

“The Sea, Not the Ocean”: Anthropocene Fiction and the Memory of (Non)human Life

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1. Transnational Studies and the Anthropocene

When the study of literature and culture has taken its transnational turn in the last three decades, it has often done so over sea. Édouard Glissant’s (1997, 5) *Poetics of Relation* uprooted postcolonial studies by putting it on “The Open Boat” deporting Africans to the Americas; Paul Gilroy’s (1995) seminal *The Black Atlantic* undid ingrained habits of what he called “camp-thinking” by refashioning the Atlantic as a zone of hybridization and intercultural affiliation; more recently, the emerging field of oceanic studies has conceived new forms of relationality—“erosion, drift, dispersion, confluence, solvency” (Blum 2014, 35)—by insisting on the material role of the sea in processes of transcontinental mobility. These maritime perspectives, Charles Forsdick and Bill Marshall (2014, 2) note, “have offered the chance to decisively step outside the nation-centred—and Eurocentric—narratives and paradigms that have traditionally determined . . . constructions of cultural history and the texts it contains.” These perspectives challenge the customary homeliness of literary studies: oceanic studies, in Hester Blum’s (2014, 24) words, aims to “take the oceans’ nonhuman scale and depth as a first critical position and principle”; Margaret Cohen (2010, 658), for her part, applauds maritime studies for adding “new geographic and spatial scales.” Yet despite this rhetoric of altered scales, it is fair to say that transnational studies’ efforts of deterritorialization have generally not strayed too far from the scale of human life; they have not, that is, plumbed the ocean’s depths to engage with, for instance, hydrothermal vents, tubeworms, and marine microbes—the

constituents of what anthropologist Stefan Helmreich (2009) has called a resolutely alien ocean. Studies of oceanic culture, whether they go under the name of oceanic studies, blue cultural studies (Mentz 2009), or the new thalassology (Horden and Purcell 2006), often fail to consider “oceans as physical entities . . . characterized by complex movements and interdependencies of water molecules, minerals, and non-human biota as well as humans and their ships” (Steinberg 2013, 159). The maritime humanities (another label used for recent interdisciplinary encounters with the sea), in other words, remain firmly oriented around human life.

Yet human life is not what it used to be. A rethinking of the relations between human and nonhuman forms of life has recently been initiated under the rubric of the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene, as is by now familiar enough, names the realization that human life has played a crucial role in changing the chemical and climatological makeup of the planet since at least the eighteenth century, and increasingly since the so-called Great Acceleration after World War II. In the Anthropocene, human life faces planetary forces—climate change, species extinction, pollution—that, even if it helped unleash them, it cannot hope to contain. An account of human life in the Anthropocene, then, cannot restrict itself to tracing that life’s transnational connections; as Dipesh Chakrabarty (2012, 14) has argued, the Anthropocene signals that our understanding of human agency “may need to be stretched” in order grasp it as a geophysical force—a stretch that invites us to reconceive of human life as “belonging at once to differently-scaled histories of the planet, of life and species, and of human societies.” The study of transnational connectedness, that is, is being resituated as part of “an investigation of the multi-scaled, ontologically plural, simultaneously historical, infra-historical, and supra-historical ‘situation’ in which we find ourselves” (Baucom 2014, 134). These scalar shifts, I want to argue, cannot but affect our understanding of the ocean and the sea.

In this more capacious context, efforts to trace how reality is shaped by human traffic and migration are shadowed by phenomena that cannot be reduced to a human scale. Contemporary accounts of ocean life, then, must factor in dimensions that remain stubbornly alien to human concerns and that confront human life with “the rude fact of the otherness of the planet” (Chakrabarty 2014, 251)—an otherness that yet affects human life. I want to argue that works of literature and art that confront customary forms of transoceanic and cosmopolitan connectedness with these less homely dimensions take on a particular importance

at this planetary juncture. Kathryn Yusoff (2015, 383, 399) has compellingly argued that the aesthetic can “provide a possible site and mode of sensibility for engaging with the temporal and material contractions of the Anthropocene,” as it provides “a mode of experimentation with, and a concentrated sensation of,” the radically incommensurate scale of geological time. The aesthetic, that is, can contribute to what Mark McGurl (2011, 380) has called “a new cultural geology”: “a range of theoretical and other initiatives that position culture in a time-frame large enough to crack open the carapace of human self-concern, exposing it to the idea, and maybe even the fact, of its external ontological preconditions, its ground.” In this essay, I read one Anthropocene fiction that puts human life at sea by exposing it to what McGurl calls “the bizarrely humiliating length of geological time, the staggering vastness and complexity of the known universe, the relative puniness of the human in the play of fundamental and evolutionary forces” (380–81).

J. M. Ledgard’s 2011 novel *Submergence*, the work on which I focus in this essay, is deeply informed by discourses on the Anthropocene. The novel stages a sustained confrontation between human and nonhuman scales, and it explores the challenges this confrontation poses for an understanding of intercultural encounters. It does this through its interweaving of different plots and thematic strands. *Submergence* presents a fairly traditional—and a decidedly human—love story that brings together Danny, a female biomathematician of color working on deep ocean life, and James, a British spy working in Africa and posing as a water engineer, which it juxtaposes with a collage of materials pertaining to the science and cultural history of deep-sea life. While this oceanic strand of the novel is clearly connected to Danny, on whose deep-sea excursion to “the largest uncharted hydrothermal vent field in the world” (Ledgard 2012, 124) the novel ends, it is also framed by James’s captivity in the hands of Somalian jihadists—a hopeless situation that grants the love affair its melancholy retrospective slant. Indeed, for all the novel’s formal diversity and excessively varied documentation, its tone is not one of baroque exuberance, as the story is tinged by a muted, retrospective quality; human life, in this novel, is something being remembered as it leaks into the more primal life forms that Danny explores, and that the novel carefully shields from James, if not from the reader. Throughout, *Submergence*’s negotiations of the tensions between the human and the nonhuman, on the one hand, and between the noncultural and the intercultural on the other are coded in terms of different forms of maritime life. The novel introduces a lexical distinction between two

dimensions of that life: there is the sea, which is shaped by human concerns, and there is the ocean, which is not, and which rather persists as an uncolonizable reality that resists human designs. In the novel, we read that enjoyment and contemplation are matters of “the sea, not the ocean” (11); and “surfers likewise belong to the sea, not to the ocean” (59). On its own terms, *Submergence* refuses to be merely a novel of the sea.

The point of the opposition between sea and ocean is not that the latter is fully withdrawn from human signification (which would remove it from the purview of the novel); rather, the insistence on an alien maritime dimension points to the difficulty of making oceanic life forms significant in human terms—a difficulty that oceanic and transnational studies, I would argue, have yet to confront. According to Helmreich (2009, 30), who has extensively studied the practices of deep-sea scientists, “the apparition of the alien signals uncertainty about the classification of life forms, about the stability of any national (or, indeed, international) framing of marine science, and therefore introduces and bespeaks an indeterminacy about how to make such unsettled life forms meaningful for forms of life.” The alien ocean is, therefore, necessarily a medium “to which humans connect only through chains of negotiation, translation, and transduction” (249). Literary works like *Submergence* begin to explore strategies to negotiate and translate alien life forms from which human life in the Anthropocene cannot fully divorce itself; in this way, they contribute to the new cultural geology that McGurl calls for as they begin to come to terms with a new situation in which human and natural history have irrevocably begun to leak into each other.

Ledgard’s novel routes this challenge through its evocations of the microbial ocean, which, as Helmreich (2009, 283) notes, “as it becomes a site in which links between life forms and forms of life are redrawn, might also key us in to transformations around the boundaries of the *human* and the biotic substances and connections through which this being is imagined.” Through its forms and themes, *Submergence* foregrounds two such transformations that the notion of human life is currently undergoing. First, it makes palpable that human life is inescapably connected to and implicated in nonhuman forms of life without, for all that, being able to directly experience that connection; indeed, what could it mean to experience ourselves as also a microbial life form? Second, and more controversially, it shows that not only the form but also the mode in which life today is imagined has been altered: as human life in the Anthropocene faces the possibility of its extinction, it is no longer only a present reality or a projected

future but emphatically also an imminent memory. Indeed, the central question facing human life in *Submergence* is how it will be remembered; how, the novel asks, can human life shape a memory that recognizes its implication with nonhuman life forms that it cannot experience or remember? In what follows, I show that *Submergence* contributes to a new cultural geology by conceiving of human life as the memory of a life that was always already nonhuman—a life that is constitutively exposed to what I call “immemorial life.” This peculiar imagining of life understands human existence in a way that is neither desperately theological nor confidently scientific. By holding on to the immemorial, *Submergence* contends, human life can, for now, stay afloat—submerged, but not yet drowning, in the nonhuman life that saturates it.

2. The Contradictions of Anthropocene Life: Memory and the Nonhuman

So how do we understand the shift in the understanding of human life to an unexperienced dimension and to a memorial mode? The question of life today revolves around the difficulty, or even the impossibility, of separating human from nonhuman life. As Eugene Thacker (2010) has shown in his book *After Life*, the concept of life tends to come apart as soon as we aim to think it. Drawing on a broad philosophical archive, Thacker shows that the long history of attempts to formulate “an ontology of life that is neither reducible to biology nor sublimated within theology” (xi) have yielded a fundamentally contradictory notion of life. Life, that is, emerges as something that “can only be thought through a logic of contradiction” (23)—as something that is simultaneously “human-centered and yet unhuman-oriented” (ix). Thacker does not stop at this pleasing paradox; instead, his book shows in great detail that the contradictions of life are always unleashed in historically variable constellations. Today, as I noted, the contradictory nature of life is often theorized under the rubric of the Anthropocene. From this perspective, human life does not stop being a biological, psychological, and linguistic phenomenon, but it now also plays in the same league as, say, heat waves, volcanoes, and Antarctic ice (Baucom 2014, 136; Chakrabarty 2012, 12).

In the field of critical theory, this upscaling of human life has gone together with an increased attention to flat ontologies and vibrant matters in approaches that emphasize, perform, and/or celebrate the reduction of human life to the ontological status of nonhuman lives, objects, and/or things. In light of Thacker’s

work, these object-oriented ontologies and speculative realisms can be said to downplay the constitutively contradictory nature of life—the fact, that is, that life actively resists the reductions that also define it. Other commentators have affirmed the need to keep precisely these tensions in view and have underlined that the Anthropocene is less a matter of abandoning human life to the great outdoors than of thinking the disjunctions that afflict it. The point is not to reduce human history to a chapter in natural history but, rather, in Dipesh Chakrabarty's (2012, 2) words, to “think . . . disjunctively about the human” and to recognize that human life is simultaneously a psychological, a social, a biological, and a geological reality. For Chakrabarty and others, the Anthropocene challenges us to grasp the specificity of the contradictions that afflict a human life that has become aware of the unavailability of its own eventual extinction. It delivers, that is, “a figure of the human that is constitutionally and necessarily doubled and contradictory” (8). Such self-consciously contradictory accounts of human life refuse the resolutely posthuman leveling operations of speculative and object-oriented approaches; they constitute, in Margaret Ronda's (2013) helpful words, “not posthumanism but humanism, with a vengeance.”

How, then, do we understand this vengeance? How, that is, do we conceive the constitutive contradictions of human life as they materialize in the Anthropocene? Human life is now inescapably part of the natural history of the planet—it has, that is, always been part of a history that is not merely human. At the same time, this realization is an event in a history that before this realization was, or believed itself to be, a decidedly human history. The entanglement of human and nonhuman histories is then simultaneously a suprahistorical characteristic of life and a historical event in a human history that learns that it was never merely human, and that the distinctions that used to define it have been erased. Human life in the Anthropocene discovers that what it believed to be its human history has now to be remembered differently—as always already entangled with nonhuman life.

In *Submergence*, this nonhuman realm is figured by water. The novel's very first paragraph underlines the hopelessness of James's incarceration by a group of jihadists when it shows him disconnected from water—a condition that, in the novel's logic, is bound to cut him loose from life: “It was a bathroom in an unfinished house in Somalia in the year 2012. There was a hole in the wall where the water pipe was meant to come in. . . . In some future time, the shower might be fitted. In some future time, it might become an incidental place. But it was not so

for him. For him, it was a very dark and specific place” (1). The novel’s opening not only underlines the untenability of a human life that remains disconnected from nonhuman life, it also emphasizes the particular temporality of contemporary human existence. The repetition of “in some future time” gestures towards a more reciprocal and sustainable situation, only to deny such a future perspective to the human life it presents—the life of James. This opening qualifies the love affair the novel will go on to recount as a thing of the past, even as it intimates that human life more generally is bound to become a memory. Indeed, the question of the entanglement of human and nonhuman lives becomes particularly acute in light of the prospect of the extinction of human life. This prospect not only radically rewrites human history (as a history that has begun to leak into natural history), it also consigns human life to the (future) past; the specific contradiction that marks Anthropocene life is that it invites humans to find ways to remember a past that has suddenly always been more than human. Human life, in Claire Colebrook’s (2014, 40) words, is now confined to “a gradual witnessing of a slow end”; it can only maintain itself in the face of the “accumulating certainty of the devastated” (Baucom 2014, 136) by learning to remember itself as not merely human. “Human-centered and yet unhuman-oriented” (Thacker 2010, xi): in the Anthropocene, this contradiction takes shape as a work of memory.

No literary form has been more crucial in imagining and policing the contours of modern life than the novel. Over a century of novel theory has established that the novel form was instrumental in inaugurating and sustaining modern forms of community (the nation), subjectivity (the bourgeois individual), gender divisions, and empire (Ortiz-Robles 2010, 1–2). *Submergence* self-consciously assumes and updates this legacy in its effort to trace the ongoing reorganization of human life, and to bring nonhuman life into the purview of the form. Part of the novel is set in a seaside hotel, where the “quality of life” is described as “pared down the way some novels were pared down” (35). *Submergence* decides not to be such a pared-down novel and instead juxtaposes its love story with scientific accounts, bits of English and colonial history, and excursions on religious and cultural histories ranging back to the Sumerians. Many of the fragments the novel collects relate to deep-sea life—to a kind of life that is not traditionally part of the form’s jurisdiction but that *Submergence* sets out to imagine as inseparably entwined with human life. The novel allows human life to remember itself and to see itself altered. To quote another passage from the novel that can be read as a statement of artistic intent: “There was a mirror in the room and he stood looking

at himself; or rather, because he was not vain in that way, he regarded his other self caught inside the mirror" (103). *Submergence* disturbs the historical feedback loop through which the modern novel allowed modern life to imagine itself into being; the life "caught inside" the novel is no longer only human.

The novel's love affair unfolds in a couple of days before Christmas 2011 in a French hotel near the Atlantic Ocean. This realm has been extensively explored as a site of intercultural encounter and diasporic expression marked by the sediments of the transatlantic slave trade at least since the publication of Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* in 1993. For Gilroy, and for the research program that developed in the wake of his book, taking up that legacy can inspire forms of conviviality and planetary cosmopolitanism. *Submergence* hints at these ideas, but it takes them beyond aspirations of intercultural connectedness. Danny is haunted by the image—she describes it as "a series of lithographs" (118)—of a sinking slave ship carrying one of her ancestors; this fills her with the thought of the possibility of her own nonexistence—"my slave ancestor is drowned in the Atlantic and I'm never born" (118). Ultimately, this fantasy inspires her fascination with deep-ocean life: "I became interested in the ocean to see where those slaves went, how deep they sank" (118, also 61). Rather than investing in black Atlantic connectedness, the novel is interested in the deeper recesses of the ocean.

Danny devotes her life to the study of microbial deep-ocean life—life that persists in the darkness, without photosynthesis, and that in the history of terrestrial life precedes the animal and plant life that later "ascended from the eternal night . . . heading towards the light" (95). The novel underlines that bacterial life continues to exceed other forms of life both in terms of biomass and genetic diversity (Brassier 2007, 226–27). Knowledge of this life form, Danny notes, is necessary "to comprehend the scale of life on earth. . . . The fact that life can exist in the darkness, on chemicals, changes our understanding about life everywhere else in the universe" (137). If the novel's different plots test the limits of the kind of cosmopolitan conviviality we know from the study of the black Atlantic, its recurring evocations of the facts and fantasies of deep-ocean life lucidly move beyond those limits in order to submerge human life in "the pullulating life in the dark parts of the planet" (9)—"life which exceeded all chronologies . . . which had yet to be named" (23). *Submergence* brings this immemorial life into the fold of the human life it circumscribes. What emerges is a sense of how the uncolonizable life force that the novel situates in the deep ocean afflicts human life as what the novel calls "a force of subtraction"—a force that subtracts from

human life until it becomes merely a “swollen creature” (7). The upshot of the novel’s sustained scaling exercise is that humankind is shown to exist “only as a film on the water” (59).

In his book *In the Dust of This Planet*, Eugene Thacker (2011, 6) introduces a conceptual distinction between the world, the earth, and the planet. The world (also called “the world-for-us”) is the realm of phenomenological experience, the reality human beings interpret and give meaning to; the earth is “the world-in-itself,” the world in its already given state that can be studied scientifically; the planet, finally, is what resists experiential and scientific mapping, and yet “continues to persist in the shadows” of our world. This planet, Thacker writes, is to be found not “in a ‘great beyond’ that is exterior to the World . . . or the Earth” but, rather, in “the very fissures, lapses, or lacunae in the World and the Earth” (7–8). The planet is what *Submergence* calls “another world in our world” (3) that refuses to become an object of human consciousness; the planet, that is, emerges when we subtract the human from the world (5). The imaginative task, for Thacker (2011, 6), is “confronting this enigmatic concept of the world-without-us” or the planet without reducing it to a regular part of worldly representation, as such a reduction would simply displace the planet to the shadows of *that* representation. The planet can only be accessed obliquely.

Submergence codes the distinction between world and earth on the one hand and the planet that ruptures them on the other through the opposition between sea and ocean; while the sea is part of human experience, the ocean instead consists of an unexplored and vibrant vastness that we have not begun to access, and that yet invisibly determines the very possibility of human life (11, 59). Indeed, the ocean is not just a great beyond that exists outside the bounds of human existence; it has infiltrated the very way we see the world: “The microbial life of the deep,” the novel notes, contains “fleeces of microbes . . . that are even more extraordinary than those that live on the timbers of our eyelashes” (156). While the sea operates on the scale of intercultural encounters—“a pause between one land-bound adventure and another” (59), a surface on which “everything [is] in flux” (62)—the “Hadal deep” is marked by constancy, uniformity, and stasis (156), and it remains withdrawn from conscious experience. While we have heroic histories of seafaring and space flight, the novel remarks, the less glamorous realities of “ocean flight” only lead to “the discomfiting realisation that most of the planet you call your own is hostile to you” (67).

Submergence imagines the ocean as a realm that is definitively withdrawn

from human exploration, colonization, and control and yet affects the ways in which human life understands itself. The novel explicitly acknowledges the modern novel's insistent concern with the sea as an area of adventure, travel, and contemplation—the literary history that Margaret Cohen (2012) has mapped in *The Novel and the Sea*—only to note that the novel's concern has mainly been with beaches and tides, while “the connection with the ocean has been lost” (95); too much occupied with “what is in the sky and what is behind the sky,” a realm that lends itself to religious inspiration (78), the novel form has tended to forget that “there is so much darkness in our world” (95). The novel, in other words, has been a form beholden to land, sea, and sky, but not to the ocean. *Moby-Dick*, we read, “is the greatest novel in the English language about the sea. It is not concerned with the ocean” (95–96). Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea*, for its part, refers in its title “to the journey taken across, not down” (96). The downward journey to a planetary darkness within is the one *Submergence* is engaged in.

Thacker (2011, 98–99) sees the confrontation with the world-without-us as an encounter with the unthinkable, with “the limits of our place within that world.” He uses the term *horror* to describe this limit experience. This limit, as *Submergence*'s evocation of “protists, archaea, fungi and especially bacteria” (Ledgard 2012, 156) makes clear, “has less to do with a fear of death, and more to do with the dread of life” (Thacker 2011, 98)—with a dreary excess of vitality that resists easy translation into human significance. If this life cannot become part of human experience, the novel includes this internal limit in the expanded sense of the human life it circumscribes—as a planetary remainder that persists in its fictional world. Thacker situates this encounter with nonhuman life in the genres of science fiction and supernatural horror, but I want to argue that such an encounter can arguably be more effective in the form that has traditionally been dedicated to containing modern life—in the literary novel, that is, rather than in genre fiction. If, for better or worse, we expect literary novels to deliver a recognizable picture of human life, *Submergence*'s decision to reflect a radically altered picture can more forcefully confront us with the disjunctions that mark life in the Anthropocene. In another passage that can easily be decoded as a programmatic statement, a character notes that “the greatest service he could offer in the complicated present was to help people catch up emotionally with where they stood historically” (Ledgard 2012, 111). Inhabiting an unstable present and affectively suturing readers to the historical conjuncture they inhabit: this is what

the novel form has traditionally been called upon to do, and it is what *Submergence* attempts to do by inserting a capacious sense of life into the shifting sense of human existence.

3. Immemorial Life

I have thus far focused on the novel’s evocation of human life’s imbrication with unexperienced and nonhuman life forms and downplayed the memorial aspect of its revision of human life. The novel from the outset underscores nature’s and humanity’s increased “vulnerability” (10, 14). Not only is the novel infused with a melancholic and muted tone, it also presents human life as a thing of the future past through its temporal organization. James and Danny’s love affair is presented as a series of flashbacks from the perspective on which the novel opens: James’s doomed fate as he is held captive by jihadists that are bound to kill him (even if the novel ends with a dreamlike scene that can be read as either a representation of his death or his miraculous rescue [184–85]). James, like human life more generally, knows he is doomed to disappear from the earth, and as he has no future, his life becomes something to be remembered. His memories focus on his encounter with Danny, who, as an oceanic biomathematician, has a scientific knowledge of deep time that—and this is crucial—remains inaccessible to James, even as, as the novel tells the reader (and not James), human life is deeply implicated in it; her knowledge can “forever change the understanding of the dimensions of life on earth” (22). James’s life, in other words, is composed of forms of life that remain inaccessible to him; the life that the novel remembers contains an essentially immemorial dimension that resists transnational circulation and connection. The novel distinguishes two forms of secrecy: that of James, who as a secret agent is “legally bound to hide behind a false identity,” and that to which Danny is committed, which has less to do with intercultural or interpersonal concerns than with the limits of the humanly thinkable: “She could not simplify the maths for him” (112). Danny notes that she traffics in “a greater polarity” than that between rich and poor or between different cultures: “the division between life on the surface of the world and the life she studied in the Hadal deep” (39). Through Danny, James’s life touches on a life that has no memorable form—the life of “teeming hordes of nameless micro-organisms that mimic no forms, because they are the foundation of all forms” (180), and that precede the novel’s engagement with human life. As the novel’s invisible omniscient narrator

presents us with myths, legends, anecdotes, factoids, and fantasies pertaining to this immemorial life, it makes it part of the novel's imagining of human life—an imagining we are given to read, if not experience.

What then does it mean, exactly, that the Anthropocene memory of human life contains an immemorial dimension? What is the life we remember when we remember a history that, it turns out, was always more and less than human? Ian Baucom (2012, 10–12) has suggested that we can find that kind of life if we read just a little further in one of the foundational documents on the ethics and politics of memory. Baucom has in mind Walter Benjamin's (1968) "Theses on the Philosophy of History." Critical theory has traditionally stopped at Benjamin's ninth thesis in order to celebrate the angel of history as an emblem of responsible memory work; Baucom notes that it is time to read on to the eighteenth thesis. In this thesis, Benjamin (1968, 263) quotes "a modern biologist" observing that "in relation to the history of organic life on earth . . . the paltry fifty millennia of *homo sapiens* constitute something like two seconds at the close of a twenty-four hour day." The angel of history famously condenses a whole human history of violence into one pregnant moment when it sees "a chain of events" as "one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage" (257); Benjamin's biological vision, in its turn, remembers "the history of mankind" as itself a compression of a vaster history that is not merely human (263). If Benjamin's angel anticipates the coincidence of past and present in order to "fan . . . the spark of hope in the past" (255) and release its messianic potential, this more capacious context recalls that the past was never simply what we thought it was, and that there are pasts that cannot be returned to the present. Benjamin's little-read later thesis, in other words, introduces organic and geological scales that complicate the messianic promise that critical theory has found in his ninth thesis; it shows that human memory is haunted by an immemorial history of life that cannot so easily be converted into human, let alone theological, meaning. For this Anthropocene Benjamin, remembering human life involves the recognition of an immemorial life, which takes the rigorously nontheological shape of a history that disturbs the separation between human and nonhuman life.

The notion of immemorial life sutures human history to a more encompassing history of life. It is important to underline why this deep history is properly immemorial: if human life is something that can only be remembered, its species history persists in it as an immemorial remainder that escapes the dialectic of remembering and forgetting and cannot be returned to the present. In that way,

immemorial life corresponds to what Chakrabarty (2009, 220) has in mind when he notes that species history can never become part of phenomenological experience. He notes that “we can only intellectually comprehend or infer the existence of the human species but never experience it as such . . . in species history, humans are only an instance of the concept species as indeed would be any other life form. But one never experiences being a concept” (220). Species history, in other words, and *Submergence*’s account of the enabling role of bacterial life in human life, can enter phenomenological experience only as the experience of an absence, as a lack. Indeed, even if “less than one per cent of [deep-sea bacteria] have been identified, they are a part of you” (156). When *Submergence* underlines the vital role that bacteria played in the development of complex life forms, and thus of consciousness, it points, in Ray Brassier’s (2007, 52) words, to a reality that “occurred in a time *anterior to the possibility of experience*”; indeed, occurring before there was a subject of experience (and memory) to which to manifest itself, “the anteriority indexed by the ancestral phenomenon does not point to an earlier time *within* manifestation; it indexes a time *anterior to the time of manifestation in its entirety*” (55). Experiencing the entanglement of human history and other life forms, then, means registering that absence, which is what Chakrabarty’s (2012, 2) “necessity of thinking disjunctively about the human” amounts to. When human life has become a memory, we need to factor in a dimension of immemorial life.

The notion of the immemorial is not new—it occurs in the work of, most notably, Giorgio Agamben (1999), Emmanuel Levinas (1991), and, as we have seen, Walter Benjamin (1968). What unites their mobilizations of this notion is that they are all at least crypto-theological: oriented toward being in Agamben, a divine command in Levinas, or a spurious redemption in Benjamin. What is distinctive about the notion of immemorial life as species history is that it is resolutely immanent and material, and that it figures the disjointed nature of human life in the Anthropocene without recourse to fantasies of theological or transhuman transcendence.

Agamben’s (1999) essay on “The Tradition of the Immemorial” draws heavily on the work of Plato and Martin Heidegger. What these thinkers help Agamben articulate is the close affinity between memory and truth. For Agamben (1999, 104), every specific act of cultural transmission also transmits “that alone through which something like a tradition is possible”; therefore, “the tradition of transmissibility is . . . immemorially contained in every specific tradition” (105), and

it is ultimately this immemorial dimension that drives the unforgetting of truth in and as the history of being. Agamben quotes Plato's definition of memory as a "disposition of the soul, which keeps watch over the unconcealment within it" (105)—which testifies, in other words, to a foundational dimension that precedes the dialectic of memory and forgetting and that is therefore properly immemorial. Memory, in this sense, is a form of anamnesis, or a memory of "the time in which man was not yet man" (106). For Agamben's Plato and Heidegger, this time before the human is a marker of the truth of being; read in light of *Submergence's* reorganization of human life, it more modestly points to the human's saturation by life forms that precede and exceed it.

If, for Agamben, the immemorial points back to being, for Levinas it surfaces in the encounter with the other. For Levinas, the other indexes a time that cannot be recuperated; the proximity of the other is marked, Levinas (1991, 88) writes, by "a command come as though from an immemorial past." The appeal of the other is defined by "a certain absence not reducible to the opposition presence/absence and belonging to an immemorial past" (Robbins 1999, 20)—by a past that cannot be "incorporated into the diachronicity of the historical process" (Wyschogrod 2002, 197). Ultimately, the immemorial, for Levinas, figures a divine command, and while this command cannot be recalled in voluntary acts of memory, it is yet through the process of memory that we can testify to this impossibility—to the imperative that compels remembrance even if it resists it. The void, that is, persists as "the void at the heart of memory" (Bernard-Donals 2009, 35). *Submergence*, I argue, gives that void a particular biological and geological shape.

If Agamben's and Levinas's accounts of the immemorial are marked by a decidedly theological orientation, the structure of experience they develop articulates the immemorial as an opening *within* memory. Near the end of his *Nihil Unbound*, Ray Brassier turns to Levinas to argue that this structure can also do without such a theological orientation, and it is this structure that is helpful for an understanding of *Submergence's* reimagining of human life. Brassier makes his point by juxtaposing Levinas's ethics of encounter with Jean-François Lyotard's reflections on the significance of the coming extinction of the sun (in about 4.5 billion years). The certainty of extinction, Lyotard observes, radically interrupts human time, in a way that is analogous to the unsettling temporality of the ethical encounter in Levinas: "Lyotard's 'solar catastrophe,'" Brassier (2007, 231) writes, "effectively *transposes* Levinas's theologically inflected 'impossibility of

possibility’ into a natural-scientific register, so that it is no longer the death of the Other that usurps the sovereignty of consciousness, but the extinction of the sun” (231). The fact of extinction is “at once a *naturalization of eschatology* and a *theologization of cosmology*” (231–32). Levinas’s imagining of the ethical rupture within phenomenology makes it possible to replace Levinas’s ethico-theological orientation with a radically immanent one, and to reimagine the immemorial as a mode of life. In this regard, Brassier writes, “Levinas’ hyperbolic phenomenology provides the perfect lexicon with which to describe extinction as a traumatic *seizure of phenomenology*” (2007, 232).

If the notion of the immemorial in the works of Benjamin, Agamben, and Levinas creates an opening for transcendence within the horizon of consciousness and secular time, the idea of immemorial life occupies that spot with the resolutely immanent content of a biological and geological history exceeding the scale of the human. In this way, immemorial life not only resists the temptations of theology, it also offers an alternative to a merely secular understanding of history. Indeed, through its reorganization of the relations between human and nonhuman life, the notion of the Anthropocene challenges “the secular basis of human history as one that wrests freedom from necessity” (Aravamudan 2013, 12; Northcott 2013, 44–47). An awareness of the geological agency of human life destabilizes Enlightenment conceptions of freedom and agency, as human life finds itself confronted with the destructive unintended consequences of its choices, yet cannot but turn to its own agency in order to act on those consequences (Chakrabarty 2009, 208–10). This requires an altered sense of subjectivity, if being a subject is understood not as “act[ing] autonomously” but as sharing “*agency with other subjects that have also lost their autonomy*” (Latour 2014, 5). Figuring immemorial life as a dimension of human life is a way of overcoming modern “dreams of mastery” without simply surrendering human to natural life (5); it affirms the entanglement of human and natural agency without collapsing them into each other, and without relapsing into theology. *Submergence* insists on the very different temporalities and rhythms of the life forms it engages: some microbes remain “deliberately rare,” “waiting a million years” for altered circumstances (Ledgard 2012, 151); deep-sea time is kept by an “unlit clock [that] ticked at an incalculably slower speed” (124). These rhythms take the memory of life beyond calculation and human experience and into the immemorial.

Submergence signals its resistance to both theology and secularism through repeated references to the mythical figure of the Kraken. For the young Alfred

Tennyson in 1830, the Kraken in his famous sonnet served as a figural device for sinking “far beneath in the abysmal sea” (“The Kraken,” l. 2), from which the Kraken will only rise when “the latter fire shall heat the deep” (l. 12) and when it will “on the surface die” (l. 14) before the eyes of “man and angels” (l. 13). Tennyson’s angel spectators not only offer an uncanny foreshadowing of the angel of Anthropocene history we have encountered in Benjamin, they also, together with the “latter fire,” rather anxiously embed the ungodly Kraken in a theological framework. *Submergence* refers to this framework, only to displace its theological aspirations from the afterlife to what it calls “another world in our world,” which will not become visible “until the latter fire heats the deep” (Ledgard 2012, 3). Yet in *Submergence*, this heating arrives in the form of climate change, as one calamity in a series of disasters: “death by famine, new epidemics . . . infestations of insects, methane gas bubbles, or even by meteors” (139). These altered circumstances, which all evoke the context of the Anthropocene, leave little room for theological comfort, nor for a firm belief that science can enlighten this darkness at the heart of life. The novel recounts the story of the late nineteenth-century HMS *Challenger*, whose job it was “to plumb the remote seas and trawl them for new life” (97). The crew managed to bring up tens of thousands of new species, as well as seemingly insignificant heaps of slime. What they did not know was that this slime was also a remainder of life: “Yet we now know that the slime which covered the inside of the dredge each time it was brought up was not the unexceptional ooze the ship’s scientists believed it to be. Not whale snot, either. It was all that remained of the most exquisite forms of millions of sea squirts, salp, and jellies, whose diaphanous musculature—more remarkable than any alien species yet conceived—had lost its form in air” (97). Sea life collapsing into slime: this reads like a cruel parody of the Kraken dying on the surface. *Submergence*’s evocations of untamed life inspire neither theological recuperation nor secular confidence: “Religious authority would not stand a chance once it had to confront the issue of species survival” (173)—an issue that here materializes as a dreadful excess of vitality that resists translation into human significance.

4. Human Forms of Life and Nonhuman Life Forms in the Transnational Imagination

The reorganization of human life in the Anthropocene also afflicts the novel, the form that has traditionally been invested in the imagining and policing of modern

life. I have discussed *Submergence* as an example of an Anthropocene fiction that self-consciously situates human life in relation to nonhuman vectors of vitality, while shifting its presentation of that entanglement to a memorial mode. By refusing the comforts of a resolutely posthuman reality devoid of human pathos as we know it, and by stubbornly continuing the problematic humanism that is arguably endemic to the novel form, *Submergence* paradoxically perpetuates that form’s mandate of shaping and inculcating particular imaginings of contemporary life. I want to emphasize that *Submergence*’s exploration of nonhuman forms of life does not entail that questions of cultural difference become irrelevant: even if a close analysis of this dimension falls outside the scope of my essay, the novel explores these issues through the plotline of James’s imprisonment by a group of jihadists, as well as through its focus on the class and racial differences between James and Danny. Indeed, the inscrutability of the deep is echoed by James’s relation to the jihadists, “whose lives he could not grasp . . . claiming a significance of history he could not decipher” (142). Also, the novel repeatedly underscores that the position of James’s prison is as secret as Danny’s deep-sea knowledge, as it resists detection by satellites or Reaper drones (103, 109, 123, 170), and that his relation to the jihadists thus also constitutes a significant challenge to customary categories of knowledge.

Even when the ocean is recognized as a repository of nonhuman life forms, it remains a privileged object of transnational inquiry—“as a site of mobility, contact and transformation, and as a location . . . where alternative understandings of culture, history and sovereignty can be imagined and at times realized” (Forsdick and Marshall 2014, 3). *Submergence* reminds transnational studies that it can imagine these transformations and alternatives beyond the limit of the human, if it wants to mobilize the ocean, in Hester Blum’s (2013, 151) words, “as a methodological model for nonlinear or nonplanar thought.” The novel’s contribution to transnational cultural and literary studies is not that it exchanges a focus on the interconnections between diverse forms of life for an exploration of different life forms. It does not, in the novel’s own terms, abandon the sea for the ocean; rather, it shows that the relations between these different lives is not a zero-sum game but a complex dynamic that puts the task of articulating *different differences* on the table of transnational scholarship.

Nor has it ever really been missing there; after all, Chakrabarty’s (2009) influential explorations of the impact of the Anthropocene and climate change on historical and critical thinking explicitly takes postcolonial studies as its province;

Rob Nixon's (2011) groundbreaking *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* meticulously outlines how different constituencies are differentially affected by the waste products of modernity; and as a last example, we can note that the recently launched *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* devoted its first issue to "New Topographies of the Postcolonial," giving pride of place to an essay by Ian Baucom (2014) on postcolonial method and Anthropocene time, which occasioned a forum in the journal's second issue. These highly visible instances of interrogations of the reciprocal connections between life forms and forms of life can help to counter the often-heard critique that the notion of the Anthropocene, by seeming to name humankind (*anthropos*) as a whole, overrides all-important cultural and economic differences; in the examples I just gave, as in Ledgard's novel, the Anthropocene reminds transnational literary and cultural studies of the need to recalibrate the relations between cultural specificity and the species perspective. *Submergence* makes clear that our species' involvement with nonhuman lives paradoxically situates a radically alien dimension at the heart of human life—an immemorial life that inhabits our form of life as it is learning to become a memory.

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