as a narration that might invite “skeptical readers into the pro-environmental behaviours” (James 2024, 332). In this article, however, the Author aims to approach *Venomous Lumpsucker* as a contemporary text that illustrates and epitomises the extinction crisis we are facing in the ‘age of *anthropos*’, and as a novel that offers an all-too-real imaginary picture of the death of thousands of nonhuman animal species within a necroeconomic system where death is transformed into a profitable commodity (Haskaj 2018, 1149).

Building on this, the first part of the article intends to analyse, by opening up Achilles Mbembe’s necropolitics to the nonhuman, how death is utterly monetised and redefined in this future context of a technologically mediated mass extinction. Because of this

commodification, some of the positive aspects of today's species preservation techniques, such as global digital biodiversity databases, de-extinction, or rewilding, are undermined and swallowed by the neoliberal economic system of the novel. In connection with that, the second part of the research aims to follow and interpret the physical, yet symbolic epic travel experienced by Resaint from environmental apathy towards awareness of the mass extinction happening around her, and her subsequent commitment to mourn the nonhuman. Her process of eco-grief, complicated by her inability to work through her guilt and angst, will turn into a mock-epic journey across the European continent to obtain personal atonement and deliver animal justice. By retracing the radical boundaries between life and death in the Necroocene, and by making use of ideas that align with Ecopsychology, eco-grief, and eco-mourning, as they encourage a shift from a helpless pathologized individual (Cole 2023, 2798) towards collectively-oriented responsible action, Beauman's speculative novel, and a close analysis of these particular aspects, undoubtedly add an invaluable insight to the discussions of mass extinction and the power of mourning beyond the human for the twenty-first century.

2 Speculative Storytelling and the Deathly Nature of the Anthropocene

First proposed by the geobiologist Eugene F. Stoermer in the 1980s and popularized by the Nobel laureate Paul J. Crutzen in 2002, the term 'Anthropocene', which was used as evidence to denote that anthropogenetic climate change was changing planetary systems to the point of defining a new geological epoch (Spencer 2021, 46), has since then transgressed the limits of scientific discourse to develop, as Ursula K. Heise sustains, "a cultural life of its own" (2016, 204). Today, the concept encompasses much more than measurements of climate change coming from the burning of fossil fuels and the emission of greenhouse gases. The Anthropocene, with its entwined challenges and interconnected problems (Chakrabarty 2009, 27), draws attention to the complex networks of relations among humans, non-humans, and material processes, as well as their entangled co-existence. For scholars like Arne J. Vetlesen, the Anthropocene is "the historical product" (2019, 9) that embodies, while at the same time challenges, the economic, social, and moral practices ingrained in the modern humanist philosophy of anthropocentrism, which entrenches human centredness and superiority above all else "in all domains of modern Western society to this very day" (2019, 2). Thereafter, Vetlesen sustains that the philosophy of anthropocentrism has led directly to the onset of the Anthropocene, and he contends that this individualistic era has resulted in a *modus operandi* where exploitation,

jeopardy, and decimation are dominant on Earth. In this sense, death and destruction of both the biological and material environments and ecosystems are common denominators for our times, in which the large-scale ecological transformations caused by humans reach such a scale and rate that are comparable to previous mass extinction events like volcanic eruptions or the asteroid that resulted in the Cretaceous-Paleogene Extinction. This is why this geological moment is recognised in environmental discourse to be going through the 'Sixth Mass Extinction' (Leakey, Lewin 1996).

The effects of climate change and habitat destruction on nonhuman animals, fungi, plants, and other living beings are such that, even if extinction and death may have been "as much a part of life as growth, decay, mutation, and proliferation" (Colebrook 2018, 150), the human-induced mass extinction we face today is changing the dynamics between life and death by furtherly exceeding the "ebb and flow of life's creation and destruction" (150). Death as an onto-epistemological concept fails to encompass what extinction entails. According to Oriol Batalla, extinction, even if still inherently deathly in nature, is a negative phenomenon that stops the prevailing generative evolutionary process through the circumstantial "negation of both life and death" (2022, 2). Attending to this, scholars like Justin McBrien (2016) or Jonathan Crary (2013) have proposed a revision of the concept of the Anthropocene, stressing the interrelatedness between the neoliberal late-capitalist system and today's environmental catastrophe. Their critical position acutely recognises and signals the conspicuous alteration that capitalist extraction and accumulation have had on the processes of life and death on Earth. Consistent with this idea, the Necrocene, where the deathly nature of capitalism is avowed as the ultimate cause that has transmuted "life into death and death into capital" (McBrien 2016, 117), appears as a more appropriate critical tool where not humankind in general but the capitalist impulse that commodifies human and nonhuman as resources is responsible for the current global multifocal crisis. The Necrocene foregrounds the fact that we are living in an age of extinction, which is an inherent consequence of capitalism, and links, by this same reason, the alienated and at the same time vulnerable existence of humankind to the nonhuman world. As opposed to other narratives, the Necrocene also highlights - because the exploitation of resources in our planet can only be finite - the unsustainability and the inevitable extinction of the capitalist system itself "through the reproduction of accumulation and the inequalities" that exist at its core (Batalla 2022, 5). Inevitably, the Necrocene as a theoretical lens allows us to pursue analyses of death in a multiple and situated sense, and more importantly, it opens the considerations of death beyond the human. As consequence, the Necrocene also calls for a conscientious and resistant mourning (Spargo 2004; Rae 2007) on our part

towards the more-than-human since, as stated by Rosi Braidotti, this narrative bluntly places the “burden of *responsibility* on our species, which is the primary cause for the mess” (2013, 6; emphasis added).

The deathly force of the Necrocene, whose tangible effects become more evident as the century progresses, has induced a structural shift in some fields within the social sciences that has ended up opening the prospects for a more responsible accountability of environmental destruction and loss. The field of Death Studies for example, which traditionally had been closely connected with the analysis of grief and mourning practices resulting from the death of a close human person (Attig, Stillion 2015), has experienced significant realignment. Apart from a move away from pathologizing individuals and from Freudian, ‘healthy’ anthropocentric conceptions of mourning, the field has broadened its scope to include nonhuman entities (both biological and abiotic) in our necropolitical considerations as valid mournable bodies, possibly as a reaction to the capitalist hegemonic logic of death and thanks partly to Judith Butler’s influential philosophical work (2004, xiv). In this respect, posthumanist oriented discourses within Queer Death Studies (Radomska, Lykke 2023, 124) question the profusion of necropolitical practices that strategically categorise certain bodies as marked for life while others are relegated to death and regarded as expendable excess. In parallel, other disciplines such as Ecopsychology, which have become more prominent in environmental studies in the last decades, pay attention to how ecosystems degradation and the mass eradication of nonhumans have impacted how we perceive biocultural processes of death. This field has specially attended to the way in which nonhuman losses are rising in humans what has been defined as ecological distress and other mental issues that reach beyond individual conditions, such as eco-anxiety, eco-guilt, eco-angst, or solastalgia (Wardell 2020, 189-91). Ecopsychology as correlative to Death Studies showcases a concern on the part of scholars and researchers for collective examples and examinations in relation to ecological awareness rather than on individual pathologies. Ashlee Cunsolo and Neville Ellis (2018) have emphasised precisely this entangled and collective dimension of environmental grief and mourning by giving a planetary and communitarian sense to loss while signalling not only “our ecological interdependency but also ‘our ethical and political responsibilities’” towards the more-than-human world (quoted in Wardell 2020, 195).

This collective and posthumanist envisioning, taking into account that critics are still weary of over applying an ethnocentric English-language lexicon (Wardell 2020, 196) and of instrumental universalisation given that not all human beings and communities experience and process environmental loss and distress the same way (Williamson et al. 2020; Meloche 2018), involves an adjustment in the

anthropocentric and Eurocentric logics from early biopolitical discourses. Thus, now more than ever, we are in need of narratives that help us make sense of how these emergent postanthropocentric logics could inspire us beyond the fear of destruction and into a better way to live and die in our current times. It is here that cultural products like literature enter to play an essential role. As pointed out by Heise, different forms of artistic practices, including literary texts, can reorient what we as individuals and as local and global communities think and do in relation to planetary destruction and, with more emphasis for this research, mass extinction, thanks to their ability to help us culturally understand “how endangered species and extinction mean” rather than just observing what they represent in scientific terms (2016, 237). Narratives of extinction have long benefited from an alliance with the speculative fiction genre, which according to Ivan Callus is a form of narrative that introduces situations to the reader that ‘could really happen’ and are “traceable to the consequentialities of ‘the way we live now’” (Callus 2022, 681). Additionally, he points out that speculative fiction “takes on aspects of a new realism”, both in the mode or style of the narration and in the “unflinching scrutiny of what is confronted”, upholding the logic of “if-we’re-not-careful-this-could-follow” (681). A myriad of contemporary speculative fiction has called to responsible accountability by employing strategic narratives that offer a glimpse into the current extinction crisis, some moving far into the future and offering a bleak vision of a post-human world, such as Margaret Atwood’s *MaddAdam* trilogy (2003-09), while others remain eerily close to today’s reality, such as Jeff Vandermeer’s *Hummingbird Salamander* (2021), James Bradley’s *Ghost Species* (2020), or Charlotte McConaghy’s *Migrations* (2020).

One of the most recent tendencies within the speculative mode that very distinctively covers narratives of the Anthropocene, and which needs to be briefly mentioned for the present research, is the proliferation of what Michel Lincoln has labelled “the speculative epic” (2022). This term, still in the process of being officially adopted by the scholarly community due to its novelty, refers to contemporary fictional texts that incorporate an epic scope (in time, setting, or cast of characters) while making use of speculative premises to tackle some of the biggest concerns of our days, with special emphasis on themes related to climate crises and extinction. By combining aspects of the ancient epic genre, like referencing mystical or supernatural motifs and connections, following the deeds or journey of a (heroic) protagonist, or having a distribution into parts with separate settings, these speculative narratives, such as Kim Stanley Robinson’s *The Ministry for the Future* (2020) or Sequoia Nagamatsu’s *How High We Go in the Dark* (2022), participate with a grand-scope style in the reimagining of humans’ complex and connected existence with the natural environment. Another characteristic of the speculative epic highlighted by

Lincoln is its genre-bending approach. These narratives, as is the case of *Venomous Lumpsucker*, mix science fiction, historical realism, literary fiction, or thriller, to convey the message of pressing urgency and of essential responsibility towards the nonhuman world that spans beyond any individual (Lincoln 2022, s.p.). This popular speculative subgenre in the form of a grand narrative is especially fitting today since, as Lincoln points out, it aligns with the size of the planet-wide problems these texts thematically examine. Certainly so, when confronting the multiple and immense focal points of the Anthropocene, one might be in need of “an epic novel to match” them (Lincoln 2022).

3 Of Extinction Credits, Sanctuaries, and Biobanks

Ned Beauman opens *Venomous Lumpsucker* with an “Author’s Note” that goes:

This novel is set in the near future. However... sums of money are presented as if the euro has retained its 2022 value with no inflation. This is the sole respect in which the story deviates from how things will actually unfold. (2022, s.p.)

This paratext, which concentrates the caustic narrative tone that the author adopts throughout the novel, gives readers a cue to be prepared for a playful and satiric story about the near future. As James points out about this Note, “[t]hings won’t *really* be this way”, however this paratext encourages readers to recognise the fictionality of this storyworld, also promoting a pretext to leave aside feelings like anxiety or fear that such scenario might in another way produce (2024, 334). And it is true that the author’s request not to take this book too seriously is very appropriate given the plausibility of the reality that this near future unfolds. Human-induced climate change and global warming have altered every single aspect of life on this version of Earth, from weather patterns to food production, and from viruses and health issues to refugees’ crises. To keep up, advanced capitalist societies have developed technologies that counterbalance the consequences of the Anthropocene, evidencing Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus’ affirmation that ever since the Enlightenment (to name a starting point) the solution to the unintentional effects of modernity “is, and has always been, more modernity... and more technology”.¹ ‘Spindrifters’ that cool the planet

¹ Shellenberger, M.; Nordhaus, T. (2011, Feb 25). “The Long Death of Environmentalism” [speech]. The Breakthrough Institute, Yale University. <https://thebreakthrough.org/issues/energy/the-long-death-of-environmentalism>.

with ocean's water, a drug that helps eaters process unflavoured food, cloning laboratories, AI personal assistants, mind-uploading technologies, and more importantly, autonomous mining vehicles (Beauman 2022, 20) sustain the exploitative and ever-evolving neoliberal economic system that is still the foundation for this world.

The consequences of all this progress continue to be of course the loss of ecosystems and of thousands of lives of those that have been considered less, naming here other (normally racialized) humans, as well as nonhuman animals, plants, and other living beings. True to what Mbembe sustains in *Necropolitics*, the fictitious setting of this novel showcases the close connection between the late capitalist system and the dynamics of war. According to him, never before "has the symmetry between the market and the war been as evident as it is today" (2019, 12-13) since they both equally partake, as the text suggests, with an unlimited power of destruction in the exploitation and eradication of what has been othered. In the novel, thousands of nonhuman animal species die every year because of this unparalleled exploitation, and extinction reaches a rate never seen before which is why, although covering other relevant environmental topics, *Venomous Lumpsucker* can be fruitfully read in the light of the Sixth Mass Extinction crisis. In an effort to jointly solve the situation and as a compromise to put an end to this amount of death once and for all, also spurred by the extinction of the last giant panda in China, 197 states around the world gather to create the World Commission on Species Extinction (henceforth WCSE), which later, very much influenced by big mining corporations, approves the creation of "the extinction industry" as their first measure (Beauman 2022, 14).

This industry, as Beauman suggests in a recent podcast interview,² is inspired almost in its totality by the current carbon credit system that regulates and aims to reduce the emissions of CO₂ in Europe (EU ETS - Phase 4 2021-30). The carbon system sets limits on the amount of pollution that big companies can release and oblige them to purchase or trade carbon credits if they want to create emissions. However, the financial regulations that pressure businesses to find tactics to reduce their carbon footprint have given rise, like in other occasions, to markets that have turned CO₂e into trading offsets or credits through which corporations generate revenue and keep producing tons of pollutants (Sitarz et al. 2024, 637). Reimagined in *Venomous Lumpsucker*, we encounter an impeccably designed extinction market that allows corporations to pay for the right to lead a species to extinction. In this system, the lives of nonhuman endangered

² Morris, V; Skene, J. (Hosts) (2023, April 11). "Ep. 51 - Novelist Ned Beauman on *Venomous Lumpsuckers* and the Price of Extinction" [podcast audio]. *When We Talk About Animals*. <https://www.whenwetalaboutanimals.org/2023/04/11/ep-51-ned-beauman/>.

species have been transformed into “extinction credits” that lobbyists can buy at very low prices, just €38,432 “to wipe a species from the face of the earth” (Beauman 2022, 22), if they want to exploit and decimate their natural habitat. When an endangered species is catalogued as intelligent by a cognitive expert like Resaint, however, these corporations will need to pay the price of thirteen of these credits, which is still very cheap considering the economic benefits they obtain from exploiting, mining, or acquiring possession of their natural habitat. This logic of sacrifice, where the idea that some lives are more valuable (in the monetary and metaphoric sense of the word) than others, such as ‘intelligent’ animals in this case, echoes Mbembe’s idea of the unequal distribution of the “opportunity to live and die” at the heart of what he calls “necroliberalism”, which in this particular fictional scenario reaches beyond the human form to other endangered nonhumans, openly considered “expendable” here (Mbembe, Bercito 2020).

Obviating the good intentions of the fictional 197 member countries of the WCSE, this new monetary regulation of extinction ends up leading to

fewer barriers now to eradicating an endangered species than there had been any time since laws of this kind were first enacted in the mid-twentieth century. (Beauman 2022, 23)

Apart from fictionalising the prevailing ethos of the contemporary moment where the logic of sacrifice is clearly powered by economic incentives (Mbembe, Bercito 2020), Beauman, in the same podcast interview and using his novel as a speculative example, also comments on the efficacy of financial instruments in the present day to fight climate change and planetary destruction. According to him, and to put it plainly, these measures based on economic sanctions are not showing results, as seen is the above passage, because they actively contribute to the same apparatus that creates the problem. The current neoliberal system that led to the Anthropocene, which Beauman pictures as “a world of water”,³ ‘captures’ everything, working almost as a super intelligent AI that reprograms itself and finds constant solutions to overcome obstacles, as is the case with said economic restrictions. No matter how rigorously these financial sanctions have been thought through and designed, money and economic profit almost always find a way around them since, according to Beauman, this ‘water’ keeps moving until it finds a gap that allows economic exploitation. As highlighted in Batalla’s study concerning the ferocious destructive force of the Necrocene, Beauman fictionalises the

³ <https://www.whenwetaalkaboutanimals.org/2023/04/11/ep-51-ned-beauman/>.

capacity of the capitalist system to survive and expand by “absorbing everything at its reach” and by “sucking out living labour and resources” until they are depleted or not useful anymore (2022, 5). In this novel, life itself, and more concretely the life of those considered inferior, has an extremely low price, and corporations and governments show no remorse in paying to sacrifice the habitat and the last of these endangered species “for the sake of growth and prosperity” (Beuman 2022, 21). This ‘cheapening of nature’, an expression used by Donna Haraway, is a strategy developed from the inner mechanisms of the Necrocene “to sustain extraction and production” by any means in the contemporary world (2016, 100). However, as Anna Tsing argues, this idea of nature as cheap, where destruction actually costs almost nothing to big corporations, is reaching its end in the current geological era, since the scope of the damage has reached such limits that now most of the earth’s reserves and refugia that could regenerate in some sort of way are completely drained (2015, s.p.). In our current world, the monetization and consequent cheapening of the environment has completely altered the evolutionary self-regulating balance between life and death, and this alteration is something the characters in this novel can legally pay for in order to keep the capitalist model perpetually going unaffected.

The World Commission on Species Extinction, as a way of undoing the ‘whole mess’ of planetary damage, also promotes species conservation by paying the price of one credit per endangered species saved to those governments and corporations that contribute to stopping biodiversity disappearance. This, unsurprisingly, originates a submarket whereby private companies build artificial nature reserves to house dozens of endangered species together in one place, “allowing for tremendous economies of scale” (Beuman 2022, 78). Real life projects for species preservation have also paid considerable attention to ecosystem restoration and the process of re-wilding, in which, as described by Clémentine Mutillod et al., natural ecosystems are rebuilt after human disturbances “by restoring processes and food webs” so that these ecosystems become self-sustaining and resilient and can house endangered species again (2024, 821). In the novel, Sanctuary North, described first as “an ark and an Eden” (Beuman 2022, 78), is created from the privatisation of Estonia’s Peipsiveere Nature Reserve, which seems to comply to some of the principles of real-life re-wilding, like landscape-scale planning, or local engagement and support (Carver et al. 2021, 1885). Nonetheless, instead of becoming a self-sustained space for certain correlated endangered species, this sanctuary functions uniquely because “it was a panopticon” (Beuman 2022, 80) in which only controlled and artificial ecosystems can flourish with continual human and technological intervention. In addition, the novel later unveils that, since Sanctuary North is a strategic business that essentially

aims for economic benefit, the place, as a way of generating a secondary source of income, also secretly houses tons of toxic waste that results in leakage and eradicates many animal species. The way in which Sanctuary North malfunctions ends up ratifying the overall motif of the novel, in which the economic interests of a few prevail over the lives of many, and more decidedly over the defenceless nonhuman animals locked in these sanctuaries. The creation of this space, where the structural opposition between outside and inside is exacerbated (Mbembe 2019, 23), is so far removed from the genuine intention of saving these animals that it does not take much to recognise how the whole extinction credit system is a farce in which “[e]ven activists don’t care about [these species]” (Beauman 2022, 16). This monetary ‘sanctuarization’ of perpetually human-controlled spaces to save some species while the limitless ransacking continues outside reveals, additionally, the hypocrisy and the unsustainability of this industry, vindicating Mbembe’s affirmation that in the Necrocene one cannot ‘sanctuarize’ some species’ home “by fomenting chaos and death far away, in *the homes of others*” (2019, 23; emphasis in the original).

The price of extinction and the redefinition of life and death in *Venomous Lumpsucker* take a drastic turn when they interlock with the latest technologies designed for human and animal brain scanning, called “[c]onnectome scanning” (Beauman 2022, 24). However, the animal preservations – that include a complete record of their genome as well as of their entire neural structure – were only useful, as Halyard reflects in a very anthropocentric way, for companies like the one he works for called Brahmasamudram Mining to legally argue in case they eradicated an endangered species that it “was in some sense *not yet lost*” (Beauman 2022, 16; emphasis in the original). The emergence of this technology, by blurring (even if only possibly) the boundary between being bodily dead or virtually alive, transforms this storyworld into a transhumanist reality, one where the biological body that sustains a living being is disposed of, and where the corporations that aim for profit at any expense end up taking advantage of this virtualization. As a consequence of these recent advances, the WSCE and the big mining company behind it prepare the ground for a reform in the extinction industry to create what Beauman calls a “biobank” (Beauman 2022, 29). These biobanks, which call to mind today’s biological digital databases like the Global Biodiversity Information Facility for instance, are introduced as an extreme, and at points outlandish, fictionalization that accentuate how technological progress (and the digitization of life) characteristic of the contemporary necroliberal system, with its disruption of the fluctuation between creation and decay, or infinity and mortality (Batalla 2022, 22), can lead to a perpetuation and accentuation of the reigning structures of power that dominate the present-day

biopolitical and necropolitical frameworks. Beaman also gives room to question whether the many positive aspects of current (bio)technological practices for species preservation might in fact prevent us from recognising their unethical and extremely dangerous consequences if they end up in the hands of private companies with mere economic interests, as is the case with Sanctuary North. This proposed reform in the extinction credit system would then mean a triumph for corporations like Brahmasamudram Mining, as it sustains that from that moment forward

even if a species didn't have a single living individual left on earth, it should still not be considered extinct, as long as it had been the subject of what was called 'multimodal preservation'. (Beaman 2022, 28)

Since species' information is kept in these servers, extinction, and by consequence death, adopts a new dimension that makes possible the belief that "a physical body breathing its last was not the same thing as The End" (Beaman 2022, 28), which then gives green light to these plundering corporations to continue their ransacking enterprise with a complete and free-of-charge access to all species' habitats in the world.

These fictional technologies, consequently, reframe death and extinction as in a transhumanist dream (García-Barranquero 2021, 179) by transforming them into categories not necessarily inclusive of one another, where extinction, or 'The End', as we know it today becomes completely detached from the idea of physical death. Batalla, as mentioned before, has maintained how in the Necrocene, death, as an evolutionary process, has been detached from extinction, which is still a deathly mechanism but one that participates with the complete negation of the generative and fruitful aspects of it, abruptly breaking the "connections and synchronizations" between life and death (2022, 3). Through these global biobanks, extinction has lost but at the same time acquired a new meaning, which, as seen, helps prolong the capitalization on the planet. In this sense, the novel seems to agree with Rafi Youatt's idea that biodiversity databases perfectly encapsulate the "extension of biopower to nonhumans" (2015, 68). Heise, for her part, focuses on how the database is culturally "associated with genocide and the trauma of pervasive violence" (2016, 61) and how it represents a continuation of the encyclopedic impulse from the Enlightenment. Franco Moretti, aligning with them, has theorised the explosion of the database as the new form of epic genre, which he calls the "modern epic" (1996, 5), by establishing how these grand-scope projects follow the humanist desire to capture the whole modern capitalist world, which in the end contributes to the perpetuation of nonhuman subjugation. The novel, in its own right, captures

this humanist rational impulse and goes beyond to suggest the point that even if extinction is detached from physical death thanks to technologies, species eradication entails considerably more than the disappearance of a mortal body; it also involves the loss of kin relations and symbiotic systems, which is something that goes beyond the individualistic organism as we know it. Beaman signals towards the general idea that these databases cannot categorically record, not even by a fraction, the physically entangled existence of nonhuman species in their natural biome.

Furthermore, the text reinforces this stance by endorsing the fact that even if these species are physically reproduced or rescued from their obliterated ecosystems, their reclusive and detached existence from their natural habitat would not be what is considered 'ethically fair', hence the affirmation: "The End could come before [death]" (Beaman 2022, 29). As Haraway asserts, "[n]o species...acts alone", they exist in "assemblages of organic species and of abiotic actors" (2016, 100), and by eliminating these environmental correlations within their unique ecosystems, these nonhuman species would be in fact extinct in life. The novel alludes to this proposition, as in this passage:

Imagine a species of frog that can gossip back and forth with frogs in other trees – except that in practise the language is as dead as Cornish because none of them can ever find anybody else to talk to. All of these species would be missing some enormous part of themselves... Even if they survived – even if they could be perpetrated indefinitely in laboratories and zoos – their extinction would already be in progress. (Beaman 2022, 29)

On the other hand, Beaman also hints at the other possibility, that The End, or extinction, is not defined by physical death because of the records of these species' data in the biobanks, which in the future could be used in de-extinction projects to bring back or create an organism that resembles said extinct species – similar to today's passenger pigeons' project led by Revive & Restore, for instance –, as in

didn't a connectome scan of an animal therefore mean that they were not truly extinct? After all, even if you never got round to *Jurassic Parking* them from DNA, you could still [virtually] raise them anytime you wanted like spirit at a séance. (Beaman 2022, 29; emphasis in the original)

The parallel with Crichton's *Jurassic Park* (1990), which is the ultimate fictional example of the process of de-extinction, connotes the proximities of these biotechnological experiments to the literary framework and to speculative and science fiction. As seen, these processes of bio preservation, like digital databases or genomic interventions,

are intimately linked, as Heise successfully tests, to the cultural impulse captured in certain types of literature that range from the ancient form of epic to the most contemporary speculative texts (Heise 2016, 211). Beaman, in any case, does not provide definite answers. His skilful illustration of the close relationship between the possible real-life applicability of these technological projects and the speculative fiction imaginary keeps readers wondering about the not-so-clear limits between life and death in a world where digitization makes the boundary between the two become ever more diffuse.

4 ‘Offloading the curse’ of Extinction

If *Venomous Lumpsucker* has readers thinking ‘how are all these deaths happening and how comes that nobody does anything?’, the novel also answers right from the beginning with a sharp affirmation that characters in this storyworld do in fact know exactly what their role in the endeavour of extinction is. Their inaction does not stem from their lack of knowledge, however, but from quite the opposite direction. The character of Resaint appears as the perfect example to show how the massive amount of data collected in scientific reports, percentages, graphs, and obscure language fail to communicate an effective message of ecological urgency, making it extremely hard “to grasp the reality of animal loss” at a personal level (Castricano 2024, 125-6). In the case of Resaint, her work in the extinction industry as cognitive evaluator of species intelligence actually makes her even more aware of the rate of extinction, for she is after all within the system that is perpetuating it. Her apathy, or even immunity, in response to mass extinction derives, instead, from “being *all-too-aware*” of it (Jensen 2019, 17 emphasis in the original). As pointed out by Tim Jensen, this awareness can cause inaction because individuals like Resaint feel less concerned and personally responsible when they observe that all others around, especially the biology experts that work with her, know exactly as well about the situation of extinction yet still do nothing (2019, 17). Resaint’s environmental apathy is crossed, moreover, with a clear sign of ‘species preference’, in which aesthetically beautiful and distinctive endangered nonhuman animals and plants – certainly featuring in fictional narratives and other forms of environmental art more prominently (Heise 2016, 35) – are considered to have a higher status in extinction discourses. She confesses that she understands, even though she does not share the feeling, when people all over the world mourn the extinction of the giant panda, while at the same time none of them really care about the fate of other species like nonvertebrate, fungal, or microbial beings (Beaman 2022, 97).

This unresponsive attitude towards extinction changes drastically after Resaint discovers that a fascinating fictional wasp,

Adelognathus marginatum, will be starved out to extinction. The disappearance of the *marginatum*, which she feels as if it “had laid an egg in her brain” (Beauman 2022, 103), creates in her what she for the first time confronts as grief for the nonhuman. This abrupt turnaround of ecological grief as used by Cunsolo and Ellis (2018) is presented to the reader as a kind of revelatory environmental epiphany. As distinguished by Barbara Barrow, the environmental epiphany is a recurrent and very potent literary device in contemporary climate fiction where a character physically as well as emotionally realises their “role in planetary harm” (2022, 123-4). This revelatory moment allows characters to acquire a new environmental consciousness, which is then incorporated to the mundane or commonplace (Barrow 2022, 123-4). In this sense, Resaint’s epiphany does not imply that she has acquired awareness of the extinction crisis around her, since she was very much conscious of it all the time, but of “the force” of the “great bonfire that was allowed to burn” without anyone doing anything (Beauman 2022, 105). The epiphany has overturned one of Resaint’s most humanist and axiomatic beliefs in relation to her perception of extinction: a tragedy was only a tragedy if it hurt or impinged on the conscious experience of a living being (Beauman 2022, 104). From this human-centred and individualistic perspective, since in practice humans are the only ‘conscious’ beings on Earth who can grasp the meaning of extinction, the epiphany impulses Resaint’s ecological awareness towards a planetary, or even cosmic, posthumanist dimension, recognising as from now that even if no conscious being, or human, had ever discovered the *marginatum*, its erasure caused by human irresponsible actions would still mean a terrible, irreparable loss to the universe (Beauman 2022, 104). This idea of leaving behind anthropocentric and at points catastrophic views of extinction to adopt a more planetary or cosmic perception of the disappearance of a species and the grief this conveys has been explored by environmentalist scholar Mick Smith who, through working on the idea of ‘senseless extinction’, suggests that at a planetary scale the disappearance of any nonhuman species by the hands of humans is in every possible way an “irredeemable loss, a loss that even eternity cannot rectify” (2013, 21), independently of the value that humans and their cultures ascribe to it.

As in any epic tale, a certain moment of revelation happens to overturn the hero’s impetus and general view of the world, and this moment catalyses a positive shift “in sensuous perception that sensitizes” Resaint to the mass eradication of nonhuman species she is participant of (Langbaum 1983, 341). Nevertheless, Resaint has not only been ‘sensitised’ with a posthumanist perception of mass extinction but is now haunted by the ghost of her revelation and by the complexity of her grief, which is physically felt as a mixture of incredulity, culpability, and anger. In her mind, her newly discovered feelings of grief

materialise into what she calls ‘the Black Hole’ (Beauman 2022, 105). The metaphor of the ‘hole’ has appeared, like the ecological epiphany, as a symbol in ecological discourse and critical theory related to the sudden acquisition of environmental awareness and its subsequent mental effects on individuals. Timothy Morton has used it to refer, like Resaint does, to the moment in which the human mind becomes aware of the massive scope of destruction in the Anthropocene to such an extent that the person finds themselves “lacking a reference point” (Morton 2010, 31) and experiencing a “giant hole in the fabric of [their] understanding” (Morton 2010, 14). Resaint, in line with this idea, feels like she has lost her frame of reference, affirming that “in comparison [to the Black Hole], any other moral question seems irrelevant, vanishingly small” (Beauman 2022, 107), which aligns with Morton’s assertion that once this hole has pierced our perception “[t]here is no way of measuring anything anymore” because no impartial measurement can be taken from “nowhere ‘outside’ this universe” (Morton 2010, 31). The uncontained power of this grief has transformed Resaint in ways that she could have never predicted or controlled, and she finds herself, in the face of mass extinction, disorientated. As she has become a *real* witness of the Necrocene and has physically experienced the inner gravitational force of the Black Hole, Resaint has also lost her former self which, according to Cunsolo and Landman, reveals how the process of “mourning-as-transformation” has suddenly altered her to become “more open to other bodies” and “to our transcorporeal connections” with them (2017, 10).

In just a few lines, Resaint transforms the work of mourning into something more than personal. For her, this work of mourning becomes a kind of protest against “the larger structures of injustice and oppression” that perpetuate environmental degradation (Cunsolo, Landman 2017, 14). This approach aligns with Rae’s idea of ‘resistant mourning’ (2007, 19), for Resaint “refuses consolation” and holds on to the feelings of pain and grief “to spur a sense of responsibility for the loss” of so many species (Cunsolo, Landman 2017, 15). Fixated on the idea that she is an accomplice in the death and eradication of thousands of living beings for the mere fact of being a human, Resaint reaches a point where she is unable to find a socially accepted and appropriate avenue for the expression of her feelings of grief. In a social context that fails to recognise environmental grief, she realises that if she wants to do a proper work of mourning, she will need an unconventional way. Scholars in both Ecopsychology and Death Studies have precisely pointed out the lack of individual and collective rituals and practices in our Western society to “help address feelings of ecological grief” (Ellis, Cunsolo 2018), making these emotions seem at some points useless or even inappropriate, which is what Resaint experiences. These feelings, and the impossibility to accurately expressing them, together with the striking

realisation that the machinery of extinction – and by consequence the necroeconomic system – is unstoppable unless humans cease to exist, lead Resaint, moved as well by her newly acquired environmental responsibility, to devise a plan in which, following the capitalist logic, death must pay for death, and in which humans must respond “in blood” for what they have done and are still to do to nonhuman species (Beauman 2022, 108).

The work of mourning the nonhuman, then, adopts both a personal and a political extent of responsibility, for Resaint feels – as if she were a figurative modern version of Joan of Arc – that she is in charge of the reprisal of the nonhuman species that are perishing in ‘the war’ against the humans. She dictates, nevertheless, that if “the Black Hole was to have any terrestrial champion”, it needed to be the animals themselves and that the revenge, in order to be appropriate, ought to be enacted by the crime’s victims (Beauman 2022, 108). In her attempt to find a nonhuman animal that could consciously grasp their own extinction and kill the human species, Resaint, after years of research, comes across the fictitious venomous lumpsucker, which is the most intelligent fish on the planet – also very vindictive and poisonous – and which could certainly be taught about the reality of extinction (Beauman 2022, 130). Beauman invites readers to confront the absurdity, and at the same time mastery, of this plan and plays with the literary expectations of ‘the epic hero against evil’ by presenting an “intentionally implausible solution to the real problem of biodiversity loss” (Heise 2016, 215) through the creation of a scenario that in a way acknowledges the seriousness and the scope of the environmental challenge but that refuses to enrol in the sombre tone of the elegiac mode as persistent in the climate fiction that treats the sixth mass extinction. As stated by Mark McGurl, this comic revenge plan makes us think of the humans as relatively laughable (2012, 548) and their portrait, or Resaint’s, “is comedic in its basic thrust” (Heise 2016, 227). Yet, this novel manages to convey the premise that in a world where ecological death and destruction are the common logic, the avenues for mourning nonhuman bodies in a responsible way maybe need to be ‘absurd’ when realistic and sensible political action is clearly not working.

Resaint’s “dream of vengeance” (Beauman 2022, 130) is torn, however, when she discovers that Halyard’s mining company might have eradicated the lumpsuckers once and for all. In order to find out if this is true, Resaint and Halyard embark on a journey across the European continent to find the last specimen of the fish, even though Halyard’s first motives to locate it lie more on the individualistic side and are far from Resaint’s quest for animal justice. As a nod to the epic, once again, the two risk their lives several times along this daunting journey through a landscape of highly contaminated seas, migrant labours camps, and the future totalitarian state of “the Hermit Kingdom” (the

fictional United Kingdom) (Beauman 2022, 254), where they also encounter characters that mimic the supernatural aspect of ancient epic forms like a ‘mermaid’, a woman who affirms that can talk to animals, and finally, the ultimate archetypical villain who saves endangered species to later rejoice in the feeling of eradicating them himself. As their travel takes dangerous turns and the probability of recovering the fish almost disappears, Resaint is continuously asked whether her tireless determination to find the lumpsucker is motivated by her real and genuine solidarity with endangered species or by a personal necessity to pass on her guilt to the animals themselves, so she can atone and relieve her culpability, as in

If you could get this endangered species to mourn for themselves, then you wouldn't have to do the heavy lifting for them... that's what you want to do with the animals. You want to offload the curse. (Beauman 2022, 245-6)

The novel's ending, in which Resaint dies in the least heroic way by slipping and falling from a cliff, readjusts the reader's perception of the epic dimension of the journey and her grand revenge plan. Even if Resaint turns into a kind of ‘unredeemable martyr’ of endangered species with whom her deed dies out, the reader is prone to believe that besides her personal atonement, Resaint's form of resistant mourning transformed her, and by consequence her travel companion Halyard, in such a way that her quest for the venomous lumpsucker turned out to be a journey towards courage and ecological hope, which are the “bridge from mourning to action” (Kretz 2017, 277) and the true catalysers for her transformation. Resaint's plan was in fact the product of her newly discovered urgent drive to responsibly defend “all the species on the list”, as well as a hopeful campaign to find out for herself, in case “there was something beyond the Black Hole” (Beauman 2022, 252), if a brighter future for all planetary beings could in fact be possible.

5 Conclusion

The analysis of Beauman's *Venomous Lumpsucker* has revealed many affinities between the ideas of the Anthropocene, and Necrocene, and speculative fiction's imaginary, yet at times too-realistic, engagement with the future. Every so often, certain texts within the genre, as the novel under analysis signals, raise awareness of their own fictional nature, however, this acknowledgement of the non-realistic disposition of speculative texts is precisely what gives them the potential that other literary forms might not have to observe and explore current ecological problems with new perspectives. In

addition, and as it was claimed at the beginning of this article, speculative fiction texts, and by extension other literary pieces, offer a unique instrumental capacity to convey messages about environmental conscience that can reach audiences at levels that scientific data cannot. They offer a capacity to “imagine, interrogate, and implement” (Cole 2023, 2796) current modes of existence from an individual and collective perspective by creating settings, characters, and plotlines that question and mirror contemporary issues which might otherwise seem too removed for audiences to commit to. This novel, with its very unique and grand representation of the reality of the current extinction crisis, participates precisely in this trend through the fictionalisation of a credit system that seems, at first, too implausible to be true. However, as readers come to realise that the extinction industry does not deviate that much from the reality of current climate policies, the novel very directly adverts attention to present-day environmental regulations and overtly questions their real efficacy.

In *Venomous Lumpsucker*, life and death, by means of the extinction industry, are completely redefined when, as transformed into monetary offsets, the lives of endangered animals also intermingle with technological developments that disembody life from its mortal instantiation to succumb to the demands of corporations that aim to permanently expand the capitalist model, and its necropolitical power, as it exists today. Other than that, extinction has been transformed into a business model that absorbs some of today’s species preservation strategies, such as rewilding or biological databases, for the profit of a few. Thus, the novel also efficiently adverts about the dark sides of these environmental strategies and projects if they end up in the hands of private companies that might not care about the ethical implications they carry in relation to the lives of many nonhuman others. Among all this, the analysis of Resaint’s speculative epic journey from apathy towards her questionable and rather comedic plan to responsibly mourn the nonhuman also underlines how, in an anthropocentric and individualistic culture where there is no conventional way to express feelings of grief for the environment and the more-than-human, sometimes the most appropriate way of resistant mourning might require unrealistic, and almost absurd, measures on our part to responsibly grieve nonhuman deaths and defend what still remains.

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