

**David Lombard**

*F.R.S.-FNRS/Universities of Liège and Leuven, Belgium*

## **Toward a Speculative-Pragmatic Sublime: A Narratological Analysis of the Toxic Sublime and the Unnarrated in Contemporary U.S. Literature**

**Abstract:** This paper provides a close narratological and comparative analysis of Rachel Carson's short story "A Fable for Tomorrow" (1962) and Susanne Antonetta's memoir *Body Toxic: An Environmental Memoir* (2001), which both highlight the pragmatic and ecocritical potential of literature as a source of cultural responses to the Anthropocene challenge. Engaging in a critical dialogue with Brian Massumi's concept of speculative pragmatism as presented in his *Semblance and Event: Activist Philosophy and the Occurrent Arts* (2011) and, more precisely, its aesthetic-political approach, the literary readings in this article build on other notions such as the *unnarrated* and the *toxic sublime* which complicate and enrich the literary discourse on environmental disruption. The literary works of environmental (non)fiction studied offer examples of how literature negotiates the (in)visibility, (un)representability, and (non)narratability of forms of environmental pollution through the use of the trope of the sublime as well as of olfactory and gustatory perception while they both portray the authors' evident rhetorical intention to foster ecological awareness and responsibility.

**Keywords:** speculative; pragmatism; sublime; toxicity; Anthropocene; American literature; narratology; ecocriticism.

### **Speculative pragmatism, the unnarrated and the toxic sublime**

The Anthropocene has called for a redefinition of aesthetics, of what it means to be *sublime* and *political*. The relationship between these two notions evokes the lasting debate on whether or not the aesthetic quality or values of art should prevail over its potential to be used for political forms of criticism. Brian Massumi's activist philosophy of "speculative pragmatism" (2011) takes a radical position in this argument insofar as it seeks to move beyond binaries by merging nature with culture and the aesthetic with the political. The political, defined by Massumi as "relational", occurs through the unfolding of "semblance", which he describes as "a lived expression of the

eternal matter-of-fact that is time's passing".<sup>1</sup> Derived from Walter Benjamin's idea of "nonsensuous similarity", the "semblance" suggests that any event can be "virtually seen", for lack of being directly perceivable, because it is not experienced through "any particular mode of perception".<sup>2</sup> In other words, Massumi's thought widens the scope of political criticism by implying that, even when an event exceeds human perception, the abstract (or "nonsensuous") can still be "felt" as a "*perceptual feeling*, without the actual perception".<sup>3</sup> As a result, what the beholder actually experiences is a "double existence" of the event produced by the "continuing-across of movement" which "involve[s] a change of state": the visible (or "[d]irectly perceptually-felt") and the abstract (or "nonsensuously perceived") are both experienced as the abstract becomes "lived abstraction".<sup>4</sup> This "relationship" (hence the "relational" aspect of the political) between the visible and abstract reflects "the *constitution* of the self worlding" and creates "linkages that bring 'extremely diverse' *nonlocal* differences together *qualitatively*".<sup>5</sup> Recently, the notion of the sublime has been deployed to address comparable relations and issues both in visual arts and literature, where it is utilized as a trope to represent the non-human or technological world. Indeed, the natural sublime, which emphasizes the separation between the individual and a pristine wilderness, has been redefined to encompass a broader anthropogenic reality. More precisely, reappropriations such as the "toxic sublime" (2011), which Jennifer Peeples describes as the sum of "the tensions that arise from recognizing the toxicity of a place, object or situation, while simultaneously appreciating its mystery, magnificence and ability to inspire awe", complicate our approach to non-human situations while including ecological concerns.<sup>6</sup> Language is used in literature and arts, also through the trope of the toxic sublime, to represent these tensions and Massumi's "double existence". As Massumi writes, language "has more fundamentally to do with *speculation*", "removes all limits to nonlocal linkages" and "enables *truth*", namely "the *pragmatic* potential to begin a movement nonsensuously and terminate it in a sense-perception satisfying an anticipation".<sup>7</sup> Consequently, a narratological analysis, based on the study of the *language* in narratives and its impact on human perception, shows that the trope of the sublime and the unnarrated elliptic style can be understood as essentially *speculative-pragmatic* narrative techniques. Indeed, the next sections of this paper will prove that the toxic sublime and the unnarrated contribute to building the "*constructive* meaning of

<sup>1</sup> Brian Massumi, *Semblance and Event: Activist Philosophy and the Occurrent Arts* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2011), 24.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 106–16.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 110–11.

<sup>6</sup> Jennifer Peeples, "Toxic Sublime: Imaging Contaminated Landscapes," *Environmental Communication* 5, 4 (December 2011): 375–80.

<sup>7</sup> Massumi, *Semblance and Event*, 118.

truth”, they are “speculatively pragmatic” or “aesthetic-political”, and also persuasive as ecologically-driven strategies.<sup>8</sup>

Peeples’s account of the toxic sublime can be extended to different forms of arts and Fanny Papay’s work “Is It Contemporary Art?” (2018) provides an appropriate illustration of such an extension. Although used in an article from *Le Monde diplomatique* which denounces the extensive and unfettered use of pesticides on flowers, the decontextualized activism in Papay’s picture resides in its potential to lure the viewer into a reflection on the invisible or *unnarrated* contents of the plastic spray gun transformed into a flowerpot.<sup>9</sup> Even though there could be water in the spray gun, the natural (the flower) and the man-made (the spray gun) are intertwined, which leads the beholder to think otherwise (hence Ramirez and Valadon’s use of the image in their article on the heavy use of pesticides on roses for the sake of productivism). The unnarrated contents of the spray gun also allude to the tensions or mixed feelings generated through the toxic sublime experience insofar as one may appreciate the aesthetic value of the image but is compelled to feel disoriented when recognizing that using a spray gun as a flowerpot is highly uncommon, especially considering that the contents of a spray gun are usually toxic. Besides, Papay’s title also encourages the viewer to ponder on what could (or should?) be considered as contemporary art today. While one may argue that contemporary art should not be reduced to such straightforward activism, I would counter that the aesthetic value of Papay’s work is specifically expressed through this *unnarrated political* message which urges the disoriented viewer to reconsider the unregulated use of pesticides on flowers. Indeed, most of the toxic sublime rhetoric rests upon its ability to actively involve the beholder or reader (in the case of visual arts and literature), allowing them to *construct* the political meaning or “truth” of the artistic work itself. Similarly, Massumi’s speculative pragmatism includes such tensions between the directly perceived (in the case of Papay’s work, what is directly visible in the picture) and the abstract (or the unnarrated, namely the contents of the spray gun and the use of pesticides on flowers), and emphasizes that the sum of the occurring “tension[s] potentiates the event”.<sup>10</sup> When embracing the paradox that “there are aspects of the world that are expressed without actually appearing”, readers and viewers play important roles in rendering the event even more “productive” and meaningful.<sup>11</sup> Contemporary U.S. literature engages in a similar staging when displaying rhetorical mobilizations of the toxic sublime which aim at “communicating knowledge, feelings, values, and beliefs” to the reader while fitting sublime situations or moments of disorientation in the overarching textual strategies that they adopt.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>9</sup> Zulma Ramirez and Geoffroy Valadon, “Allons voir si la rose...,” *Le Monde diplomatique* (February 2020), 13.

<sup>10</sup> Massumi, *Semblance and Event*, 22–23.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>12</sup> James Phelan, *Narrative as Rhetoric: Technique, Audiences, Ethics, Ideology* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1996), 18.

In their introduction to a collection on ecocriticism and narrative theory, Erin James and Eric Morel identify such textual strategies in narratology which could significantly expand the scope of considerations but have remained underexploited in the field of so-called econarratology.<sup>13</sup> Among these leads, the critics mention feminist narrative theorist Robyn Warhol's concepts of the "unnarrated" and "neonarrative". Warhol describes the "unnarrated" as referring to "those passages that explicitly do not tell what is supposed to have happened, foregrounding the narrator's refusal to narrate", and the "neonarrative" as the successful attempt of passages in narratives as "narratorial strategies" in "making narrative genres new".<sup>14</sup> Warhol also establishes four subcategories for the "unnarrated": the "subnarratable" as what is "too insignificant or banal" to be told, the "supnarratable" as referring to "events that defy narrative" and which cannot be represented by means of "language" or "visual image[s]", the "antinarratable" as what cannot be told because it "transgresses social laws or taboos", and the "paranarratable" as what would not be told in a specific genre because of its "formal convention".<sup>15</sup> As James and Morel point out, Warhol's subcategories could be used to answer the question of "why more contemporary narratives don't give attention to toxic waste" inasmuch as, I would add, a close analysis of the strategies which are used in "neonarratives" to circumvent the "unnarrated" can throw light on innovative ways of relating to and describing the nonhuman.<sup>16</sup>

### Unnarrated toxic pesticides in Rachel Carson's apocalyptic "Fable"

In line with Papay's work, Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) belongs to such category of texts which make use of the toxic sublime and the unnarrated and, as several ecocritics have acknowledged, promote "a sense of environmental responsibility".<sup>17</sup> More specifically, if critics generally refer to Carson's *Silent Spring* as a milestone in the U.S. and global environmental movement, her fictitious narrative "A Fable For Tomorrow" has a different, imaginative and aesthetic-political potential. Indeed, this short story utilizes strategies from contemporary ecocriticism such as the interrupted pastoral while including several effective unnarrated passages.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Erin James and Eric Morel, "Ecocriticism and Narrative Theory: An Introduction," *English Studies* 99, 4 (May 2018): 355–65.

<sup>14</sup> Robyn R. Warhol, "Neonarrative; or, How to Render the Unnarratable in Realist Fiction and Contemporary Film," in *A Companion to Narrative Theory*, eds. James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz (Malden: Blackwell, 2005), 221.

<sup>15</sup> Robyn R. Warhol, "Neonarrative," 222–25.

<sup>16</sup> James and Morel, "Ecocriticism and Narrative Theory," 360.

<sup>17</sup> Erin James, *The Storyworld Accord: Econarratology and Postcolonial Narratives* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015), 47.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). Leo Marx's is a fundamental text about the interrupted pastoral inasmuch as it conveys that the pastoral experience can be disturbed or interrupted by the noise of civilization or technology, thus eliminating the possibility of isolation in nature.

“A Fable for Tomorrow” is an apocalyptic “neonarrative” which accounts for the author’s belief in “the potential for narratives to help shape environmental policy”.<sup>19</sup> In addition to James’s econarratological reading, which properly underlines Carson’s use of an apocalyptic lexical field including the “evil spell” or the “strange blight”, which both refer to the invisible but lethal pesticides, as well as her deviation “from the generic conventions of the fable” to switch “to first-person narration” and better serve her political agenda, Massumi’s philosophy and the toxic sublime enable a different perspective on the unnarrated in Carson’s story.<sup>20</sup> Carson’s “Fable” is first presented as *local*, set in “a town in the heart of America where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surrounding” and thus adopts a nostalgic tone which invites the reader to rejoice in imagining a landscape with “places of beauty” and “wildflowers” that “delighted the traveler’s eye through much of the year”.<sup>21</sup> This pastoral ideal is then rapidly interrupted by the apocalyptic “strange blight” which spread “a shadow of death” on communities, a “grim specter” that “has [now] crept upon us almost unnoticed” to eventually “become a stark reality we all shall know”.<sup>22</sup> As Justin McBrien argues, with this “single sentence, Carson globalized this tragedy as a creeping catastrophe of deep time, not in the flashy mega-explosions of the Bomb, but in the slow violence of its unknown, invisible by-products”.<sup>23</sup> Carson does not mention any word about the pesticides, which she therefore saves for the rest of the book, and, yet, the story introduces a framework of global ecological urgency and sheds a light on this still unknown form of “slow violence”.<sup>24</sup>

This framework of urgency is represented through aspects of the toxic sublime which contribute to defining the “Fable” as a “neonarrative”. Indeed, Carson blames the event on the people who “had done it themselves”.<sup>25</sup> As a development of the technological sublime, toxic sublime rhetoric avoids the systematic rejection of sublimity in any form of technology, whereas natural sublime rhetoric highlights that sublimity is only perceivable in strictly so-called *pristine* natural landscapes. Instead, toxic sublime rhetoric promotes, like the technological sublime, considerations of “some human creations” as sublime inasmuch as they are able to “leave a visitor dumbfounded, amazed, and deeply impressed by humans’ ingenuity in overcoming them”.<sup>26</sup> Pesticides can be viewed as such a human achievement whose primary goal

<sup>19</sup> James, *The Storyworld Accord*, 538.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 539–40.

<sup>21</sup> Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2000), 21.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 21–22.

<sup>23</sup> Justin McBrien, “Accumulating Extinction: Planetary Catastrophism in the Necroocene,” in *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, ed. James W. Moore (Oakland: PM Press, 2016), 128.

<sup>24</sup> “Slow violence” is understood here as “a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, [...] of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, [which is] not viewed as violence at all” (Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011], 2). Forms of “slow violence” could thus vary from toxic chemicals to ecological disasters or global warming itself.

<sup>25</sup> Carson, *Silent Spring*, 22.

<sup>26</sup> David E. Nye, *Technologies of Landscape: From Reaping to Recycling* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 10.

was to gain control over nature by eliminating pests and weeds. Like in Papay's picture, the use of pesticides shapes the unnarrated part of the "Fable" or what the book in its entirety "attempt[s] to explain", and therefore the background of the toxic sublime trope.<sup>27</sup> Through this trope, pesticides represent the human-made force which enables the overcoming of natural inconvenience in agriculture and opens the way for massive production. Carson's rhetorical goal in employing this trope is to demonstrate the drawbacks of humanity's propensity to recklessly impose itself on and dominate nature. Carson therefore provides an aesthetic-political narrative which counters productivism by pointing out the carcinogenic nature of seasonal flowers and vegetables which are sold throughout the year. What is more, Carson's narrative also moves beyond locality by transposing this issue to a nonlocal context. "This town does not actually exist, but it might easily have a thousand counterparts in America or elsewhere in the world", Carson writes, emphasizing the worldwide impact of the still unnarrated issue. This sole extract echoes both the central problem of the Anthropocene, namely the extension of the effects of human influence to a global scale, and Timothy Morton's concept of the "hyperobjects", which are "things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans".<sup>28</sup>

As Morton stresses, the effects of hyperobjects are also *nonlocal*, which complicates their visibility. For instance, toxicity in Carson's "Fable" is a hyperobject inasmuch as it is invisible, but it still affects human health and can be observed from a slightly higher-dimensional perspective, relating to what is not human.<sup>29</sup> This is also where the unrepresentable dimension of the sublime and Massumi's concept of "semblance" come into play. Toxicity is not here perceived through any mode of human perception, it is not directly experienced and, yet, it is now almost omnipresent with apparent consequences. Carson highlights humans' involvement in this issue and steers them toward radical systemic changes. Representing abstract forms of ecological disruption such as air pollution, climate change and global warming itself being one of the main challenges of the Anthropocene, Carson circumvents here the opposition between the concrete (or visible) and the abstract (or invisible) by using the trope of the toxic sublime. Her use of the toxic sublime also enables the reader to evolve toward Massumi's idea of "lived abstraction" and to construct political meaning based on the unnarrated and unrepresented, but pervasive hyperobject of toxicity. In fact, Massumi notes that most Western philosophers tend to oppose the concrete to the abstract while the abstract is an extension of what actually exists. In other words, the concept of "lived abstraction" provides "abstract dynamic" and enriches our understanding of "nonsensuous" hyperobjects which are not directly seen or experienced.<sup>30</sup> This idea of "lived abstraction" is also transferable to the notions of the unnarrated and the sublime

<sup>27</sup> Carson, *Silent Spring*, 22.

<sup>28</sup> Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 1.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>30</sup> Massumi, *Semblance and Event*, 27–41.



which, in Carson's "Fable", explore the limits of the narratable and representable. Indeed, Carson's text becomes a "neonarrative" inasmuch as it is a successful attempt to represent pesticides in fiction by means of the unnarrated and the toxic sublime ("paranarratable"). The unnarrated and the sublime are interrelated strategies through which the vocabulary of the sublime, potentially causing feelings of dread and disorientation (e.g., the "grim specter" or "strange blight" spreading "maladies" and causing a "strange stillness" which leaves people "puzzled and disturbed"), suggests that the nature of the unnarrated is toxic or, at least, dangerous and invasive. Moreover, if most people were unaware of the toxic effects of pesticides and could have considered them as banal in the 1960s ("subnarratable"), Carson's use of the sublime as a trope allows her to tackle the issue of dangerous forms of invisible toxicity which had yet been unnarrated by using language ("supranarratable"). Finally, by means of her evidence-based and uncontested account of the carcinogenic nature of pesticides, she got round the possible taboo ("antinarratable") accusations that would have been rejected because of a lack of overwhelming proof, and denounced common unfettered and risky practices in the agricultural industry. Interestingly, Carson's "neonarrative" opened the way for a greater number of environmental writings which border on the limits of the (un)narratable. Susanne Antonetta's *Body Toxic: An Environmental Memoir* (2006), which I explore in the next section, is an example of a "neonarrative" that breaks down the silence on the poisoning of the Pine Barrens in order to bring poor environmental policies and management to light.

### **Unnarrated toxic bodies in Susanne Antonetta's pragmatic autobiographical work**

The first chapter of Antonetta's book includes a significant statement on the power of the *unnarrated*: "My grandfather succeeded because *silence* succeeds. It can't be argued against. It is the last word".<sup>31</sup> A little further, the author explains that "both sides of [her] family had elaborate silences, mantras or *unspeech*: *You don't talk about it. You didn't talk about it then. Disease. Death. Wrongdoing.*"<sup>32</sup> Referred to as a taboo, a discussion topic which should be avoided for reasons the reader is (still) unaware of, the *silence* and *unspeech* belong here to the category of the "antinarratable". Besides, toxicity in Antonetta's work pertains to the realm of the "subnarratable" insofar as she mentions that "no one gave chemicals a second thought until the late sixties, early seventies".<sup>33</sup> More importantly, this conception of the unnarrated is also closely related to the author's portrait of her grandfather. Described as "a narrative that couldn't be unstuck from a single image", while it seems impossible to disconnect Papay's image from its environmentally-friendly narrative, the grandfather created an "ontological

<sup>31</sup> Susanne Antonetta, *Body Toxic: An Environmental Memoir* (Washington: Counterpoint, 2002), 4.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

vacuum” in the family, a “void” which developed into their “landscape of litter and syncope, where solid things could against all Einsteinian principles disappear”.<sup>34</sup> By means of this portrait, the author establishes a connection between her own sense of self and the polluted environment she grew up in, which her grandparents had always ignored. Indeed, contrary to people in the 1960s and her grandfather, the author sees a different reality inasmuch as she states that “there’s something precious about these walks through the wasted landscapes only I can see”, which evokes the unrepresentable and awe-inspiring dimensions of the toxic sublime.<sup>35</sup> The dangerous and uncontrollable aspects of the toxic sublime are also predominant throughout the memoir, in a way reminiscent of Carson’s “Fable” because the memoir identifies “nuclear power” as the main cause of toxicity and diseases while being “the ‘new control’ over nature”.<sup>36</sup> Antonetta turns herself into the voice who intends to show that there is more than meets and pleases the eye in the natural landscape of the Pine Barrens, and that the existing narrative of her polluted environment has solid but neglected *political* implications.

In order to circumvent the deception induced by her grandparents, Antonetta must deconstruct the “bodilessness” and selflessness of her family or their tendency to view themselves as “impregnable”.<sup>37</sup> More specifically, the author must debunk the belief that the body is a mere “semblance” and not a physical reality, a belief directly influenced by her grandmother’s endorsement of Docetism or of “the doctrine that the body could not be ill but only the spirit controlling it, the spirit that in fact made up the body”.<sup>38</sup> To that end, the author initiates a dialogue with Carson’s narrative of environmental disruption. More specifically, Antonetta depicts a nuclear era landscape that is impregnated with radiation and toxic chemicals, whose effects were visible in the Kirkwood-Cohansey aquifer system of the Pine Barrens, home of “mutated creatures: legless frogs, sexless trout, blind muskrat, [and] pinkeyed birds”.<sup>39</sup> Renamed as the “Camelot underground”, pervaded with “twilight”, but also paradoxically as “a beautiful fiction”, the narrative of the aquifer resembles that of Carson’s apocalyptic “Fable” and of the toxic sublime. Antonetta even goes as far as quoting Carson’s book as demonstrating that “radiation and chemical contamination increase each other’s effects when they’re found in the same area”, a form of explicit intertextuality which ingeniously makes reference to the unnarrated toxic effects of nuclear power.<sup>40</sup> The narration process of the unnarrated body is, however, different in Antonetta’s memoir inasmuch as she endeavors to reexplore the body’s full sensorium with the aim of restoring what Stacy Alaimo calls the “biological substance of her body”, and of

---

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 36–40.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.



representing her toxic body and self through language.<sup>41</sup> While Alaimo is not particularly interested in human sensory perception or in the ability of the “lower” senses (smell, taste and touch) to complicate our understanding of external phenomena, the fact that Antonetta does not represent the toxic body through conventional language, which echoes the “subnarratable” nature of toxicity, calls for an analysis of her frequent invocations of the senses of smell and taste as a rhetorical and narrative method of describing the unnarrated.

Antonetta’s use of the lower senses leads back to the oppositions between invisible and visible, concrete and abstract, previously discussed in this paper. As Antonetta notes, her grandparents “make[ ] no distinctions between the visible and the invisible, the real and the unreal.”<sup>42</sup> As a result, Antonetta alternates between the trope of the toxic sublime, in a similar way to Carson (by using the phrases “dangerous stuff”, “demons” or “hell’s drinking fountain” to illustrate toxic chemicals and poisoned water) and the senses of smell and taste to narrate the unnarrated and invisible, and therefore render the process of “lived abstraction” possible.<sup>43</sup> While the apocalyptic discourse adopted by the grandparents reinforces the banal or unrepresentable nature of the toxic landscape, the author’s stress on sensorial perception allows her to place toxicity in the realm of the perceivable or sensible, for lack of being part of the articulable. Consequently, the water from “hell’s drinking fountain” which contains “ten times the legal limit of iron” with “manganese [and] a reek of sulfur” is described as having “an unaccountable taste” and being “full of good iron”, acknowledging that the family is drinking polluted and non-potable water. Through the act of drinking or eating, the body becomes toxic itself. Indeed, this toxic body that Antonetta fashions is essentially made of things she drinks and eat, as the quoted song from Reader Rabbit suggests: “*From my head down to my feet/I’m made of things I drink and eat*.”<sup>44</sup> Eventually, the sense of taste becomes a way of avoiding transmitting her “body burdens” to her children and illustrates her wish to construct political criticism based on the unnarrated or invisible.

As the most intrusive and unmediated of the lower senses, the sense of smell also has an intriguing development in Antonetta’s memoir. Odors are mostly used to represent dead bodies or “dead things”, or to refer to the epitome of the unnarrated, and the cause of the perpetual intoxication of the body: her grandfather and his “adult smell of liquor.”<sup>45</sup> While complicating her relationship with odors, Antonetta still identifies the smell of places with toxic chemicals (e.g., “sulfur, something mustardy, something corrosive” or an “oily presence”) which she often relates to dead people or

---

<sup>41</sup> Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 102.

<sup>42</sup> Antonetta, *Body Toxic*, 128.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 130–31.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 241.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 14–35.

death itself.<sup>46</sup> This approach to smell evokes the tensions of the toxic sublime, symbolized by odors which “smell briny fresh” while possessing “a wheaty underodor of cut cattail”, a tension also perceivable through the act of tasting a disturbingly “sweet poisoned fish”.<sup>47</sup> Both the senses of smell and taste function in Antonetta’s memoir as reminders of the existence of the unnarrated, of the fact that toxicity invades the body and mind. This conceptualization of the body and death is also reminiscent of a passage from Don DeLillo’s classic postmodern novel *White Noise* (1985), widely analyzed in terms of toxicity and sickness, in which the protagonist’s family experiences the “funny smell” of “some chemical from a plant across the river”, which pervades their minds and bodies and makes them undergo a “synthetic death” whose ambiguous nature is poised between their physical destruction and their spiritual demise.<sup>48</sup>

Antonetta’s literary work strategically makes the concrete and abstract, the physical and spiritual, entangle and produce, in Massumi’s sense of the word, *political* meaning, while underlining the fallacy that nature can be fully controlled or dominated. Her memoir is an invitation to reconsider significant technological changes such as nuclear power as having deeply altered environments, bodies, and selves, exemplifying “the human imperfection which le[d], ultimately, to the imperfection of the complex technological system”.<sup>49</sup> In the passages discussed above, the senses of smell and taste transcend banality (“subnarratable”), taboos (“antinarratable”), conventional language (“supnarratable”) and generic conventions (“paranarratable”) to offer a “neonarrative” which reveals a form of disgust closely connected with toxicity as well as with the active physical participation of the body in the scandal of intentional and unintentional or unknowing human pollution. A pertinent example of such involvement is perhaps Antonetta’s event of drug abuse as an adolescent, which is then used as a metaphor to measure the effects that toxic chemicals such as nuclear waste and pesticides have when invading the human body. As a consequence, descriptions of the feeling of disgust compel Antonetta’s characters to rethink the relationship between body, environment and self. The unnarrated content of these narratives also includes feelings and tensions which are essentially unnatural and pertain to the vocabulary of the toxic sublime and disgust. These aesthetic and rhetorical mobilizations show that the authors lean toward a speculative-pragmatic or aesthetic-political conception of literature, which only urges them as well as readers to reconsider environmental (non)fiction in the philosophical paradigm highlighted by Massumi’s speculative pragmatism. Antonetta also evokes this pragmatic purpose when she claims that “[m]emory is a form of lying” and that “[a]utobiography is a literary form devoted to the ceremonial lie”<sup>50</sup>, a statement in line with what Regenia Gagnier defines as the “pragmatics of self-representation”, namely when writing the truth becomes significantly

---

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>48</sup> Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (New York: Picador, 2011), 276.

<sup>49</sup> Antonetta, *Body Toxic*, 151.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 185.

less important than “the purpose an autobiographical statement services in the life and circumstances of its author and reader”.<sup>51</sup>

## Conclusion

In a comparable approach to visual arts in Papay’s “Is It Contemporary Art?” or fiction writing in Carson’s “Fable”, autobiographical writing in Antonetta’s work becomes speculative-pragmatic inasmuch as it constitutes a means to an end, the end of including literature or, more largely, the arts as a source of cultural responses to the ongoing Anthropocene crisis, and narratology as a method of identifying and evaluating such responses. Although in different forms (an image, a short story and a memoir), the visual and literary texts studied in this paper border on the suggestiveness of art through the elliptic style of the unnarrated while endeavoring to bring more visibility to forms of toxicity which are usually abstract or “hidden” in traditional idealized landscapes.<sup>52</sup> In each of the works, the sublime serves as a trope which ultimately becomes a rhetorical, aesthetic-political or even speculative-pragmatic strategy inasmuch as it merges aesthetic representations of nature and narrative artifices with the political aim of denouncing the disastrous consequences of the Anthropocene. While Papay’s flower in a spray gun alludes to the unfettered use of pesticides, Carson’s short story confirms this idea that there is more in anthropogenic nature than meets and pleases the eye, and Antonetta builds on this apocalyptic fable by highlighting, in a non-fiction text, the pervasive adverse effects of toxicity, which will invade and intoxicate the environment and human bodies if no concrete action is taken soon.

## References

- Alaimo, Stacy. *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010.
- Antonetta, Susanne. *Body Toxic: An Environmental Memoir*. Washington: Counterpoint, 2002.
- Buckley, Geoffrey L., and Yolonda Youngs, eds. *The American Environment Revisited: Environmental Historical Geographies of the United States*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018.
- Carson, Rachel. *Silent Spring*. New York: Penguin Classics, 2000.
- DeLillo, Don. *White Noise*. New York: Picador, 2011.
- Gagnier, Regenia. *Subjectivities: A History of Self-Representation in Britain, 1832–1920*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.

---

<sup>51</sup> Regenia Gagnier, *Subjectivities: A History of Self-Representation in Britain, 1832–1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 4.

<sup>52</sup> Geoffrey L. Buckley and Yolonda Youngs, eds., *The American Environment Revisited: Environmental Historical Geographies of the United States* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 289.

- James, Erin. *The Storyworld Accord: Econarratology and Postcolonial Narratives*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015.
- James, Erin, and Eric Morel. "Ecocriticism and Narrative Theory: An Introduction." *English Studies* 99, 4 (May 2018): 355–65. doi: 10.1080/0013838X.2018.1465255.
- Marx, Leo. *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Massumi, Brian. *Semblance and Event: Activist Philosophy and the Occurrent Arts*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2011.
- McBrien, Justin. "Accumulating Extinction: Planetary Catastrophism in the Necrocene." In *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, edited by Jason W. Moore, 116–37. Oakland: PM Press, 2016.
- Morton, Timothy. *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013.
- Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011.
- Nye, David E. *Technologies of Landscape: From Reaping to Recycling*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999.
- Peeples, Jennifer. "Toxic Sublime: Imaging Contaminated Landscapes." *Environmental Communication* 5, 4 (December 2011): 373–92. doi: 10.1080/17524032.2011.616516.
- Phelan, James. *Narrative as Rhetoric: Technique, Audiences, Ethics, Ideology*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1996.
- Ramirez, Zulma, and Geoffroy Valadon. "Allons voir si la rose..." *Le Monde diplomatique* (February 2020).
- Warhol, Robyn R. "Neonarrative; or, How to Render the Unnarratable in Realist Fiction and Contemporary Film." In *A Companion to Narrative Theory*, edited by James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz, 220–31. Malden: Blackwell, 2005.

Article received: April 23, 2020

Article accepted: May 30, 2020

Original scholarly paper