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## J.G. Ballard and the Anthropocene

Noah Terrell

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# J.G. Ballard and the Anthropocene

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement  
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English from  
The College of William and Mary

by

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What is presented everywhere as an ecological catastrophe has never stopped being, above all, the manifestation of a disastrous relationship to the world . . . Environmentalism's present paradox is that under the pretext of saving the planet from desolation it merely saves the causes of its desolation. The normal functioning of the world serves to hide our state of truly catastrophic dispossession. What is called 'catastrophe' is no more than the forced suspension of this state, one of those rare moments when we regain some sort of presence in the world. – The Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrection* 2007

You might be right, Daniel, to despise mankind. All those who wanted to transform mankind began by hating it – otherwise they would have never wanted to transform it. – Isidore Isou, *Venom and Eternity* 1951

You have to keep enough of the organism for it to reform each dawn; and you have to keep small supplies of significance and subjectification, if only to turn them against their own systems when the circumstances demand it, when things, persons, even situations force you to; and you have to keep small rations of subjectivity in sufficient quantity to enable you to respond to the dominant reality. – Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari 1980

## I. Introduction

In one of the footnotes to Tom Cohen's essay "Escape Velocity: Hyperpopulation, Species Splits, and the Counter-Malthusian Trap (Before Tipping Points Pass)", he takes note of an especially prescient remark by Claire Colebrook regarding her analysis of a quote often attributed to Frederic Jameson by way of Slavoj Žižek: that "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of global capitalism" (Cohen 147). Colebrook's provocative analysis is that Jameson has misread the ideological message offered up by the disaster narratives of Hollywood – for in fact it is the end of capitalism itself that is figured as the end of the world. Cohen elaborates upon Colebrook's analysis, stating that "For the western consumer and wired cosmopolite, the end of 'capitalism' is a horrifying return only to what the 'third world' peripheries experience as daily life," namely, "the horrors of gang culture, instant death, no grid or toilets . . . What is projected [as the end of the world] is a kind of Manhattancide, where smart phones and Starbucks disappear" (Cohen 147). What emerges with extreme lucidity from these

quotes is a clear demarcation of the class lines on which the social imaginary of mass marketed disaster narratives is organized. Which is, as we may have rightly expected, the broad but overwhelmingly homogenous category of the western suburban middle classes.

The satirist of this subset of the global population known as the suburban middle-class *par excellence* is none other than one of its own members: J.G. Ballard. Ballard's writings are obsessed by the topic of disaster. The texts he composes operate according to the compulsion to repeat the disaster narrative arc from the perspective of some iteration of a disaffected "specialist" or "professional" (i.e., a doctor, one of Ballard's favorites). It is through this generally detached but subtly indignant main character that Ballard's subtle satirical ruminations on boredom, mass media, sexuality, catastrophic events, aimless violence, urban and suburban environs, neuroses, and the pleasures of the middle classes are processed. Ballard was not unaware of both what position he occupied and was interrogating in his texts. Mark Fisher makes clear through an elaboration on a quip Ballard made whilst doing a BBC interview that both prefigures and mirrors the insight Colebrook brings out of the mass marketed disaster narrative:

people often comment on how extreme his early life was, Ballard said. Yet, far from being extreme, that early life – beset by hunger, fear, war and the constant threat of death – is the default condition for most human beings on the planet, now and in every previous century. It is the comfortable life of the Western Suburbanite which is in every way the planetary exception (Fisher KP 43).

This, I take it, is not a romanticization of the lives of the people who inhabit the 2/3rds world as in the trope of the "noble savage". Rather, it is a provocation to interrogate what it is that invests such intense desire in the bourgeois obsession with "security" and "comfort" which has emerged as a global anomaly.

Though these obsessions, questions, and figurations – as I have noted – are constitutive of each of Ballard's works over the course of his nearly five-decade long career as a writer, I want

to zero in on the early Ballard going forward. That is, for the purposes of this paper, I want to take under consideration J.G. Ballard's first four novels: *The Wind From Nowhere* (1961), *The Drowned World* (1962), *The Burning World (The Drought 1964)*, and *The Crystal World* (1966). The reader may have already noted that even in the very beginning of Ballard's literary career disaster is that which emerges as the narratives central thematic. But – in this case – it is specifically *environmental* disaster. Thus, I want to here take Ballard's first four novels as a set of case studies for how literature might respond to some of the problems posed by a relatively new imaginary of global disaster: that of the Anthropocene.

When referring to the Anthropocene, I am referencing a proposed geologic period that was first conceptualized in Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer's groundbreaking page and a half long piece of biogeochemical research titled "The 'Anthropocene'" first published in the May 2000 edition of *IGBP* and clarified by Crutzen in a later publication in *Nature* titled "Geology of Mankind." Subtle variations between the two pieces aside, the main point of these articles remains the same: humanity has changed so much of the biogeochemical makeup of the planet that we have transcended our position as biological subjects and become properly geological agents. Which is to say, humanity – or more precisely Western imperial society – has become a biogeochemical force equivalent in its own way to volcanic eruptions, large meteorite impacts, or the shifting of tectonic plates: in other words, its impact on the biosphere, the earth's crust, oceans, lands, and the atmosphere now registers at a systemic level.

From a stratigraphic point of view, the start date of the continually unraveling narrative of the Anthropocene epoch is contested (from 1492 to 1945<sup>1</sup>). Whichever date is ultimately chosen as

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<sup>1</sup> See Simon Lewis and Mark Maslin's *Defining the Anthropocene*: "We find that only two other events – the Orbis spike dip in CO<sub>2</sub> with a minimum at 1610, and the bomb spike 1964 peak in <sup>14</sup>C – appear to fulfil the criteria for a GSSP to define the inception of the Anthropocene" (177). Also, Jeremy Davies' *The Birth of the Anthropocene*:

the official start of the Anthropocene aside – one is left to wonder how a technical term originating in the geological sciences and popularized by an atmospheric chemist has managed to virally infect so many disparate disciplines and to create numerous academic journals, art installations, working groups, and even several dozen sub-derived names.<sup>2</sup> Various scholars have attempted to answer this question to multiple convincing ends, which perhaps indicates something else altogether.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps the conceptual force that enables the Anthropocene's ability to infect other disciplines and multiply its own discourse is in virtue of not only its seductively poetic affirmation of nearly a century and a half of research regarding the climate crisis, but also – and importantly – the re-emergence of what seems like true ontological alterity. That is, the re-emergence of an outside that resists easy re-incorporation into culture and thought through standard conventions of representation.<sup>4</sup> In this sense, the Anthropocene as an ecological crisis doubles itself as a crisis for conventional practices of representation.

Ballard's eco-disaster quartet not only has an immediate content-based relevance to literary engagements with ecological problems. His work also has the added register of being historically

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"looked at from a stratigraphic point of view, the time of capitalist globalization since the fifteenth century can be understood as the crossing between two geological epochs" (196).

<sup>2</sup> Some of the main competing terms intended to assist or replace the Anthropocene conceptually are Sloterdijk's Euroscene and Technoscene, Moore's Capitaloscene, Haraway's Chthulucene and Plantationoscene McBrien's Necrocene, Clover and Spahr's Misanthropocene, Stiegler's Neganthropocene, Parikka's Anthrobscene, Mann's Homogenoscene, and Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz's astounding list of variations: Thermoscene, Thanatocene, Phagocene, Phronocene, Agnotocene, Polemocene etc.,

<sup>3</sup> A few compelling pieces that offer an explanation of the Anthropocene's academic infectiousness are Zoe Todd's *Indigenizing the Anthropocene* in Davis and Turpin, pg. 246. Peter Sloterdijk's *The Anthropocene: A Process State at the Edge of Geohistory?* In Davis and Turpin, pg. 327. And Jason W. Moore in his *Anthropocene or Capitaloscene*, pg. 3.

<sup>4</sup> For more literature on and by the scientific pre-cursors to the Anthropocene concept, see: Clive Hamilton and Jacques Grinevald's "Was the Anthropocene Anticipated?" *The Anthropocene Review*, vol. 2, 2015, pp., 59 -72. G.P. Marsh's *Man and Nature* (1864) reprinted as *The Earth as Modified by Human Action*, Belknap Press, 1965. V.I. Vernadski's *The Biosphere* (1926), Springer, 1998.

coincident with one of the most rapidly accelerating periods of human induced climate change.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, the suburban middle classes that Ballard so astutely satirizes make up a large portion of the population responsible for this spike in human induced climate change which has been primarily caused by a mere “25% of the world population” (Crutzen 23). In lieu of this, Ballard’s satire of the middle classes in the face of environmental catastrophe acquires an intensified prescience. This is not to say that we need more writings about the middle-class experience in general. The qualifier I want to introduce here is related to an edge I see in Ballard’s writing on the middle-class which is not merely a critical academism restating the often trotted out facts that middle-class life is overwhelmingly inefficient, ecologically disastrous, and founded upon an outright exploitative character. The edge to which I am referring is a certain pragmatism which goes beyond restating facts. And this pragmatics can be read as an expressive form of ideology critique on the one hand, and a user’s guide for orienting oneself towards other possibilities for how to be in the world on the other.

I will thus be arguing that in Ballard’s literature we see not only a negatively charged satirical response to both the humanist and anti-humanist tendencies popular at the time of his writing – but a positive, inhumanist trajectory to the Outside. While Ballard’s texts are against the enlightenment category of Man, they are still concerned with what paths the human might seek out as alternative ways of being in and relating to the world. In an attempt to synthesize Ballard’s theoretical inhumanism with his literarily represented eco-catastrophic subject matter, I will turn to what I consider to be “inhuman affects” – the uncanny, the weird, and the eerie. I will be contending that these inhuman affects might help to bridge the gap between the aesthetic-

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<sup>5</sup> See *The Great Acceleration: An Environmental History of the Anthropocene since 1945* by J.R. McNeill and Peter Engelke for a thorough characterization of this phenomenon.

theoretical register and the lived-readerly register when discussing literature in relation to the Anthropocene.

## II. The Foundations of Ballardian Inhumanism

J.G. Ballard's early period of writing was occupied by his eco-disaster tetralogy: *The Wind from Nowhere* 1961, *The Drowned World* 1962, *The Burning World (The Drought)* 1964, and *The Crystal World* 1966. Each of these texts reiterate each other along a number of axes, most obviously of which is the repeated narrative frame. In all of these texts one of the four "fundamental elements" of air, water, fire, and earth goes awry in a perverse proliferation which ultimately reshapes the entirety of the earth's biosphere thereby causing both the psychological and physical reconstitution of the characters in each narrative. Despite Ballard's repetitious approach to forming his narrative arcs in these early texts, each novel carefully displays a distinctive moment in the rapid development of Ballard's early thought. There was such a radical change in Ballard's mode of expression between his first novel (*The Wind from Nowhere*) and his fourth (*The Crystal World*) in fact that he ultimately disowned *The Wind from Nowhere* all together. In an interview with David Pringle, Ballard boldly claimed that his second novel *The Drowned World* was, in his eyes, his first "true" work of literature (Pringle&Ballard).<sup>6</sup>

Nonetheless, there are at least three general but central motifs for Ballard that begin with these initial works – *The Wind from Nowhere* included – that extend throughout his entire corpus. To enumerate these motifs in no particular order: these early novels center themselves on the depiction of post-apocalyptic or otherwise traumatized landscapes, they explore what effects these deranged landscapes have on humans psychically and physically, and they tease out the

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<sup>6</sup> Stuart Pringle, JG Ballard. "*Interviews: 4 January 1975, part 2*". *Solaris-Books*, 1975. <http://www.solaris-books.co.uk/Ballard/Pages/Miscpages/interview4b.htm>

(very general) ethical question of what interwoven implications the catastrophic situation has for Human civilization writ large. In this section of the paper, I want to take under consideration Ballard's first and fourth novels in the comparative register in order to provide a schematic of the transition in Ballard's thinking and writing in this period. In so doing, I will be teasing out what I see as a driving fascination that emerges in Ballard's oeuvre that has profound implications for how Ballard's texts fit into discourses of the Anthropocene. That is, I want to attend to the emergence of an anti-humanist or, as I hope to show, an inhumanist tendency in the movement from Ballard's first to fourth text.

For the little literary merit truly contained within Ballard's first novel *The Wind from Nowhere*, it is not without its moments of brilliance wherein the reader catches a glimpse of the emerging Ballard soon to come. For example, there is a clear through line in *The Wind from Nowhere* to Ballard's later works in the description he offers of wind desecrating the Harrod's department store in London: "Harrod's department store lay in ruins, brownstone facing tiles lying thickly across the roadway, the wind picking like a thousand vultures at the tangle of girders and masonry, detaching fragments of furniture and tattered drapery and carrying them away in its fleeting clasp" (Ballard 79). The situation Ballard here poses rather poetically concerning the demise of Harrod's department store comes across as highly satirical. The department store serves as a synecdoche of the perversely blithe culture that preceded the wind induced disaster. By singling out the desecration of Harrod's department store as a traumatic scene that would register at the level of the general cultural imaginary of 1960's England, Ballard draws the reader's attention to certain existing value systems in a way that implicitly critiques the pretensions of middle-class consumers. Affectively, this registers one of two ways for the reader. This is either the melancholic scene of destruction wherein the reader feels the

pain of losing an iconic business-place, an “important” social institution for the middle class. Or the more disinterested reader perceives the irony of the scene where Harrod’s is destroyed poetically whilst simultaneously human, animal, vegetal, and mineral members of the global population are being levelled by the storm.

Ballard’s use of subtle but complex-ethical quandaries such as this is something that the reader will find peppered throughout Ballard’s *oeuvre*. Additionally, the precision of Ballard’s apocalyptic-poetics in the above passage formally pre-empts the perverse beauty of his later works. The likening of the inanimate wind to vultures for example offers a rather obscene beauty that draws attention to the perceived animacy of the wind as it sweeps over and slowly picks away from the building. To contrast this vertical movement of the bricks into the wind, Ballard juxtaposes a horizontal layering of bricks piling up in the streets that “thickly” congeal from the building’s refuse. These descriptive elements add a sense of material density and suffocation co-existent with the sweeping streams of air. Here it is a formal matter of stagnation against movement that mirrors the figurative problematic of the scene traced out in the above paragraph.

For reasons such as these, I find it hard to agree wholly with Ballard when he claims that *The Wind from Nowhere* “is just a piece of hackwork” (Pringle&Ballard). Rather, *The Wind from Nowhere* perhaps occupies the position of a necessary – and at times even (against my better judgement) enjoyable – evil in his oeuvre. Which is to say, when retroactively taking Ballard’s eco-disaster tetralogy under consideration, *The Wind from Nowhere* holds up as a solid and integral foundation that lays the groundwork for Ballard’s later texts, even if this groundwork is only seen as a continually constitutive negation. In some ways, it is as if *The Wind from Nowhere* is the repressed text found latent in Ballard’s later works.

In perusing *The Wind from Nowhere*, then, the reader is granted insights into what and how Ballard's later eco-disaster novels are transfiguring and enlivening specific thematic concerns that drove Ballard to write his first novel. The fundamental transformation to be traced between Ballard's treatment of eco-disaster fiction SF in *The Wind from Nowhere* and Ballard's later eco-disaster novels such as *The Crystal World* concerns the attitude one takes in relation to the stakes of apocalypse for Human civilization as opposed to human beings themselves. This motif is first laid out in *The Wind from Nowhere* in the following passage:

'It's curious, but until I saw Charlesby lying in that ditch I didn't feel all that concerned. In a way I was almost glad. So much of life in the States – and over here for that matter – could use a strong breath of fresh air. But I realize now that a garbage-disposal job of this size rakes away too much of the good along with the bad (Ballard 49).

This passage leaves a somewhat expected and extremely palatable response to various ecocatastrophic impacts on human life and the environment. But importantly, Ballard nods to the somewhat lustrous appeal of disaster as the re-emergence of the Outside and how this re-emergence offers the potential to forge some new relationship with the world. But, this flirtation with collapse for the sake of radical change is all too quickly then transvalued against the cost to (capital "H") Human life that disaster entails. This ultimately leads Ballard's narrator to conclude along the lines of one of humanism's seemingly all too obvious mantras – that the set of new human possibilities immanent to catastrophic events are simply are not worth the cost of Human life. More often than not, this mantra is spoken from the structural level whilst wearing the face of an individual human (someone like Charlesby).

Of course, death is nothing to be taken lightly. But I would contend that in Ballard's text this is precisely the point. He grapples with how there is something disturbing about turning the death of human beings into martyrs for the cause of re-affirming all that was good about middle class liberal civilization. This is made clear by the way the narrator pronounces his ultimate

conclusion that even if “the States” and “over here” in England need some “fresh air,” it can only be a breeze that co-exists with the dominant order of things or “too much good” is taken out “along with the bad” (Ballard 49). The underlying irony that can be brought to the text then is that what is being mourned as civilizational loss in the hands of disaster is in fact the loss of the causes that led to disaster in the first place. But this fact is more occluded in Ballard’s first novel through the (possibly ironic) re-shuffling of humanist truisms and platitudes. *The Wind from Nowhere* thus forecloses on the possibility for Ballard’s characters to further explore the position the narrator briefly flirts with – that is, that maybe disaster opens up a path to new and otherwise fresh relationships to the world.

Though this edgier underbelly of the eco-disaster genre is merely speculation, it is a trajectory not often followed – especially in the 1960’s – out of the risk of sounding inhumanely macabre. But Ballard returns again and again to a flirtation with the Outside as it emerges in the catastrophic event. In each of his novels the dialectic played out between Humanity and the Outside forms the foundation of his antihumanist position. Ballard stages this scene repeatedly with the underlying question of what these two positions mean at the level of the individual human.

In *The Crystal World*, for example, Ballard develops the apocalyptic-environment over time to reveal its latent possibilities for transfiguring human life and experience through catastrophe. Upon first arriving to the space just outside of the crystalized jungle zone, the narrator – Sanders – states that “he felt that the past day at Port Matarre, the ambivalent atmosphere of the deserted town, in some way placed them at a pivotal point below the dark and white shadows of the equinox. At these moments of balance any act was possible” (Ballard 38). Topologically Sanders is located on the boundary of the eco-catastrophic zone. Ballard is careful

to use the language of precarity in describing what this region is offering Sanders, noting that the atmosphere was ‘ambivalent’ and that the protagonists were at a ‘pivotal point’ beyond the compulsory binarism of the past – “below the dark and white shadows of the equinox”. Ballard here creates a hybrid space in which his characters unfold through their actions as they are in an interstitial zone somewhere between Human civilization or the Outside: a kind of purgatory. This ambiguous region has a distinct boundary that demarcates the Outside by a barge that separates the crystal forest and the rest of the civilized world: “the presence of the barge seemed to mark off once section of the forest from the other, a point beyond which they entered a world where the normal laws of the physical universe were suspended” (Ballard 67). The situation posed here pits the Outside against the seductive qualities of security offered by a retreat to civilization – the region of ‘normal laws.’ At this point, it is an open question whether or not Sanders will be swept up by the desirous glean of the catastrophic zone where he might find a respite from the stagnation of Human civilization and its insistence on the Law – for in the crystal forest, the ‘normal laws’ are all in ‘suspended’.

Ballard’s protagonist Sanders somewhat expectedly gives in to the allure of the afflicted crystal jungle in the novel. Ballard utilizes his character’s experience in the eco-disaster zone of *The Crystal World* to explore the sensations effectuated by and the possibilities emerging within the catastrophe zone. When describing the crystal forest, *The Crystal World’s* narrator offers a thick description over-saturated sensory experience he is met with in the region:

the long arc of the trees hanging over the water seemed to drip and glitter with myriads of prisms, the trunks and branches sheathed by bars of yellow and carmine light that bled away across the surface of the water, as if the whole scene were being reproduced by some Technicolor process. The entire length of the opposite shore glittered with this blurred kaleidoscope, the overlapping bands of colour increasing the density of the vegetation, so that it was impossible to see more than a few feet between the front of the trunks (Ballard 68).

The reader is taken through the narrator's metonymic gaze as it is forcefully directed by the sheer density of sense-data in the crystal region. This scene come across as almost cinematic. There is an implicit gliding movement in the landscape's architecture captured in the rather gorgeous prose: the "long arcs of the trees" ascend and swoop back downwards into "hanging" portion of the tree as the gaze is directed in a downward movement where the eye is to the "dripping" water whose surface "glitters" thereby fracturing the image into "myriads of prisms" that refract the layered multicolored "yellow and carmine light" of the trees.

This beautifully vibrant and yet oppressively dense description of the apocalyptic environment only becomes more overwhelming as the crystallization process intensifies. As the land is overgrown by the crystals, the promise of an entirely new landscape drained of all prior notions or identities emerges: "here and there a soft blur below the bank revealed itself as the illuminated spectre of a lighter or river launch, but nothing else seemed to retain any trace of its previous identity" (Ballard 163). The reader can imagine that at this point pure crystallization and an intense play of light takes precedence in Sanders' field of vision. The jungle has been transfigured into a purely abstract environment retaining only formal elements: line, curve, color, lighting, surface, and depth. The enlightenment notion of an interiorized and stable self-identity that characterizes every entity gives way to a world where instead it becomes evident at even the level of visual perception that "bodies are distinguished from one another by reason of motion and rest, speed and slowness, and not by reason of substance" (Spinoza E2P13L1 41). Ballard challenges the reader to stay open to engaging with what kinds of a changes this re-constitution of one's relationship to the world might mean for the individual human.

The daring move Ballard makes to trouble the humanist platitudes mentioned earlier in the paper regarding the of disavowal of the Outside in favor of the gestural affirmation of

Humanity become more ethically complicated when matters are transposed from abstract and perceptual phenomena to individualized human life itself. In *The Crystal World* for example, the reader is witness to a situation wherein Captain Radek becomes crystalized as one object among others in the forest. Sanders attempts to save him by peeling some of the crystals off of his chest and face, and ultimately ends up severely injuring him through his attempt at “saving” him: “Max, I found him later, I’d torn half his face and chest away” (Ballard 122). And yet Ballard’s presentation of this situation remains ambivalent. He offers two responses from Sanders on Radek’s fate: “Although exasperated by Ventress’s callous lack of sympathy for Radek, Sanders sensed that there might be some other explanation for his behavior”, and “after the initial impact of the forest, a surprise more visual than anything else, I quickly came to understand it, knowing that its hazards were a small price to pay for its illumination of my life. Indeed, the rest of the world seemed drab and inert by contrast” (Ballard 83, 100). In the first of the two responses, Ballard in a nuanced way bites the bullet and implicitly commits to saying that preserving human life at all costs is not a transcendental value. As Sanders puts it – there could be “some other explanation” for Ventress’s “lack of sympathy” entailing that one could provide a rational explanation for letting another human being succumb to their impending death without trying to intervene. And in the latter quote, Ballard makes a less complex but more resounding affirmation of the potentials of the Outside despite the cost to Human civilization. Ballard writes that the risks and actions the crystal forest requires of an agent are a “a small price to pay” for the “illumination” it infuses into a life as compared with the “rest of the world” in its relatively safe but “drab and inert” civilization.

Most of Ballard’s protagonists do indeed end up concluding their journey’s by returning to the terminal zones opened up by (eco)-catastrophe. These protagonists air on the side of the

possibilities of the Outside over the every increasingly securitized world of late capitalism. *The Crystal World* is no exception as in the end Sanders' ultimate concluding act is to return to the forest: "I shall return to the solitary church in that enchanted world, whereby day fantastic birds fly through the petrified forest and jeweled crocodiles glitter like heraldic salamanders on the banks of the crystalline rivers" (Ballard 169). On its surface, Ballard's misanthropy appears to operate on the level of nihilistic obscenity here. Some readers might see in this kind of conclusion a concealed form of the primitivist imperative to return to nature or, even more problematically, the nihilist's desire to see the world accelerate into extinction. But I read Sander's decision as ultimately translating into a disavowal of Humanity in the form of civilization (as the enlightenment produced capitalist world order ) in order to save humanity in the form of a species-being (the crystal forest as an Outside which offers the possibility for forging a new relationship to being in the world). Though – the text does remain rather ambivalent as to what saving humanity looks like. Ballard does not inject a telos into the Outside as the primitivist or nihilist reading might. Rather, Ballard is seems here interested in the opportunity to restructure humanities' relationship to the world in the most general sense – that is, at the level of desire and affect. For this reason, I read the way Ballard satirizes humanism less as an anti-humanist critique in the form of a philosophical dispute than as an inhumanism in the form of practical experimentation.

When faced with ecological collapse then Ballard refuses humanism and anti-humanism. In Ballard's texts the humanist drive towards conservatism, securitization, and reform is made into a joke. The anti-humanist drive towards re-unifying the human with the Natural world, escaping alienation, and forming an organic society of individuals is questioned through a surprising political realism and raw depiction of the natural world. Instead, the inhuman elements

both found in and traversing across the human are what Ballard seizes upon in his texts. Whether this be in the register of the affective that escapes the human ability for Rational control (as in the mystifying desire of the crystal forest) or the network of non-human actors that operate as the potential for changing humanity (as in the crystals traversing the human body or landscape). I hope to tie these two threads together going forward by what I consider, thinking with Sigmund Freud and Mark Fisher, to be inhuman affects: the uncanny, the weird, and the eerie. Using these three affects, I hope to not only clarify Ballard's relationship to ecological disaster – but to more directly bridge the gap between literature and the Anthropocene.

### III. So, is the Earth an Alien?

In 1962, J.G. Ballard published a short essay titled “Which Way to Inner Space?” in which he claimed that “[t]he only truly alien planet is Earth.”<sup>7</sup> This provocation contextually holds much significance as Ballard was one of the forerunners of the so-called New Wave of the late 1950's and 60's – a movement which often played upon motifs of space-exploration and alien-contact in order to achieve certain estranging effects.<sup>8</sup> Suggesting the alien-ness of the earth itself is an unintuitive gesture on Ballard's part, implying a defamiliarization of the most familiar of all: (the very psychoanalytically loaded) “mother” earth – a collective home for each and every being. Stranger still, however, Ballard's sense of the earth as an alien planet was echoed some 40 years later in the deflationary conclusion of Paul Crutzen's 2002 report in *Nature* summarizing the historical and biogeochemical evidence for the concept of the Anthropocene: “we are still largely treading on *terra incognita*” (Crutzen 23). Aside from the colonial connotations of “treading on *terra incognita*” in terms of cartographically addressing some unknown territory to

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<sup>7</sup> Reprinted in J.G. Ballard, *A User's Guide to the Millennium: Essays and Reviews*. Picador, 1996, p. 197.

<sup>8</sup> Other important figures associated with the science fiction new wave include but are not limited to Brian Aldiss, Harlan Ellison, Ursula K. Leguin, Norman Spinrad, and Judith Merril.

be discovered and indexed, one also gets the sense that with the Anthropocene concept's derivation from an earth systems analysis of geological proportions, the earth itself, by virtue of the radical rupture implied by the Anthropocene, has returned as the unknown – the alien. An assertion of the earth's fundamental uncanniness, then, unites Ballard and Crutzen's observations.

Surely, the idea of the uncanny as the unhomely [*unheimlich*] captures not only the irony of Ballard's quip that earth is truly alien, but also signals the deeper and quite radical kernel of ontological alterity entailed in such a claim. As Hugh Haughton argues in the introduction to Freud's *The Uncanny*, "[the essay] reminds us not only that there is no place like home, but that, in another sense, there is no other place. For Freud, our most haunting experiences of otherness tell us that the alien begins at home, wherever that may be" (Freud *xlix*). That there is no other place than home is a particularly refreshing notion when thinking about planet earth in the present moment, as the rhetoric of space colonization often overwrites the attention – political and corporate – that could otherwise be directed at climate change and structural inequalities.<sup>9</sup> With this in mind, the idea that the alien begins at home, that alterity, the outside, the unrepresentable all originate within the body of the earth itself seems a generative starting point to consider how we represent climate change in the Anthropocene.

I want to argue that engaging such an endeavor explores the affective uncanniness found peppered throughout the general discourse surrounding the Anthropocene as a conceptual signifier of climate change and the sixth mass extinction. Additionally, I want to think through said discourse's uncanny version of the Anthropocene in relation to the aesthetic challenges

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<sup>9</sup> For more on the political implications and problematics of political space colonization narratives, see Tom Cohen's essay *Escape Velocity: Hyperpopulation, Species Splits, and the Counter-Malthusian Trap (after 'tipping points' Pass)*, pp. 129.co

posed by the Anthropocene concept as a multifaceted rupture of exceedingly large temporal and spatial scales. With regard to this latter point, I will transition from the uncanny as genus to two related terms discussed by Mark Fisher: the weird and the eerie. As species of the uncanny, Fisher's expanded notions of the weird and the eerie afford the conceptual machinery necessary to articulate specific features of the Anthropocene that otherwise elude the immediate representational grasp of the uncanny (Fisher W&E 9).

#### IV. The Uncanny Anthropocene

Before we proceed to these weird and eerie Anthropocenes, however, let us quickly review the "standard," uncanny version first trotted out in the prior section. To partially reiterate my introduction, the Anthropocene conceptually emerged in academic discourse through Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer's groundbreaking page and a half long piece of biogeochemical research titled "The 'Anthropocene'," first published in the May 2000 edition of IGBP. Crutzen later published a redacted version of their co-authored publication in *Nature* titled "Geology of Mankind." In this proposed new epoch that is meant to follow the Holocene on the geological calendar, humanity is seen as having emerged as a set of properly geological agents. The emergence of humanity as a geological agent has begun to register on a systemic level. Which is to say, the earth has begun symptomatically expressing the effects of human life on the overarching world-system through various ecological, climatological, and otherwise environmental crises. Parts of the earth have begun to re-emerge front and center thereby displacing humanities' self-perceived "naturally evolved" centrality to the world-system. This, decentering of the human by natural forces in some ways created the phenomenon of a return of the Outside: that is, of something which is unknown but not othered. The return of an Outside

signifies the emergence of something which resists easy appropriation into the compulsively codifying and interiorizing structures of capital.

Anselm Franke has noted in conversation with Etienne Turpin that the Anthropocene is contentiously the last political scene. He argues that when taking the Anthropocene under consideration, “1968 was naturally a point of reference because it was the last moment of discernible momentum where there was a very modernist belief in ontological alterity and the ability to engineer (or return to, as some would have it) other ontologies” (Davis, Turpin 145). In this sense, the Anthropocene is as utopian as it is catastrophic in that it re-establishes an outside to the compulsively interiorizing, seemingly inescapable grip of global capitalism. In so far as the Anthropocene maintains this underlying contradiction as it is deployed discursively, the term “Anthropocene” withholds as much as it reveals; for every question it answers it generates several more in a hydra-like series of self-regenerations. Which is to say, as the Anthropocene concept uncannily repeats and doubles itself while spreading throughout varied discourses, it creates, conceals, and accumulates new meanings along the way.

Perhaps this explains why it is that several other scholars have begun to note the uncanniness of the climate crisis with various different examples and intentions. Amitav Ghosh, for example, has made the prescient observation that in our moment where a general sensation of unrest regarding the climate crisis ferments, “it is surely no coincidence that the word *uncanny* has begun to be used, with ever greater frequency, in relation to climate change...no other word,” he continues, “comes close to expressing the strangeness of what is unfolding around us” (Ghosh 30). Both Timothy Morton and George Marshall, Ghosh points out, rely heavily on the uncanniness found in material expressions of climate change, highlighting things like “an oil slick” or “a tornado” as supremely uncanny entities (Ghosh 30). With these sorts of examples in

mind, I want to take into consideration Freud's most precise theorization of the uncanny in his meandering and exploratory essay on the subject: "[the] uncanny element is actually nothing new or strange, but something that was long familiar to the psyche and was estranged from it only through being repressed" (Freud 148). From the compulsory practice of igniting the liquified remains of once living beings compressed for millennia under the pressure of the earth's crust as a means of creating energy, to the belief that nature is an inexhaustibly cheap standing-reserve, one can come up with a seemingly unending list of cultural repressions latent in objects such as the hybridized natural-cultural oil slick or a tornado correlated with anthropogenic actions. Ultimately, however, with an issue as politicized as the Anthropocene, the more frequently the effects of these varied cultural repressions come to be symptomatically expressed in material crises, the more the lingering desire to point to a "who" of the climate crisis intensifies – and probably rightly so, but more on this later.

In the age of the sixth mass extinction, where sea levels are rising at a rate double that of the twentieth century – and the water acidity of those seas is continuing to rise beyond the steep 30% they have since the Industrial Revolution; where extreme weather events are becoming the norm globally, and the U.S. among other geographical regions has seen an increase in record high temperatures with a corresponding decrease in record lows since 1950; in this situation, one is left with the feeling that the metaphoric *jouissance* of the Anthropocene as a concept has

ceased altogether to be a metaphor and has rather taken on the full expression of its meaning.<sup>1011</sup> Freud pointed out “the fact that an uncanny effect often arises when the boundary between fantasy and reality is blurred, when we are faced with the reality of something that we have until now considered imaginary, when a symbol takes on the full function and significance of what it symbolizes” (Freud 150). With both climate crises and post-apocalyptic societies as two of the most popularized sources of narrative content in the latter half of the twentieth century, it seems uncanny that the colloquially nominated “speculative” genres have become more apt to addressing the present than any example of realism can manage. What was once seemingly a general fantasy-structure for exploring the uncanniness of “the world without us” (as in the case of Alan Weissman’s bestselling book of that title) has transformed to take on an ominous significance: in short, extinction is on the horizon.

Where so dire a possibility should galvanize any rational species into action, instead we witness paralysis and outright denial. It is as if the fantasy of a “world without us” were butting up against another long-standing cultural fantasy: the neoliberal notion of unhindered progress achieved through humanitarian capitalism. The result is a horrible stasis. What is most unsettling

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<sup>10</sup> Scientific source materials: USGCRP, 2017: *Climate Science Special Report: Fourth National Climate Assessment, Volume I* [Wuebbles, D.J., D.W. Fahey, K.A. Hibbard, D.J. Dokken, B.C. Stewart, and T.K. Maycock (eds.)]. U.S. Global Change Research Program, Washington, DC, USA, 470 pp. and Chivian, E. and A. Bernstein (eds.) 2008. *Sustaining life: How human health depends on biodiversity*. Center for Health and the Global Environment. Oxford University Press, New York. Climate-change–driven accelerated sea-level rise detected in the altimeter era. *PNAS*, 2018 and <http://www.pmel.noaa.gov/co2/story/What+is+Ocean+Acidification%3F>, and Thomas, C. D., A. Cameron, R. E. Green, M. Bakkenes, L. J. Beaumont, Y. C. Collingham, B. F. N. Erasmus, M. Ferreira de Siqueira, A. Grainger, Lee Hannah, L. Hughes, Brian Huntley, A. S. van Jaarsveld, G. F. Midgley, L. Miles, M. A. Ortega-Huerta, A. Townsend Peterson, O. L. Phillips, and S. E. Williams. 2004. Extinction risk from climate change. *Nature* 427: 145–148. and R. S. Nerem, B. D. Beckley, J. T. Fasullo, B. D. Hamlington, D. Masters and G. T. Mitchum.

<sup>11</sup> See Simon Levesque’s “Feral, Emancipated: J.G. Ballard’s time-suffused nature. A comparative study of ‘THE Volcano Dances’ and ‘Myths of the Near Future’” *Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism*, vol. 22, no. 4, 2018, pp., 381-397. Pages 390-392 are an especially useful and fascinating explication of the Anthropocene as metaphor.

about the Anthropocene on the cultural level, therefore, is the way in which it represents “not so much a regression but a radical breakdown of any idea of advance to a higher stage” (Hamilton 18). The Anthropocene here implies an empirically unavoidable counternarrative to the neoliberal story of unbounded progress, suggesting that the faux gesture of a “green capitalism,” presumably achieved through appropriate investments of capital, is like putting a band aid on a severed limb. Even more damning, Tom Cohen has suggested that the Paris Agreement, which was meant to establish international initiatives to fight climate change, might “essentially acknowledge that tipping points had passed without acknowledging that, with that, a politics of managed extinction followed inexorably . . . the numbers ‘aspired’ to by ‘Paris’ were a third of those required to avert ‘the worst’” (Cohen 129). The low bar of only reducing “a third” of the amount of human expelled waste(s) needed to curb “the worst” of the climate crisis’s possible outcomes is inexplicable. Such low international standards for tackling the issues of climate change underhandedly propagate what Rob Nixon has described as “slow violence” on a mass scale and downright materially abandons those living under conditions of post-colonial oppression. One is left to remark upon the prescience of the warning Mark Fisher left behind in his rumination on capitalism’s ability to cover up its own tracks with regard to disaster: “There is no punctual moment of disaster; the world doesn’t end with a bang, it winks out, unravels, gradually falls apart” (Fisher CR 2). The proliferating crises that constitute the “winking out” of the world’s biosphere as we know it are continually undergoing a dialectic of expression and repression within the cultural sphere which I have been aiming to foreground and describe thus far.

Though, perhaps the notion of the cultural sphere itself is somewhat vague in its grand and homogenizing reach – a problem that often slips into discourses conceptually invested in the

Anthropocene. Such murkiness is embedded in the very language of responsibility implied by the Anthropocene, in so far as the root “*Anthropos*” is meant to represent an undifferentiated humanity. That being said, it does not take much acuity to identify *Anthropos* as a guise that blurs the question of agency wherein a nebulously distributed elite class strives to conceal itself alongside the masses; which is to say, *Anthropos* itself is a rather uncanny figure. To flesh out this claim, let us return to the question touched upon earlier concerning “who” is primarily responsible for the Anthropocene and its climate crises. As the ad hoc cobbled together mass known as “Anthropos” is staring extinction(s) – personal and multispecies – in the face, it is striking to note that most of the issues that have led humanity to this particular edge have been primarily caused by a mere “25% of the world population” (Crutzen 23). In this regard, the crisis of the Anthropocene has inarguably exposed the wealthy elite as the answer to “who” is responsible for the climate crisis. However, it can never be quite so easy as highlighting this fact, insofar as the “who” of the Anthropocene is still doubled in an uncanny way: though evidentially, the Anthropocene indicts the top “25%” of the global elite that constitute the colonial and capitalist world order as those “who” are responsible for the crisis – the “who” that is ultimately sentenced is *Anthropos* generally speaking: 100% of the earth’s inhabitants must face this crisis, with the brunt of the punishment falling, or anyway falling first, on the world’s most vulnerable in the global South. With this in mind, the *Anthropos* of the Anthropocene poses an enormous problem for representation: how does one contemplate the generalized geological subject of the Anthropocene who will suffer the consequences of climate crises without abandoning the crucially differentiating and intersecting features between these varied subjects. Said representational crisis expands even further into the world of non-human objects when thinking through Rob Nixon concerning how “Climate change, the thawing cryosphere, toxic

drift, biomagnification, deforestation, the radioactive aftermaths of wars, [and] acidifying oceans [and other] slowly unfolding environmental catastrophes present formidable representational obstacles” (Nixon 2). It would seem almost inevitable in regard to these representational crises that the humanities and literary studies more specifically would wholesale have to wrestle with the concept of the Anthropocene out of necessity in so far as it shakes the ontological and epistemological foundations of the literary enterprise.

One particularly useful way of exploring the Anthropocene concept in relation to literary studies without sacrificing political relevance, then, might be as an ecocritical challenge to the very aesthetic foundation of literature, art, and poetry: representation. Amitav Ghosh has gestured toward this in *The Great Derangement*, wherein he argues that

the modern novel, unlike geology, has never been forced to confront the centrality of the improbable: The concealment of its scaffolding of events continues to be essential to its functioning. It is this that makes a certain kind of narrative a recognizably modern novel. (23)

The very methodology of structuring a narrative such that it suits the demands of the modern novel, with “modern novel” understood as narrative writing from the nineteenth through the twentieth century as Ghosh would have it, has necessarily foreclosed on a number of representational possibilities in virtue of its form. As Ghosh unfolds the stakes of the problem of concealment in the modern text, he speaks worriedly concerning future readers and museum goers. What will those future aesthetes be left with when they attempt to probe the archive of the Anthropocene for the traces of their decaying world to come? If they “fail to find them [examples of creative art and literature wrestling with the Anthropocene], what should they – what can they – do other than to conclude that ours was a time when most forms of art and literature were drawn into the modes of concealment that prevented people from recognizing the realities of their plight?” (Ghosh 11). Though this may be the case when considering the

dominant canon of modern novels and fine art, which admittedly do not *prima facie* present themselves as vehicles for addressing the Anthropocene, I find Ghosh's view unnecessarily narrow and pessimistic. Not only could these future readers consider the ways in which certain *omissions* shape the texts found within the Anthropocene archive just as much as admissions do, but those same readers may well observe that the archive contains a wide range of cultural productions from the modern period that pass unnoticed in Ghosh's account (perhaps on the ground that they are not properly "literary" enough).

At any rate, Ghosh is not the first to make such claims about the Victorian "modern" novel. In fact, Ballard, for one, had made similar claims on any number of occasions. In an interview with Will Self, he asserted that "the literary culture which dominated English life since the mid-Victorian period and survived intact until the Second World War . . . had laid down through generation after generation the blueprint of what was possible and what was not possible in one's work, one's writing, one's life and one's set of mental attitudes" (Sellars, O'Hara 301). And Ballard moreover saw his own oeuvre as breaking with just such an inheritance of the "form of concealment" Ghosh is concerned with. Interestingly, Ballard is also one of the first authors cited as directly writing what is often referred to as "climate fiction."<sup>12</sup> I am fascinated by the seemingly *too convenient* fact that Ballard both discussed the structural limitations of the Victorian novel with respect to the limitations it imposed on its successors *and* began his career by writing four eco-catastrophe novels. Ballard's eco-catastrophe quartet, *The Wind from Nowhere* (1961), *The Drowned World* (1962), *The Burning World* (aka *The Drought*, 1964), and

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<sup>12</sup> For more on the literary history of climate fiction – and additionally on Ballard's specific position within this history – see page 186 of Adam Trexler and Adeline Johns-Putra's "Climate Change in Literature and Literary Criticism." *WIRES Climate Change*, vol. 2, 2016. Pp. 185 – 200 and page 9 of Andrew Milner and J.R. Burgmann's "A Short Pre-History of Climate Fiction." *Extrapolation*, vol. 59, 2018, pp., 1-23.

*The Crystal World* (1966) are thematically structured around the four “classical” elements: air, water, fire, and earth respectively. In light of this fateful coincidence, I want to take two out of Ballard’s first four eco-disaster novels as a pair of case studies for exploring how an author can present representational narrative that manages to navigate the complexity of the Anthropocene’s expanded sense of temporal and spatial scale. Perhaps, through this analysis of Ballard, we might walk away with a clearer picture of some of the things that are implied in nominating a narrative one adequate to addressing the Anthropocene concept.<sup>13</sup> Without presuming to tackle so large a project in one fell swoop, I simply want to argue that a modest way to bridge the gap between the complexity of the Anthropocene and the limitations of representational narrative is through attention to affect.

From the uncanny Anthropocene I have traced out thus far then, I want to push my analysis further by extending the conceptual apparatus to different modes of the uncanny – the weird and the eerie. In exploring Ballard’s novels, I will be explicating the utility of the aesthetic affects of the weird and the eerie as species of the uncanny for analyzing literature related to the Anthropocene. In so doing, I hope to explicate how these concepts gesture towards some of the broader features of the Anthropocene that often evade conventions of representation. In aiming to expand the conceptual toolbox available for literary studies of the Anthropocene, I am ultimately seeking to highlight the importance language plays in tackling the problematics of the Anthropocene. Before the Anthropocene can be properly addressed as an ontological crisis, as Jason Moore reminds us, it must first be grasped as a *nominal* or discursive one:

Although the challenge cannot be reduced to conceptual language, neither can we make headway without confronting the problem of language. We must ‘name the system,’ . . . If naming can be a first step to seeing, it is also more than a discursive act. In the circumstances

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<sup>13</sup> For a contextualized reading of J.G. Ballard and climate change, see Jim Clarke’s “Reading Climate Change in J.G. Ballard.” *Critical Survey*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2013, pp., 7-21.

of civilizational crisis, as the old structures of knowledge come unraveled without yet being interred, the imperative and the power of fresh conceptual language can become a ‘material force’ as Marx might say. (*Capitalism in the Web of Life* 4)

Going forward, I endeavor to make just such a contribution to the general body of conceptual language used to explore the Anthropocene concept. Though I am specifically honing in on literary studies going forward, I suspect that disparate disciplines across disparate time frames might also glean something from the this proposed shift to the “weird” and the “eerie.”<sup>14</sup>

Likewise, I want to suggest that the weird and the eerie as literary tools may be apt for bridging the gap between explicit climate fiction, such as Ballard’s, and literary fiction more broadly considered (the later non-SF works of Ballard’s may prove a useful set of texts to test this hypothesis in the future). With these ambitiously stated goals in mind, and in order to avoid too capacious a scope for the space allotted, I will be confining my interpretation to a few snapshots out of Ballard’s *The Drowned World* (to explicate the weirding of climate) and *The Crystal World* (to explicate the eeriness of geological agency).

#### V. The Weird: *The Drowned World*

In Freud’s essay *The Uncanny* he uses the words “weird” and “eerie” as interchangeable alternatives for “uncanny.” Mark Fisher notes as much in *The Weird and The Eerie* and offers by way of supplementary analysis a series of interconnected essays differentiating the terms (Fisher W&E 9). Taking Fisher’s lead--and giving each term its due--I want to first delve into the weird as a possible entry to Ballard’s *The Drowned World*, particularly when it comes to thinking about how climate and setting are related and, further, how the weirding of setting might bear on

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<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Liam Heneghan’s “Ecology gets Weird just in time for the Anthropocene.” *Ecology*, vol. 98, No. 7, 2017.

Anthropocene literature more generally. Though Fisher – like Freud – gives multiple definitions of his terms throughout the text, I want to begin with his idea that

the weird is a particular kind of perturbation. It involves a sensation of *wrongness*: a weird entity or object is so strange that it makes us feel that it should not exist, or at least it should not exist here. Yet if the entity or object *is* here, then the categories which we have up until now used to make sense of the world cannot be valid. The weird thing is not wrong, after all: it is our conceptions that must be inadequate. (W&E 15)

One might say that Fisher here inadvertently articulates a central feature of Ballard’s fiction: some sense of the world’s fundamental *wrongness* directly correlating to the mind’s equally fundamental inadequacy. Within the first few pages of *The Drowned World*, Ballard articulates precisely this correlation when describing his narrator’s slowly altering states of consciousness with respect to the environment. As the narrator, Kerans, sits on his balcony, his gaze drifting over a jungle lagoon where London once stood—a scene straight out of Max Ernst<sup>15</sup>—he notes that “his own withdrawal was not symptomatic of a dormant schizophrenia, but of a careful preparation for a radically new environment, with its own internal landscape and logic, where old categories of thought would merely be an encumbrance” (Ballard TDW 25). The notion shared between Fisher and Ballard here (i.e. that an encounter with something that strikes us as wrong through its initial weirdness entails the need to either update or replace our current concepts) weirdly mirrors the role of scholarship in the Anthropocene. Not only does Ballard’s narrative frame establish the shifting orientation of Kerans toward the transforming environment, but it also re-orientes the reader’s attention toward the crucial importance setting will play within the text. Here, Ballard is re-working the conventional use of setting as a passive backdrop for human

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<sup>15</sup> For a thorough treatment of Ballard’s relationship to surrealism see Jeannette Baxter’s *J.G. Ballard’s Surrealist Imagination*. Routledge, 2009. Chapter 1 is entirely devoted to *The Drowned World* and *The Crystal World* – making it ideal for more information related to the primary sources of this paper.

action by instead foregrounding the ways in which the spaces his characters occupy *constitute* and *mediate* human actions, thoughts, and concerns.

The eco-catastrophic event that begins to transform the environment of Ballard's fictionalized world is caused by "solar storms" that are said to have "massively depleted the ionosphere" thereby exacerbating global warming (Ballard TDW 33). This improbable event leads to a steadily corresponding rise in the world's temperature and sea levels, which in turn causes "the flora and fauna of this planet . . . [to begin] to assume the last time such conditions were present – roughly speaking, the Triassic period" (Ballard TDW 54). Ballard's explicit citation of the Triassic period as a template for the environment he plans to depict speaks to the geologic register that frames the narrative of his novel. By invoking the Triassic, Ballard "weirds" our sense of narrative temporality, in so far as "the weird effect typically manifests a sense of anachronism" (Fisher W&E 40). One can see the teleological de-structuring implied in the return of the Triassic as a metaphorical return of the earth's "repressed" geologic periods. The weird time invoked by Ballard's use of setting here makes the stability of the earth seem both temperamentally malleable and extremely contingent. Terminology such as "Triassic" or "the Anthropocene" carry such rhetorical weight, merely by virtue of their scientifically clinical guise, that they begin to acquire their own *mythos* in discourse. One almost entirely forgets the vulnerability of the earth when the aesthetics of periodization overwrite the reality of the earth's materiality: in Ballard, however, "the weird de-naturalizes all worlds, by exposing their instability, their openness to the outside" (Fisher W&E 29). Ontologically, then, Ballard's use of the "Triassic" as a descriptor weirds the novel's temporal setting, highlighting the very contingency of geological periodization.

The initial setup Ballard creates for addressing climate in the novel's setting is further complicated towards the end of his narrative. In one of the narrative's most pivotal scenes, Kerans and a colleague, Bodkin, aid Strangman – the novel's figuration of obscene British colonialism – in draining one of the larger lagoons (formerly the site of Leicester Square). In this sequence the narrator notes that “they were now looking across a diffuse straggle of roof-tops, punctuated by eroded chimneys and spires, the flat sheet of the surface transformed into a jungle of cubist blocks . . . what remained of the water had formed into distinct channels, dark and somber, eddying away around corners and into narrow alleyways” (Ballard TDW 140). Surveying the slow exhumation of the drowned city, Beatrice Dahl, the novel's lead female character, suddenly exclaims ‘Robert Stop it! It's horrible!’” (Ballard TDW 140). What makes it horrible for Dahl is less its slimy presence than the superimposition of that immediate presence and an imagined past: “it's all so hideous,” she continues, “I can't believe that anyone ever lived here. It's like some imaginary city of hell. Robert, I *need* the lagoon” (Ballard TDW 143, emphasis mine). Dahl's reaction codes the city as a supremely weird entity. This coding has to be read against modernism's<sup>16</sup> enchantment and tropification of the city (in the figure of the flaneur, for example); in which case, Ballard performs a kind of *detournement*, foreclosing on the enchantment associated with cityscapes and instead emphasizing the darker (and here literal) underbelly of the setting. Dahl's reaction is, if anything, a bit too on the nose, pointing up the unnaturalness of the city as a concrete entity exposed like an indented sore on the body of the otherwise fecund jungle. For Dahl the city's aesthetic produces “the weird [as it] is constituted by a presence – a presence of *that which does not belong*” (Fisher W&E 61). Which is to say, the traumatic kernel found within the drained London carries with it the extremely radical shift in

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<sup>16</sup> For a rich explication of Ballard's relationship to modernism, see Robert S. Lehman's “Back to the Future: Late Modernism in J.G. Ballard's *The Drowned World*.” *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 41, no. 4, 2018, pp., 161 – 178.

perspective implied by a society post-catastrophe. The problem is presented through Dahl initially finding the city aesthetically “hideous” only to close the claim on Dahl’s *need* for the lagoon to return. What is most estranging here to the contemporary reader, I would contend, is the radical difference in desirable living space – and what sort of environment goes into constituting such desires.

Nonetheless, it is important to conclude this conceptually useful analysis of the weird by remarking on the political register of climate fiction, that thankfully in Ballard’s case, is not left out of the text. After the lagoon has been drained, in spite of Dahl’s protests, Strangman loots the ruins of London, nearly killing Kerans in the process; the latter survives only on account of the timely arrival of Colonel Hardman and his paramilitary troops from Camp Byrd. Though the reader is initially relieved to see that Hardman and the military troops succeeded in saving Kerans’ life, one soon learns that Strangman will not in fact be reprimanded for almost killing someone in the process of senselessly looting a city of apocalyptic ruins or for draining the lagoon. Ultimately, Hardman states that Strangman will be rewarded for taking these actions under the remaining political statutes used to mediate the earth’s surviving human population: “Don’t you remember the Reclaimed Lands Act and the Dykes Maintenance Regulations? They’re still very much in force” (Ballard TDW 179). Ballard ironically pierces through the anthropocentric legal fictionality of private property here by shafting his own protagonist’s outcome in favor of the colonially coded figure in the narrative. Indeed, Ballard’s *The Drowned World* offers a complicated and weird ending to his narrative that unsettles the presumed fixity of the law by drawing attention to those who truly benefit from culturally entrenched forms of legal mediation: the retainers of private property and those with (neo)colonial legacies.

## VI. The Eerie: *The Crystal World*

Though the eerie is perhaps the most underused of the three terms I have centralized my paper around, I find it to have an extremely flexible range of utility for addressing literature in the Anthropocene. In shifting from the weird to the eerie, I am aiming to put into practice Dipesh Chakrabarty's assertion that "To call human beings geological agents is to scale up our imagination of the human" (Chakrabarty 206). In this section of the paper, then, I will be deploying the eerie in order to articulate the human subject as a "geological agent" in Ballard's *The Crystal World*. Though, I would be remiss to not begin my discussion of Fisher's theorization of the eerie without first noting the most frequent way in which the eerie is used in aesthetics – which is the way in which "the eerie clings to certain kinds of physical spaces and landscapes" (Fisher W&E 61). Abandoned houses, ancient ruins, and a misty view of the British moors at dawn all capture some of the disparate senses in which the eerie "clings" to a landscape. In *The Crystal World*, Ballard certainly provides an eerie setting for his text, wherein "the jungle the air seemed to glitter continuously, as if the crystallizing atoms were deliquescing in the wind and being replaced by those rising from the forest below" (Ballard TCW 130). Perhaps the misty British moors provides the most succinct analogue to this image. In both cases, the aura of the air itself seems to embody a certain animate presence that decenters the uniqueness of human life.

As the reader may have begun to notice, the eerie is a supremely ontological term. As formulated by Fisher, it is "constituted by a *failure of absence* or by a *failure of presence*. The sensation of the eerie occurs either when there is something present where there should be nothing, or if there is nothing present when there should be something" (Fisher W&E 61). And though this succinct and ontologically loaded definition of the eerie certainly does bring much to bear on the affective power of certain physical spaces and landscapes in *The Crystal World*, I want to make use of the eerie to analyze something more marginal to this picturesque novel:

figurations of the body. I contend that the eerie is invaluable for metaphorically excavating the newly discovered “geological agency” of humanity. Which is to say, by way of Ballard’s text, I hope to use the eerie to retrieve a central piece of the materialist subject.

When materialism is invoked with relation to the subject – especially in the theoretical context of Anthropocene studies – there is a certain necessary degree of clarification. I am aiming to articulate the way in which Ballard mobilizes the “striking contrast” Fisher points out between “the new materialist idea of ‘vibrant matter’, which suggests that all matter is to some extent alive . . . and Freud’s positioning of Thanatos . . . [where] *nothing* is alive: life is a region of death . . . what is called organic life is actually a kind of folding of the inorganic” (Fisher W&E 84). Through the formation of human subjects as a processual “folding of the inorganic,” Fisher argues that “we ourselves become an exemplary case of the eerie: there is an agency at work in us . . . but it is not what we expected it to be” (Fisher W&E 85). In *The Crystal World*, a plight of self-organizing crystal structures proliferate in a rampant case of *autopoiesis* that transforms the post-colonial setting of an “isolated corner of the Cameroon Republic [which] was still recovering from an abortive coup ten years earlier” into an obscenely crystalized landscape filtered through a dizzying “technicolor process” (Ballard TCW 12, 68). The setting here, is established as doubly eerie: there is an apparently self-causing crystalline disease indiscriminately homogenizing all matter into an undifferentiated *plenum* located within a zone terminally haunted by extractive capitalism’s ongoing (neo)colonial legacy. Within the scope of this terminal zone, the narrative takes the twin figurations of leprosy and the crystalline as features of the setting that modulate into agential outgrowths of the human.

The subsumption of one’s body into the crystalline jungle is depicted in *The Crystal World* as an eerie metaphor for the alterity always already present within the human to begin

with.<sup>17</sup> That is, for Fisher, the subject consists in a “folding of the inorganic” (Fisher W&E 85, 85). This “inorganicism” is unavoidably swept up by an agency alien to that of everyday phenomenological experience. The notion of a “folded” subject implies an inside composed entirely of the outside, such that when Dr. Sanders lies on the ground with “his body lay[ing] sprawled in a bed of sprouting needles,” the crystals begin to fuse “[with] his right arm . . . encased in a mass of crystalline spurs, three or four inches long, that reached almost to his shoulder” (Ballard TCW 148). In this description one can see Ballard reinventing the human as a multicellular version of the radiolarian always already on the hybridized boundary between animacy and the inanimate. In this sense, for Ballard here it is not so much a question of reconciling the correlationist problem of mind and matter, but of undergoing a nuanced exploration of the ways in which the human body is constantly traversed by non-human elements. I see Ballard as offering a medium to build upon Fisher’s aforementioned reading of Freud – wherein he claims that humans are themselves composed by a “folding” of the inanimate on the principle of Thanatos (Fisher W&E 85). Ballard can help us to draw this idea into the register of geological agency by highlighting the way in which a collective assemblage of biogeochemical and non-human actors composes much of the agency wielded by said materially folded human subject.

The crystallization of the body does well to explicate the interplay of Fisher’s notion of a “folded subject” and Chakrabarty’s notion of “geological agency.” Ballard’s protagonist notes that “living and inanimate forms” undergo a “transfiguration” after encountering the crystal

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<sup>17</sup> For a wonderful analysis of the relationship between the ‘crystallized’ subject, materialism, and the history of science see Moritz Ingwersen’s “Solid-State Fiction: J.G. Ballard and the Crystallization of Life.” *Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden*, 2016, pp., 73-91.

jungle to any extent (Ballard 169). The process of transfiguration is described as being affected through “the surrender by each of us of our own physical and temporal identities” to the crystal jungle (Ballard 169). The very notion of geological agency already entails an analogous transfiguration of biological subjectivity. That is, geological agency conceals a mass of biological subjects in so far as “we can become geological agents only historically and collectively” (Chakrabarty 206). Which is to say, the individual biological subject unavoidably enters into a collective geological agency through the temporally and spatially bifurcated effects of their actions (i.e., immediate and long-term effects of certain actions). For example, the effects of the industrial revolution’s collective agency are still being played out through today’s climate crises – just as contemporary society’s production of nuclear waste<sup>18</sup> implies an environmentally impactful half-life of 24,000 years, promising even more far reaching fragments of trans-temporally expressed agency. Ballard foreshadows this complication of temporal and spatial scales when Dr. Sanders notes in *The Crystal World* that the spaces he occupies retain “fragments of himself living on in their own prismatic medium” that will long affect the jungle’s environment beyond his own lifespan (Ballard 174).

I would contend that the task of coherently articulating a hybrid of Fisher and Chakrabarty’s materialist subject – caught between biology and geology – by way of Ballard could be best accomplished through a very surface level Deleuzian analysis. Fisher also cites Deleuze and Guattari through a summarization of one of *Anti-Oedipus*’s key points concerning how to politicize the materialist subject. When taking the function of the eerie subject into consideration, Fisher writes: “Does not any real rejection of civilization entail a move into

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<sup>18</sup> Author(s) not indicated. “Background on Radioactive Waste.” *United States Nuclear Regulatory Commission, July 23, 2019.* <https://www.nrc.gov/reading-rm/doc-collections/fact-sheets/radwaste.html>

schizophrenia – a shift into an outside that cannot be commensurated with dominant forms of subjectivity, thinking, sensation?” (Fisher W&E 100). I here want to add a distinction between the two key modes of schizophrenia in Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus*: the schizophrenic *subject* and the schizophrenic *process*. As Deleuze and Guattari put it, “the schizo is not revolutionary, but the schizophrenic process ... is the potential for revolution” (Deleuze and Guattari 341). In my view, Fisher is exactly right to point out that any real rejection of civilization entails a move into schizophrenia (in Deleuze and Guattari’s sense of the term of course) and I want to build upon this by first reiterating that Fisher’s eerie subject does well to capture Deleuze and Guattari’s schizophrenic subject. Fisher’s theorization of the eerie subject involves a transition outside of dominant forms of “subjectivity, thinking, and sensation” in so far as his notion of the subject consists in a folding of the outside, which is radically anti-Cartesian.

However, it is not clear what the radical potentials of Fisher’s eerily defamiliarized subject are on the face of it. In this sense, I contend that drawing upon the Ballardian point made earlier concerning how the subject is traversed by a collective assemblage of biogeochemical and non-human actors that eerily compose the subject’s geological agency is essential. I want to consider the movement of this collective assemblage of geological agency (i.e., the crystal-human assemblage in Ballard) an eerie figuration of the “schizophrenic process.” Ballard tarries at this eerie juncture between the schizophrenic subject and the schizophrenic process in *The Crystal World*, ultimately leaving the reader with an ambiguous ending. Dr. Sanders notes that he will willingly go back into the crystal jungle in order to cultivate his “geological” subjectivity, but Ballard withholds any pure image of how Dr. Sanders’ transformation will culminate (Ballard 169). Nonetheless, the complex view of the subject I have drawn out of Ballard’s text

thus far seems apt to at least metaphorically express the unsettling feelings and implications that go along with one's geological agency – and perhaps gestures toward the radical potentials contained therein.

The stakes of mobilizing such a geological agency are prescient as ecological crises begin to exponentially multiply. As the self-named anarchist collective known as the Invisible Committee pointed out in their 2007 tract: “As long as there is Man and Environment, the police will be there between them” (IC 80). In Ballard's *The Drought* we find a situation in which this political drama is played out against a kind of geological subjectivity. Upon Charles Ransom *et al.*'s arrival at the now overcrowded shanty town by the sea, they find that there has been a fence erected by the military separating civil society from the civil service: “all along the beach there's a double wire fence, the army and police are on the other side . . . militia unties were shooting at people trying to cross between the fences” (Ballard 129). After taking into account what *milieu* he has now stumbled into, Ransom breaks off from the rest of his group to speak with two adjacent strangers he sees sitting outside of their trailer. The man in the couple that Ransom is speaking with states that “this [situation] won't last forever. Already most of these people have only a day's water left. Sooner or later they'll break out” (Ballard TD 129). The tensions on the beach produce a classic Marxian scene. A certain configuration of social relations has been solidified on the beach with the figurative threshold of the fence stands between the class of owners and their military counterparts, and the workers who are quickly approaching the conditions of bare life. Importantly, the class lines have become stretched so thin that here the middle class identifies with the working class against the securitized owners.

The political situation forged at the threshold of the fence does in fact come to a head in the text. Interestingly, Ballard utilizes an instance of affective resonance to enable the

insurrectionary potential latent in the *milieu* of the shanty town. Moments before the decisive instance of radical rupture, the narrator notes that “Listening to the uncertain movements, Ransom realized that there was no concerted plan of action, but that some dim instinct was gathering force and would propel everyone simultaneously at the wire” (Ballard TD 135). This “dim instinct” that is “gathering force” and capable of propelling “everyone simultaneously” is a direct pragmatic result of the new relations forged on the beach by environmental conditions. There is a general structure of meaning that everyone at once within the newly forged relation seems to apprehend.

What led to the conditions for this new social relation in the text is none other than a biogeochemical assemblage that traverses the characters in a way analogous to the crystals from *The Crystal World*. In *The Drought* though, it is water and dust rather than crystals that are the focal point. Water, or rather the loss thereof, not only facilitates the changes on the landscapes in his novel but holds a fundamental role in articulating entanglements between humans, other-than humans, and objects. Ransom articulates this well in an extended mediation on the slow disappearance of the river:

“throughout the long summer Ransom had watched the river shrinking, its countless associations fading as it narrowed into a shallow creek. Above all, Ransom was aware that the role of the river in time had changed. Once it had played the part of an immense fluid clock, the objects immersed in it taking up their positions like the stations of the sun and planets . . . The real movements were those random and discontinuous relationships between the objects within it, those of himself and Mrs. Quilter, her son and the dead birds and fish . . . Ransom was certain that the absence of this great moderator, which cast its bridges between all animate and inanimate objects alike, would prove of crucial importance” (Ballard TD 22)

Ballard has a very clinical eye in his description of the ongoing changes effected by the shift in water level in this passage. He attributes a strong semiotic dimension to water here by framing it as stabilizing a certain ecology of meaning within a given space. The river is described as a

“great moderator” translating and bridging relations between “animate and inanimate objects alike.” But I want to further suggest that this semiotic dimension also reinforces a pre-existent a-signifying material relationship. That is, the river and its relation to all sorts of objects form an assemblage in which water, dust, and object are reciprocally operative one another. This time one part of the assemblage increases the others’ powers of acting, that time it diminishes them. Presuming that the river was the primary operator in this assemblage, the dissolution of the river is key in draining the network of relationships “between the objects within it” both human and other-than human: Ransom, Mrs. Quilter, her son, dead birds, a sunken car, a tire, some cans, and fish to name a few. Ransom describes viewing the disappearance of the water as witnessing “its countless associations fading.” Hence, the solidified relations of a past *milieu* melted into air only to be re-forged later the beach within a new collective assemblage.

## VII. Conclusion

By engaging with the work of J.G. Ballard in this paper, I have sought to explore how literature might respond to the problematics posed to it by the Anthropocene. Simultaneously, I have attempted to offer a reading of the Anthropocene itself as a profoundly uncanny happening. In between these two central focuses, I have tried to balance the aesthetic and the political so as not to occlude the pressing stakes present in every intervention into the climate crisis in this moment of mass extinction and generalized ecological collapse. I first turned to Ballard for the conveniently coincident set of problematics that coincide in his work: his historical position at the beginning of the great acceleration, his ecological choice of subject matter, his obsessive restaging of disaster, and his unceasing satirization of the middle classes whose lifestyles were largely constitutive of the issues which have led humanity to the actually existing edge of extinction as the largest subset of the “25% of the world population” responsible for the climate

crisis. In lieu of these facts, I set out to here offer a reading of his work that might provide insights so as to how one might conceptualize an engagement with eco-disaster that is thoroughly critical of the bourgeois humanism that otherwise saturates discourses of the Anthropocene (Crutzen 23).

On the side of aesthetics, I found a set of inhuman affective structures in Ballard's work organized around the uncanny, the weird, and the eerie that enabled his clinical precision when dealing with representation in the Anthropocene. On the side of politics, I found a thoroughgoingly critical response to dealing with the catastrophes' that loom within the Anthropocene. Throughout Ballard's first four novels, I found him rejecting the sorts of responses to disaster which seek to pro-long catastrophe for the sake of conserving the order of things. Instead, Ballard imagined a set of other ways to be in the world in the face of catastrophe all together – and I tried to seize on this trajectory. This trajectory in many ways ties together Ballard's aesthetic representations and political tendency through a program of radical inhumanism mobilized by a set of inhuman affects. Ballard's inhumanism refuses to assume the reductive form of a categorical imperative that provides a surefire answer of the age-old question of "what is to be done?". In its place, his inhumanism offers up a simple but liberating trajectory to the Outside; that is, to a zone where a territory of unceasing experimentation is to be established. For as Ballard shows us, it is by learning to inhabit this "terra incognita" that the conditions necessary for creating a new relationship to the world are constituted.

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